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Tracing Social Inequalities in Environmentally-Induced Migration

Concept Note / Call

The social inequalities between world regions, countries, geographical regions, organisations, groups and categories of people involved in environmental and climate-induced migration constitute the core thematic foci of the 2nd 2012 ESF-Bielefeld University research conference. Environmentally-induced migration has become a major theme in contemporary climate change politics and research. This is owing, in part, to the increasing prevalence of climate change and related displacements in recent years. In 2010, the floods in northern Pakistan alone affected over 20 million persons. The same year a total of 373 natural disasters destroyed the livelihoods of about 208 million people. In 2011, the East African drought affected nearly 15.8 million people. Moreover, small, low-lying islands are permanently threatened by sea-level rise. Such events and processes can result in not only short-term displacement, but also more permanent migration in which people search for better living conditions or income opportunities to support those back home.

However, not all regions or social groups are susceptible to climate and environmental change as a trigger for migration in the same way. Nor do all regions and groups have a comparable influence on policy decisions or public discourse that might affect them. Those regions, groups, organisations and states affected by environmental change have very unequal material and immaterial resources to respond to displacement, impelled migration and its causes. Differences in vulnerability and capacities to address these challenges are partly due to the fact that geographical areas are differentially exposed to climate and environmental harms, but also because their exposure is a consequence of their socio-economic position, class, ethnicity, race and gender. Not only are regions and countries heterogeneous in their societal, technological and financial capacities to adapt, to mitigate, and to influence international political conditions that are favourable for them. But societies themselves are also heterogeneous and comprised of differentially positioned societal structures and groups; hence we would expect differential capabilities to cope with environmental change and choose coping strategies such as migration. In other words, social inequalities are at stake regarding the relative position of states and non-state actors in the global arena as well as within states and between their respective social groups.

The central questions of the conference therefore are:

1. In what ways do social heterogeneities and social inequalities contribute to social vulnerability to environmental and climate change and the likelihood that some people or groups are more prone to migrate than others?
2. What are the social mechanisms that shape the unequal distribution of resources, the social status of the persons involved, and the capacities to make decisions, and how do these differences in endowments influence the responses to environmental change and migration?
3. How does the legal framing of migration processes from environmentally degraded areas impact on social inequalities, i.e. when and why are people regarded as internally displaced versus voluntary migrants, or why - in case of cross-border migration - do they opt for illegal versus legal migration or for a refugee status, and how does the legal framing feedback into the status of migrants at the destination place? What are the implications of legal framing for social inequalities?
4. How does the perception of social inequalities and social justice between regions, states and groups impact upon who is held responsible for climate change and action, and the policies designed to cope with environmental deterioration and migration?
5. What is the role of state interventions to combat social inequalities in environmentally degraded and disaster prone areas for adaptation and environmental migration with respect to the norms adhered to and the ideas of equality headed for?

We propose that environmental migration can be fruitfully understood by accounting for social inequalities on the local, national and global scales. Here we distinguish between three dimensions of social inequality: inequalities in resources, status, and power. First, **resource inequalities** refer to the uneven distribution of material resources such as access to land or financial capital as well as immaterial resources such as social capital (reciprocity, solidarity, trust), or professional skills. Groups, organisations and states are characterised by vast resource inequalities in dealing with environmental migration and concomitant conflicts. Second, **status inequalities** concern the uneven distribution of social capital, socio-economic positions, lifestyle, and legal status. Status is important because it is often embedded into and backed by legal provisions, which has a direct consequence on legal recognition and rights. Third, **power inequalities** refer to the unequal access to decision-making power as well as to the capacity to shape belief systems and command ways of thinking between the governed and those who govern. In this way, power inequalities find expression not only in formal politics but also in agenda-setting and the ways in which specific political issues are framed. All three dimensions of social inequalities are interlinked empirically. Also, they equally touch the question of **the perceptions of social justice** on local, national and global scales. This relates to the question of who is going to carry the social costs of adapting to and mitigating environmental and climate change or the lack thereof, and whether policy interventions are perceived as mitigating or increasing social inequalities.

On the **local scale**, inequalities in material resources and legal status have explanatory power to understand mobility, i.e. why some households (or household members) of the same place of origin migrate while others do not, where they migrate and whether such migrations are transboundary, legal or illegal / irregular. Social inequalities also have consequences for remittance behaviour and can help explain why some migrants and households benefit from remittances while others do not. Differences in material resources (e.g., financial means to reach attractive destinations), human resources (e.g., skills demanded in labour markets), cultural aspects (e.g., sense of belonging to certain groups), and legal status (e.g., change of status and legal claims when crossing national or administrative boundaries) have to be considered, among

others. Moreover, for some households remittances might improve livelihood conditions, while at the same time they may lead to increased inequality and social fragmentation, thus deteriorating their collective capacities for adaptation. In general, persons and groups are affected differentially along lines of gender, class, age, place, ethnicity and religion – to name only a few.

On the **national scale**, belief systems, public policies and laws that frame the migration option have to be assessed with regard to their relation to migration. Regulations concerning access to land and land tenure are crucial in this regard. Resource inequalities play a crucial role with regard to the capacities and willingness of authorities to support adaptation processes, including migration as a form of adaptation or resettlement schemes. Power inequalities condition how decisions are reached as regards the redistribution of resources that enable adaptation to environmental and climate change and they influence the distribution of adaptation funds across spatial and amongst social groups. This includes the decision how much preference is given to in-situ options versus the mobility option. Finally, inequalities in legal status and decision-making power can carry severe consequences for planned relocation in particular, whether relocation is forced or enabled by specific policy intervention. Generally, social inequalities play a role in the framing of issues, the ideological underpinnings of political debates over environmental change and adaptation.

A similar set of concerns arise at the **global scale**. For instance, we might ask why and how the international policy agenda related to climate change and migration is framed the way it is. What sorts of resources are mobilised to enable some framings over others? And how do vast inequalities between the world regions influence the discussion over social justice and the responsibilities for climate change and migration? Crucially, the issue of generating and redistributing resources for adaptation globally and, even more important in the run-up to that, the decision whether to focus on mitigation or adaptation is a question of power and thus of power inequalities. On the global scale, the interests of differently powerful nation states, their respective clubs, international organisations, multinational companies and opinion leaders amongst non-state actors are candidates for shaping the international framing and programmes. These again feed back into national and local debates and decisions, and vice versa. The global scale also reveals the great disparities of local resources to adapt in-situ or to opt for the mobility option. Communities in poor countries do not only have fewer capacities to adapt, but also to leave, whilst citizens of OECD states are often endowed with much greater options (legal status) regarding where to go to.

Finally, the question of social inequalities and measures to address them is inherently linked to perceptions and definitions of social justice. The notion of justice, for example, could refer to the individual's 'capability' to make choices in a context that guarantees his/her freedom of action. Contributions on normative contents of policy interventions such as **human rights** and other recognised standards in the realm of migration and environmental change therefore need to clearly address how such policies impact (or fail to impact) upon social inequalities on local, national and/or global scales empirically.

In addition, the conference will feature an introductory session on **migration theories** and how those can be made fruitful for the analysis of environmentally-induced migration. This panel seeks to familiarize all those with migration theories who are working on environmentally induced migration, but who are not (yet) familiar with the field of migration studies. The contributions will include neo-classical, historical-structural and network approaches, considerations on structure and agency, and the relationship between exit, voice and loyalty. Submissions to this first panel are also welcome.

Further information on the call for papers, deadlines and requirements for participation are available at www.esf.org/conferences/12402.