

COMMENTARY

Bringing migrants' perspectives in 'migration as an adaptation strategy' discourses

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Abstract

Over the last few years, migration is increasingly being framed as an adaptation strategy to deal with climate change, to move away from apocalyptic representations of migration in debates on climate change. While acknowledging the merit of this discourse, this commentary calls for more attention to include migrants' perspectives in debates on environmental migration and reflecting on how such discourses work out in practice. As most studies have focused on regions of origin being impacted adversely by climate change, and the ability/willingness to migrate, the perspectives of migrants themselves and how they feel about their migration and integration, whether internally or internationally, facing slow-onset or sudden climate impacts, have not been discussed thoroughly. This point of view is needed to grasp the preconditions of success for such discourses, as migrants occupy vulnerable positions in immigrant societies, but are pressured to have a 'double engagement' towards both the region of origin and destination.

KEYWORDS

climate adaptation, environmental migration, inclusion

1 | FRAMING MIGRATION AS AN ADAPTATION STRATEGY TO DEAL WITH CLIMATE CHANGE

Facing increased climate change, the body of research and policy-making on environmental migration is rapidly growing (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018). In this body of research, migration is frequently proposed as an adaptation strategy and seen as a solution for dealing with the changing natural environment, through the reduction of demographic pressures and the instalment of transnational practices, such as the sending of remittances (Black et al., 2011; Gemenne, 2010; Gemenne & Blocher, 2016, 2017; Smit & Wandel, 2006). This discourse was stimulated by the urgent need to portray environmental migration in a more positive light, away from catastrophic imaginaries on so-called 'climate refugees' that will 'flood' immigration countries, which is often the case in many western European countries. These discourses aim to prevent the stigmatisation of migration as such, as they give rise to anti-immigrant sentiments and policies (Durand-Delacre et al., 2021; Gemenne & Blocher, 2016; Methmann & Oels, 2015). Furthermore, framing migration as an adaptation strategy put migration on the agenda of climate scientists and reports, such as the influential IPCC reports (IPCC, 2022; Felli & Castree, 2012). Hence, the merit of framing of migration as an adaptation strategy cannot be underestimated.

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The migration as adaptation discourse also received some critiques and adjustments over the years. Proponents pointed at potential pitfalls and maladaptation, to realise the ‘ideal’ of framing migration as an adaptation strategy (Gemenne & Blocher, 2017). Other critics stated that the emergence of this framing could strengthen existing neoliberal migration policies (Felli & Castree, 2012), as remittances—together with other transnational practices—are subject to governance and used to deal with transitioning environments (Fagen, 2006). Adapted frameworks, such as the ‘translocal social resilience perspective’ of Sakdapolrak et al. (2016), gave more attention to how migration should be approached from a translocal perspective to better account for the negative effects for the region of origin, including local dynamics and actors in climate adaptation plans. In a recent study, Sakdapolrak et al. (2023) argued that ‘migration as adaptation’ is pushed to its limits by the interplay of three corresponding core mechanisms: (1) simultaneous and/or over-exposure, (2) immobility, and (3) disconnectedness. The first reason is that migrants may face too many risks and hazards at the same time, which makes it hard to cope with all of them. The second reason is that they may be unable to move to a new place because of factors outside of their control, like legal barriers or lack of resources. The third reason is that they may feel disconnected from their new community, which makes it hard for them to build a new life. Other scholars, such as Radel et al. (2018), studied the underlying assumptions, including the proven impact of diversification strategies to deal with environmental change and life stressors, and its potential relationship to migration within broader structures in society.

These academic responses again focus on the point of view that is especially relevant for regions most affected by climate change and people living there, keeping an eye on climate adaptation of these regions. As a consequence, they do not reflect the experiences, agency and living conditions of migrants themselves (see also Jokisch et al., 2019). Building further on these growing insights in the literature, this commentary is dedicated to highlight the importance of looking at these discourses from migrants’ perspectives and paying attention to their difficulties when making migration decisions, during trajectories, when relocating, and during acculturation processes in the new living environment—considerably jeopardising the successful realisation or understanding of ‘migration as an adaptation strategy’.

