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Concluding Remarks: The Complex Nexus between Environmental Change and Migration

In August 2015, at the conference “Global Leadership in the Arctic: Cooperation, Innovation, Engagement, and Resilience”, held in Anchorage, Alaska, the former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry delivered the opening plenary. Addressing environmental changes taking place in the Arctic area and globally, he stated as follows:

“(W)e as leaders of countries will begin to witness what we call climate refugees moving – you think migration is a challenge to Europe today because of extremism, wait until you see what happens when there’s an absence of water, an absence of food, or one tribe fighting against another for mere survival.”

Kerry employed alarmist rhetoric to call leaders in the Arctic area to act against environmental change, utilizing the anxieties created by the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 to push the countries and their leaders into action.

Kerry was certainly right to remind the audience about the importance of acting against environmental change. As the acts of the new U.S. presidential administration show, it cannot be taken for granted that world leaders take changes taking place in our environment seriously. However, what the presentations and discussions during the two-day seminar “Migrations and Environmental Change” highlighted is that the connection between population movements and environmental change is much more complex than what appears on the surface or what Kerry suggested in his talk. Researchers, civil society actors, and deci-

sion-makers alike still have only a vague understanding of the actual dynamics between environmental factors and forced or voluntary migrations.

In these short concluding remarks, I would like to discuss three takeaway points from the seminar, which I, as a migration scholar, found the most compelling. The first point is precisely about the complexity of the relationship between environmental change and migration. Both sudden catastrophes and slow-onset environmental changes can push people to move, but who is able to leave the affected areas, where do those who can leave exactly go to and for what reasons, what rights they have in this situation, and what their future hopes and prospects are, are all questions that are highly context-specific and need to be examined in detail to better understand climate change population mobility. To phrase this slightly differently, how climate change affects a particular population is not just a question of environmental issues. As Professor Roger Zetter poignantly brought up in his presentation, climate change is not an apolitical or ahistorical phenomenon – it is entangled with the historical developments, politics, economics, and social relations of the context in which it takes place. The environmental change, or a catastrophe, does not take place in a vacuum, but in a place that has a history of its own. Hence, to understand what happens in the context of environmental change necessitates a deeper understanding of the local dynamics and power relations.

Migration scholars pay – or at least should pay – particular attention to the terms they use in research. Terms are not just words – they carry their own weight, and they have the potential to impact political and economic decision-making as well as public opinion. This is the second important point brought to the fore during the seminar: it is not necessarily feasible, or even desirable, to talk about “environmental refugees” or “climate refugees”, to borrow Kerry’s words. Professor Zetter addressed the conceptual, empirical, and normative challenges of using these terms when discussing the conjunction between environmental change and migration. It is difficult to prove causal links between the two, as motives behind any migration decision are difficult to disentangle: the environmental intertwines with the political, the economic, and the social in individuals’, families’, and groups’ migration decisions. Moreover, the tendency to frame climate as the driver of forced migration fundamentally depoliticizes the issue, drawing attention away from the structural inequalities that make certain people or groups more vulnerable than others to changes that take place in their environment.

These leads to the third point that I would like to highlight as a takeaway lesson from the seminar. This is that humans are resilient, and they develop adaptive strategies when faced with dire situations. Migration is one of those adaptive strategies, as the IOM’s Research and Policy Officer Susanne Melde noted in her presentation. However, there are deep structural issues at play, and research has shown that those who are already in a vulnerable position tend to be most affected by environmental changes. More research is needed on this issue as well. Scholars should examine intersectionally how different factors influence the strategies that groups or individuals are able to develop when faced with environmental challenges.

In my view, another lesson of the so-called “refugee crisis” is that acting out of alarmism rarely brings about durable and well-measured solutions. At the moment, while there is con-

sensus that environmental factors will likely play an important role in future migration patterns, few countries or international organizations are prepared to deal with environmentally displaced people. The EU Parliament found some years ago that in Europe, there was no specific legal protection for “environmentally displaced individuals” beyond temporary measures that fail to address long-lasting or permanent environmental damage to homelands (Kraler, Cernei & Noack 2011). At the policy level, it remains to be seen what measures individual nations and supra-national bodies such as the EU take to better prevent or prepare for environmental changes and the displacements they may cause.

When it comes to understanding the nexus between environmental change and human migrations, there is clearly a demand for more effective collaboration between researchers, policy-makers, and civil society actors. Within the research community, this is an area where research collaboration between human sciences and natural sciences seems not only plausible but also needed.

References

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