



Environmental Mobility in a Polarized World: Questioning the Pertinence of the “Climate Refugee” Label for Pacific Islanders

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Accepted: 17 December 2020 / Published online: 12 January 2021

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Abstract

This note offers thoughts on the conceptual and empirical debate surrounding the “climate refugees” label, created as a theoretical category of migrants to reflect the plight of environmentally vulnerable communities. This note challenges this status on conceptual terms. First, we investigate its academic foundations and contend that it fails to portray the complexities of choice, agency, and causality in climate-induced mobility. We then parallel this concept with narratives on traditional asylum seekers to argue that, in a context of heightened anti-immigration sentiment, using security and victim frames may be counterproductive. Finally, we contend that the concept of “climate refugees” is difficult to institutionalize at the international level because it would require challenging dominant conceptions of humanitarian and environmental distress and call into question the West’s responsibility in global climate change and inequality. We conclude that promoting more humane and effective governance regimes requires integrating affected communities’ perspective and conceptualizing climate-induced mobilities as complex and multifactorial processes. Keeping in mind the political context in which it is being used, we argue that the label “climate refugees” is inefficient and inadequate in contemporary politics.

Keywords Climate refugees · Climate mobilities · International governance · Immigration · Movement

Introduction

For years now, researchers have been calling attention to the important human implications of anthropogenic climate change. In his famous report, Nicholas Stern (2008)

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writes the impossibility for certain peoples to continue living on their land and the imminence of large-scale population movements in many regions across the world. The vulnerability of these communities is increased by the combination of environmental factors and the weakness of their socioeconomic systems, hindering their social and political resistance and their adaptive capacities to climate change. As slow-onset environmental degradation thwarts communities' capacity to remain on their land, "climate refugees" have emerged in discourses as a new category of asylum-seeking migrants (Levy and Patz 2015; Geddes et al. 2012). Coined in the 1970s (Morrissey 2009), this legally void term has sparked much debate in both academic and policy circles. It has been created in reference to traditional refugees and widely deployed in media and academic narratives to convey a sense of urgency in addressing global climate change, without actually providing any political or juridical protection for vulnerable populations. Why is the "climate refugee" label inefficient and inadequate in contemporary politics?

This research note questions the discursive construction of "climate refugees" by analyzing it in relation to narratives on traditional refugees and asylees. We explore the political context in which the label "climate refugees" has been mobilized: that of immobility and division in the face of environmental and humanitarian crises. It is contended here that this concept is inappropriate due to its inherent conceptual ambiguity, its controversial nature among communities, and because the international community would essentially overlook yet another "refugee crisis" in a context of increasing anti-immigration sentiment. Labeling is important insofar as it enables a better comprehension of a global issue, but the inextricable link between political praxis and scientific conceptualization requires that we think about questions of choice and causality in climate-induced mobility, bottom-up claims-making, and the legacy of narratives and policies plaguing traditional refugees and asylees.

Contextualizing Climate-Induced Mobility

The Controversial "Climate Refugee"

Few points of consensus are apparent in the "climate migration" literature. Generally divided between the maximalist and minimalist camps (Suhrke 1994), questions revolve around the drivers, directions, and predictions associated with human movement precipitated by environmental degradation. Maximalists offer the most alarming visions of movement, estimating that environmental degradation will soon become one of the leading causes of forced migration in the twenty-first century (Aminzadeh 2007). Writings of the threatened existence of states (Republic of Kiribati 2015), leading to the extinction and obliteration of the entire Pacific nations (Conisbee and Sims 2003), animate this particular class of researchers. They are depicting a rather straightforward relationship between climate change and human movement, emerging from sea-level rise, coastal erosion, land salinization, depletion of water supplies, and the propagation of diseases (Swing 2015; Oliver-Smith 2014). In this perspective, climate refugees have been defined as "people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to

at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, or drought and water scarcity” (Biermann and Boas 2010:67).

