

Conference on
“Environmental Change and Migration:
From Vulnerabilities to Capabilities”

5-9 December 2010

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Expert bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have claimed that climate change induces and reinforces the deterioration of living conditions in many parts of the world. Moreover, they have also warned of a dramatic increase in the flows of so-called environmental refugees. This prediction was recently borne out by the plight of the Maldivians, some of whom are already emigrating to Sri Lanka to escape the permanent threat of inundation, which reached the television news all over the world. What is often overlooked, however, is that the impact of climate change goes well beyond land-loss due to rising sea levels, and that it is not just climate change but environmental degradation in general that imperils the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. Such degradation often results, for example, from overuse of natural resources, population pressure, and unsustainable development programmes. Current climate change – without much doubt itself predominantly anthropogenic – often aggravates such degradation and puts additional pressures on living conditions and the environment. As climate change increases exposure to risks, experts and observers in the mass media have claimed that this vulnerability will be a major factor driving future migration flows, particularly in the global South. But as plausible as this argument may be, it neglects the fact that migration may function not simply as an expression of vulnerability but also of capability.

Migration as an adaptation strategy – in certain circumstances – serves to increase life-chances by insuring against risks such as crop failure or income loss more generally. Or it may open new possibilities for earning a living. In other words, migration may not simply be a reactive response to external shocks but a proactive choice to improve living conditions. It may also be a response to the lack of “voice”, that is, expressing dissent and engaging in improvements *in situ*. Migration is only one of many adaptation strategies, including infrastructural measures (e.g. building dykes and embankments), or agricultural innovations (e.g. floating gardens to grow produce in areas threatened by inundation). Furthermore, there is no linear causality between environmental degradation and migration. Local degradation can just as equally contribute to a decrease of migration flows, because people lose or are deprived of assets necessary for geographical mobility. The major emphasis on refugees in current discussions assumes that environmental stress is confined to places of origin. Yet environmental change in places of destination and along migration routes equally influences migration patterns. Keeping such considerations in mind, the crucial question, then, is how environmental change impacts the interplay between vulnerabilities on the one hand and capabilities on the other hand, and how this relationship affects mobility patterns. A transnational perspective seems appropriate to complement the capabilities perspective with regard to mobility, in particular when it comes to cross-border migration. Thinking in nation-

state categories implicitly perpetuates the image that states are not only the main regulators of migration regarding exit and admission – which is certainly true – but are the main and primary unit in which social life is contained. This fallacy of conflating social life almost exclusively with the nation-state has been called “methodological nationalism”. Such a perception does not support a systematic examination of the transnational dynamics, including sub-national dynamics, inherent in migration processes and in environmental degradation.

The conference will serve as a platform to facilitate intensive discussions on a number of open questions and methodological challenges. Invited participant-researchers represent a wide range of fields, such as sociology, ethnology, gender studies, geography, economy, development, international relations, health care, geology, and climate or environmental studies. The conference will bring together not only junior and senior scientists, but also experts from all sectors concerned with environmental change and migration, state representatives as well as non-state actors.

The conference is structured along seven panels, which cover the following areas: (1) The contentious issues of the environment migration debate, and the need to address migratory strategies within the broader livelihood context, and beyond climate change; (2) The vulnerability context from a natural science perspective – making climate change modulation and its uncertainties accessible to social scientists; (3) The vulnerability context in light of the sustainable livelihood approach from a social scientific perspective; (4) Results from field research on the relationship between vulnerabilities and capabilities in the case of environmentally induced migration; (5) Promising approaches to incorporate the capabilities perspective into applied methodologies for the study of environmentally induced migration; (6) Results from field research focusing on environmental refugees in a more narrow sense, and on the question how the mobility perspective can be applied to humanitarian crises; (7) The political dimension of the acquired findings and insights, and the role and function of (social) sciences and (social) scientists in public debates and for policy-making.

Call for Papers

We invite submissions for Panels 2 to 7, and particularly welcome applications which focus on empirical findings and methodological issues (Panels 4 to 6). The guiding questions for the respective panels are:

Panel (2): What do we know about climate and environmental change in developing and developed regions of the world? Contributions should reflect the vulnerability context in accordance with the sustainable livelihood approach from the natural science perspective. They should seek to make climate change projections, including the uncertainties of climate change modulation, accessible to participants from the social sciences.

Panel (3): What impact do climate and environmental change have on the livelihoods of vulnerable groups? Contributions should reflect the vulnerability context in light of the sustainable livelihood approach from a social scientific perspective. The discussions are to focus on the basic categories of areas and persons which have been identified as highly affected by climate change. The categories include fields crucial for livelihood such as food and water systems, basic services such as health and housing systems, and income generation.

Panel (4): What do field research and case studies tell us about vulnerabilities and capabilities with regard to mobility? We interpret mobility as a potential asset that might have been consciously chosen to mitigate the effects of environmental change. As vulnerabilities and capabilities do not depend only on environmental change, contributions

should consider structures of inequality and how relevant institutions, policies, and processes feed into constraints and opportunities for mobility.

Panel (5): **How can we support and benefit from the capabilities perspective in our research on environmentally induced migration?** The session will deliberate upon approaches that promise to incorporate the capabilities perspective more deeply into applied methodologies. Contributions should aim to establish a basis from which the academic community can begin to develop an elaborated approach to the questions at stake.

Panel (6): **How does the mobility perspective apply to the humanitarian crisis caused by climate and environmental change?** Contributions should present results from field research that focuses on those who could be called environmental refugees in a more narrow sense. These are the victims of sudden and extreme weather events, whose plight raises the question whether and to what extent a capabilities approach can be applied to their situation as well.

Panel (7): **What is the role and function of (social) sciences and (social) scientists in public debates and for policy-making?** Contributions should analyze the political dimension of the acquired findings and insights. Participants are invited to analyze policy approaches, and to examine how a more sophisticated exploration of environmentally induced migration would feed back into those approaches.

Deadlines and Further Information

Interested applicants are strongly advised to read the extended concept note regarding the conference before submitting abstracts:

www.uni-bielefeld.de/tdrc/ag_comcad/downloads/envimig2010_confnote.pdf

For further information on the conference and the series visit the conference websites:

[www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/tdrc/ag_comcad/conferences/envimig2010.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/tdrc/ag_comcad/conferences/envimig2010.html) or
www.esf.org/activities/esf-conferences/partnerships/esf-zif-bielefeld-conferences.html

The permanent link for the call for papers is:

www.uni-bielefeld.de/tdrc/ag_comcad/downloads/envimig2010_cfp.pdf

The conference will be held in English. Proposals for papers and a brief CV should be submitted to: envimig-esf@uni-bielefeld.de

The deadline for all proposals (max. 300 words) is **August 15, 2010**.

All paper and poster submissions will be reviewed before being accepted. Notification of the decision will be sent by e-mail no later than August 30, 2010. Full papers are expected by **October 31, 2010**.

We are making all efforts to ensure funding to reimburse the travel costs of conference participants.