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COMMENT

Critical approaches to climate-induced migration research and solutions

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary we explore the confluence of factors shaping climate-induced migration and the need for comprehensive solutions grounded in historical and systemic understandings. We argue that climate change, colonial legacies, and geopolitical policies significantly influence migration patterns, particularly for historically marginalised communities. We call for scholars to develop holistic frameworks that consider environmental, political, historical, and economic factors while advocating for the legal recognition and protection of migrants and people displaced by climate impacts. Drawing on examples of internal migration and displacement in the United States and refugee camps globally, we highlight the complexities of resettlement. We propose integrated approaches that include legal reforms, economic reparations, and community-based solutions to address the root causes and effects of climate-induced migration. Our commentary emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary strategies to promote climate resilience and self-determination for affected communities. We advocate for narrative shifts and structural transformations to meet the global challenge, and opportunities, of climate-induced migration.

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Introduction

Climate change is increasingly acknowledged as a powerful intensifier of human mobility, including migration and displacement. Climate change also intensifies inequality, with poor and historically excluded populations disproportionately displaced in the wake of climate-related disasters (Burzyński et al. 2019; Islam and Winkel 2017). Further, the resettlement of climate-displaced people is fraught with complexities that extend beyond mere physical relocation. The current dynamics of migration and resettlement are tied to colonial histories and ongoing foreign policies by Western and other major global powers, which entrench colonially-produced inequality. Extractive economies further fuel inequality. Here, we argue for the need for academic and research institutions, civil society, and governments to understand and address in historically informed and holistic ways the

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complexity of issues that characterise climate-induced migration. We use the term *climate-induced migration*, a term increasingly adopted by academic, governmental, and intergovernmental organisations, to avoid attributing a singular, totalising influence to climate-related mobility. Instead, we acknowledge that climate relates to migration in various ways. For example, climate may be a primary driver of displacement, such as when rising sea levels render inhabited areas unlivable. In other cases, climate exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities, serving as a tipping point for migration decisions. We use the terms migration and migrants as umbrella terms for "movement from a place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently and for a variety of reasons" (IOM n.d., 132, 137). In what follows, we highlight structural transformations and narrative strategies needed to address climate-induced migration, foster migrants' self-determination, and foster climate resilience in communities. We urge scholars to register their expertise in collaboration with peers in neighbouring fields as well as artists, activists, and policymakers.

Towards complex models of the drivers of climate-induced migration

The climate crisis is now interacting with and exacerbating factors that have long led to environmental displacement, including resource extraction (e.g. deforestation), environmental degradation (e.g. dam construction), and conservation-induced displacement, which have disproportionately impacted poor and racialized populations across the Global North and Global South, including Indigenous peoples and communities that have already been displaced due to environmental, political, and economic factors (Lunstrum, Bose, and Zalik 2016). Additionally, contrary to common perception, climate-induced migration can result from preemptive displacement due to anticipated climate changes rather than direct environmental changes, and these preemptive migrations are shaped by past patterns of migration (Parola 2020; Bose 2016).

These factors complicate the development of environmental or climate refugees as an officially recognised category in international law. Their absence as a category of vulnerability remains despite debates in the late 1990s and its re-emergence as a critical issue today (IOM n.d.; UNHCR n.d.-a). The current international definition of refugees does not account for those forced to flee due to climate change or environmental degradation. In contrast, legally binding protocols, such as the Kampala Convention for Africa (Soares 2018), and other policies in South America and Asia, increasingly provide protections for internally displaced people accounting for climatic and environmental factors, even as the primary driver for such displacement is conflict. This inability to administratively deal with the large numbers implied by a wider definition creates a "ghost category" of individuals who remain unprotected and unrecognised by the law. Part of the problem is resistance from organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to expand the category of refugees to include environmental or climate refugees due to practical concerns over capacity and the enormity of the challenge, as well as the unevenness in how the burden is shared. We see this too at the national level where states, in their functions as gatekeepers, are resistant to expanding refugee rights and categories, such as the reluctance to grant asylum based on gender or sexual orientation (Musalo 2010). Accounting for the interlocking set of factors that drive climate-induced migration can contribute to radically different frameworks with which to understand climate-induced migrants as a category, but also for the legal, institutional, and infrastructural transformations needed to protect people displaced by climate change. We should consider, for example, climate reparation frameworks highlighting the moral and ethical obligations of major carbon emitters like the U.S., China, and Western Europe to those disproportionately affected by climate change (Sheller 2020).