By focusing on the inevitability of climate displacement, it seems the rather vague term “climate refugee” is being broadcasted with little prudence. For minimalists, these types of alarmist rhetoric serve only to conjure sentiments of culpability and compassion in the Western world (Gay 2014). Some go so far as to deem this mono-causal conceptualization “unhelpful and unsound intellectually, and unnecessary in practical terms,” arguing that it paints an inaccurate picture of reality because of the difficulty of tracing a definite causal link between risk exposure and mass migration (Black 2001:1; Boas et al. 2019). In this perspective, climate change is best seen as a catalyst for preexisting socioeconomic vulnerabilities that would exert additional pressure on communities (Levy and Patz 2015), having the capacity to tip fragile states into conditions exacerbating forced displacement (Brown and McLeman 2009).

As such, climate-induced mobilities are the result of various socioeconomic drivers embedded in an array of governance issues that are eroding the coping capacities of populations affected by climate change. Baldwin (2017) has gone so far as to oppose the term “climate migration,” arguing that the cause to effect relationship is so difficult to pinpoint that it invalidates the label altogether. Drivers of movement, such as scarcity of resources, unemployment, and overpopulation, are putting strain on communities, and it would be erroneous to point to climate change alone. “Climate refugees” have thus become a “self-perpetuating myth” (Boas et al. 2019: 902) heavily criticized for the lack of empirical grounding for their existence (Piguet 2013). Understanding climate-induced mobilities, therefore, entails framing them as contextual, multifactorial, and multi-response adaptive behaviors. As such, the continued portrayal of the one-dimensional “climate refugee” figure in media and academic writings seems problematic.

Polarization and Solidarity in the West

In addition, mobility is occurring in a difficult period for migrants, asylees, and refugees around the world. The West has taken a right-wing turn in major elections in Europe and North America. Public opinion is increasingly polarized, and the massive rejection of asylees from the Middle East and Africa has been largely documented (Varvin 2017). Media and populist leaders speak of “waves” and “invasions,” nourishing conspiracy theories of the “Great replacement” and disproportionate perceptions of the “refugee crisis” (Fourquet 2016). National identities, notably in North America and Australia, have been confronted to the existence of an “Other” created through discourse and policy to portray a negative image of asylees and refugees (Olsen and El-Bialy 2016; Syed 2019). This social construct has been reinforced through categorizations in the media, encouraging marginalization through a series of narratives including “boat people,” “illegal immigrants” (O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007; McKay et al. 2011), and “bogus refugees” (Esses et al. 2013). A recent study finds that unfavorable attitudes towards asylum seekers in the Western world is correlated to public discourses and representations of refugees as security threats (Dempster and Hargrave 2017), a narrative also found in representations of “climate refugees” (Ransan-Cooper et al. 2015; Høeg and Tulloch 2019).

These discourses have been fueled, in part, by the institutionalization and bureaucratization of refugees (Zetter 1991) and have swayed the West towards a dehumanization of migrants (Varvin 2017). Right-wing and conservative parties have gained ground in parliaments over Europe, in Spain, France, Austria, Germany, and Italy, while their North American conservative homologues have made their mark in Quebec and the USA. This hostility is linked to deteriorating economic conditions which have accentuated xenophobic reactions to asylees and migrants (Lubbers et al. 2002; United Nations 2016). The radicalization of so-called traditional values has become a “pathological normalcy” (Mudde 2013:16) that has been greatly instrumentalized by right-wing parties in various elections to protect their interests from what have been wrongly perceived as surges of refugees. This alleged security threat has enabled certain states to justify restrictions on movement, such as President Trump’s closed border policies (BBC News 2018), Australia’s tightened immigration laws (Cave and Kwai 2019), or the UK’s deportations of migrants considered as “burdens” to citizens (Syed 2016:456). In the context of additional barriers to international movement created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the practical utility of the “climate refugee” label is further put into question.

