



# Challenging climate change and migration discourse: Different understandings of timescale and temporality in the Maldives



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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on ongoing research in the Maldives to explore differences between elite and non-elite perceptions of climate change and migration. It argues that, in addition to variations in perceptions based on diverse knowledge, priorities and agendas, there exists a more fundamental divergence based upon different understandings of the timescale of climate change and related ideas of urgency and crisis. Specifically, elites tend to focus on a distant future, which is generally abstracted from people's everyday lived realities, and to utilise the language of a climate change-induced migration 'crisis' in their discussions about impacts in a manner not envisaged by non-elites. The article concludes that, rather than unproblematically mapping global, external facing narratives wholesale onto ordinary people's lives and experiences, there needs to be more dialogue between elites and non-elites on climate change and migration issues. These perspectives should be integrated more effectively into the development of policy interventions designed to support people in adapting to the impacts of global environmental change.

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## 1. Rethinking climate change and migration

It has long been recognised that changes in the environment can influence patterns and behaviours of human movement (El-Hinnawi, 1985). More recently, the impacts of climate change on population distribution and mobility are attracting growing interest with suggestions that climate change impacts will induce and increase population movements as migration becomes a significant potential adaptation strategy or a consequence of a failure to adapt (Tacoli, 2009). Recent empirical investigations into the relationship between climate change and migration have led to cautions about assuming a clearly delineated and inevitable link (Stojanov et al., 2014). In this context, more nuanced analyses of migration have emerged providing detailed empirical studies of the specific characteristics of migrant flows such as duration, destination and composition (Foresight: Migration and Global

Environmental Change, 2011). Significantly, these highlight the importance of seeing migration as only one of an array of potential responses to environmental change, and as being inextricably linked to other socioeconomic and cultural dynamics.

While these studies have provided considerable insight into the relationship between climate change and migration, they have tended to rely on the perspectives of 'elites', such as climate change professionals and experts, while perceptions 'from below', or from non-elites, are largely absent or marginalised. In an attempt to address these shortcomings, recent studies have recognised the agency of vulnerable populations (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2011; Kelman, 2010; McNamara and Gibson, 2009), and identified social differences and inequalities amongst those affected (Marino and Ribot, 2012). This article builds on this work by examining the perceptions, experiences and responses of those perceived to be most immediately and directly affected by climate change. We suggest that, whilst there is increasing awareness of the differences between elites and non-elites in terms of understandings of how the climate is changing, the meanings attached to this, and the extent and form of response, such differences are not only based on diverse knowledge, priorities and agendas. Importantly, we propose that elite and non-elite accounts reveal a more fundamental divergence of perceptions, one that is based upon different understandings of

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the timescale of climate change and related ideas of urgency and crisis. Specifically, elites tend to focus on a distant future which is generally abstracted from people's everyday lived realities, and take a long-term perspective that can obscure more mundane concerns that may be more central to the present-day lives of non-elites. Moreover, experts often utilise the narrative of a climate-related 'crisis' in their discussions about future impacts, particularly those relating to future population displacements and migrations, whereas non-experts do not envisage such changes with the same sense of urgency or inevitability. Thus, privileging elite perceptions may lead to the development of climate change policies that are inappropriate and unsustainable or, through their dominance, invisibilise more immediate livelihood priorities.

These issues are particularly relevant to small, low-lying island communities, which are considered to be amongst the most vulnerable to global economic and environmental change (CDKN, 2014) and, thus, have become prominent in debates on climate change and migration (Gerrard and Wannier, 2013). Sea-level rise and island inundation are commonly assumed to be the main cause of projected forced migration although empirical evidence for island disappearance under sea-level rise is limited (Ballu et al., 2012; Rankey, 2011; Webb and Paul, 2010). Other factors, such as reduced freshwater availability and the deaths of corals, might precede sea-level rise in forcing major changes to island life (Yamamoto and Esteban, 2014). This article draws on ongoing research in one such island group, the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean. Elite perceptions of climate change, and of migration as an adaptation strategy, were gathered from interviews with government personnel, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), grassroots organisations and international agencies in 2013 and 2014. Additionally, non-elite knowledge of climate change and migration, and how changes to the climate are being observed, interpreted and felt, was explored through discussions with people living on central and peripheral islands in the same years.

