

#Concepts

Deciphering migration in the age of climate change

Towards an understanding of translocal relations in social-ecological systems



Dr. Clemens Greiner

Global South Studies Center (GSSC),
University of Cologne

Simon A. Peth

Department of Geography,
University of Bonn

Dr. Patrick Sakdapolrak

Department of Geography,
University of Bonn

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Bundesministerium
für Bildung
und Forschung

Translocal Resilience Project
Department of Geography, University of Bonn
Meckenheimer Allee, 166
D-53115 Bonn
Germany

Tel: +49 (0)228 73-3851
Web: www.transre.org

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Clemens Greiner
Global South Studies Center (GSSC), University of Cologne
Universitätsstraße 22
D-50937 Cologne (Köln), Germany
Mail: clemens.greiner@uni-koeln.de

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Editor: Simon A. Peth
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Dr. Clemens Greiner

Global South Studies Center (GSSC), University of Cologne

Simon Alexander Peth

Department of Geography, University of Bonn

Dr. Patrick Sakdapolrak

Department of Geography, University of Bonn

ABSTRACT

Talking about migration and human environment relations in times of globalization and climate change is a highly relevant but also difficult venture. The debate usually takes place in a blurred field between science, media and politics. The tug of war between alarmists and sceptics has dominated the scientific debate. Whereas the alarmists try to show a causal link between climate change and migration, the sceptics deny direct causal relation between environment and migration and criticize the “shaky empirical character and sloppy nature” (Piguet 2012: 155) of the alarmist assumptions. Since the advent of a critical view of climate change and migration, it seems that scholars increasingly refrain from drawing links between environmental change – including climate change – and human migration in order to avoid the geo-determinism trap. However, we start from the assumption that human-environment relations are intimately coupled and argue that the heated debate should not prevent us from scrutinizing the complex nature of these interrelations. Doing so we further argue that this can be realized by combining on a conceptual level the discussion of two broad topics that even today remain largely unconnected: translocality and Social-Ecological Systems (SES) approaches.

KEYWORDS: Translocality; Climate Change; Migration; Social-Ecological Systems (SES)

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1. Introduction

“It is not sufficient to simply blame environmentalists for their oversimplified vision of migration. Rather, it is up to migration scholars (...) to attempt to reembed environmental factors into their own theoretical framework while avoiding naive neodeterminism.”

(Piguet, 2012, p. 156)

Talking about migration and human-environment relations in times of globalization and climate change is a highly relevant but also difficult venture. The debate usually takes place in a blurred field between science, media and politics. Since its beginning, numbers have played a crucial role (Jacobson, 1988; Myers, 2002) and the first attempts to grasp the issue were rather deterministic and unidirectional. The tug of war between alarmists and sceptics has dominated the scientific debate. Whereas the alarmists try to show a causal link between climate change and migration, conceptualizing climate-related migration as an almost inevitable emergency response (Bogardi & Warner, 2009). Based on empirical case studies (see Morrissey, 2011, & Obokata et al., 2014, for an overview) the sceptics deny direct causal relations between environment and migration, and criticize the “shaky empirical character and sloppy nature” (Piguet, 2012, p. 155) of the alarmist assumptions. Several authors argue from a discursive perspective, asking about whose interest the environmental migration narrative serves and what effects it has, while pointing to the hegemony of the discourse and the role played by power relations (e.g. Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012; Bettini, 2013).

Since the advent of a critical view of climate change and migration, it seems that scholars increasingly refrain from drawing links between environmental change – including climate change – and human migration in order to avoid the geo-determinism trap. However, we start from the assumption that human-environment relations are intimately coupled, i.e. that “people and nature interact reciprocally and form complex feedback loops” (Liu et al., 2007, p. 1513), and argue that the heated debate should not prevent us from scrutinizing the complex nature of these interrelations (see also Piguet, 2012). In this working paper, we explore a way to progress beyond a geo-deterministic, unidirectional, and causal perspective on environment and migration without neglecting the prediscursive materiality of space and environment. We argue that this can be realized by combining on a conceptual level the discussion of two broad topics that even today remain largely unconnected: translocality and social-ecological systems (SES) approaches.