2 | MIGRANTS’ PERSPECTIVES AND POSITIONS IN IMMIGRANT SOCIETIES

Despite the growing literature on environmental mobility (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018), it is striking that especially the perspective and agency of migrants themselves seems missing and are underrepresented (see also Jokisch et al., 2019). In many of these discourses, the positions of migrants are automatically assumed to be active agents in the adaptation to climate change and environmental risks, for instance, by diversifying risks in the region of origin and supporting the region of origin through remittances (Radel et al., 2018). However, less is known on how migrants themselves feel entitled, are able and view their role herein, regardless of whether they migrated internally or internationally. Earlier research in Belgium (Blinded for review) showed that the knowledge and capacity to contribute to climate adaptation in the region of origin of a diverse group of international migrants living in Belgium depends on the forms and degrees of capital, both in the region of origin and the immigrant country. This only tackles a small tip of the iceberg, as most environmental migration covers shorter distances and occurs internally or regionally (Zickgraf, 2021). Other research in a small fishing community confronted with rising sea levels in Senegal of Zickgraf (2018) shows how, by studying migrant and non-migrant households, that only a selective group of labour migrant and non-migrant households, namely the wealthiest, could send remittances and increase the adaptive capacity of these households in the country of origin, emphasising the importance to also focus on the situation of migrants. A study in Malawi by Suckall et al. (2017) included both farmers (as potential migrants) and migrants who went to urban areas. The authors found that those who migrated are not the ones that experienced climate shocks, but those with higher capital levels who migrate for better opportunities and a distinct lifestyle and thus do not contribute to adaptive strategies of farmers dealing with environmental stressors. These studies focusing on both internal and international migration indicate the relevance to put more effort into understanding migrants’ views and motivations—when originating from regions confronted with environmental stressors—to ensure that policies are oriented towards the people who need their support the most.

Recognising the large diversification of environmental migration patterns and local adaptive needs and capacities, little is known about migrants’ perspectives and abilities to support their networks and non-migrant households. This is first related to the categorisation and identification of migrants as ‘environmental migrants’, both by themselves and by scholars (Black et al., 2011; Zickgraf, 2021). This applies for instance to the ‘labour migrants’ of the fishing community in Senegal mentioned earlier (Zickgraf, 2018) or large organised migrant flows coming from Morocco to Europe after the Second World War. This research acknowledges the importance of reduced opportunities due to water scarcity and

stresses, and sending remittances, but does not frame this as environmental migration (Ou-Salah et al., 2022; Ou-Salah et al., 2023; Sakdapolrak et al., 2023; Van Praag et al., 2021; Van Praag, 2021a, 2021b; Van Praag, 2023). Nonetheless, even when clearly identified, for example, due to environmental hazards and sudden climate impacts, the lack of migrants' perspectives and support in research and policy is too little considered but needed. For example, after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, a survey of Fussell et al. (2010) found that not all residents returned to the same extent and pace to New Orleans due to housing damage. These findings stress the importance of migrants' perspectives and characteristics, including race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and how this is rooted in larger socioeconomic and political systems. They help to uncover the perspectives and experiences of individuals who may have been overlooked or marginalised in previous studies on environmental migration.

As the position of migrants is insufficiently considered in ongoing research, the added value for receiving societies and communities is mainly theorised in abstract terms. For instance, Gemenne and Blocher (2016) argue that (1) migration is a solution to market imbalances, (2) there are cultural benefits for diversity, and (3) the establishment of migrant communities and transnational migrant networks could foster knowledge exchange and transfer of technologies, which again stimulates economic development. While these arguments sound very promising and fit many policy ideas and ideals, these scholars approach the benefits of migration from a rather macro-level perspective, leaving out micro-level and to a lesser extent meso-level perspectives that could further yield interesting insights on the preconditions in which migration is a successful adaptation strategy for all parties involved.

