

SCOPING PAPER ON CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND RELIGION

ABSTRACT

In the recent studies and discussions about migration and climate change, the role of religion and belief has been poorly investigated. Therefore, this scoping paper aims to investigate the intersection of climate change, migration, and religion. We first explore the links between climate change and migration, in particular the implications of the lack of legal recognition of 'climate refugees'. We then explore how religion comes into play: specifically, providing critical commentary on studies that have considered whether religion is a predictor of views about climate change; the centrality of religion to the climate justice debate; and how religious actors and institutions produce networks of support for climate migrants. Finally we explore the role of indigenous communities (and their nature-based belief systems) who are routinely displaced by extractivism and consequent environmental destruction, in tackling climate change.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND ON THE CLIMATE CHANGE-MIGRATION NEXUS

Mass migration is predicted to occur due to the consequences of climate change – including food insecurity, low water availability and disease outbreaks – disproportionately affecting the Global South. The World Bank (2021) estimates there could be as many as 216 million climate migrants by 2050, including 105 million in Africa, 88.9 million in south and east Asia, and 17.1 million in Central and Latin America.

Climate migration is unfolding across the globe: however for the most part, within borders (European Commission, 2022). In 2021, according to the OHCHR, climate change caused more internal displacement than armed conflict: of the 59.1 million people being displaced in 2021.

There are two types of climate change impacts: 'sudden onset' climate-related disasters include droughts, floods, storms,

heat waves and hurricanes which are believed to result in temporary and local displacement, whilst 'slow onset' processes such as coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and desertification are believed to cause long-term, gradual and 'voluntary' migration (Tagliapietra and Lenaerts, 2022). Bangladesh – frequently cited as the most climate-vulnerable country in the world – experiences a combination of 'sudden onset' and 'slow onset' events, and it is estimated that 6 million have already been displaced due to frequent natural disasters and sea level rise (UNCCFFC, 2012).



There is an increasing trend of cross-border movements too. Tuvalu – the Polynesian Island nation between Hawaii and Australia which sits only 4.6m above sea level – has seen populations relocate to New Zealand autonomously and through pilot resettlement programmes (Yates et al., 2022). Climate is increasingly being regarded by officials as a driver of migration from Mexico and Central America across the US-Mexico border – the world's busiest border – due to increased frequency of hurricanes, drought and crop loss (The New Statesman, 2021; Yale Climate Connections, 2022).

At present, there is a striking lack of international cooperation to address climate migration. At COP21, the UN made a plea to developed countries to strengthen their commitments to climate migrants by creating pathways for legal migration and ensuring decent work for migrant workers to prevent trafficking (IOM, 2022)

WHERE DOES RELIGION COME IN?

The intersection between migration and religion has been a subject of rich scholarship as a 'complicated phenomenon' (Ullah, 2022). One of the most enduring debates is if religion is a source of integration or exclusion for migrants. Hirschman (2004) takes the view that religion is a tool for migrants' integration, providing them with 'refuge, respectability and resources'. Beckford (2019) and Vertovec (2005) tend to agree through their exploration of migration's ability to produce religious cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as new or hybrid religious beliefs, practices and pathways to 'integration'. However, Ullah (2022) considers, whilst pursuit of religious freedom has traditionally been a driver of migration, freedom to practise religion in destination countries' socio-economic and political conditions has emerged as a critical issue. For example, Islam – Europe's fastest growing religion – is frequently discussed as contradictory, if not a threat, to the 'modernity' and 'secularism' of Europe, spurred on by securitisation of Islam since 9/11.

The connection between climate migration and religion has not been widely studied in a 'practical' sense because climate-driven cross-border migration – which produces situations where different religions may come into contact – has not occurred at scale.

In light of this, in this paper we explore the religious dimension of climate migration from a variety of 'theoretical' perspectives. We provide critical commentary on studies that have considered whether religion is a predictor of views about climate change; the centrality of religion and indigenous beliefs to the climate justice debate; how religious actors and institutions can support and advocate on behalf of climate migrants. Finally we turn to the role of indigenous communities (and their nature-based belief systems), who are routinely displaced by extractivism and consequent environmental destruction in tackling climate change.



OVERVIEW OF KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS AND LEGAL ISSUES AROUND CLIMATE-DRIVEN MIGRATION

Currently, individuals migrating due to the effects of climate change – or climate migrants (1) – are not recognised as refugees in international law, and this is not set to change. Despite pressure from the UN and other international organisations, there is reluctance from nation states to revisit the definition of a refugee, which would arguably catalyse the adoption of international protection mechanisms for climate migrants. This is due to several factors, including the trend of public opposition to migration; a lack of international cooperation on migration in general; a 'much-to-be-desired' discussion of migration in the climate change debate, as well as a disputed link between climate change and migration, all of which uphold and perpetuate states' lack of cooperation.