Aims, Methods, and Concepts

The aim of this research note is to reflect on the pertinence of the “climate refugee” label often associated with Pacific Islanders, in light of its controversial nature and conceptual shortcomings. It draws on preliminary research on civil society agency in the context of climate-induced mobility and adaptation in small island states and relies principally on a literature review supported by interviews of civil society actors and international organizations’ representatives. The qualitative methods used here enable us to explore the ways in which this label may be received and apprehended by communities it claims to represent, and the underlying connotations which hinder its efficacy in contemporary politics, in the hope of raising new considerations for further field research.

In total, nine interviews were conducted with representatives from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Platform on Disaster Displacement, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Kiribati Adaptation Program, as well as Friends of the Earth Brisbane, Climate Wise Women, Displacement Solutions, Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Kiribati Climate Action Network (KiriCAN). Interviews were conducted on Skype in 2018 and lasted between 40 min and 1 h. The transcripts were transcribed manually and analyzed using the qualitative analysis software QDA Miner. As interviews touched on various issues related to climate vulnerability, qualitative coding was used to decipher predominant conceptions of mobility and adaptation and enable a more systematic comparative analysis of the varying perspectives and discourses on these issues (Bryman 2012). Open coding, in line with grounded theory analysis, allowed for flexibility in breaking down interview data to highlight specific narratives on “climate refugees,” state-civil society interactions, and adaptation strategies in Pacific Islands. Interviews were semi-directive and tailored to respondents but followed a general guideline centered on actors’ perceptions of the lived experiences of communities referred to as “climate

refugees.” Questions ranged from broad inquiries such as “how are climate refugees and migrants viewed by your organization?,” to more specific issues, such as the Australian and Neo-Zealander immigration quotas, land issues in Papua New-Guinea, and in situ adaptation strategies of particular groups in Kiribati. For actors working directly with islanders, we asked about people’s expressed acceptance of movement and thoughts on labels and mobility prospects.

This research has focused on small island developing states (SIDS) and Pacific Islanders (in Kiribati and the Carteret islands in particular) as typical cases of study for two main reasons. First, the “climate refugee” label has been mostly widely used in the context of SIDS because they are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts and face specific mobility challenges (Merone and Tait 2018). Although the majority of movements are internal across the world (McAdam 2011), Pacific Islanders face a higher probability of transborder movement due to receding shorelines and lack of higher ground for relocation (McNamara 2015), yielding greater potential for seeking environmental asylum. Second, the instances in which the “climate refugee” label has been used for juridical advancement has involved Pacific Islanders in Australian and New Zealand courts (Buchanan 2015), providing us with empirical insight on the practical shortcomings of this form of asylum seeking. For these reasons, the situation in SIDS lends itself to an analysis of regional socio-political contexts and concerns over the “climate refugee” status.

This note strays from notions of climate displacement or migration and instead anchors analysis within the concept of “climate mobilities” (Boas et al. 2019; Baldwin et al. 2019). Because vulnerable communities are disproportionately affected by climate change and global capitalism, their adaptive capacities and mobility opportunities are subjected to contextual and intersectional forces that cannot be captured by the “climate refugee” label. In this regard, mobility is more than an outcome of climate risk: it is a factor of underlying colonial, economic, and systemic forces which influence communities’ ability or willingness to engage in movement. With this in mind, “persons moved by climate change” is used here as a generic term referring to movement influenced to some degree by environmental threats, whether forced or pre-emptive, in an attempt to avoid the “refugee” etiquette and for lack of a better label. This note does not question the hardship of communities affected by global climate change and rather reflects on the shortcomings of counterproductive narratives that are preventing their protection. We contend that climate change is posing an immediate threat to many communities and that “myths” on the inevitability of their displacement and their security implications may not adequately reflect the various conditions and ways in which populations react to these multifaceted environmental risks (McNamara and Farbotko 2017; Boas et al. 2019).

