

**Adaptive Migration – pluralising the debate on climate change and migration****Guest editors**

Dr Andrew Baldwin, Department of Geography, Durham University

Dr Elisa Fornalé, World Trade Institute, University of Bern

**Abstract**

The interaction between environmental change and human mobility is attracting global attention, both in policy circles and in the contemporary literature. This introductory essay proposes using the concept of pluralism to explore the multi-dimensional relationship between climate change and migration and to advance new perspectives and concepts to interpret the emerging theory of adaptive migration.

The essays included in this themed section cover diverse issues in this area of research by focusing on the contemporary debate about the 'migration-as-adaptation strategy'. This themed session identifies six key areas: the role of law in dealing with climate-induced migration, the category of place related to the community of origin and destination, the theme of climate justice and rights, the contribution of international organisations in framing the migration-as-adaptation strategy, adaptive measures developed in the Maldives, and seasonal nomadism in the East Sudan. All are quite different, but all converge in their emphasis on the role of the individual, the migrant, and on whether and how state responses are adequate in the progressive concordance between adaptation and individual capability. This introduction raises a set of salient questions that might catalyse multiple new research trajectories over the coming years.

**Key words:** Migration, Adaptation, Climate Change, Justice, Pluralism

**Introduction**

It is commonly argued that, in our current conjuncture, events like the Syrian refugee crisis are the new normal (O'Hagen 2015; Kauffmann 2016). Thus, more such crises should be expected in the decades ahead, spurred in part by climate change. Such reasoning is typical of the so-called 'climate security' literature (Campbell et al. 2007; Schwartz and Randall 2003), which often claims that climate change will result in greater numbers of migrants and refugees and thus more violent conflict. In spite of its prevalence, however, this assertion is widely disputed, often on the grounds that migration is multi-causal, irreducible to climate change, and mediated by all manner of social relations (Gemenne et al. 2014; Baldwin and Bettini 2017). The claim that climate change triggered the large-scale rural-to-urban migration that precipitated the war in Syria (Kelley et al. 2015) is routinely met with the inconvenient truth that disaggregating climate change from all the other factors, such as land tenure, economic neoliberalism and sectarian conflict, which contributed to the Syrian civil

war, is impossible (Hulme 2015; Gemenne et al. 2014). It is similarly untrue that the large-scale movements of refugees from Syria to Europe since 2015 are the result of climate change.

We introduce this themed section on climate change and migration with the example of the Syrian civil war to illustrate the multi-causal nature of 'climate change and migration'. Climate change can never be said to be the exclusive factor behind migration. Indeed, a growing consensus seems to be emerging in academic and policy research around the idea that climate change does not and will not *cause* or *determine* migration, but that migration in the context of climate change is multi-causal. Like the Syrian civil war, it is irreducible to climate change. This emerging consensus, however, is not especially novel. That migration is multi-causal has been a mainstay in migration studies for a very long time and only recently, within roughly the past decade, has it become a dominant framework for conceptualising the 'climate-migration' relationship.

In this short introduction, however, we move away from the focus on causality – whether multi- or mono- – and instead propose a different concept for framing the relation between climate change and migration, the idea of pluralism. Whereas multi-causality is narrowly concerned with the reasons behind migration (McLeman 2014), pluralism is a far broader concept, one that designates the all-encompassing nature of the relation, the way it touches upon almost all aspects of political, social and cultural life (Baldwin 2014). By pluralism we simply mean that the relation between migration and climate change can be interpreted from a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Our claim is that the concept of pluralism is analytically more useful than that of multi-causality if, as critical analysts, our task is to broaden the ethical and political scope of the relation between climate change and migration. Pluralism is useful because it can help us develop more politically engaged readings of climate change and migration. For example, it can help us better appreciate how, as a discursive phenomenon, the relationship between climate change and migration is constructed around all manner of conceptual binaries, many of which are familiar in contemporary geography: nature-society, local-global, inside-outside, Europe-Orient, and liberalism-militarism to name but a few. Pluralism, moreover, can expand our understanding by calling attention to the politics of knowledge that infuse the discourse on climate change and migration: empiricism versus the hermeneutics of power and representation; bounded space (i.e., nation, city) against the power-geometries of place; and kino-politics<sup>1</sup> against geopolitics. Pluralism can help us see how the discourse is marked by a range of familiar political concepts – difference, inequality, sovereignty, responsibility, neoliberalism, citizenship, race, borders and labour (Baldwin and Bettini 2017;

