

*Routledge Studies in Environmental Migration,
Displacement and Resettlement*

MIGRATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN THE WEST AFRICAN SAHEL

WHY CAPABILITIES AND ASPIRATIONS MATTER

Victoria van der Land

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Migration and Environmental Change in the West African Sahel

The West African Sahel is predicted to be heavily affected by climate change in the future. Slow-onset environmental changes, such as increasing rainfall variability and rising temperature, are presumed to worsen the livelihood conditions and to increase the out-migration from the affected regions.

Based on qualitative and quantitative data from study areas in Mali and Senegal, this book examines the relationship between population dynamics, livelihoods and environment in the Sahel region, focussing specifically on motives for migration. Critiquing the assumption that environmental stress is the dominating migration driver, the author demonstrates the important role of individual aspirations and social processes, such as educational opportunities and the pull of urban lifestyles. In doing so, the book provides a more nuanced picture of the environment-migration nexus, arguing that slow-onset environmental changes may actually be less important as drivers of migration in the Sahel than they are often depicted in the media and climate change literature.

This is a valuable resource for academics and students of environmental sociology, migration and development studies.

Victoria van der Land is a sociologist with a research focus on climate change and migration. She has extensive work and field experience in West African countries, such as Benin, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal. Currently, she works as a DAAD lecturer at the University of Bamako, Mali.

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Abbreviations

ANSD	<i>Agence National de la Statistique et de la Démographie, Senegal</i>
BMBF	<i>Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung; German Federal Ministry of Education and Research</i>
CA	<i>Capability Approach</i>
CIESIN	<i>Center for International Earth Science Information Network, Columbia University, New York</i>
ECOWAS	<i>Economic Community of West African States</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
FDI	<i>Foreign Direct Investment</i>
GPCC	<i>Global Precipitation Climatology Centre</i>
INSTAT	<i>Institut National de la Statistique du Mali</i>
IOM	<i>International Organization for Migration</i>
IPCC	<i>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</i>
ISOE	<i>Institut für sozial-ökologische Forschung, Institute for Social-Ecological Research</i>
LARTES/IFAN	<i>Le Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Transformations Economiques et Sociales/Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noir</i>
NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organization</i>
ODA	<i>Official Development Assistance</i>
SLA	<i>Sustainable Livelihoods Approach</i>
TRMM	<i>Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission</i>
UN	<i>United Nations</i>
UNDP	<i>United Nations Development Programme</i>
UNEP	<i>United Nations Environment Programme</i>
UNHCR	<i>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</i>

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1 Introduction

Climate change, environment and migration

The impact of climate change on population mobility as a popular topic

Today, images and headlines of African migrants desperately trying to enter Europe fill the media news and shape the public opinion on migration from Africa to Europe. The media takes up images of migrants undertaking dangerous journeys by crossing the sea in overcrowded boats from Northern and Western Africa to Europe and of desperate migrants storming the fences of the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa. In addition, the political and public debates on global warming and climate change emphasise their urgency with images of disaster-hit landscapes and suffering people. Due to these images, the Sahel region became synonymous with drought-hit soils and starving people during severe droughts.

The impact of climate change on human mobility moved into the centre of interest and concern in the mid-1980s, when the term *environmental refugee* was brought into public by a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) publication (El-Hinnawi 1985). At about the same time, climate change entered the public debate with the First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and presumed that climate change could strongly affect human migration (IPCC 1990). Predictions of tens or even hundreds of millions of environmental refugees as a consequence of climate change boosted this interest in the 1990s (Jacobson 1988; Myers and Kent 1995). Later, a few reports even argued for a potential mass migration as a result of climate change and increased the estimated number of people affected by climate change to up to 1 billion by 2050 (Christian Aid 2007).

Although these numbers have been criticised as highly speculative, they have been cited even years later – often being treated as empirical evidence – and have had a major impact on politics, media and academia (Brown 2008b; Gemenne 2011). The high number of potential environmental refugees and the alarmist rhetoric concerning climate change and its impact on humanity expressed by various actors, including UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), national governments and popular media, sparked political debate and interest in the topic. It also raised concerns that they may threaten national and international security in the “global North” (Homer-Dixon 1991; Kibreab 1997).

2 Introduction

During the last two decades, there has been an enormous increase of case studies and several research projects on the linkages between population movements and climate change in particular – and environmental change in a more general manner (Laczko and Piguet 2014). The studies cover regions all over the world, including developed and developing countries, and focus on various environmental phenomena. One-third of the existing research studies and publications on environment and migration focuses on Africa with the Sahel region used as a prominent example of migration caused by drought and/or rainfall variability. The West African Sahel is presumed to be one of the regions that will be most affected by climate and environmental change in the future and the impact of environmental changes on human populations in the region is a major global concern (Dilley et al. 2005; IPCC 2007).

The development of the environment-migration research

The increasing interest on the linkages between climate change and mobility and differing academic perspectives of the term *environmental refugees* led to fundamental research and developments on the subject. The development in research in turn influenced the political debate and public opinion on the effects of climate change on human mobility. In academia, a disciplinary divide between natural scientists and social scientists marked the discourse on the linkages between climate change, environment and migration, pushing the research forward. The proponents of the term *environmental refugees* were usually natural scientists also referred to as “environmentalists.” They supported the concept of *environmental refugees* aimed at directing public attention to the negative human impacts of environmental changes. The critics of the term were often migration scholars who criticised and challenged the concept of *environmental refugees* (Suhrke 1994; Kibreab 1997; Castles 2011; Morrissey 2012b).