Discussion: Challenging the Concept of “Climate Refugees”

The Question of Choice and Its Effect on Conceptualization

The environmental refugee concept is derived from the traditional refugee title, a label which holds precise criteria to uphold for claiming legal protection. The 1951 Geneva Convention defines a refugee as a person suffering from direct human persecution

outside of its country of origin (UNHCR 2007), from which has been conceptualized the “climate refugee” and its variants. Bates (2002) has, for example, classified environmental refugees under three categories (disaster refugees, expropriation refugees, and deterioration refugees), all absorbed under a voluntarily vague definition of “people who migrate from their usual residence due to changes in their ambient non-human environment” (Bates 2002:468). Although the recognition of different drivers for movement is important conceptually and empirically, it is misguided to consider these vulnerable populations as “refugees.” Pre-emptive movement is a valid adaptation strategy which certainly adds a crucial dimension to our comprehension of mobility; but associating it to asylum seeking, as implied by the “climate refugee” label, is questionable. Using Bates’ conceptualization, we would assume that the twenty-two million people who are displaced each year by natural catastrophes are asylees or potential refugees (Yonetani 2016), but that would be vastly misleading.

The instability provoked by weak institutions, conflict, and resource scarcity and further strained by severe environmental degradation can be considered as the basis for population displacements associable to refugees. This has led to the creation of typologies of the various kinds of people affected by climate change in an attempt to categorize movement and argue for the creation of a “climate refugee” status (Renaud et al. 2007; Vlassopoulou 2010). Nonetheless, the issue remains; climate refugees do not legally exist. They have been created in reference to traditional refugees and “climate migrants” to underscore a sense of urgency and involuntariness in mobility. Where migrants are considered by the UNHCR as people “moved by the desire to change or adventure, or by family or other reasons of a personal nature” (UNHCR 1979:12), they are largely associated with economic drivers and the notion of choice in departure. By comparison, refugees are affiliated with a lack of agency, a sense of desperation and lack of planning, and their status implies that they benefit from some juridical and political protection.

This has led to thinking of climate-induced movement as a continuum of agency, with “involuntary” movement at the far right and “voluntary” movement on the far left (Bates 2002; Hugo 1996). However, this dichotomy aimed at justifying the existence of “climate refugees” translates a deeply neoliberal conceptualization of human movement, in which a non-urgent move is perceived as inherently economic and the notion of choice arbitrarily assigned. It lends unique motivations to multifactorial mobilities and disregards an array of external impositions, whether they be environmental, cultural, emotional, social, economic, or political shocks that influence a person’s decision or ability to migrate. By assigning a label, migrant, or refugee, based on the scale and timeframe of environmental degradation, these narratives are perpetuating a dichotomist and simplistic view of mobility.

This perspective rests on an erroneous notion that movement under climatic stressors can be entirely voluntary or involuntary, simultaneously ignoring the multiple sources of pressure which push individuals to reconsider their ability to remain in place and occulting the willingness of others to adapt to climate change in situ (see, e.g., McNamara and Farbotko 2017). This distinction presumes agency and seems to lack any insight on the realities of populations forced to deal with (im)mobility. More than that, the economization of discourses through the creation of the migrant-refugee dichotomy has eclipsed the plight, emotions, and land attachments of affected population by conceiving their mobilities as a uniform decision-making process and

movement as inevitable. The spotlight on “climate refugees” has therefore prevented the study of immobility and “trapped populations” (Geddes et al. 2012; Black and Collyer 2014) and occulted the multiplicity of grassroots perspectives which are contesting these doom-and-gloom narratives and proposing new outlooks on community adaptation (McNamara and Farbotko 2017).

The Politicization of the “Climate Refugee”

On account of the polarization of public opinion on traditional asylees and refugees (Verkuyten et al. 2018), it is no surprise that there has not been a sweeping call for protection of those moved by climate change. This tense political context urges us to question the utility of creating a “climate refugee” category under international law, especially as alarmist rhetoric over a legally inexistent category of persons continue to produce counterproductive “doom and gloom” discourses, fueling xenophobic reactions in the West and minimizing the agency of affected peoples (Bettini 2013; Boas et al. 2019). For some authors, “crisis narratives about climate refugees and conflict serve the interests of national security actors” (Hartmann 2010:239), by conjuring sentiments of overwhelming human displacements that in reality, as research shows, will most likely remain internal for now (McAdam 2011; Bettini 2017). Of course, climate-led movements will intensify and necessitate border crossing in some particular cases, such as for small island states with very limited land (McNamara 2015), but the logistical costs associated with moving and the disproportionate effects of climate change on poorer communities suggests that internal mobility is more plausible, especially in the short to medium term. As such, conceptual and empirical interrogations on the appropriateness of the “refugee” label are necessary, considering the context in which this discourse is being produced.

