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Challenging Eurocentric Perceptions of Mobility Justice through Climate Diaries

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“What is climate change for you?”

This was the question we posed to our research participants in the city of Saint Louis, Senegal to answer visually. Given alarmist racialized portrayals of so-called ‘climate migrants’ as an invasive threat from the Global South to Global North we examined how visual methods can challenge western production of knowledge around the climate crisis. Via our methodology of ‘climate diaries’, we asked participants to share photos and perceptions of the climate crisis over a period of time through a WhatsApp group. The photos we received in response reveal the intensity of the phenomenon on their lives. A question that we, as two European academics based in Italy, may struggle to answer as a lived experience, as a concept that directly affects our everyday lives. Perhaps we may think of Venice as it sinks (Elena), or the floods in the UK (Sarah), issues which connote a spatio-temporal distance. But a question, that, as we shall see later in this blog, for our participants is a powerful force in the here and now of their everyday lives. Yet a force that is not purely ‘natural’, but instead intertwined with structural political, economic and cultural factors that worsen the impacts of the climate crisis upon everyday lives.

To ‘de-naturalise’ the climate crisis, often portrayed as natural disasters which invisible both the socio-political responsibilities and the global inequalities at the heart of the crisis, our research draws on sociologist Mimi Sheller’s concept of ‘mobility justice’ (2018). This expands the notion of climate justice, broadening our understanding to include climate change, unsustainable urbanisation and unsustainable bordering systems as a combined crisis. The concept reflects the interconnecting strands that emerge from the interdisciplinary EU funded research project [<https://climateofchange.info/about-the-project/>] *ClimateOfChange* [<https://climateofchange.info/about-the-project/>] : the right to mobility, the right to live in a healthy environment, and the unequal access to such rights across the globe.

We visited Senegal as European academics, adapting a 'live sociology' (Back, 2012) approach, informed by feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, to work with climate activists and people affected by the climate crisis in two localities: Dakar and Saint Louis. Here we focus on one area: Saint Louis to examine how the people living there experience and perceive the effects of climate change upon their lives. St. Louis' geography makes it particularly vulnerable to the climate crisis. The area is highly environmentally fragile and faces concomitant sea level rise, coastal erosion, soil salinization, maritime storms and depletion of fish stocks and biodiversity (IPCC 2014).



Figure 1. Destruction of building that used to house *pirogues* (wooden fishing boats), Guet Ndar

Our main focus was the district of Guet Ndar, one of the most densely populated districts in all of West Africa, this together with its fragility to the climate crisis makes it emblematic of the concept of mobility justice (Sheller, 2018). In this site, the intertwining of climate change, unsustainable urbanisation and unsustainable bordering systems creating an inhospitable environment for those that live there are evident (see figure 1). In addition, people from other areas of Senegal move there to work in the fishing industry. In the main, people from internal rural areas where changes in rainfall patterns, desertification and lack of investment in new technologies are destroying agricultural livelihoods. These are people either seeking to work and return to their home region in Senegal, or to save money for the irregular journey via pirogue across the Atlantic to Spain: the Canary islands [[https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/12/7/senegal-canary-islands-migration-overfishing-coronavirus-restrictions.](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/12/7/senegal-canary-islands-migration-overfishing-coronavirus-restrictions)].

Figure 2 shows the beach at Guet Ndar, where coastal erosion is destroying the buildings. Sand is covered in plastic detritus.



Figure 2. Coastal erosion at Guet Ndar beach

We commence with a focus group (figure 3). Held on the beach in the open air, both for covid safety purposes, as we are researching in the time of the pandemic, and to enter further into the everyday world of the participants. We recognise that the meaning of location can function in different ways for different people, and is produced and reproduced within contested social relations (Herzog, 2005). Indeed, the interview location is both a physical 'space' and a 'place' where power dynamics and social relations, identities and meanings unfold in multiple ways (Gagnon, Jacob and McCabe, 2015). The beach was particularly poignant as, as participants informed us, we were sitting in the site where once a school stood.



Figure 3: Focus group on the beach at Guet Ndar.

During the initial focus group conducted with local people from Guet Ndar, “no choice” was a recurrent and dominant theme that emerged in the discussion of motivations leading people to take the risky pirogue journey to the Canary Islands/Spain. This illegalised journey is seen as a life and death challenge. The Wolof motto for which is: “Barca wala barsakh” - ‘either we get to Barcelona or we die trying’. Literally, Barcelona or the hereafter (see figure 4). There was a fatalistic recognition of the limited options available in Guet Ndar, where land is slowly disappearing before people’s eyes and the fishing industry is being destroyed by changing currents leading fish to migrate elsewhere, as well as EU industrial fishing boats taking the larger, more expensive fish under an agreement between the EU and Senegal. These intertwined factors led people to maintain that often there was ‘no choice’ to stay, even if that may be the preferred option.



Figure 4: Image on wall in Guet Ndar.

Contemporaneously, people we spoke to were recognizant of the unjust border system rendering opportunities to travel elsewhere very limited. The border system keeping them in place, and forcing people to take dangerous journeys across the Atlantic, knowing full well the risks: the hereafter or Spain. What strongly emerged from the focus groups, and subsequent interviews, was that people want only to have the right to travel elsewhere and to RETURN.

Indeed, Nick Van Hear maintains that ‘the most radical response to upheaval in the face of capitalism is to be still, to maintain continuity’ (2017, p. 223), referring to the capacity to choose between moving and staying as ‘moving power’ (2017, p. 222). It is this moving power, embedded within the right to work, to a healthy environment and to stay still, that is missing from the lives of the people in Saint Louis.

So, when we asked our participants 'what does climate change mean for you?' The responses we received via the climate diaries were dramatic. An everyday lived and visual reality of the devastation of the climate crisis on people's lives. The selection of photos below show the degraded and depressing environment, the village disappearing under the sea and the sense of abandonment.



Figure 5. MAMADOU shares this photo of a primary school destroyed by the sea in Guet Ndar.



Figure 6. FATOU – climate change is represented by the ongoing of sea level advance.



Figure 7. MODOU – this photo shows the terrible damage that the area is suffering.
remains of building with turquoise walls, the sea washed up to it and two trees poke up through the water

The treetops in this photo show where once there was land and buildings. All now submerged under the sea, which is still encroaching. As people tell us, the impact of coastal erosion and sea level rise is destroying not only the physical landscape but also livelihoods and memories.

Concluding thoughts

Broadening the concept of Climate Justice to Mobility Justice (Sheller, 2018) reveals how the climate crisis includes a broadened set of civil rights issues, with far-reaching implications beyond the environmental, directly understood. The global disparities highlighted by the crisis are starkly evident in the lives of those in Guet Ndar. The site evidences the mingling of socio-political and environmental abandonments that curtail possibilities to address the injustices, creating a hostile environment. We concur with Achille Mbembe (2020) who calls for the universal right to breathe, meaning not just biological breathing, but full enjoyment of the human experience. We see this as embedded in the right to a healthy environment for all in the widest sense.

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