<sup>1</sup> The concept of kinopolitics comes from Thomas Nail's book *The Figure of the Migrant*. It describes kinopolitics as 'the politics of movement. Instead of analysing societies as primarily static, spatial or temporal, kinopolitics or social kinetics understands them primarily as "regimes of motions". Societies are always in motion: directing people and objects, reproducing their social condition (periodicity), and striving to expand their territorial, political, juridical and economic power through diverse forms of expulsion. In this sense, it is possible to identify something like a political theory of movement' (p. 24).

Baldwin 2014) – and how it is caught within a tangle of temporalities – pasts, presents and futures. And perhaps less intuitively, but no less important, pluralism can help us see how the relation between climate change and migration is constituted by a set of under-theorised affects: antipathy (towards migrants), fealty (for one's own), desire (to see what is not there), solidarity (with those affected) and anticipation (of the coming heterogeneity of climate change). In short, 'climate change and migration' is an encompassing *relation* which demands to be understood *in its plurality*.

Taken together, the papers presented in this themed section offer a particular vantage for pluralising 'climate change and migration'. Specifically, although diverse in numerous respects, they converge around an increasingly popular concept in both research and policy development, namely *adaptive migration*. In many ways, this is an exciting way to think about migration in the context of climate change, one reason for which is that it moves us well away from the debate about causality. If the debate about causality is centrally concerned with the extent to which climate change *causes* migration and, consequently, with defining something called 'climate migration' or 'climate-induced migration', then the discourse about adaptive migration side-steps these questions entirely (Baldwin, 2017). It is not concerned with definitions and terminology but with how to make migration a viable adaptation option for people, anyone, in the context of climate change. This is the approach that Gemenne and Blocher (2017) take in their contribution (outlined in more detail below). With the exception of the opening essay, which focuses squarely on international law, all the essays in this themed section in one way or another centre on how migration is used or is configured as an adaptive response to (climate and) climate change.

The very notion that migration is an adaptive mechanism has a very long pedigree in geographic thought, with origins in evolutionary biology and environmental determinism. For many years it has also pervaded the migration–development nexus in which migrants are said to be 'agents of development'. Nowadays *adaptive* migration is presented as the more progressive option for conceptualising migration in the context of climate change. It tends to treat migration as central and not inimical to contemporary globalised life. It is firmly grounded in human security as opposed to national security. And it fits seamlessly within the global remittance economy whose flows to developing countries had an estimated value in 2016 of nearly US\$430 billion. All of which suggests that the migration-as-adaptation thesis bears some resemblance to neoliberal political rationality (Felli and Castree 2012; Felli 2012), the biopolitical dimensions of which have been the subject of much recent investigation (Bettini 2014; Methmann and Oels 2015; Baldwin 2017).

Inasmuch as the debate on adaptive migration is still very much in its infancy, these essays offer a unique set of insights at a moment when the terms of debate are still very much up for grabs. Indeed, when taken together they go at least some way towards pluralising the debate on climate change and migration insofar as they draw the discourse on adaptive migration into dialogue with a range of new and fruitful

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approaches, including climate justice (Bettini et al. 2017), migration theory (Gemenne and Blocher 2017; Stojanov et al. 2017), practice theory (Ober and Sakdapolrak 2017), and political ecology (Suliman and Ahmed 2017). In the final section of this introduction, we suggest one further albeit vastly under-researched framework that might be used to further pluralise the discussion around adaptive migration: legal geography. Our point here is simply to offer provisional insights into what pluralising this relation through legal geography might look like. Before turning to that discussion, though, we offer some introductory reflections on each of the papers included in this themed section.