The images associated with “climate refugees” are directly derived from existing immigration narratives which have spawned specific frames for speaking of persons moved by climate change (Ransan-Cooper et al. 2015). The first is the security narrative, which echoes representations of traditional refugees as threats to national stability (O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007; Olsen et al. 2016) and which legitimizes tightened immigration laws (Piguet 2013). The second, the victim frame, engages the idea that climate change is unjustly affecting vulnerable populations that need “saving” (Herrmann 2017), an image widely rebutted by those Pacific Islanders it pertains to (McNamara and Gibson 2009; Dreher and Voyer 2015; McNamara and Farbotko 2017; Farbotko 2010). In essence, “When it comes to the media, climate refugees have mainly two roles: victims and security threats” (Høeg and Tulloch 2019: 229). Depicted either as people to fear or to protect (Bettini 2013), “climate refugees” exist as rhetoric figures constructed through apocalyptic estimates of climate change-driven movements (Baldwin 2017).

As such, the “climate refugee” narrative is used to conjure a sense of helplessness for victims of climate change (McNamara and Gibson 2009) and falsely implies any sort of juridical protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The negative image that the title now confers has had great impact on the discontent surrounding the refugee label. For islanders, it is a question of dignity, as they believe the unfavorable connotation translates to “people who can’t help themselves, who are in need, who are perhaps less worthy or outsiders of society” (Climate Wise Women, interview 2018). Because they

do not want to be regarded as victims to be rescued (Friends of the Earth Brisbane, interview 2018), communities facing mobility are very disgruntled by the term (McNamara and Farbotko 2017). They believe their desire to relocate, to pursue a better future, and to “thrive and not just survive” does not translate into the “climate refugee” label and as such does not grant them the level of dignity they deserve (Climate Wise Women, interview 2018). As they have no control over the environmental degradation caused by the industrialized world, islanders feel an intense desire to control their movement in both the shape, direction, and terminology. As a civil society leader in Kiribati notes, “we have our own lands, we can do our own business, and run our own work, you don’t want to be a slave in another country” (KiriCAN, interview 2018). Some actors have advanced that titles such as “forced climate migrant” or “climate change-related displacement” are preferred by certain islander communities (Friends of the Earth Brisbane, interview 2018). In the Carteret islands of Papua New Guinea, for example, community leader Ursula Rakova hates the label “refugees” and prefers to speak in terms of migration and resettlement (Climate Wise Women; Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, interviews 2018). Rejecting the refugee label may be a way to dissociate affected communities from the difficulties facing other populations struggling to gain protection rights in the West (Merone and Tait 2018).

Preliminary research also reveals the unwillingness of islanders to leave, an ordeal often associated with loss of identity and culture (Farbotko and McMichael 2019). Many older Carteret inhabitants have claimed “we’ll stay here and die!” (Friends of the Earth Brisbane, interview 2018), as the cultural shock of a total-subsistence island lifestyle moving to a capitalist system in a Western society would be too difficult to bear. This threat to their social structures is further accentuated by the asylum-seeking system founded on individual cases and is thus antagonistic to the cultural and community dimensions of climate change impacts. As I-Kiribati islanders migrate economically and circularly to New Zealand and Australia to work and generate remittances (McAdam 2011), they highlight the importance of diasporas and communal culture in their survival. “We’re always depending on each other in other countries, that’s how we survive. If we don’t have this communal culture, we’ll never be able to survive, we’ll be on the streets eating from the rubbish bins” (KiriCAN, interview 2018).