2. Scales, networks and migration in social-ecological systems

The role of migration for sustainable resource management has long been neglected in Social-Ecological System (SES) research. Netting's (1990) critical review of his own seminal study on the ecology of Swiss mountain farming (Netting, 1981) provides a telling example. In this work, Netting admits that he barely considered linkages to the world outside the alpine setting, such as migration, which – as he came to realize later – was an important “safety valve” in balancing the fragile alpine environments. The neglect of outside linkages, he writes, was due to an overemphasized notion of closed community boundaries, of small and locally bounded sets of interaction. Pre-spatial-turn case studies, such as Netting's *Balancing on an Alp* (1981) largely informed Ostrom's “design principles” for successful Common Pool Resource Management (1990), in which sustainable institutions are considered to be facilitated only through the establishing of clear boundaries for resource systems' user groups and decision-makers. In this perspective, migration and scale-transcendent interactions potentially disturb sustainable institutional arrangements and weaken social bonds, trust relations and reciprocity, and thus threaten the functioning of the SES (Anderies et al., 2004). Such perspectives have contributed to the conception of migration as an outcome of a failed in situ adaptation, as part of a vicious cycle of impoverishment that ultimately leads to resource degradation (e.g. O'Keefe, 1983); or, in more recent discussions, as a threat to environmental security (Warner et al., 2010; Myers, 2002).

During recent decades, resilience and related concepts, such as adaptive cycles, multi-stable states, panarchy, nested scales, and response diversity, have become popular to describe complex SES (Folke et al., 2010). These concepts urge us to understand the complexity and the dynamics of human-environment interactions in a more comprehensive way, and address linkages across scales explicitly as important elements for the functioning of SES. As such they generally also place more emphasis to the influence of social networks on the adaptive management of natural resources (Bodin et al., 2006; Pelling & High, 2005; Rodima-Taylor et al., 2012; Tompkins & Adger, 2004). While not addressing migration directly, Tompkins and Adger (2004, p. 2), for example, point out that the “extension and consolidation of social networks, both locally and at national, regional, or international scales, can contribute to increasing ecosystem resilience”. Scheffran et al. (2012, p. 119) assert that “migrant social networks can help to build social capital to increase the social resilience in the communities of origin and trigger innovations across regions by the transfer of knowledge, technology,

remittances and other resources” (see also Rodima-Taylor et al., 2012). In a more nuanced appraisal, Bodin et al. (2006) elaborate on the effects of different structural properties of networks (e.g. reachability, density, betweenness) on the features identified as important for the adaptive management of natural resources (e.g. social memory, heterogeneity, learning, redundancy, trust). Their assessment indicates the multifaceted nature of these relationships.

In this vein we argue that it is a severe shortcoming to consider migration merely as a negative response to environmental pressure or climate change. Research must include the full range of aspects of the environment-migration nexus, including the potentials and potentially positive effects of human mobility and networks. This relationship, however, remains empirically under-researched and most conceptual frameworks lack explanatory capacity with regard to the multifaceted and often neglected environmental impacts of migration, particularly with respect to the emergence, dynamics and functions of migrant networks and the consequences of simultaneity and the multi-local embeddedness of the actors involved.

3. The emerging concept of translocality

In the course of widespread migration flows and multiplying forms of mobility (UNDP, 2009; Hannam et al., 2006), the connectedness of people and places to multiple and often distant localities intensifies (Zoomers & Westen, 2011). Migration, though not the only means (e.g. media, information and communication technology), is an important one, through which these networks and connections are established, and which facilitates the flow of both material and immaterial resources and “social remittances” (Dietz et al., 2011; Levitt, 2001; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). To better understand the multi-local embedding of actors and livelihoods, and to conceptualize their multiple interactions with the environment, the newly emerging concept of translocality provides a promising research perspective (Steinbrink, 2009 ; Brickell & Datta, 2011 ; Hedberg & Do Carmo, 2012 ; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Freitag & Von Oppen, 2010 ; Zoomers & Westen, 2011 ; Müller-Mahn & Verne, 2012; Islam & Herbeck, 2013).