### Contents of the Themed Section

In their opening contribution, Elisa Fornalé and Curtis Doebbler (2017) identify how existing areas of international law can be interpreted and applied to address the protection needs of people facing what they call climate change-induced displacement (CCID). They argue that the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), in particular, has a legal duty to assist persons who are forced to migrate due to climate change. In many ways what Fornalé and Doebbler offer is a fairly straightforward legal claim, one that gives primacy to the idea that CCID poses a problem for which international law offers a relevant solution. Their reasoning is based on an interpretation of the definition of a refugee in the African Refugee Treaty, and on UNHCR's expressed commitment to provide protection for persons falling under this wider definition. The authors argue that it is a lack of will rather than of law that prevents UNHCR from acting to protect CCIDs. Fornalé and Doebbler locate the moral and legal duty within an existing set of international institutions and, in this respect, attempt to map the legal space within which they believe the people affected ought to be protected. Their claim is that people adversely affected by climate change require humanitarian treatment and adequate assistance. Ultimately, for Fornalé and Doebbler, providing for the well-being of displaced people is a matter of justice, a theme that resurfaces in the paper by Bettini, Nash and Gioli (2016) and which provides the basis for some of our later reflections on how legal geography might contribute to our understanding of climate change and migration.

In the second paper, Gemenne and Blocher (2017) provide a unique set of insights concerning the now fashionable migration-as-adaptation thesis, answering the question: for whom is **adaptive migration**? The purpose of their contribution is to provide researchers with a novel analytical framework for evaluating the overall utility of adaptive migration. The focus is very much on redirecting research attention away from *in situ* causal dynamics, which almost inevitably result in the claim that migration is multi-causal. The two empirical chapters in this themed section, one by Stojanov *et al.* (2016) and the other by Suliman and Ahmed (2016), both make this point in one way or another. In contrast, however, Gemenne and Blocher propose that when considering the needs of migrants adapting to changing climatic

**Commented [BAW2]:** This was amended to read: for whom is migration adaptive? This formulation doesn't accurately capture the original question. The amended question assumes that all migration is potentially adaptive and that some entity is on hand to ascertain whether or not it is adaptive. But on p.2 the authors ask the following question: adaptation by migration for whom? My feeling is that 'for whom is adaptive migration' is a more concise and grammatically correct version of the question they ask. It presumes that something called 'adaptation by migration' exists (apart from other forms of migration) and that it will be of some benefit to some but not all.

conditions, greater emphasis ought to be placed on refining our understanding of adaptive migration by asking how it can be meaningfully harnessed and modulated in the wider interests of climate adaptation at the scale of the household, community of origin and destination community. The internal logic of their reasoning is hard to refute. Creating enabling environments for migration is precisely the aim of this kind of research. Moreover, they are very clear that adaptive migration is a household risk management strategy which functions not unlike a form of insurance. In a world on the verge of deep and lasting climatic transformation, adaptive migration therefore seems like a reasonable policy choice. But, as Gemenne and Blocher make very plain, it is not one that comes entirely risk-free. Thus, one area of further investigation that arises out of their focus on households, communities of origin and destination communities concerns the precise nature of the risks in respect of very specific forms of migration across all three domains. And, additionally, if we examine Gemenne and Blocher's important argument in light of the arguments of the preceding paper, then we might also begin to ask whether adaptive migration can provide some measure of justice to those most likely to experience the adverse effects of climate change. This, in our view, ought to be the measure of adaptive migration as a worthy policy option.