Historical Responsibility and the Difficulty to Protect

In light of such pushback, it appears important to question the context in which labels are being deployed, notably the interests of institutions involved in producing such discourses. For international organizations, the “climate refugee” title is barely applicable to people moved by climate change, unless they were to prove some form of marginalization on the grounds of religion, political affiliation, or sexuality (UNHCR, interview 2018). More than that, nations are not subject to any restrictive conditions regarding the Refugee Convention, other than having the obligation to review the applicant’s claim. In the Pacific, where many low-lying nations are facing the dire consequences of sea-level rise and intensified climatic events, relocation to neighboring Australia and New Zealand is a real possibility. Unfortunately, the Howard years (1996–2007) have greatly damaged Australia’s relationship with asylees, as Prime Minister Howard began opposing assistance to Pacific Islanders enduring climate

change and politically constructing a “Fortress Australia” mentality, aimed at distancing the country from any responsibility to potential refugees (Collett 2009). This stance has permeated political response in Australia, as the nation remains anchored in a “horribly toxic never-ending political issue” surrounding their refugee policy (Displacement Solutions, interview 2018). As such, the application of the 1951 Convention is greatly limited, even if an environmental component were to exist. In practice, protecting people moved by climate change through conventional channels would necessitate that they cross a border, and it is more likely that they will be treated as migrants rather than refugees by receiving countries (Displacement Solutions, interview 2018).

This is due to the difficulty of tracing environmental persecution back to a single actor in the context of global climate change. “Climate refugees” have been associated with intense natural disruptions and the notion of forced displacement, but the absence of an identifiable persecutor means that peoples affected by forced cross-border movement cannot fulfill essential requirements for asylum seeking. This has been reiterated in courts over environmental asylum requests in Australia and New Zealand, which have argued that persecution must take a human form and must unequivocally be related to one of the very restrictive criteria set forth by the 1951 Refugee Convention (RRT Case 2009; Buchanan 2015). Additionally, international climate-related movement will become increasingly difficult for vulnerable populations as immigration laws harden in Western countries (McLeman 2019), providing fewer opportunities for advancements in environmental asylum seeking.

This also highlights the inability of the international system to absorb new categories of mobility, as organizations continue to frame migration as voluntary movement and contest the necessity to rethink their conception of environmental migration altogether (Platform on Disaster Displacement, interview 2018; IOM, interview 2018). The unwillingness of international agencies to overcome a juridical gap in the protection of vulnerable populations because of the unfeasibility of opening up international negotiations (IOM, interview 2018) could be understood as a way to dissipate attention on an issue that is sure to put into question the inability of polluters to face their responsibility in the humanitarian and environmental crises. If “the most important governance need is to address the plight of climate refugees” (Biermann and Boas 2010:61), it should indeed speak to historical responsibilities over global climate change. What some call “corrective or rectificatory justice” (Bell 2004:139; Skillington 2016) implies that industrialized nations have the heaviest burden in redressing grievances linked to environmental mobility. Although small island states have been calling out the world’s largest polluters at UNFCCC events since the 1990s, very little action has been taken to accommodate affected communities. The UNHCR’s engagement in climate relocation remains non-operational, providing only normative and policy advice to concerned nations (UNHCR, interview 2018), again highlighting a certain lack of engagement from the international community. Instead, organizations rely on what Ransan-Cooper et al. (2015) call the “adaptive frame,” which encourages those impacted by climate change to engage in adaptation and resilience at individual levels, essentially pushing them into labor migration and the capitalist market. This resonates with what Syed (2016:450) names Market Migration, the “intentional labor market-based recruitment and exploitation” of racialized peoples. By avoiding responsibility and encouraging assimilation into globalized neoliberal schemes of production and movement, as is happening with I-Kiribati

circular labor migration, international organizations are deflecting from addressing the root causes of global climate change.