Conceptualizations of translocality usually build on research into migration networks and remittances, particularly on insights from transnationalism (Smith, 2011) and seek to overcome some of the conceptual limitations of this well-established research perspective. Notably, translocality stands for the expansion of the analytical focus beyond the limits

of the nation-state by focussing on various other dimensions of border transgressions. Socio-spatial configurations beyond those induced by human migration are accounted for, such as symbolic flows, memories or what Brickell and Datta (2011, p. 18) refer to as “translocal imagination”, and immobile populations are integrated into a more holistic, actor-oriented and multi-dimensional understanding of social-spatial interdependencies and simultaneities. Furthermore, most scholars of translocality question the overemphasis on deterritorialization and fluidity of social spaces as described by the approaches of transnationalism (Pries, 2003). Migrants and actors do remain anchored at specific localities, or, as Brickell and Datta (2011, p. 3) put it, there is always some degree of situatedness, even during mobility. Even though concepts of translocality do not deny the blurring of borders in times of globalization, they plead for a more nuanced view of the role of space, place and borders, and bring the significance, materiality and uniqueness of locality back into the debate.

The idea of translocality is increasingly being used as an umbrella-term (e.g. in Freitag & Von Oppen, 2010) and therefore often lacks conceptual clarification (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013a). Given the brevity of this working paper, we limit this section to our own conceptualisation and usage of the term. In our attempts to develop the notion of translocality more specifically in order to apply it to empirical data on migration in Namibia (Greiner, 2010 ; Greiner, 2011), Kenya (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013b), Bangladesh (Peth & Birtel, 2014, forthcoming) and Thailand (Sakdapolrak et al., 2013), we have conceptualized translocality as a form of spatial structuration (Giddens, 1984; Pred, 1984). Starting from an actor-oriented focus on the social production and reproduction of spatial interconnections, we particularly emphasize three dimensions of translocal structuration, namely place, networks, and trans-locales (see Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013b, p. 538):

(1) Place: Places are conceived of as dynamic, multidimensional and historically specific nodes where “local-local negotiations” between actors are grounded (Brickell and Datta 2011: 10), and where migrant networks are rooted and flows converge. The structuration approach thereby enhances a more explicit discussion of the temporal dynamics, and interconnections of places (see Leach et al., 1997, on the structuration of landscape).

(2) Networks: Migrant networks are crucial for exchange and communication: they are considered as outcomes of, as well as a precondition for, translocal practices. Networks are structured by the actions of the people involved, and at the same time provide a structure for those very actions and practices (Steinbrink, 2009). They allow the flow and

circulation of resources, information and commodities, as well as social remittances of ideas, practices and identities (Levitt, 2001).

(3) Trans-locales: Locales are the settings for social interaction (Giddens 1984). Migration, as a process of “time-space distancing” (Giddens, 1984, p. 171), expands locales beyond places. Routine activities through which migrants and non-migrants interact across space eventually transform locales into translocales. These translocales provide the context and setting for action that is extended and increasingly influenced by remote interaction. The sketched translocal structuration process, which puts strong emphasis on local-local interactions, is nested in a multiplicity of higher-level dynamics beyond the immediate translocal scale, such as national policies, global economies, or climate change. In other words, “the global is collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations rather than something monolithic or external to them” (Marcus, 1995, p. 102).

By connecting networks and places and emphasizing their fusion into translocales, our concept of translocality draws attention to the transformative character of local conditions and allows for the integration of physical and natural environments without essentializing them. As such, translocal research can engage in the discussion of global environmental change and strengthen the importance of the mobility of people, concepts and resources within this debate.

4. Challenges and opportunities of translocal SES

We argue that bringing the concepts of SES and translocality together is a fruitful step toward understanding migration in the age of climate change without getting caught in a neo-deterministic frame. In our view, two major gains arise from this synthesis.

