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Policy Briefing Note Nr. 1: Speaking about climate change and migration – ambivalences in the debate and their impact on policy making

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Background

The current discourse on climate change and migration is characterised by a set of contradictory arguments, feeding into a complex debate. What are the most salient features that contribute to this complexity? This policy briefing note identifies the main ambivalences in the debate and comes up with food for thought about what could be done (better). The salient feature are:

- Missing data and missing definitions of climate change and migration
- The framing of migration either as adaptation or as “loss and damage”
- A missing normative compass of global solidarity
- A concentration of the debate on the Global South - Turning a blind-eye to resource-hungry forms of migration and mobility in the Global North
- A lack of interdisciplinary research

Challenge

For a long time now the conversation around climate-related migration seems to have been characterized by major ambivalences and contradictions that frame the open discourse in various ways and make policy decisions difficult. Historically, the lack of data on the regional effects of global climate change was used as an explanation for slow political action. Nowadays it has become clear that nature is already stepping up with a “new normal”: wildfires, droughts, floods and changed rainfall patterns are experienced all over Europe.

Both the most recent report on climate change by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and the World Migration Report by IOM (International Organisation for Migration) put the slow-onset impacts of climate change in the center of their analysis and predict an increase in migration in the future. Increasingly, environmental degradation exacerbated by climate change - according to their prognoses - will provoke mass migration in many parts of the world. By now, it is widely acknowledged that migration can work as an adaptation strategy or a solution on the

individual level and that migration and mobility are normal features in many parts of the world. In fact, immobility, often labelled as “trapped populations”, is considered a possible hindrance to sustainable development. But what about the relationship between migration and climate change when it comes to more large-scale dynamics, such as the predicted inhabitability of regions due to droughts or to the fragile, transnational organisation of food systems? Which features and arguments contribute to the politicization of the debate on the nexus between climate change and migration and how could policies possibly respond to them?

First, there is no standard definition for when mobility starts to become migration. In addition, very little is known about regional tipping points at which climate change turns landscapes into places to leave – we have little localized data considering local responses to environmental change, vulnerabilities and migration as an adaptation strategy. What is needed is for local knowledge to become part of the quantitative documentation of the dynamics.

Second, while attempts have been made to politically frame migration as part of “loss and damages” (see for example the Cancun agreement), migration scholars reject the definition of migration as a “problem”. This normative bias is among the major ambivalences in the discourse: how to judge migration? Is it a loss and, consequentially, should it be compensated? If so, who is responsible for the damages and who should be paying what? For which time period should there be compensation and to whom? As these are tricky arguments, which may also hide home-grown political failures, the debate on climate justice and attribution research risks ending up stuck either in accusations or justifications.

Third, we do not have a normative compass for how to deal with global changes that play out very differently on the local level. Which groups of people, which regions and which cultures should receive the most attention and which vulnerable groups should be helped? We do not have global social policies, nor do we have a globally accepted international organisation that could decide on the prioritisation of support and the allocation of resources. In consequence, a heterogenous field of private actors, NGOs and state institutions has evolved over the past 20 years, leading to a cacophonous debate with little binding political decision-making on the way.

Fourth, the debate on the relationship between climate change and migration has largely concentrated on mobilities in the Global South and people migrating there. What has not been in the focus until now are resource-consuming forms of mobility that have evolved in the countries of the Global North. Here, international mobility has expanded strongly with globalisation, be it in the form of tourism or international exchange. Here, the expectations of large parts of the population to be mobile any time and at any costs has become part of a lifestyle. We must consider the fact that such mobility-expectations eat up precious resources and that they also contribute to heightened temperatures on the planet. A focus of action should thus be on technologies for more sustainable mobility and on societal transformation.

Fifth, interdisciplinary research is missing, leading to silo-thinking when looking for solutions. The relationship between climate change and migration confronts us with wicked problems that are located on different scales of agency and that involve a variety of institutional players. Not only we do see heterogenous spatial realities that intersect, but also time is a crucial factor when it comes to migration-decision-making: if individuals do not see a perspective in their place of living they are likely to find a solution abroad. Smart policies must act locally on short-term problems with a globally long-term strategy.

Responding to the challenge

What is needed now is a debate on the contradictions outlined here which would underscore the debate on climate change and migration with a special focus on the dimension of climate justice. More interdisciplinary research is needed that includes sustainable, local perspectives and local knowledge.

Policy makers must move away from ‘one-size-fits-all’ schematic solutions that are based on technological inventions of the Global North and should watch out for long-term participatory approaches that may include migration as an adaptation strategy. Also, the debate should address a full range of entangled migration and mobility patterns: for example the resource-consuming mobility expectations of many people in the Global North.

Suggested further readings

IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on climate change). 2022. Climate Change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerabilities. <https://www.ipcc.ch>. Zugriffen: 14. April 2022.

Chazanoël, M.T. and A. Randall. 2021. Migration and the slow-onset impacts of climate change: Taking stock and action. In *World Migration Report 2022*, Hrsg. M. McAuliffe und A. Triandafyllidou, Genf: International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Hillmann, Felicitas et al. 2022. Climate change – impact on migration. Research Brief C1. Vernetzungsprojekt „Paradigmenwechsel“ am Institut für Stadt- und Regionalplanung. Berlin: TU Berlin. https://www.isr.tu-berlin.de/fileadmin/i40_typo3/Research-Brief_climate_public_04_2022.pdf.

Felicitas Hillmann unter Mitarbeit von Matthias Tang und Felipe Argüello Guerra: DIFIS-Studie: Forschungsstand und Forschungsbedarfe zum Zusammenhang von Klimawandel, Migration und Sozialpolitik: <https://www.difis.org/institut/publikationen/publikation/22>

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