When approaching this macro-level added value at a micro-level, it appears that migrants' voices, the lack of coordination and support for migrants at all stages of their migration trajectories, are absent. First, concerning migrants' contributions to market imbalances in the immigrant country, many people who migrate searching for better employment and/or educational opportunities, such as in nearby cities or seasonally, and in most cases not even crossing international borders (IPCC, 2022; Zickgraf, 2021). These migration flows are not necessarily adapted to macro-level labour market needs—especially not in the long term—nor to places that are less vulnerable to climate change and/or have more resources to deal with climate change (Jokisch et al., 2019; McLeman & Gemenne, 2018; Sakdapolrak et al., 2023). Second, regarding the added value for diversity in the new immigration region, not all migration results in cultural diversity due to the relatively short distances, and if it does, such cultural diversity is not always positively rewarded or easily established after migration. Migrant integration does not necessarily, and certainly not immediately, result in feelings of sense of belonging and inclusion by migrants, especially given the negative and xenophobic discourses on migration across the globe, accompanied by hostile attitudes, stereotyping and difficult living conditions after migration due to loss of capital and acculturation in a new society (Ellermann, 2020; Esses, 2021). And finally, when looking at the importance for the exchanging of social and financial remittances, little is known about how people involved approach how transnational practices are framed and even 'hijacked' as an adaptation strategy to deal with environmental change in the region of origin, or as part of a development strategy from the immigrant countries (Van Praag et al., 2021; Van Praag, 2021a). Research on remittances related to environmental change insufficiently include the perspective of the sender and receiver, ignoring people's agency (Jokisch et al., 2019; Methmann & Oels, 2015; Meyer & Stroehle, 2023) and the capacities of migrants to send funds to their relatives in the region of origin. Moreover, remittances may not be sent regularly, nor be systematically invested in climate adaptation, or yield in the long-term positive effects for climate adaptation (Carling, 2020; Blinded for review). Rather, they could reinforce existing (gender/social/ethnic/racial) inequalities as not everyone has equal access to such resources, within and between households (Ginty, 2021).

3 | INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND DISCOURSES

By countering negative portrayals of migration in the media, policy, and academic discourses, the preconditions that guarantee the success and/or positive outcomes of promoting migration as an adaptation strategy are lost or under-represented in these discourses. This is especially important as the actions undertaken by migrants are too frequently taken for granted, understudied, and not checked to see whether they are still applicable in practice. Nonetheless, a large part of the success relies on such actions. Many migrants need time to adjust and to (slowly) build up social, cultural and economic capital—needed for sending remittances—in the immigrant country as they must invest in their own acculturation processes, relocation and new society (Ryan et al., 2015; Zickgraf, 2018; Blinded for review). Migrants often have a 'double engagement' to contribute both to the region of origin and to 'integrate' in the immigrant society (Mazzucato, 2008). Apart from financial remittances, knowledge sharing about climate adaptation and climate change discourses between transnational networks are also highlighted as important, attributing migrants

as transformative knowledge agents. However, sharing expertise may be seen as demanding high levels of expertise, and confidence to feel entitled to see oneself as an expert. At the same time, the available expertise in the region of origin is ignored. Furthermore, such knowledge sharing within one's networks assumes that such transfers in the end are translated into practice or reach the powerful and resourceful policy-makers in the regions in which they live. Many 'alternative' views on climate adaptation, which do not match existing scientific discourses, are disregarded in climate adaptation policy-making. Failing to consider how people interpret climate change and view their relationship with the land they are living on (Farbotko, 2005; Van Praag et al., 2021) hinders the actual realisation of climate plans and actions, also preventing climate mitigation and adaptation plans to be implemented as foreseen and supported by the people involved.

To realise the positive assets of the 'migration as an adaptation strategy' (cf. Gemenne & Blocher, 2016), some caveats need to be made to stress the preconditions that could turn the strategy into a success. First, and most importantly, is to ask oneself whether migrants should be the actors dealing with climate adaptation and supported in policies to better correspond to climate adaptation in their moves, actions and practices (see Jokisch et al., 2019). Too much weight is given to the obligations of migrants to develop climate adaptation strategies, while their views are absent in these 'migration as adaptation strategy' discourses. Furthermore, including their views and reflections could be an asset and so they need to be considered in policies and governance coordination. Policies focus on the facilitation of sending remittances, for instance by reducing taxes on these money flows. However, as shown by evidence from Nigeria, such unregulated remittances only have a limited impact on the exposure and hazards households experience in the regions of origin (Maduekwe & Adesina, 2022) or may not be sufficient, as shown in the example in Senegal (Zickgraf, 2018). Despite the added value of such tax reductions for migrants and their families, in light of climate adaptation policies, this cannot be a solution as such.