First: The social-ecological systems perspective conceives of the ecological and social as integrated subsystems, “[...] in which some of the interdependent relationships among humans are mediated through interactions with biophysical and non-human biological units” (Anderies et al., 2004, p. 3; see also Resilience Alliance, 2008). SES are intricately coupled and complex (Crumley, 1994; Turner II et al., 2003), i.e. there exist strong mutual feedbacks between system elements and across scales (Becker & Jahn, 2006). In conceptualizing migration as a specific empirical example of coupled social-ecological systems, it becomes essential not only to consider the effects of environmental change on migration, but also to comprehend the feedback processes of migration on the environment.

Second: The translocal perspective emphasizes the connectedness of people across localities. Flows of resources, information, knowledge and other forms of social remittances are at the centre of the translocality approach. By adopting a translocal perspective on “environmental migration”, out-migration is not conceived as a process whereby actors are leaving the setting of social interaction, but rather as an expansion of this very setting. In doing so, the analysis has to take into account the feedback processes that can influence the environment and the ways in which actors deal with environmental stress across spatial scales.

To sum up, the SES perspective gives us the opportunity to consider the feedback relations between the social and the environmental subsystems. The concept of translocality helps us to focus on feedback processes across different scales and translocales. These opportunities, also pose some challenges, however. While it is, for example, a mere terminological exercise to label human-environment relations as coupled, the great empirical task for future research will be to describe and analyse how the coupling and decoupling of subsystems emerges and how this relates to scale-transcendent feedback processes. Another challenge is the significant scale mismatch between SES and translocality. Whereas SES systemically conceptualizes scale in the sense of hierarchically nested levels, the translocal approach interprets scale in terms of networks that are socially produced, emergent, inherently fluid and constantly reworked. The latter approach thus challenges the notion of boundaries as applied in many established conceptualizations of SES. Taking up this challenge means that we must accept that in the social realm, system boundaries are always politically constituted and often blurred. Impacts on the SES, such as climate change (CC), emerge at different scales with different intensities and different characteristics. The idea, concept or discourse of CC is widely shared at the global level (Weisser et al., 2013), but the specific geo-bio-physical impacts of CC itself are mostly experienced and perceived on a very local level, e.g. fields with hail damage, or areas affected by floods. Local actors increasingly refer to notions of global rules or legally binding frameworks, while global media e.g. use localized cases, such as Tuvalu, as a “laboratory and a litmus test for the effects of climate change on the planet” (Farbotko & Lazrus, 2012, p. 385). Migration decisions in this context are taken in reference to these multidirectional and cross-scale processes, and contribute in themselves to the increasingly multi-scalar settings of social-ecological systems. From our point of view, the challenging and questioning of the notion of clearly defined and hierarchically ordered scales, such as global, national, regional and local, is a step towards a more nuanced way of understanding the migration-environment nexus.

5. Conclusion

The advent of critical views of the nexus between climate change and migration has prompted a prolific debate on the difficulties involved in examining this complex issue. We have argued that it is not sufficient to criticize the earlier simplistic approaches to 'climate migrants and environmental refugees'. We must go a step further and provide alternatives that help us to improve migration theories and concepts, in particular by including more accurate accounts of social-ecological interrelations. The challenge for migration researchers is to do so in a way that goes beyond the neo-determinists' agenda, yet acknowledges the materiality of the environment (Piguet, 2012). In short, a conceptual framework is needed to guide future empirical research on the environment-migration nexus.

We have argued that combining concepts of SES with the approach of translocality provides a promising yet challenging way toward such a framework. Translocality will be particularly helpful in examining the feedback of migration dynamics on the environment as well as on communities dealing with environmental changes. This will significantly enhance our comprehension of trans-scalar dynamics on complex SES and bring us forward in understanding the complexities of human-environment relations in the age of climate change.

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University of Bonn

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Department of Geography,
University of Bonn

About the TransReProject

Our research group “Environment. Migration. Resilience” offer a fresh perspective on the environment-migration nexus. It starts from the assumption that, regardless of the accuracy of the projections of future environmental changes, migration is already occurring and will continue to be a major dynamic of global change. We seek to interrogate how migration-induced translocal relations alter the environment and the capacity to deal with environmental changes in the places of origin of migrants. Please find more information on:

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