LACK OF RECOGNITION OF ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES

The prevailing legal and normative standard for international cooperation and establishing the responsibility of states with respect to refugees remains to this day the 1951 Geneva Convention, which was developed in the immediate aftermath of the large movements of people from WWII.

In the 1951 Geneva Convention, a refugee is identified as a person seeking protection outside of their country of origin, given a well founded fear of prosecution of race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion. The 1967 Protocol (in which the United States became signatories) went on to sharpen a distinction between 'refugees' from 'economic migrants', who are understood

to have left their country voluntarily and are therefore not afforded the same protections. (Albro, 2019)

Countries that are signatories to the Convention are not mandated to protect climate migrants, as they are not legally recognised as refugees. For example, migrant victims of food insecurity exacerbated by climate change from Central America are routinely described by receiving countries either as economic migrants or as fleeing violence, and so not fitting the definition of refugees (ibid).

Despite the fact we are well upon the 'climate change era' – in which rising temperatures and sea-levels are leading to regions becoming uninhabitable,

(1) There is no consensus on what to label individuals migrating due to the effects of climate change: terms such as 'climate refugees', 'environmental refugees', 'climate-induced migrant(ion)' and 'environmental migrant(ion)' are used interchangeably. In this scoping paper, we will be using the phrase 'climate migrants'.

increasing the frequency of natural disasters and rate of biodiversity loss, all of which impacting on food security – there is little appetite to revisit the 1951 Refugee Convention to expand the definition of refugee to include those who ‘voluntarily’ leave their countries due to climate change.

This ‘lack of appetite’ is linked to trends of increasingly restrictive immigration policy in developed countries to limit the influx of migrants, as well as lack of international cooperation on migration (2), which Bhagwati (2003) describes as ‘a gaping hole in international institutional architecture’.

There have been some international efforts to provide protection for climate migrants. The 2018 Global Compact on Migration and Global Compact on Refugees and Migrants, internationally negotiated non agreements on the global governance of migration, recognise the role of climate change in driving migration, however they provide only non-binding objectives which have seen only limited implementation (Centre for Global Development, 2023).

According to the Centre for Global Development (2023), regional frameworks for the protection of climate migrants including the 1969 OAU Convention on Refugees and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, are more promising.

The 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention is a binding agreement, and uses a broader definition of refuge, providing protection to those fleeing ‘events seriously disturbing public order’, which may include individuals forcibly displaced by the effects of climate change. The 1984 Cartagena Declaration is non-binding, however it also mandates protection is given to those fleeing ‘circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.’

There have also been international campaigns to include ‘ecocide’ – the systematic destruction or neglect of the environment by a company or a country – as the fifth crime in the International Criminal Court (El Salto, 2022). The first country to recognise it in domestic law was Vietnam, where the concept originated after the US War (ibid). In January 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution and recommendation calling for recognition of ecocide. It could be argued that an international recognition of ecocide could be a catalyst for the legal acknowledgement of climate refugees.

(2) Despite the existence of global consultative forums, international standards, and international migration agencies, there is no international migration regime; consequently the international state community has struggled to establish efficient and effective global migration governance (Thielmann, 2021).

A DISPUTED LINK BETWEEN MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The climate change and migration 'nexus' is not a new phenomenon – it was first mentioned in the 1970s, and in a UN Environment Programme report in 1985. In the past decade or so, there has been increasing recognition of the link between migration and change. Key developments include:

- In 2008, a Council of Europe report recommended environmentally induced migration may implicate security risk to Europe as migratory pressures are expected to rise;
- The 2010 United Nations Forum for Cooperation on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meeting in Cancun was the first time that an international forum on climate change formally recognised displacement migration and planned relocation as a part of any framework for climate change adaptation (Albro, 2019)
- In 2011, António Guterres (High Commissioner of UNHCR at the time) acknowledged people displaced due to climate change have the right to protection and requested a 'legal framework' (Pajares, 2020);
- At COP26 in Glasgow, the UN stated developed countries must strengthen their commitments to the increasing number of people escaping the adverse effects of climate change (The New Statesman, 2021).

Despite increasing calls for action to mitigate the effects of climate-driven migration, international frameworks – either to manage migratory flows or protect climate migrants – have failed to materialise substantively. The 2015 Paris Agreement barely mentions migrants or refugees, whilst the Global Compact on Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018), although making reference to climate-induced migrants and proves objective for their project, the Compacts simultaneously harden the distinction between 'migrants' and 'refugees' and disputes refugee movements having a causal link with climate change, which can be seen as a move in the opposite direction.

