Tackling the Science-Policy Interface: Paths forward for Climate, Environment, and Migration Researchers

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I. Introduction

Academia as a profession has long been criticized for producing research and knowledge within the comfortable confines of the 'ivory tower'. It is unfortunately true that many scientists indeed shy away from direct engagement with policy processes. Climate change and migration, however, present two of the biggest governance challenges of the 21st century, and scientists have a critical role to play in navigating these complex spaces. The climate change-migration nexus begs for scientific input at all stages, from formulation to implementation to evaluation. We are uniquely positioned and qualified to provide crucial insights into the dynamics of migration related to climate change, from migration causality to eventual outcomes of population movements. Our capacities and training allow us to critique current policies and ultimately to inform better political responses. What's more, academics are not just capable of engaging with policy, but also have a distinct responsibility to do so. For one, much of our research is publicly funded: it may therefore be argued that we have an obligation to inform public and policy debates. Additionally, as someone who works 'in the field', conducting interviews with people affected by climate change and those who have left their homes in search of better lives and opportunities for themselves and their families, I feel a professional and personal responsibility to acknowledge the generosity of these people who have shared their lives and stories. One way we 'pay back' our respondents is by raising their concerns with policy actors. The information we collect should be shared outside of academia if we are to demonstrate a real impact of our research, and potentially make their situations better.

It is important to acknowledge that this particular field of study has seen a notable amount of science-policy interaction. Far from sitting quietly on the sidelines, academics have been directly involved in shaping the policy narratives around these issues for decades, arguably since the public and policymakers first took note of migration related to climate change. The IPCC, an both an intergovernmental body and a scientific one, warned that migration would be a major human impact of climate change in its initial 1990 assessment report. Estimates followed of projections of hundreds of millions displaced in the future because of increasing greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and climate inaction on the part of governments, industry, and private citizens. Norman Myers, an environmental scholar, predicted at different times that 150 to 212 million people would be displaced by 2050, figures that still circulates today as evidence of the significance of the matter (Myers 1993; Myers and Kent 1995; Myers 2002). These declarations and forecasts, however, were not met with scientific consensus. Social scientists in particular critiqued the simplistic nature of the estimates and lack of appropriate methodology. The use of the 'climate refugee' met with equal academic critique. Refugee scholars denounced the misappropriation and misuse of the term 'refugee' (see McGregor 1993). Camps formed, referred to as maximalist versus minimalist or alarmist versus skeptics. Such divisions reflected disciplinary divides amongst academics, but also the tension between research and advocacy objectives. Was the goal climate action (specifically mitigation) or the protection of those (potentially) displaced? These divides have been extensively covered by scholars (see Suhrke 1993; Gemenne 2011a;

Bettini 2013), but more than two decades later, tensions persist regarding the nexus that continue to play out in policy circles despite the boom in scientific research providing a wealth of evidentiary knowledge.

Today, environmental migration scientists[1] cover a number of pertinent policy angles: legal perspectives on 'climate refugee' terminology and protection instruments, political science approaches to migration opportunity structures at macro- and meso-levels, environmental science and technological solutions for disaster risk reduction via urban planning, infrastructure, etc. Yet we can still better speak to the policies that relate to the plight (or some might say power) of migration in the face of climate change. Despite the longstanding relationship between science and policy within the field, three examples reflect the limited success of scientific communication to policy actors. Firstly, environmental migration scholarship has actively dismissed narratives of mono-causality and rather pushed forward multi-causal interactions driving migration (see Black et al. 2011). Nonetheless, interactions with policymakers reveal a persistent demand for singular attribution and a lack of policy approaches that address complex interactions among environmental, social, political, economic and demographic migration drivers. Secondly, forecasts of numbers of people that might be displaced by climate change continue to permeate policy arenas and media discourse, even though many academics have strongly critiqued these 'guestimates' for their lack of scientific rigor and deterministic biases (see Gemenne 2011b). Thirdly, negative framings of migration related to the environment, particularly reflected in the 'climate refugees' discourse, still dominate international and national political thought. The academic response, strongly taking hold in the early 2010s, that migration is not always the failure to adapt but may in fact be an adaptive response itself (typically referred to as Migration-As-Adaptation) has yet to gain a strong foothold in international negotiations, regional cooperation, or national adaptation plans. These points imply that we are far from achieving a strong science-policy dialogue. What follows, therefore, are a number of suggestions as to how we as academics and researchers can improve our interaction with policy arenas.

II. Paths forward

1. Learning the policy landscape

One key, initial step towards in better managing the science-policy interface is for academics to better familiarize themselves with relevant policy landscapes. On a broad level, this involves getting to know any number of domains and the actors involved in climate change, environment and migration, from climate change governance (including UN entities such as the UNFCCC and UN Environment), disaster risk reduction (e.g. Sendai Framework), migration frameworks (GCM/GCR as well as bilateral agreements), health initiatives (e.g. Lancet Countdown) and development arenas (e.g. GFMD).[2] Practically speaking, this entails understanding the actors' positions, their concerns, mandates and capacities, and the sometimes competing objectives and lenses through which they see (or do not) the links between climate change and population movements. Learning what is out there in terms of entities, debates, frameworks and mechanisms, enables more focused interactions.

