



Understanding the relationship between environmental change and migration: The development of an effects framework based on the case of northern Ethiopia



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 June 2012

Received in revised form 16 July 2013

Accepted 25 July 2013

Keywords:

Environment
Climate change
Migration
Ethiopia
Typology

ABSTRACT

Empirical work on the relationship between environmental stress and human migration has blossomed over the last 10 years. While such work has provided important insights into this relationship, there has been, to date, limited effort expended on generating a generalisable framework for apprehending such interactions. This paper seeks to address this deficit. Based on semi-structured interviews in two sending and four receiving areas in northern Ethiopia, it explores dominant mobility narratives among populations whose livelihoods are exposed to a range of environmental stresses. Analysis of these narratives corroborates findings from other empirical studies on the subject, highlighting how the impact of environmental stress on human mobility can only be understood within the context in which it occurs. To this end the paper attempts to generate a typology of interactions between environmental and non-environmental factors shaping mobility. The typology is based on four effects: additive, enabling, vulnerability and barrier effects. It is thought to provide a generalisable conceptual language which is capable of describing the role of environmental stress in mobility decisions and thereby offering a systematic means for thinking through the processes by which environmental stress impacts upon mobility. While the framework is hypothesised to be suitably generalisable to account for other contexts and other environmental stresses, this still needs to be tested. In addition it is acknowledged that the framework suffers from some major limitations. Most notable is reliance on a conceptually false distinction between environmental and non-environmental factors, and the inability to account for the non-environmental features which shape perceptions of migration.

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1. Introduction

Interest in the relationship between environmental stress and human migration has waxed and waned over the last 40 years (Saunders, 2000). A recent resurgence of interest in the topic has been fuelled by growing concern about the potential demographic impacts of climate change and the conditions of human insecurity that might result. This, in turn, has ignited debate over the suitability of the term ‘environmental refugee’ as a means for describing people responding to environmental stress by moving away from their places of contemporary abode (Bilsborrow, 1992; Islam, 1992; Westing, 1992; McGregor, 1994; Myers and Kent, 1995; Lonergan, 1998; Bates, 2002). Central to this debate has been whether or not the notion of an ‘environmental refugee’ accurately captures the complex interplay of both environmental and

non-environmental factors which shape mobility decisions that are taken in a context of environmental stress (Morrissey, 2012).

Despite the centrality of this debate to work on the environment-migration nexus, and despite multiple calls for better conceptual models of the dynamic(s) at play, there remain few works which focus explicitly on theorising these relationships, and even fewer with an empirical basis. Instead, empirical works have tended to focus on either proving or disproving that environmental factors play a role in mobility decisions (Feng et al., 2010; Massey et al., 2010) or on simply describing the relative role of environmental change in shaping different mobility outcomes (Apeldoorn, 1981; Kidane, 1989; Findley, 1994; Ezra, 2001; Ezra and Kiros, 2001; Haug, 2002; Hampshire, 2002; Carr, 2005; Barrios et al., 2006; Mortreux and Barnett, 2008; Gray, 2011; Afifi, 2011; Doevenspeck, 2011; Gila et al., 2011; Gray and Mueller, 2012). In light of such findings different authors have variously come to characterise the relationship between environmental stress and human mobility as complex (Black et al., 2011b), hard to distinguish (Renaud et al., 2011) and conceptually fuzzy (Castles, 2002).

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Works focussed on conceptualising the relationship between environmental and non-environmental factors in mobility decisions have tended to be desk-based and focussed on typologies of migrant: – ‘voluntary’, ‘forced’, ‘refugee’, etc. Such typologies have generally been based on the nature of flight, degree of decision-making and rate of onset of environmental stress (Bilsborrow, 1992; Suhrke, 1994; Hugo, 1996). Some of these have also been further refined to account for the origin of the environmental stress (Bates, 2002). Common to all however, has been a focus on categories of people moving in response to environmental drivers. These have included, among others: ‘environmental refugee’ (Bilsborrow, 1992; Bates, 2002; Renaud et al., 2007), ‘environmental migrant’ (Islam, 1992; Bates, 2002; IOM, 2007), ‘environmentally forced migrant’ (Renaud et al., 2007), ‘environmental emergency migrant’ (Renaud et al., 2011), and ‘environmentally displaced person’ (Zetter et al., 2007).

While such discussions have been valuable for the nuance they provide, the focus on categories of migrant does not illuminate the process of migration itself, and, has been noted elsewhere to potentially undermine it (Bakewell, 2011).

One exception to the focus on typologies of migrant is recent work by Black et al. (2011a,b) who, noting the complexity of the relationship between climate change and migration, suggest an integrated approach (Black et al., 2011a,b). They posit that the best way to examine the relationship is through an exploration of how environmental change (in this case climate change) will affect other established drivers of migration, including political, demographic, economic and social drivers. While such an approach is certainly welcome as an attempt to better conceptualise these relationships, it remains highly generalised, focussed on mobility trends rather than on mobility decisions, and still invokes ‘environment’ as a driver of migration without providing any means to conceptualise this driver.