The question of justice resurfaces again in the paper by Bettini *et al.* (2016), in which the authors point out that the migration-as-adaptation thesis contains no explicit principle of climate justice. Although critical of the categorisation 'climate refugee', the authors note nevertheless that one of the advantages of the 'climate refugee' concept is that it is often associated with claims to climate justice and an accompanying delineation of rights and responsibilities. They go on to note, however, that such overarching concerns with climate justice, rights and responsibilities are no longer visible in the migration-as-adaptation thesis insofar as the latter is primarily concerned with accommodating labour migration to the exigencies of capital in the context of climate change. One immediate consequence of this is that without any corresponding discourse on rights and responsibilities, and thus legitimate means for making rights claims on the state or international institutions, the migration-as-adaptation thesis appears to espouse a depoliticised reading of climate change – one in which climate change is imagined as a political economic phenomenon to which one must accommodate oneself and not one that demands sustained political contestation. As noted above, it is precisely here in the debate on justice that legal geography is well suited to contribute to the wider discussion about climate change and migration.

For their part, Ober and Sakdapolrak take a very different approach to the migration-as-adaptation thesis, focusing on international institutions using Bourdieu's theory of social practices. Their premise is that the migration-as-adaptation thesis was not deliberately forged on the basis of empirical evidence or in deliberate support of neoliberalism or any other form of power. Rather, they explain the emergence of the migration-as-adaptation thesis as the outcome of quotidian bureaucratic practice and routine organisational positioning. More specifically, they

observe that the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) developed the migration-as-adaptation thesis in its ongoing effort to acquire and maintain 'social capital', and thus legitimacy both within the wider UN context and within the international climate change community. Through a series of interviews with key actors in the climate change and migration epistemic community, Ober and Sakdapolrak show how much of this was achieved through IOM's publication strategy and its strategic positioning within what they call emerging 'nodal points' in the policy development context. But they also show clearly that the migration-as-adaptation thesis was not a deliberate strategy per se, but rather the unintended outcome of such practices, including routine efforts to consolidate internal institutional expertise and narrative. They conclude that if social practices are a central albeit neglected 'site' in the pedigree of the migration-as-adaptation thesis, then social practices also represent an important 'site' for intervention and influence and for more 'radical policy imaginings'.

The remaining two papers in this themed section are detailed empirical case studies in which migration is conceived in terms of adaptation. In the first of these, a study of the individual perceptions of the slow-onset climate change impacts in the Maldives, Stojanov *et al.* found that while Maldivians have relatively high awareness of climate change and understand that domestic adaptation measures are necessary, there is also a widely held view that out-migration is not a preferred option. The authors also found that for those Maldivians who do migrate, climate change is a relatively insignificant reason for doing so. Migrants cite instead the economic advantages as being among the more important justifications for out-migration. These findings do not exactly contradict the conclusions that Gemenne and Blocher reach, but neither do they confirm them. Instead, the findings of Stojanov *et al.* suggest a significant asymmetry in the demands that international policy research places upon small island states, such as the Maldives. Whereas there is a strong push within the international community for incorporating migration into national-level adaptation planning, the findings of this case study suggest that adaptive migration can be over-emphasised. In fact, islanders may prefer to develop other adaptation strategies for their 'sustainable future' and consider migration as a last resort. Although this study of the Maldives cannot be generalised to all places that stand to experience the most adverse effects of climate change, it nevertheless raises the important issue of power within the epistemological space of climate change and migration. In particular, questions arise about who (i.e., which people, institutions, research networks, etc.) have the power to formulate research agendas on climate change and migration, what kinds of questions get asked, how they are formulated, and to what ends. It also raises the perennial question about where political responsibility lies in adapting to climate change.

And finally, although an outlier in a themed section devoted to migration and climate change, the final paper offers an important 'control' study which does much to complicate the facile assumption that climate change causes migration. The overarching claim of the paper by Sulieman and Ahmed (2016) is that seasonal

