

Introduction

Populations fleeing “sinking” island states or drying pasturelands have recently become anchored in our collective imagination. It is now a common wisdom that “climate refugees” *should* be the object of an international protection mechanism or, otherwise, that “climate migration” calls for specific policy responses.

On a closer look, however, things appear inexorably more confused, indeed almost inextricable. Attributing specific environmental phenomena to climate change is a necessary first step, yet a highly problematic one. While climate change increases the frequency and the severity of certain weather events, it does not create new or distinct disasters. As to slow-onset changes such as desertification or sea-level rise, they generally unfold so slowly that it is practically impossible to disentangle their consequences from other, more immediate, causes of migration. People migrate out of small island states or leave their traditional nomadic pastoralism for reasons that have much more to do with economic forces, political processes, cultural ideologies, or even local environmental degradation, than with gradual changes in sea level or average temperatures. How the physical impacts of climate change affect human societies – including whether and how they impact migration patterns – largely depends on particular circumstances, such as development, demography, socio-political conditions, and culture. Although it is likely that climate change will induce an increase of the overall number of migrants within and across international borders, it is, in most of the cases, impossible to identify individual “climate migrants.”¹

But even if individual “climate migrants” could somehow be isolated, or if specific scenarios of migration could be identified as particularly likely to be exacerbated by climate change, should this be normatively relevant? Arguably not. All migrants have rights, as human beings, and these rights should generally be protected notwithstanding the factors of migration. Ethical arguments that could be made for the protection of

¹ See, generally, Foresight, *Migration and Global Environmental Change: Final Project Report* (UK Government Office for Science, 2011). These issues are further discussed in Ch. 2, section II, where further references are indicated.

forced migrants, including by recognizing a right for them to cross borders or to stay abroad, should not be limited to specific causes of compulsion but apply to all individuals with similar protection needs. Protection needs do not generally depend on whether migrants are fleeing persecution, conflicts, misery, or disasters – and even less on whether such direct triggers are related to climate change. Likewise, while arguments can be made for a responsibility of greenhouse gas emitters for the adverse impacts of climate change, migration policies are far from being a natural, efficient, or realistic way for one responsible agent (state, company, or individual) to provide reparation to another agent. Climate change responsibility calls for reparation, most likely through compensation, not for intrusion in the way communities respond to the impacts of climate change. Specific instruments for the protection of “climate refugees” have been advocated by (mostly Western) scholars, but not generally claimed by concerned populations. As a matter of fact, the absence of “climate migrants” from the discourse that calls for their protection has remained remarkably unremarked in most of the literature.

The literature on climate migration and global governance has long eluded these conceptual and normative inconsistencies.² On the one hand, doctrinal works have tried to establish what law would apply to protect “climate migrants,” despite the difficulty of identifying such populations.³ On the other hand, prescriptive arguments have been made for a protection of the same elusive category of “climate migrants,” leaving aside the lack of a rationale for specific measures addressing climate change as a cause of displacement or migration as a form of damage.⁴

Law and governance scholars have certainly not been unaware of the conceptual and ethical limitation of such studies and arguments, but their epistemic communities appeared to have shown a certain clemency to deficient arguments if they appeared generally to go in the “right” direction. From a migration governance perspective, many felt that any argument that could raise broader awareness on the unfulfilled protection needs of many migrants were generally needed, even if they were based on arbitrary distinctions based on dominant political discourses. From a

² For a critical literature review, see: Benoît Mayer, “Constructing ‘Climate Migration’ as a Global Governance Issue: Essential Flaws in the Contemporary Literature” (2013) 9 McGill Int’l J. Sust. Dvlpt L. & Pol’y 87.

³ See e.g. Jane McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law* (Oxford University Press (O.U.P.) 2012).

⁴ See e.g. Frank Biermann and Ingrid Boas, “Preparing for a Warmer World: Towards a Global Governance System to Protect Climate Refugees” (2010) 10 Glob. Envtl Pol. 60.

climate change governance perspective, scholars apparently had in mind the potential of discourses on migration to spur high-level political reactions leading, hopefully, to an engagement to mitigate climate change. In either case, it was thought that incomplete advocacy could at least do some good. It was often omitted that such incomplete advocacy could also do great harms, either by reinforcing general structures of oppression when defining exceptions to it, or by allowing further encroachment of the sovereignty of developing states that developed states could exploit to further their own agendas.