With the above in mind this paper aims to provide a generalisable framework that allows for a more systematic conceptualisation of how environmental and non-environmental factors interact to shape mobility in a context of environmental stress. To achieve this the paper describes a study from the northern highlands of Ethiopia, exploring the mobility dynamics in two rural, sending areas (*Ahuntegegne* and *Habes*) and four, urban receiving areas (*Kone*, *Weldiya*, *Wukro* and *Atsbi*) – see Table 1. The paper begins with a brief outline of the theoretical framework informing the study and details the methodology used. It goes on to describe the livelihoods in the study area as well as the nature of the environmental stress affecting them. The paper then details the dominant observed mobility dynamics before describing a typology which attempts to account for these dynamics. The paper closes with a discussion of the value of this typology, its omissions and limitations.

2. Conceptual framework

This study takes as its starting point a number of insights from migration theory and studies on the specific role of environmental stress in mobility decisions. It thus acknowledges that migration forms only one of many possible responses to environmental

stress (McGregor, 1994; Suhrke, 1994; Tacoli, 2009) with other documented responses including: changing family structures (Kidane, 1989), engaging in off-farm labour (Ezra, 2001; Ezra and Kiros, 2001; Affi, 2011), selling cattle, enacting community networks (Gray and Mueller, 2012), engaging in savings cooperatives and foraging for wild foods (Affi, 2011).

The value of these alternate, non-mobility livelihood options is explained by migration theory which points out that significant obstacles can undermine mobility as a livelihood strategy (Massey et al., 1993; Castles and Miller, 2009), with multiple studies highlighting how groups and individuals do not migrate in times of environmental or livelihood stress. Reasons for this include: a lack of education (Sporton et al., 1999; Gray, 2011), strong attachments to land (Affi, 2011), age, number of dependants in the household (Mortreux and Barnett, 2008), poor levels of market integration between sending and receiving areas (Gray, 2011), legislative impediments (Barrios et al., 2006), physical barriers to movement (Sporton et al., 1999) and a lack of capital (Findley, 1994; Ezra, 2001; Hampshire, 2002; Mortreux and Barnett, 2008; Gray and Mueller, 2012). Such findings have lead some authors to conclude that because environmental stress undermines stores of wealth, it might actually undermine migration among certain groups rather than encourage it (Findley, 1994). Such ideas have given rise to the notion of ‘trapped populations’ (Forsight, 2011) and calls to focus on immobility in a context of environmental stress rather than on migration (Hugo, 2011).

At the same time, however, migration theory has documented the important role played by institutions (Faist, 1997) and networks (Massey et al., 1993; Massey, 1990) in overcoming such impediments. The role of institutions (where these are meaningfully distinguished from networks) has generally not manifest very clearly in work on the environment-migration nexus. This is because such work has generally focussed on the role institutions play in overcoming barriers to international migration – such as attaining visas and passports. With the consensus position on migration in a context of environmental stress being that it will pertain, predominantly, to migration within national borders, institutional theory is thought to be of limited relevance. That said, the important role played by migrant networks has been clearly documented in work on the environment-migration nexus, determining both who migrates (Apeldoorn, 1981; Haug, 2002), and where they go (Sporton et al., 1999; Doeveenspeck, 2011).

The multi-causal nature of migration (Castles and Miller, 2009), has lead authors to argue that environmental stress constitutes but one of a host of migration drivers (Black, 2001; Black et al., 2011b; Parnell and Walawege, 2011). Other documented drivers have been documents to include: land tenure, population pressure, family size and structure, exposure to other social stresses, access to other resources (Kidane, 1989; Meze-Hausken, 2004; Ezra, 2001), patterns of urbanisation, the availability of transport infrastructure (Doeveenspeck, 2011), historical efforts at sedentisation, a lack of facilities (Gila et al., 2011), and poverty traps in sending areas (Affi, 2011).

Such documented complexity has lead authors to emphasise the degree to which migration is contingent upon its suitability within the entire suite of available livelihood strategies (Hampshire, 2002) and that it, as such constitutes a highly contextual response to environmental stress (Gray and Mueller, 2012). Such findings resonate with work in established migration theory which posits migration as a highly contextual phenomenon which needs to be understood as existing within a broader livelihood framework (Castles and Miller, 2009). This latter dynamic has been most formally accounted for by theories on the new economics of labour migration, which notes that migration is enacted as a strategy for managing risk at the level of the household rather than the individual (Massey et al., 1993; Castles and Miller, 2009).

Table 1

Showing the six fieldsites, split across two National Regional States, so that two rural, sending sites and one urban, receiving site was studied in each of Amhara and Tigray.

National Regional State	Amhara	Tigray
Urban (receiving)	Weldiya Kone	Wukro Atsbi
Rural (sending)	Ahuntegegne	Habes

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