Additionally, getting to know the objectives of different actors— whether intergovernmental, governmental or non-governmental — is essential. For example, a number of governments expressly want to stop migration, internal or international. Therefore, recommending facilitating migration (as adaptation) can be a rather confusing and even unwelcome message. That is not to say we should entirely support their objectives, but rather to say that we have to acknowledge their rationale and address it accordingly. For instance, academics can demonstrate that facilitating certain forms migration is a way of decreasing displacement risks. Objectives also change from actor to actor and region to region, recognizing this is a step towards more tailored research and recommendations. Similarly, capacities to craft and/or implement policy

[1] I use this term to broadly denote academics who are engaged in research on links on climate change, environment and human mobility.

[2] A good place to start is the recent mapping exercise published by IOM in the framework of the Task Force on Displacement, "Mapping Human Mobility (Migration, Displacement and Planned Relocation) and Climate Change in International Processes, Policies and Legal Frameworks".

vary widely. While promoting evidence-based action, we need to make appropriate, realistic and ultimately feasible recommendations.

An added benefit of getting to know the layout of the land is that we form networks with a diverse group of players, including academic non-academic partnerships. These partnerships can elevate our own research and produce new ways of thinking. Much like we celebrate interdisciplinary research, we can also think of civil society organizations as research partners, bringing unique expertise, not just as end-users. For example, the European Union-funded "Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Evidence for Policy" (MECLEP) project (2014-2017), led by IOM, brought together academics and non-academics in order to formulate policy options on how migration, including displacement and planned relocation, can benefit adaptation strategies to environmental and climate change.[3]

2. Stepping outside the climate box

Environmental migration researchers largely focus their attention on the international scale of governance. For the most part, this interaction between science and policy has taken place within the domain of climate change, specifically international negotiations on climate change. A watershed moment for science-policy interaction was the 2010 Cancun Framework, which recognized for the first time human mobility within climate governance, a direct outcome of academic and non-academic collaboration. It was hailed as a victory for those arguing for more nuanced and cautious understandings of the drivers and impacts of migration than the typical 'climate refugee' discourse in that it included migration as adaptation alongside more negative outcomes of displacement.[4] Some five years later, UNFCCC international negotiations on climate change produced the 2015 Paris Agreement, which took the important step of formally establishing the Task Force on Displacement (TFD), comprised of international institutions and civil society organizations alike. Again, academics were directly involved in its formation, the Advisory Group to the TFD includes academics of various social and political science disciplines in direct dialogue with UN bodies and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, academics are represented on the TFD as represented by the civil society organization seat. The annual Conference of the Parties (COP) offers a space open to academic interventions via side events, and therefore provides a unique platform for policy engagement and research dissemination.

One of the most common policy messages circulating at COP is the need to reach across policy and institutional divides. While we insist that good policy requires bridging across silos, academics have not yet sufficiently followed their own advice. Compared to the presence and participation of academics in international climate policy, migration policy arenas are largely lacking in environmental migration scholarly representation. This may reflect the funding sources for research, often firmly planted in climate domains, and/or the dominance of environmental concerns over migration ones. Whatever the cause, our policy reach remains rather narrowly confined to climate. A major task for academic experts is thus to diversify our policy portfolios, so to speak, through our insertion in other realms. Stepping outside of the climate box can open a number of doors for policy debate and influence. On an international level, the past year gave birth to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). Both documents acknowledge the environment to varying extents, thanks in part to the concerted efforts of organizations such as the Platform on Disaster Displacement and the MECC division of the International Organization for Migration. While these texts have already been drafted, once these are ratified environmental migration academics have the opportunity to help formulate policies and programs that result.

We might similarly enter into any number of policy fora. In doing so, we can better place our research in a policy context, but also speak across policy silos and inform more cohesive and innovative policy approaches.

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[3] For more on the MECLEP Project, see https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/migration-environment-and-climate-change-evidence-policy-meclep

[4] UNFCCC (2010), Cancun Climate Change Adaptation Framework Decision adopted as part of the 2010 Cancun Agreements of COP16, decision 1.CP/16 paragraph 14 (f), available from: unfccc.int/resource/docs/2010/cop16/eng/07a01.pdf#page=4

While it is impossible to be in every room, as an expanding research community we might do a better job of not boxing ourselves or our research in.

3. Meeting the demand for knowledge

A rather welcome statement coming from international, regional, and national governance levels is the call for more research. Even with the amount of studies seeming to grow exponentially, policymakers and civil society organizations are demanding more from the scientific community. On this front, academics and policy actors' interests align. The newness of the field and the variety of direct and indirect pathways through which migration is affected presents opportunities for researchers in that multiple major empirical and theoretical gaps exist. For instance, we have yet to adequately tackle inequalities, including gender, to look at the function of social and financial remittances in climate contexts, or to treat the migration-climate-health triangle (Schütte et al. 2018). Even when it comes to the controversial numbers game, we have been so concerned with future estimates that we still do not have appropriate methodologies to provide current global numbers.[5] International policy platforms like the Task Force on Displacement of the UNFCCC and the Platform on Disaster Displacement have in the past two years pushed for more and better research to fill knowledge gaps, especially on slow-onset population movements and quantitative approaches. These are gaps that can be directly responded to by scientific research.