nomadic migration by the Lahaween ethnic group in East Sudan, a specific form of climate migration, is undergoing significant fragmentation as a result of capital investment in large-scale agriculture which, in turn, is having differential effects on the well-being of nomads. The authors also point to increasing levels of competition between differing land-uses practised by nomads and agriculturalists. Although this paper is not about climate change *per se*, it serves as a potent reminder that migration is shaped by and intersects with myriad other social processes; in this case, expanding large-scale agriculture and urbanisation. This observation remains firmly entrenched within the wider debate on climate change and migration. Nevertheless, the paper by Sulieman and Ahmed offers a window onto one of the many ways that capital shapes landscapes and furthermore suggests a productive opportunity to re-theorise the relationship between migration and climate change through the framework of political ecology. The paper itself does not do this, but certainly suggests that if researchers want to comprehend better how migration becomes enrolled as a means of adapting to climate change or indeed to any form of environmental change, then political ecology offers a vital set of concepts and theories for doing so. In this regard, it is noteworthy that even while Piguet (2013) has acknowledged that political ecology can be a potentially fruitful approach for understanding migration and climate change, to the best of our knowledge no fulsome attempt has yet been made to bring political ecology into the debate on climate change and migration.

### **Towards a legal geography of climate change and migration**

In the final section of our introduction we turn to a brief discussion of how legal geography might also help us pluralise climate change and migration relations beyond those in each of the papers described above. The impetus for this discussion derives not only from the fact that one of us is a geographer and the other a legal scholar but also from the juxtaposition between the opening essay on international law and the remaining essays. In particular, this juxtaposition calls attention not simply to the ways in which a rights-based framework might be used to manage migration in the context of climate change, but also to the legal geographies that underpin this relation. As a relatively new area of investigation, with researchers based in law, legal studies and geography departments, legal geography is broadly concerned with understanding the socio-spatial underpinnings of law and, inversely, the constitutive role of law and legal practice in the formation of space, place and nature, which represent some of the formative concepts of contemporary human geography (Braverman *et al.* 2014; Bennet and Layard 2015). And yet, as a simultaneously legal and spatial issue, we know remarkably little about the imbrications of space and law in the climate change and migration debate. A substantial body of legal scholarship has emerged in recent years, which addresses the international legal context of climate change (McAdam 2012), multi-level governance (Cournil and Vlassopoulos 2015) and, more recently, the human rights

dimensions of the climate change–migration nexus (Manou *et al.* 2017). And, similarly, geographers are very much at the forefront of the academic and policy debate on climate change and migration (McLeman 2013; Baldwin and Bettini 2017). For example, the principal experts who oversaw the *UK Foresight Report on Migration and Global Environmental Change* (2011), a landmark text in the field, included a number of prominent geographers, including Richard Black, Neil Adger and David Thomas. But no concerted attempt has been made thus far to bring these two important bodies of scholarship into dialogue. This is to the detriment of both climate change and migration scholarship, but perhaps more importantly to policy development, insofar as concrete steps are now being taken to bolster the normative framework concerning migration and environmental change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), for example, recently set up a task force on the related problem of displacement. Or, to give another example, the ‘adverse effects of climate change [and] natural disasters’ as relevant drivers of migration are now the subject of an international negotiation process around the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration (UN General Assembly 2017). Both processes and their relevant stakeholders, we would suggest, stand to gain from the insights of legal geography.

In the remainder of this introduction we ask what legal geography – an area of research concerned with the imbrications of space and legal norms and practice – might offer to the wider debate about migration in the context of climate change. What kind of understanding does legal geography provide? What kinds of legal geographies are emerging in the vexing space of climate change and migration or displacement? And what kinds of concepts might be useful for thinking across the categories of law and space as they relate to climate change and migration. Space limitations preclude full answers to these questions, so instead we offer tentative insights about this novel area of investigation, the aim of which, as we see it, would be to provoke further inquiry leading towards what might be called a legal geography of climate change and migration. Legal geography is broadly understood to designate a form of social science for the ‘co-constitution of the constellation of the legal, the spatial and the social’ in order to produce the world in which we live (Bennet and Layard 2015).