A factor contributing to the international community's unwillingness to extend refugee protection to climate migrants is perhaps underpinned by the difficulty in establishing a causal link between climate change and migration (Werz and Hoffman, 2016). There is a debate about causality: the degree to which climate change influences migration, as migration is often a multicausal process. There are myriad, political, social and economic reasons people migrate (Baldwin, 2019; Ferris, 2021).

"ALARMIST" VS "SCEPTICAL" PERSPECTIVES

Thielmann (2021) suggests there are two main perspectives in scholarship on the intersection between climate change and international migration. An 'alarmist' perspective focuses on large numbers and calls for urgent action. A 'sceptical' perspective sees scholars concerned by hype around the migration-climate change debate. Migration expert Hein de Haas (2020) is one of leading 'sceptical' voices on climate-driven migration, arguing that predictions of climate-driven mass migration – particularly from the Global South to Europe – is not backed up by sufficient reasoning. de Haas draws attention to the fact that the majority of climate-driven migration occurs internally or to neighbouring countries; migration being a multi-causal process; and the majority of vulnerable people lacking the means and resources to move vast distances.

De Haas also warns of a danger of drawing unfounded links between climate change and migration, as it depoliticises the migration of vulnerable people. For example, entrenched poverty, poor quality housing and weak public services may be the reason why people choose to live in another region when a hurricane hits a poor country. If it is framed that individuals have migrated due to climate change, the blame is shifted to climatic factors rather than government inadequacies.

It could even be argued that 'alarmist' perspectives on climate migration will contribute to the securitarian media constructions of refugees 'swarming' upon Europe, when in reality forced migration continues to occur for the majority regionally, within the Global South.



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HOW DOES RELIGION COME INTO PLAY?

There is a lack of 'applied' research between climate migration and religion because climate-driven international migration – which produces situations where different religions may come into contact – is still only theoretical.

However, diverse scholarship on the religious dimension of climate migration does exist, and it is notable that it is constructed through a problem-solving lens, with a focus on how religion can be used to alleviate and mitigate the human impacts of climate-driven migration.

This section considers and provides critical commentary on the link between religion, climate change, and climate-driven migration. Although there has been useful information about religions' role in supporting climate adaptation, the lack of empirical evidence into the interaction of religion and climate-change migration, it is difficult to establish religion as a 'stand-alone' factor which influences the climate-migration debate.

THE LINK BETWEEN RELIGION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

There has been research into the effect of religion as a predictor of views about climate change. In 2015, Pew Research Centre conducted a study into the effect of religion on attitudes towards climate change in the United States. Evangelical Protestants were most likely of all religious groups to express sceptical views about climate change, whilst members of non-Christian religions and non-religious communities expressed the highest levels of concern.

However, it could be argued that these patterns are not influenced by religion, but rather by politics. Evangelical Protestants largely identify with the GOP,

who are less likely than the overall public to believe that global warming is caused by human activity (Pew Research Centre, 2022). Therefore, it could be argued political party identification is a stronger predictor of views about climate change rather than religious identity. The link between right-wing ideology and climate change scepticism also occurs in Europe. Kulin, Seva and Dunlap (2021), demonstrate that European citizens voting for rising right-wing populism parties may be sceptical about climate change and oppose policies that increase fossil fuel taxation.

RELIGION AND THE CLIMATE CHANGE JUSTICE DEBATE

Climate justice relates to concerns that countries which produce the least emissions, suffer the most from the effects of climate change. Communities that are already poor, and largely excluded from the rewards of global economic activity, are disproportionately affected by climate change and at the same time are less prepared to deal with. At the same time, the richest countries which are disproportionately causing environmental risk, are less exposed, and have the resources and capacity to mitigate its effects. There is increasing recognition that the unequal distribution of the effects of the climate crisis reflects pre-existing economic inequalities caused by historical colonial legacies and resource extraction (the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change, London School of Economics, 2022).

Central to the climate justice debate is geography. The Global South, home to low-income countries that produce the least emissions, is disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change (Pajares, 2020). The Global North, which is estimated to be responsible for 92% of global emissions (Lancet Planetary Health, 2020) is affected to a lesser extent. The Pacific Islands, which is sinking due to climate change, produces just 0.03% of the world's global emissions (Al Jazeera, 2022); whilst in Pakistan

floods have displaced over 33 million people and caused over 1,200 deaths, despite the nation being responsible of less than 1% of the world's global emissions (Democracy Now, 2022). Desmond Tutu has referred to the disproportionate impact of climate change on the Global South as the 'climate apartheid' (UNDP, 2007).