To begin to make progress in terms of both legal protections and structural change, we need to move beyond reductionist framings of climate-induced migration solely as a result of climate change, overlooking other interlocking and aggravating causes like political unrest, economic instability, and deeply embedded inequality stemming from centuries of colonial, patriarchal, and racial injustice (Chowdhury 2021). These systems of exploitation are foundational to the current

climate crisis and to perpetuating economic disparities and environmental degradation that spur displacement. Indeed, simplistic explanations for the drivers of climate-induced migration elide Western responsibility for political and economic issues in affected regions that have created the conditions for displacement, in addition to the ways that unfettered consumption drives environmental degradation. These conditions have created deep "loss and damage" that exacerbates and hastens displacement and migration (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2019).

While the issue of climate-induced migration is often couched in terms of North–South migration, most displacement is internal, including in the United States. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva, in 2020, the United States ranked fifth globally for individuals internally displaced due to climate events (IDMC 2021). Thus, there is a discrepancy between the perception of refugees as individuals fleeing across international borders and the reality of those displaced within their own country due to climate hazards. Within the United States, climate-induced migrants are not legible within the broader context of migration and displacement discussions nor is the United States legible as a nation of significant climate displacement. As in Hernández (2024), we point to the contradictory stances of anti-immigrant politicians like Governors Ron DeSantis of Florida and Greg Abbott of Texas. These politicians have made headlines for transporting migrants to liberal-leaning areas as political stunts, all the while ignoring the vulnerability of their own states' residents to climate-induced displacements. Florida and Texas are particularly susceptible to hurricanes, extreme heat, and other climate-related disasters, with Texas leading the nation in climate-related deaths over the past nine years (NSC Injury Facts n.d). These political moves further deny the potential for refugee populations to revitalise abandoned or declining areas, pushing back against apocalyptic narratives to highlight the benefits that displaced people can bring to new communities. However, for these benefits to be realised, local and state governments must significantly invest in developing plans and infrastructures to resettle and integrate people displaced by climate disasters.

Complicating resettlement

Bose's (2024) discussion of "nexus dynamics" illustrates how refugee resettlement can go wrong. Refugee camps, such as the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, Dadaab in Kenya, and Zatari in Jordan, house significant numbers of people in conditions of heightened vulnerability. These camps, initially intended for temporary shelter, have grown into large settlements facing issues like public health crises and political instability, on top of the environmental vulnerabilities. The plight of refugees at Cox's Bazar camp is particularly illustrative of the multifaceted crises faced by displaced people, including public health crises (COVID-19, cholera, malaria), environmental factors (monsoon rains, mudslides, fires, cyclones), and political tensions within the country and the region. Bose (2024) shows how various crises intersect, complicating response efforts and highlighting the need for a holistic understanding of displacement factors beyond treating them in isolation.

The case of the Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana further illustrates the challenges of resettlement in the context of differences in values, and the absence of deep holistic understandings of community contexts in planning (Baurick 2022). This community, having lost 98% of its land through sea level rise, was awarded a $48 million HUD grant for resettlement, marking a significant but challenging attempt at addressing climate-induced resettlement. The resettlement process faced numerous challenges, leading to criticisms about the poor quality of the new homes and the overall management of the funds, raising questions about where the money went and highlighting the complexities of planning and executing resettlement projects (Baurick 2023). Further, the resettlement effort revealed profound differences in the values and worldviews that underlie ideas about what a successful resettlement should look like (Naquin 2023). Western perspectives prioritise individual reasoning and a hierarchy of man within society, often leading to a placeless understanding of community that can be moved from one location to another without loss. In contrast, many Indigenous perspectives value relationality, emphasising a holistic relationship between humans and the

environment, where knowledge and ethics are derived from a deep interconnectedness with all beings, suggesting a profound unity of life (Chowdhury 2020).