One starting point for forging such a legal geography concerns the category of place evident in the concepts of community of origin and community of destination introduced earlier in relation to the paper by Gemenne and Blocher. Saldanha (2017) has recently argued that Massey’s concept of power-geometry is indispensable for conceptualising place within the debate on climate change and migration. A conventional understanding tends to treat place as a bounded spatial phenomenon. The town, the city, the neighbourhood, the home, and even the informal settlement, are all examples of places regularly understood as discrete and bounded. In discussions about climate change and migration, a coherent place is often assumed to be threatened by a world thrown into motion by climate change. But what Massey’s concept of power-geometry does is open up place in order to



show it to be a dynamic expression of the global flows and interconnections of people, information, technology and capital. There is no sense of boundedness in Massey's ontology of place, only place infused by difference and movement, and, as Saldanha (2017) puts it 'ongoing struggles about its past and future' (p. 153). Important in Saldanha's formulation, furthermore, is that the power-geometry of place acknowledges how the interconnectivity at the heart of place is always stratifying; that globalisation implies immobility as much as it does mobility; that non-humans are as significant to formations of place as humans; and above all that place is marked by politics.

Approaching the power-geometry of place from the vantage of legal geography would, we suggest, allow for more nuanced interpretations of the ways in which the lived experiences of stratification, immobility, non-humans and politics are inextricably bound up in law. By such an analysis, the inhabitants of informal settlements may be shown to live where they do, not by virtue of poverty or poor choices, but by virtue of a law that gives them no other option. So too, a legal geographic analysis may reveal how psycho-social attachments to place, one of the more intriguing recent explanations of immobility (Adams 2016), are a manifestation of, and thus contingent on, law. Or in the case of the nomadism described in the paper by Sulieman and Ahmed, nomadism has a distinct relation to the category of ownership which may operate at cross purposes to more place-based or spatially fixed definitions of ownership that are often protected under the law. All of these 'geographies' – the informal settlement, immobility (i.e., 'trapped populations'), and nomadism – are now central to the debate on climate and migration and yet so far the debate on climate change and migration, and more specifically adaptive migration, has not considered or grappled with the legal geographies that underpin them. To point this out is not to chastise the climate change and migration epistemic community. It is simply done to identify areas of further research that might prove useful for thinking about migration in the context of climate change beyond considerations of causality.

Another starting point for thinking through the imbrications of law, space and climate change and migration concerns the recurring issue of justice, a theme clearly evident in many of the papers of this themed section. As Delaney (2015) argues in a recent review of legal geography, 'conventional legal imaginaries commonly legalize injustices or render them as mere misfortunes, if not deserved fates,' whereas critical legal geography is primarily concerned with investigating the legal bases of spatial injustice and thus exposing 'the contingencies and constraints of spatial justice'. A legal geographic approach might therefore examine what the concepts of spatial justice and spatial injustice mean in relation to migration in the context of climate change. In his discussion of the right to the city, Delaney describes such a right as comprising 'substantive enforceable claims such as rights to affordable, secure shelter; rights to a dignified employment; rights to a healthy environment, and so on. That is, rights that impose enforceable obligations on others and substantively reconfigure the relevant fields of power.' With this as a starting point, examining the

legal geographies of climate change and migration might entail inquiring for example into the ways that the migration-as-adaptation thesis either promotes or undermines such rights within socio-natural political spaces. In other words, such an inquiry might ask how the migration-as-adaptation thesis valorises or obscures various forms of injustice or whether and how adaptive migration might be utilised as a means for realising the right to the city.

As Delaney has also argued, nature itself as an artefact of law and can thus be examined from the standpoint of legal geography. In this respect, it is conceivable to examine the legal geography of climate change and migration by asking about the legal constitution of the 'climates', 'environments' and 'natures' that are implicated in migration. What for example is the legal status of environmental degradation? What are the legal geographies that underpin land degradation? Who or what is responsible for environmental degradation? And what kinds of conclusions can be drawn about legal geographies of environmental degradation and migration? These are only preliminary suggestions for examining the legal geographies of climate change and migration. No doubt many other possibilities exist. But as a starting point, we feel these lines of inquiry stand to offer a unique perspective to the rapidly expanding and increasingly topical issue of climate change and migration.

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