Nonetheless, if migration is used strategically to manage climate adaptation, some actions can be put to the fore. First, in these policies, migrants' perspectives and communities need to be considered in decision-making; these discourses could therefore make policy-makers aware of the factors migrants consider during their search and relocation to new places. Second, if migration is needed to relieve demographic pressures and/or provide for better economic market balances across the globe, one should develop legal frameworks, policies and governmental support to coordinate such migration within a wider socio-political and economic context (e.g., through bilateral agreements such as those possible under the United Nations Global Compact for Migration [<https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>] or by developing conventions on the protection of internally displaced persons as suggested by the UNHCR [<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/handbook-protection-internally-displaced-persons-part-i-foundations-idp-protection-chapter-2>]). In doing so, employment opportunities and training need to be provided as well to successfully adapt to the new labour market. Third, migration may seem like a viable solution to protect oneself against the adverse consequences of climate change. Nevertheless, destination areas are investigated with less scrutiny. Many migrants decide to move to larger cities to find better employment opportunities; however, some of these regions may be even more vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, for instance when migrating to cities located at the seaside or in swamps (McLeman & Gemenne, 2018). Fourth, after arrival in the new immigrant society, governments need to ensure that migrants acquire a 'good' position in the new immigrant society, including faster, easier, and better immigration procedures and arrangements, so migrants can immediately invest in participating in the new living environment and society (Crul & Schneider, 2010). Finally, migrant communities and networks could be consulted and integrated institutionally when making development policies and need to be given equal status to all other actors involved when doing so (Blinded for review).

4 | DISCUSSION

In this commentary, first, I wish to express the merits of the 'migration as adaptation strategy' (Black et al., 2011; Gemenne, 2010; Gemenne & Blocher, 2016, 2017; Smit & Wandel, 2006). This gives attention to reframing migrants as valuable players in climate adaptation policies and local governance, giving them agency, and expressing their potential, not only in terms of reducing demographic pressures, but also as knowledge agents who capture local dynamics, which is needed to develop adjusted local climate adaptation plans. Although this discourse aims to give more agency to migrants, and this is increasingly being recognised as very important, this line of thought is not implemented throughout the entire rationale, and is especially missing when reflecting upon the pressure and demands put on migrants themselves. More research is needed to understand the limitations of how migrants act as transformative agents, and to what extent we should rely on these groups as actors to deal with climate adaptation. Scholars have insufficiently considered

how migrants themselves, living elsewhere, can contribute to climate adaptation or how migrants' knowledge of multiple frames of references can be institutionalised into climate policy-making.

Migrants are confronted with a 'double engagement' to both the region of origin and destination (Mazzucato, 2008). They do not necessarily frame their moves and decisions in terms of climate change (Ou-Salah et al., 2022) and encounter difficulties when finding their new position in their new living area, including climate vulnerability, discrimination, and lack of employment opportunities amongst many. By starting from migrants' perspectives, many expectations are coupled, at the micro-, meso- and macro-level, in which they are given a central role, but where governance and guidance on what they should do, how they can be supported, and how their actions result in climate adaptation seem missing. Most weight to deal with climate change is then again placed on the most vulnerable groups in society—including the ones that are most heavily confronted by climate impacts or are most vulnerable to its consequences, also occupying a vulnerable position as 'migrants' in their new surroundings (cf. maladaptation, Barnett & O'Neill, 2013). Nonetheless, the role migrants play as transformative agents remains valid to create societal awareness on how climate change impacts people's livelihoods. They are prominent players who can put climate issues in their region of origin on the political and societal agenda (Oostindie, 2020).

When it comes to supporting (financially and logistically) climate adaptation through migration in such a way that people involved are given a voice and their views and positions in society are considered, more inclusive policy coordination is needed. On the side of the sending region, more policy coordination is needed to embed environmental factors adding to immobility and migration decisions, in the wider social, political, economic and demographic context (Foresight Report, 2011), but also to coordinate aid (e.g., multilateral development banks, Huang et al., 2022; climate investment funds, such as 'Loss and Damage' funds, see COP27). On the side of the migrants and the receiving regions, more attention should be given to the relocation of migrants in the arrival city/region, their acculturation processes, capital they have built up, and the views and initiatives of migrants and how these can be included in policy-making. The tackling of complex and wicked problems, such as environmental migration and climate adaptation, requires far more multilevel, multi-actor and international coordination and support than what is suggested that migrants—as individuals, as groups or as communities—can realise (despite huge efforts from their sides, many remittances and knowledge exchanging that is already taking place; Termeer et al., 2013). Future debates should ask to what extent policy-makers can use the experiences and knowledge of migrants and transnational networks to better align their ideas on climate adaptation, without placing additional pressure and demands on these groups.

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None.

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