

Climate change and migration: the case of Syria

Ever since the Syrian conflict has led to large flows of refugees seeking protection in Europe, people have been asking whether this has something to do with climate change; a question that has eagerly been picked up by the media. Even Prince Charles has argued in an interview with Sky News that global warming has been one of the key factors leading up to the Syrian conflict and that a failure to tackle climate change will spark similar problems in future. Let me quote:

“in fact, there’s very good evidence indeed that one of the major reasons for this horror in Syria was a drought that lasted for about five or six years, which meant that huge numbers of people in the end had to leave the land.” (Prince Charles 2015)

This debate about Syria and climate change started with the publication of an article by Colin Kelley and his colleagues in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in March 2015, entitled “Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian Drought”. Let me take you through the core argument of this article briefly by means of a cartoon produced by Years of Living Dangerously and Symbolia Magazine. The key argument is that in the years prior to the outbreak of the protests there has been a severe drought causing agricultural insecurity. According to Kelley et al, this drought has led to mass migration of 1.5 million people from rural areas to urban centers. These problems were magnified because of a lack of governmental aid. For instance, president al-Assad had cut fuel and food subsidies on which many farmers depended. Well, the story then continues to emphasize that this drought-induced migration led to overcrowded and overburdened city centers, thus adding to the unrest that eventually led to protests and the war.

So ever since this has become a popular topic of discussion, several academics – including myself - have been trying to spread the message that the role of climate change in the up-rise of the Syrian conflict and the following refugee crisis is much more complex and also less evident than is being suggested here. Let me try to give this nuanced perspective.

First of all, conflicts and migration are both multi-causal phenomena. This means that it is hard and not necessarily helpful to single out one clear causal force. Thus drought may very well have played its part as one of the complex and interlinked sets of forces that have led to the Syrian unrest. But it is certainly not the only factor and its relative importance compared to other socio-political causal factors remains unclear. For instance, according to an analysis of Jan Selby and Mike Hulme, urbanization in Syria had risen throughout the 2000s and cannot simply be pinpointed to the drought that started in 2006. Also the estimated number of 1.5 million people that were supposed have migrated towards these cities as a result of the drought could not be sustained and turns out to be much lower. More importantly, the very impact of climate change upon society is often indirect and dependent on structural factors, such as the availability of socio-economic opportunities to diversify livelihood strategies; access to social networks that communities can rely on in times of need; and the level of governmental support or foreign aid, etc. These other socioeconomic and political factors are thus more vital in determining situations of conflict. To cite the IPCC report regarding findings of academic studies on the relationship between global warming and armed conflict: “Some of these find a weak relationship, some find no relationship, and collectively the research does not conclude that there is a strong positive relationship between warming and armed conflict” (IPCC 2014: 772).

Second, the suggested direct connection between climate change and the flight of Syrian refugees to Europe is seriously flawed. Most people migrating or displaced because of climate impacts remain within their home country. People move to nearby cities or try to move back if they can. Also, when your government still supports you, why run to another country? That is the very point here. People fleeing Syria are fleeing political persecution and war, and thus have to flee the country. Thus, when migration becomes transnational as in the case of Syria, other factors than climate change often have a larger role to play.

Of course, many of the media sources and others making this link with climate change tend of acknowledge that Syrian refugees are war and political refugees and not so much climate refugees. Instead, they use the case of Syria to warn for a state of chaos and mass migration in a future warmer world heavily affected by climate change. But also these assumptions tend to be flawed and misrepresent the very nature of climate-related migration and displacement. An issue that is for instance ignored is that those most severely affected by climate change are often the poorest and marginalized communities. These groups are often the least mobile. They may either be forced to stay behind and at least do not have the resources and social networks needed to move large distances and across continents.

Now getting to lines for further and future research:

We should encourage research to further entangle the complex connections at play between climate change, migration and conflict. In particular, much discussion and ambiguity remains regarding the indirect role that climate change can play in processes of migration and conflict. My main recommendation would be to not just promote and fund research with a focus on worst-case scenarios of conflict and mass migration. But instead to also actively endorse the analyses of cases where migration or problems of scarcity are managed well and to draw lessons from that, also for policy-making. So cases where communities are finding new coping and livelihood strategies to adapt to a changing climate, or cases where planned, voluntary and preventive relocation of endangered communities is taking place in a just and preventive manner. Such research is important to untangle the complexities at play and to avoid that future research and policy-making builds on false assumptions on the relationships between climate change, migration and conflict.

Related to that, more research is needed to examine the vulnerabilities and resilience of people who cannot get out in time. As mentioned, those most vulnerable to climate change are often the least mobile – so the poor, the elderly, children. For instance, following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans groups with less resources and powerful social networks were not able to flee the city in time and were stuck in a dangerous situation. So more attention needs to go into factors that prevent people from moving towards safer areas and what protection they require and how these groups can increase their resilience.

Finally, I would like to encourage out-of-the-box research in the fields of political science, legal studies and philosophy. Are our current legal systems up to the task to cope with the complexity of migration challenges ahead? How can it be transformed to have a better fit with the contours of our current and future society? As mentioned, migration is a multi-causal phenomenon. And this multi-causality is only becoming more complex in the years to come given the various types of conflicts around the world, the worsening impacts of climate change, and other factors such as the influence of smart phones and mobile phones making migrants and refugees from different parts of the world

increasingly mobile and connected. Given this complexity, does it make sense to rely on exclusionary legal systems focused on protection of narrowly-defined groups of migrants and refugees? Politically perhaps so, but does it also in moral terms? We have the Geneva Convention protecting political and war refugees. We have initiatives developing guidelines for states to protect persons displaced by natural disasters and climate change. But do such provisions work – especially in the decades ahead – when migration is becoming increasingly multi-causal making it difficult to pinpoint the main cause and thus to classify a migrant either as a political refugee, as a climate migrant or as an economic migrant? Moreover, does it still make sense to exclude those fleeing climate impacts or economic hardship from legal protection? Can we imagine new transnational systems and legal structures having a more inclusive and holistic focus by protecting not just those facing an “existential threat” to their lives via political persecution and war, but also those facing an “existential threat” to their livelihoods, so to their basic needs and daily survival (see Betts 2010 for details)? I have no simple answers to these questions and more inclusive protection regimes seem at the moment politically unfeasible. Nonetheless, I think it would be highly relevant in the light of current events and developments if research dares to, is encouraged to, come up with out-of-the-box proposals which may potentially help our global society to move forward.

Ingrid Boas

Key references

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