Regional and national demands for studies catered to local concerns also abound. Demonstrating this, the MIEUX initiative, spearheaded by ICMPD and supported by the European Union, received several requests from West African policy makers (specifically Togo, Guinea-Bissau and Benin) for trainings and workshops with external experts, many of whom were academic, on environment and migration. One of the strongest takeaways from a 2018 MIEUX workshop in Cotonou was the desire for academic experts to assist in the design and implementation of a regional survey that could be implemented and adapted to national and local conditions in the ECOWAS region. Their collective concern was how to quantify the *current* flows within the region that can be linked to climate and/or environmental change. A simple way forward is, therefore, to learn what we can provide policy actors by direct engagement and discussion. What do they know and what are they missing? This interaction might also encourage the reverse relationship, with researchers able to have better awareness of and access to existent data sets of governments and institutions, culminating in a mutually beneficial exchange.

One cautionary note, we should be careful not to overly cater to our 'clients'. Policy should not dictate research: that is to say, we mustn't only do research that conforms to a specific public or political request. Part of engaging with policy is also shaping agendas; through dissemination of research findings we can raise new questions for policymakers and flag emerging issues.

4. Identifying multi-scalar pathways to action

Climate change and migration are often thought of as global issues that require unprecedented international cooperation, as exhibited by the strong focus on UN agreements and frameworks as spaces of governance. Without neglecting this scale of policy interaction, academics would do well to address other scales of governance, regional, national, and subnational. Engagement with UN processes or supranational governance structures should not come at the expense of local engagement: much of what is occurring and will occur in the future regarding population movements depends on local and national institutional implementation (Tacoli 2011).

[5] The annual GRID report from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) provides internal disaster displacement figures, but they do not include migration due to slow-onset changes, international population movements, or relatively 'voluntary' migration.

Moreover, most research on climate change and migration takes a local approach in research design. We typically explain the varying results or findings among our case studies through contextualized local factors, including governance, when asked to identify global trends or extrapolations. Despite the scale of research, we as a community have not sufficiently developed localized policy pathways. Instead, we favor more top-down approaches and macro-level platforms for research dissemination and policy engagement. When we do make local recommendations, they typically come in the form of the vague, catch-all 'capacity building'. A big gap remains to be filled on this front. If we want to move from sweeping, broad recommendations to action and implementation, our research should not underestimate the importance of identifying local pathways to action. What are the best (and worst) local practices? To what extent have local relocation programs worked and why? What can local bureaucrats, civil society and other policy actors do to minimize displacement? If local context is used as an explanatory variable for research findings, we should also consider how that local context might also present solutions.

5. Communicating better

The last suggestion for more effective science-policy collaboration might be an obvious one, but it is nonetheless fundamental. Designing good, policy-relevant research, engaging with a variety of actors and platforms, and crafting multi-scalar recommendations are only effective if we know how to communicate with policy actors. The gulf between what is 'common knowledge' among the research community and that which is known by the policy community is immense. Admittedly, this is a source of frustration for academics. How is it with the many studies that we produce and the knowledge we have obtained that we not been able to get these messages across to policy? Why do we find ourselves repeatedly answering certain questions, even years later? Of course, policy actors are tasked with a great deal of topics and priorities regularly shift, as do the people themselves from ministry to ministry, or organization to organization. It is understandable that they are not all experts in climate change and migration issues. Yet, fault also lies with us. We simply are not very good at communicating scientific research for policy. On one hand, traditional scientific platforms are rather constraining. Our results are published in scientific journals and presented in academic conferences. This is essential to our career advancement, but does little to challenge the notion that we live in ivory towers. We should protect these spaces of intellectual exchange, while also embracing the power and reach of grey literature, policy briefs, and social media. On the other hand, the nature of our knowledge, ways of thinking and writing do not translate well to writing for policy. Depending on the discipline, many social scientists are accused of using 'academic jargon', writing long drawn-out analyses explaining context at-length, and ending in over-complexity or 'it depends'. Policy engagement requires a very different style: concise and precise talking points. Policy makers simply will not read a thirty-page report. We might argue the merits of each approach, but the reality remains the same. If we want to be heard by policy actors, we have to learn to speak their language.

III. Conclusions

This short piece briefly covered some key points in science-policy engagement on climate change and migration, outlining the strides made and stumbling blocks that persist in effectively marrying science with policy. While non-exhaustive, we have suggested some ways forward in order for us as an academic community to design more and better policy-relevant research, to maximize our presence and voice in policy debates, and to ensure that our research is effectively communicated to stakeholders and end-users of our research. In an ideal science-policy feedback loop, research feeds into better policy, and policy feeds better research. It should remain a mission that we continually strive to improve our relationships and our general attitude toward the policy community. There is simply too much at stake not to.

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