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This book participates in a critical reflection on political discourses on “climate migration” and their possible influence on global governance. As such, it is neither a doctrinal analysis exploring how existing law may apply to “climate migration,” nor a prospective work about possible norms or policies that could respond to specific shortcomings in global governance. It is a book about the *concept* of “climate migration” – a concept that may not directly correspond to any tangible reality – and about the political discourses built on the basis of this concept. By engaging critically with the concept of “climate migration,” including doctrinal or prospective works on it, questioning their assumptions and assessing their political prospects, this book aims to draw a map of the discursive arena where arguments on “climate migration” are deployed. This map permits to situate groups of advocates who share specific political agendas and to indicate the destination that they are likely to reach if they opt for a specific argumentative pathway, the perils that they could face *en route*, including when crossing the routes of other advocates, and possibly some shortcuts that they could take to reach their destination in time.

Three broad discourses or narratives are thus distinguished, whereby groups of advocates relate “climate migration” to, respectively, a general humanitarian project, a specific project of protecting migrants, or to climate change responsibilities. In each case, discourses on “climate migration” are only a first step towards greater policy endeavours involving, in particular, establishing a more efficient system for promoting human welfare around the World, effectively protecting the human rights of all migrants, and preventing more dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. These discourses face specific difficulties, related in particular to their own conceptual and normative shortcomings. They also face one of the major challenges of today’s

governance: the inertia to address collective issues in a cooperative and effective manner.

Other narratives frame the concept of “climate migration” more pragmatically, often on the touchstone of states’ own interests, defined in particular in terms of national economic interests or of national security. These multiple moral and pragmatic narratives inevitably interact and compete with one another, as they use the same terminology, attempt to capture a limited political attention, but promote diverging political ends. On our map of the discursive arena, these narratives do not depart from the same point, nor do they fight with the same arms. Moral arguments have a long slope to ascend before they can generate any reform in global governance. Pragmatic narratives, on the other hand, approach the argumentative battlefield from a much higher position; they can appropriate and utilize the momentum created by moral narratives.

The analysis conducted in this book borrows from multiple disciplines, ranging from international law and international relations, to some elements of argument studies and psychology, thus digging into what determines the prospect of diverse political arguments related to the concept of “climate migration.” While such multidisciplinary perspective precludes any exhaustive scrutiny into any specific discipline, it allows a broader understanding of current advocacy strategies which, it is hoped, could be of some political relevance and some intellectual interest. In particular, this analysis highlights the risk that moral arguments could raise fears of migrants (whether or not as part of a deliberate advocacy strategy), which the other actors could use to promote repressive policies. Already, border and migration control policies have been presented as the “necessary” defence of developed states against what was framed as a possible “invasion” of “climate refugees.” Particularly evasive emancipatory reform projects elaborating on “climate migration” could revive appetites for much more concrete repressive policies.

This analysis leads to the strategic suggestion of re-framing and developing moral narratives on the basis of an alternative pragmatic narrative. According to this possible re-framing, it is in the well-understood interest of each state, in the long term and in a complex and interdependent world, to participate in a global governance regime based on international solidarity and responsibility. The plight of migrants, exacerbated by climate change, is the consequence of many issues left unaddressed for too long: a lack of international solidarity; an incomplete recognition of the human rights of all migrants; and irresponsible environmental conduct, in particular in developed states. The “climate migration” crisis calls us not to a minimal action for the protection of a tiny population of individuals forced out of their country by natural

disasters that can more or less reliably be associated with climate change, but to an overall reflection on how we, as a civilization, approach international assistance, the protection of the human rights of the migrants, and environmental sustainability generally. The concept of climate migration, and climate change more generally, could become an eye-opening crisis leading to systematic reconsideration for the shortcomings of existing international institutions – a step, perhaps, towards “a destination more hopeful and enlightened.”

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The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 provides a more thorough discussion of the conceptualization of “climate migration.” The four following chapters identify and discuss the prospects of specific narratives: the humanitarian narrative (Ch. 2), the migration narrative (Ch. 3), the responsibility narrative (Ch. 4) and the pragmatic narratives (Ch. 5).