

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict
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Abstract

**"Climate refugees" as dawning catastrophe?
A critique of the dominant quest for numbers**

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While the evidence about climate change is increasingly corroborating, the scientific and public interest about the scale and scope of the social changes associated to global warming is constantly rising. This holds especially true for the consequences of climate change for patterns of human flight and migration. However, the concern with “environmental refugees“ appears in most parts driven by a quest for ever bigger numbers. Paradigmatic in this regard is the prominent assessment of Oxford-based researcher Norman Myers who predicted the amount of at least 150 million climate induced refugees by 2050. Although this figure can certainly just count as a rough estimate, it is cited by many publications on the social consequences of climate change. In recent years, a number of studies has been added to this literature all together concluding with ambiguous results about the exact figures, but some of them even exaggerating the numbers once more: 50 million by 2010 (UN University), 50 million by 2060 (UNEP), 900 million by 2050 (Christian Aid), just to name a few. Also at the political level, the issue of climate refugees has been put on the Agenda, as for instance by the Solana report.

The apparent ambiguity in numbers points to the fact that most of the existing research on climate refugees is fundamentally flawed when it comes to tracing the exact causal relationships. Although climate change will lead to severe social consequences - flight and migration surely among them - the dominant quest for numbers often blurs the complex web of causal relations and socio-economic conditions on the ground and stretches the predictive capacity of the social sciences beyond its limits. Whether or not climate change leads to flight or migration depends on a multiplicity of different factors, as for instance climate sensitivity and exposition, migration policy and regulations, existing migrant networks and resources that actually enable people to migrate, and political responses regarding adaptation to climate change. Faced with the local conditions of climate change, it seems that there is more to the story of environmental refugees than most of the global models suggest.

Starting from a review of existing research on climate change and forced migration, the proposed paper seeks to answer the question of what social science can plausibly state about the link between climate change and migration and what kinds of predictions - if any at all - are possible. [?] Drawing on two case studies of already existing examples of climate flight and migration - Mali and Tuvalu - [?] it argues for a more profound approach to the issue of environmental refugees and aims at exploring the directions for further research. We argue that research should focus less on ever more sophisticated quantitative models but rather ground analysis in detailed and thorough case studies. These would allow for reconstructing the complex causal mechanisms at work and so put the understanding of a complex phenomenon before its prediction.