Critical research of the term *environmental refugees* started dominating the view on the linkages between environmental change and migration in academia in the early 2000s and led to important changes in research. The research on the linkages of climate change and migration henceforward distinguished between slow-onset environmental changes and rapid-onset changes. Research on migration and slow-onset environmental changes shifted towards a more positive and proactive understanding of the people and their mobility in the context of environmental change. Table 1.1 illustrates the different shifts included in the development of the research on the linkages between slow-environmental changes and migration.

Earlier research assumed a mono-causal relationship between the environment and population displacement by considering environmental degradation and global warming as a direct cause of potential large-scale population displacements. In contrast, migration scholars argued that migration is multi-causal and that environmental factors are not the only and often not the predominant cause of migration. Today, academics and non-academics commonly agree that migration in the context of slow-onset environmental changes is multi-causal; environmental

Table 1.1 Shifts towards a positive understanding of people and mobility in the context of environmental changes.

	Earlier view		Current view
Link between environment and mobility	mono-causal	➔	multi-causal
Mobility as	failure to adapt to change	➔	adaptation strategy
Character of mobility	forced	➔	voluntary
People considered as	victims of global warming	➔	agents adapting to change
Term used	environmental refugees	➔	environmental migrants

Source: Author.

factors almost always interact with other cultural, demographic, economic, political and social drivers of migration (Piguet et al. 2011; Hummel et al. 2012; Laczko and Piguet 2014; McLeman 2014). The mono-causal approach assumed that environmental degradation leads to migration. Therefore, the predicted numbers of environmental refugees were often based on the number of people living in areas identified to be prone to the effects of global warming. Migration scholars criticised that being at risk does not necessarily directly result in displacement or migration, but that coping strategies and adaptive practices and the local context have to be considered (Lonergan 1998; Black 2001; Castles 2002). By considering migration as one possible coping strategy, the perspective of migration changed from a passive towards a more positive and a proactive view on mobility.

At the same time people's vulnerability became the crucial link between the environment and the migration decision and their available strategies to cope with or adapt to environmental stress emerged as a key focus for research (Kelly and Adger 2000; Cutter et al. 2003; Oliver-Smith and Shen 2009). Consequently, the view of mobility as a failure to adapt to environmental changes shifted to a more positive view of migration as an adaptation strategy to environmental stress. Today, research considers migration in the context of slow-onset environmental changes mainly as an adaptation strategy to diversify people's income sources and to reduce their vulnerability to external environmental and non-environmental stress (McLeman and Hunter 2010; Adger and Adams 2013; Ober 2014). With that, the view on migrants shifted from passive victims of environmental stress to a more positive perception of agents whose migration is a conscious decision in order to adapt to environmental stress.

At the same time, this also changed the perception of mobility from forced to voluntary. Nevertheless, research agrees that population movements caused by climate or environmental change range from voluntary to forced and that most migrations contain elements of both (Richmond 1993; Morrissey 2012a). While earlier studies on migrants considered them the most vulnerable to environmental stress, recent literature regards those who are not able to migrate as the most vulnerable. These people have been labelled as "trapped populations" (Adger et al. 2014; Black and Collyer 2014).

4 Introduction

As a consequence of this general shift in the environment-migration research the controversial term *environmental refugees* was replaced little by little by the term *environmental migrants*. Migration scholars and refugee specialists rejected the term *environmental refugee* due to the legal and political implications linked to the term *refugee* (Brown 2008a; Afifi and Jäger 2010). The legal definition of refugees only includes people who have crossed international borders to seek protection from political persecution. People affected by environmental changes rather move within their country. In contrast, the term *migrant* reflects the agency of the people, acknowledges the potential voluntary characteristic and highlights the multi-causality of the movement. Up to now, there is no consensus on a common definition of an appropriate term or concept. International Organization for Migration (IOM) offers an often cited working definition as follows:

Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.

(IOM 2007: 1)

The continuous advancement of environment-migration research in academics had a ripple effect on the political debate on climate change and the impact of human mobility. Eventually also governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations, the media, and civil society adapted the critical perspective of migration scholars and considered the role of migration as an adaptation strategy to maintain livelihoods in response to environmental changes.

Challenges and consensus within the environment-migration nexus

Despite progress in the environment-migration research and the increasing number of publications, the effects of environmental or climate change on human mobility remain unclear. The results are often highly context-specific and difficult to generalise. Even case studies that focus on the same wider region vary in focus, methods, concepts and theories, if any, and are therefore difficult to compare (Jónsson 2010; van der Land *et al.* forthcoming). General difficulties for comparing case studies result from a lack of definitions for *environmental migrants* or terms such as *migration* and *climate change* or *environmental change*. Studies often refer to different factors, such as changes in the environment (e.g. land degradation, changes in rainfall, temperature or vegetation) or types of migration (e.g. only first migration, migration intention or life history of migrations) and use different spatial scales, ranging from a village to several countries in one geographical region. In addition to the multiple factors that influence human mobility, in many areas – and particularly in the Sahel – people have been mobile and have been living with highly variable climatic conditions for