This clash of values, between viewing migration as moving bodies from one point to another versus understanding migration as maintaining a network of relationships that transcend physical space, is at the heart of the challenges such as the one faced by Isle de Jean Charles. The failure to acknowledge and incorporate the Indigenous perspective on relationality and place results in resettlement efforts that do not fully address the needs of those displaced by climate change, as well as the needs of Indigenous peoples on whose land resettlement occurs. A deeper understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems, ethics, and struggles for self-determination could provide valuable insights into how to better support communities facing climate-induced displacement. This includes recognising the importance of not just physical relocation but also the preservation of community ties, cultural practices, and the interconnectedness of life that defines a place and its people (Chowdhury 2020).

The case of Puerto Ricans displaced by Hurricane Maria also shows the challenges and the multifaceted solutions needed to help and protect climate-displaced people. Holyoke, Massachusetts was a key site for resettled Puerto Rican migrants, receiving, according to Massachusetts government communications, a 10% population increase shortly after Hurricane Maria. This influx put a strain on local resources and exposed a lack of preparedness and capacity to deal with such sudden demographic changes (Vargas-Ramos and Venator-Santiago 2019). Poverty, housing shortages, and a lack of coordinated response from federal to local levels, exacerbated by political and bureaucratic hurdles, illustrate some of the challenges many municipalities will face amidst increasing climate change-induced displacement. However, the case of displaced Puerto Ricans, as in Isle de Jean Charles, point to the importance of kinship and social networks in the initial response to the needs of climate-induced migrants. This along with the establishment of a "one-stop" Welcome Centre in Holyoke proved effective in the short-term.

Paths forward

Our discussion so far suggests the need for a just and historically informed overhaul of the global political economy, administrative frameworks, and social systems in order to understand, prepare for, and address climate-induced migration. To address rising migration driven by climate change, we need a holistic research framework that accounts for Western policies' historical and ongoing contributions to the crisis. A comprehensive strategy could include measures like legal protections, economic reparations, a shift towards practices that address the underlying causes of climate-induced migration, and efforts to counter the societal discourses that redirect attention away from the root causes of climate-induced migration. In our concluding remarks, we reflect on some possible paths forward.

A holistic and structural response to climate displacement that is attuned to local and regional needs, while addressing the many interlocking dimensions of the issue is needed. Paths forward must address the disproportionate impact of climate-induced displacement on the Global South. We note, for example, that over 70% of the world's refugees and internally displaced people come from the most climate-vulnerable countries, predominantly in Africa and Asia (UNHCR n.d.-b). Climate mitigation investments in wealthy Western countries like the U.S. are not just necessary for reducing carbon emissions, but also a way for the largest carbon emitters to be accountable for their role in the climate crises. Still, we need to be cautious of an over-reliance on technological fixes as a way to address climate change. Such solutions tend to follow path dependencies that serve the interests of massively wealthy people, companies, and states, and may therefore not break out of the feedback loops that maintain acute inequality at multiple scales.

We underscore the importance of considering not just immediate but also long-term solutions and strategies for addressing migration driven or intensified by environmental changes and conflicts. In the short-term, improved community-based systems, such as Welcome Centres can

not only provide emergency services like shelter and food, but function to integrate migrants into the community. Like those developed in Holyoke after Hurricane Maria (Vargas-Ramos and Venator-Santiago 2019), such centres can be designed to offer a more comprehensive support system, including education and housing, through direct collaboration between community-based organisations, state agencies, and other public institutions. Crucially, such systems can foster a sense of belonging and home, even if it is for a temporary period.

Long-term, restorative justice and climate reparations approaches hold promise. The emphasis of these practices on the need for accountability, not only for those experiencing climate change on the ground, but also in concert with those who worsen the crisis through policies prioritising economic growth over ecological and human well-being. For example, "A Text of Repair," aims to mobilise various stakeholders, including journalists, activists, and artists, to address gendered, class, and Indigenous marginalizations (https://www.waysofrepair.com/texts-of-repair). This project seeks to challenge dominant narratives and promote reparative justice by centreing the voices and needs of historically excluded communities, avoiding reductive portrayals of trauma, and emphasising the importance of storytelling in conveying the human experience of climate change and displacement. Such projects further counter the devaluation of the expertise of Global South scholars and scientists (Sultana 2024).