Leimgruber's (2004) notion of injustice is helpful to understand the West's relentless efforts to prevent the institutionalization of persons moved by climate change. The technocratic vision that has been guiding conceptions of environmental exploitation since the industrial revolution has, by promoting market liberalism's dominance on nature, generated a rejection of responsibility on both humanitarian and environmental fronts. Indeed, "we are reaping the fruits of worldwide colonization, of the export of the European way of thinking, of reckless exploitation of the Earth for the benefits of the few" (Leimgruber 2004:264). He argues that this rejection of their responsibility to protect people moved by climate change is a trademark of their inability to generate a transformation in Western attitudes. In practice, institutionalizing this category would necessitate a shift in the policy debate to rethink mechanisms and methods for responding to humanitarian and environmental crises, which would directly engage the responsibility of the international community as a whole.

The "climate refugee" label thus seems idealistic and inappropriate to deal with the political and migratory realities of affected communities because it masks institutions' liability in causing this predicament. In fact, "raising the specter of climate refugees and climate conflict obscures the real battle lines in the climate policy arena" (Hartmann 2010:242), eclipsing the international community's actual unwillingness to protect these peoples and masking the rejection of the label by affected communities. At the moment, the political climate seems unfavorable to any type of migrant or refugee protection that would require a shift in dominant ideologies. With no change in sight, the continued use of the "climate refugee" label runs the risk of evoking "fantasies of uncontrollable waves of migration", fueling "xenophobic reactions or serving as justification for generalized policies of restriction for people seeking asylum" (Piguet 2010:81).

Conclusions

To investigate the effectiveness of the "climate refugee" label, we have first provided insight on its academic construction, highlighting shortcomings in its inherent conceptions of choice, agency, and causality in climate-induced mobilities. Then, we have noted its counterproductive character by bringing attention to the similarities in narratives plaguing traditional asylum seekers, refugees, and "climate refugees," portrayed both as victims and security threats in political and media discourses. We argue that these frames have politicized the image of persons moved by climate change in a context of already tightened immigration in the West, making their institutionalization at the international level difficult. Due to a general unwillingness to recognize responsibility to these new mobilities in contemporary political spheres, international organizations have promoted labor migration channels anchored in a deeply neoliberal agenda to provide cheap labor force to industrialized countries as a solution to environmental vulnerability (Weber 2016). Adding to this unfavorable context, the general reluctance of islanders to be identified as "climate refugees" has further put into question the

pertinence and legitimacy of this concept (Merone and Tait 2018; McNamara and Gibson 2009; Farbotko 2010; McNamara and Farbotko 2017).

In conclusion, the argument presented in this paper is not simply based on accepting that the “climate refugee” label is legally unbinding and will most unlikely be integrated into the 1951 Geneva Convention. It is to say that it is vastly unsatisfactory on conceptual grounds because it inadequately expresses the realities of climate-induced mobilities in a context of hardened borders and because it perpetuates colonialist and capitalist understandings of humanitarian and environmental distress. Is there, then, a clear benefit to using such a label? We argue that it may be more helpful to conceptualize movements as “climate mobilities,” a term proposed by Boas et al. (2019) to stray from doom and gloom discourses and “wishful sinking” narratives (Farbotko 2010). In light of the current political context in which asylum and movements are evolving, attention should be placed on promoting governance regimes which fully encompass the realities of climate mobilities, both in the complex decision-making processes of movement and the consequences of its inscription in a neoliberal paradigm.

An obvious limit to this research is the use of interview data with intermediary actors rather than with affected islanders. This is due to the difficulty of accessing Pacific communities themselves, notably because of the geographic location of the case studies, as well as the challenges associated with limited Internet and telephone services in the Carteret Islands and Kiribati (according to the Kiribati National Statistics Office (2016) for example, around 15% of the country’s population has regular Internet access). These conditions made long-distance interviewing with islanders difficult. As such, the overall scope of this study is limited because it does not include the perspective of islanders themselves, instead conveying that of civil society actors working with communities and institutional representatives. These basic results nonetheless hint that further research could enable a better comprehension of the policy needs for labels and protection regimes for affected peoples. These preliminary conclusions are thus not definitive and call for further documentation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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