The section that follows provides a discussion of how particular perspectives have been privileged in climate change discourse. It shows how the discourse has become increasingly professionalised, technicalised and overly-scientific resulting in the marginalisation of the perspectives of those most immediately affected by changes in the climate. The article then goes on to describe the case study context and methods in more detail, before exploring how understandings of time and temporality are currently shaping perceptions of climate change and migration.

## 2. Diverse actors and different perspectives

Climate change exists as both a material phenomenon and a narrative (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2011). In recent years, a range of studies have examined narratives of climate change in developing country contexts in relation to issues such as involuntary resettlement (Arnall, 2014; Kothari, 2014) and disaster risk management (Gaillard, 2010; Mercer, 2010). Although diverse in their approaches, these studies are united by a common concern with whose voices are being expressed and acted upon as climate change policy is developed and implemented, and what the effects of these interventions are.

One framework with which to understand these dynamics is that of the discourse coalition. This is defined as a group of actors that share the usage of a particular set of storylines over a particular period of time (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). By their very nature, discourse coalitions can provide powerful impetus for change or advancement of a particular issue or agenda. However, they can also reinforce exclusivity of knowledge by defining environment and development-related problems as parts of complex systems that can only be understood by experts (Fischer

and Hajer, 1999). These often discount the views and ideas of non-experts, portraying them as having the 'same interests, rationality, and aspirations' with little mention of their 'contradictory or conflicting needs, desires and interests' (Felli and Castree, 2012:2). The resulting outcome is a narrowing of the boundaries of what is viewed as legitimate social action, thus limiting space for political debate and dissent (Few et al., 2007; Skoglund and Jensen, 2013).

The discourse coalition that has developed around the climate change issue is largely based on the authority of science, and the increasingly technicalised and professionalised nature of the policy community that surrounds it (Arnall et al., 2014). One of the strongest voices in this community is that of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which presents its reports as the 'consensus view of the leading climate change experts in the world' (Hulme, 2007:8). The scientific and technical discourses of the IPCC are reproduced by international agencies and national governments when formulating interventions to promote action on climate change adaptation and mitigation (Lohmann, 2011). However, in drawing upon the authority of science in this manner, Hajer and Versteeg (2005) state that such actors will often, intentionally or unintentionally, present their arguments about environment and development as objective, factual and urgent, and thus beyond dispute. In this way, climate change has become one of the defining contemporary international development issues (Tanner and Allouche, 2011).

In spite of the dominance of the international climate change discourse coalition over the past 30 years, there is increasing awareness of the need to understand how the discourse becomes locally appropriated (Rudiak-Gould, 2014), and to integrate the perspectives, values and knowledge of 'ordinary' people or 'non-elites' who live in climate change affected places. For example, in relation to Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Paton and Fairbairn-Dunlop (2010) highlight the significance of local knowledge and beliefs to climate change and migration debates in Tuvalu, and Rudiak-Gould (2012) emphasises the difficulties associated with translating internationally-derived climate change terms into local languages and dialects in the Marshall Islands. These studies demonstrate that non-elite perspectives can bring to the fore different narratives, meanings and responses to climate change that are largely invisible in prevailing discourses, and also have the potential to uncover unequal social and environmental relations (Featherstone, 2013). This is important as such groups could provide new meanings, insights and solutions for the climate change and migration debate (Artur and Hilhorst, 2011). Climate change-related policies and interventions that overlook these alternative perspectives have the potential to prove unpopular (Patt and Schroter, 2008), exacerbate inequalities (Liverman, 2009) and place additional stress on already vulnerable communities (Marino and Ribot, 2012).

In studying differences between elite and non-elite perceptions in the Maldives, we suggest that scientists tend to project longer-term future scenarios which contrast with the shorter-term, day-to-day and intergenerational lens of non-elites. This insight builds on recent scholarship exploring the temporal dimensions of vulnerability (Nielsen and Reenberg, 2010). One emerging theme from this strand of research is the contrast between the external temporal reference frames commonly utilised by experts studying disasters and human responses to hazards, such as 'objective historicism' (de Vries, 2011:163), and the non-linear, multidirectional social or everyday perceptions of time and temporality commonly experienced by people in their daily lives in the past, present and future (Fincher et al., 2014). In the context of climate change, Adam (1998) refers to this as a 'temporal disjuncture' where scientific knowledge validates the climate risks with reference to the visible present, while the impacts of alterations in global weather patterns are often latent, taking 30–40 years to

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