In another example, the "right to stay" framework, developed by the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, encompasses the right to safely resettle and the right to remain in place amidst climate crises (Ayazi and Elsheikh 2023). This framework is supported by three key demands: legal rights for all people displaced by climate crises, climate reparations (payments to Global South countries as compensation for the impacts of Global North's exploitative activities), and just transitions that democratise, decentralise, diversify economic activity, and redistribute resources and power (including in ways that also address Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination). We highlight the importance of reparations as an active world-building measure involving new institutions, norms, and relationships aimed at fostering just transitions. Co-governance, land reform, public ownership of transportation and utilities, and worker-led organising are essential components of reparations and just transitions. Furthermore, we need a reconsideration of the role of local and regional currencies in constructing a green economy, advocating for practices of self-determination that challenge the dominance of the US dollar.

Policy and legal frameworks are urgently needed to protect those displaced by climate change. As displacement risks grow, it is vital to recognise that vulnerabilities are economically, politically, and environmentally constructed. Ignoring this systemic nature mirrors the broader denial of the climate crisis – a denial humanity cannot afford as its impacts intensify. Counter to anti-immigrant laws and practices that overlook the basic principle of treating others as one would want to be treated – embodied in the Golden Rule – principles of fairness, self-reflection, and reciprocity should guide our approach to handling the challenges posed by climate-induced displacement. Anti-immigrant attitudes and laws, which across time and national contexts, have tracked with increases in immigration (Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes 2017; Ford 2011; Kaufmann and Goodwin 2018), are reinforced through reductive and polarising discourses.

The discourse around climate-induced migration is no exception. Climate-induced migration is often framed by a binary that pits the "desired West" against the "wretched rest," invoking images of non-white migrants as threats to Western nations, echoing Malthusian fears of overpopulation. Fears of overpopulation and the burden placed on poor and global majority women through population control regimes reveal a contradiction with pronatalist policies in wealthy nations (Hartmann 2014; Ojeda, Sasser, and Lunstrum 2020). Such discourses and related policy responses replicate colonial arrangements that restricted immigration of colonised peoples but afforded colonisers' freedom of movement (Bashford 2014; Cook-Martín and FitzGerald 2010). There is also the dichotomy of "good refugees" versus "bad migrants," which highlights how racial background, country of origin, legal status, and the reasons for displacement inform how individuals are categorised and treated. These framings reinforce stereotypes and xenophobia, where migrants are seen

through a lens of criminality, undesirability, and national security (Ahuja 2021). Such discourses, and the policies they advance, are failing large populations currently displaced by the climate crisis and reinforcing structures that characterise the climate crisis itself (Hartmann 2010).

As the number of climate displaced people increases, these discourses must be countered. Towards this, we close by highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the sciences and the humanities to develop systemic and empathic understandings of the causes, consequences, and experiential dimensions of climate-induced migration. As a case in point, poetry is capable of embodying different perspectives and reaching people emotionally and psychologically (Leavy 2020). Both a mode of analysis and a mode of representation, poetry is a methodology of embodiment through which individuals can reflect on their own positionality, choices, ethics, and actions that contribute to or counter the discourses that lead to bad policy (Wolfe 2021; Sylvain 2022). Indeed, storytelling, whether in written or oral forms, or through art, photography, and film, plays an important role in crossing ideological and cultural borders, and in shifting narratives. Existing interdisciplinary projects including MoMA's "Crossing Borders," the "Humanizing Deportation" initiative at UC Davis, and the "Undocumented Migration Project," provide models for future projects focused on climate-induced migration. Emotions can function as powerful forces of change, and the affective weight of humanities' methodologies and practices can set in motion environmental justice policies (Chowdhury and Philipose 2016; Kim 2021).

To close, addressing climate-induced migration at multiple scales requires comprehensive and historically informed approaches that recognise the interdependent forces shaping displacement. By integrating legal, institutional, and infrastructural reforms with an emphasis on restorative justice, community-based solutions, and ethical narrative practices we can better protect and support those displaced by climate change.

Data availability statement

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