Skirbekk, de Sherbinin and Adamo (2020) argue it is important to consider religion when considering climate justice. The authors suggest that countries that are less religious (for example Europe and China) tend to have greater GDP, use more resources and produce more emissions, yet, they are better prepared to deal with the effects of climate change because they are wealthier. Nations whose populations are more religious tend to have lower GDP, use fewer resources, but have less capacity to meet environmental challenges, and are therefore subject to more adverse outcomes. A working example of this is the comparison between relief efforts in Honduras (a Catholic country) and Germany (a secular country). The International Rescue Committee criticised the lack of international assistance for Honduras which saw 10% of its population displaced following a hurricane in November 2020. However following flooding of the Rhine basin (date), the German government put together a €30bn reconstruction fund –

an aid package nearly 1.5 times larger than the GDP of Honduras (The New Statesman 2021).

The study also observes that the lowest level of energy use per capita, as well as climate change adaptive capacity is found in Hindu-dominated countries, such as India and Bangladesh. This is significant when these countries experience the highest rates of water stress, as well as risk of flooding.

However, in relation to climate change, religion never seems to stand as a factor that has significance by itself, and often intersects with other demographics, such as race and ethnicity.



WHAT IS RELIGION'S ROLE IN CHALLENGES POSED BY CLIMATE MIGRATION?

Among academic and policymakers there has been interest in the potential of faith-based actors and communities playing a role in the response to climate migration. The Centre for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) at the American University, Washington DC investigated how religious responses can mitigate environmental displacement in Latin America. It was concluded that there are several dimensions of religious engagement with environmental displacement:

- The potential contributions of faith-based actors and religious concepts to national and international deliberations and to emerging normative frameworks addressing new governance and security challenges posed by environmental migration;
- The participation of transnational faith-based NGOs in humanitarian intervention on behalf of migrants;
- The role in receiving communities of religion for addressing the needs of migrants, especially in contexts of resettlement and social integration;
- The ways religious engagement is well-positioned to ameliorate intangible and collective dimensions of environmental dislocations beyond just the material needs of migrants.

In 2019, CLALS researcher Albro produced a paper exploring the recognition of faith-based actors as partners in The humanitarian response to climate-induced migration, in which he demonstrates that the role of faith-based actors protection in the climate migrants has been considered at both international and regional level.

During The Nansen Initiative (2012), a consultative process intended to build consensus on the development of a protection agenda addressing the needs of climate migrants, the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres convened a dialogue on 'Faith and protection' together with interfaith dialogues to explore the role religious actors and communities can play in the role of protecting and supporting refugees and migrants (Albro, 2019). According to Albro, this paved a way for more faith leaders and religious voices to participate in the Nansen process, which led to a series of positive outcomes including a UNHCR joint statement on forced displacement with 25 faith-based NGOs. This 2012 dialogue also arguably had an effect on the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees acknowledged the role of humanitarian faith-based actors as first responders providing relief services.

At regional level, Albro points out church groups cooperating to provide support to migrants across Latin America has come-

to the attention of international and regional faith-based umbrella organisations, such as Latin American Council of Churches, the Latin American and Caribbean chapter of Religions for Peace, Caritas, the ACT Alliance, and the Scalabrini International Migration Network. These umbrella groups serve as points of connection for religious groups to policy and decision makers on climate change, with facilitating the participation of religious actors and groups in UNFCCC and COP meetings (ibid).

RELIGION AND EXTRACTIVISM IN LATIN AMERICA

If we look at belief beyond the three Abrahamic religions, indigenous beliefs, such as Animism, include a broader perspective on what constitutes life, spirituality and the social world. Features of the environment, such as mountains, lakes or the wind are considered to be non-human relatives or ancestors. In the Andean region, the Pachamama, or "Mother Nature", is honoured and worshipped as an ancestor, a goddess, and as the universe.

Indigenous communities, representing 5 to 10% of the world's population, preserve 80% of the world's biodiversity.

However they are amongst the most vulnerable to environmental displacement. Indigenous communities' lands are routinely and often illegally dispossessed for industrial projects, which pollute rivers, contaminate water supplies, and destroy homes and agricultural land. Indigenous peoples' key role in preserving biodiversity, nature-based belief and knowledge systems, as well as their vulnerability to environmental destruction, makes them key agents in fighting climate change and seeking climate justice.

However, globally, indigenous communities' action against illegal state and multinational corporate incursions in their lands are being suppressed (Delina, 2019). The following are a few of many examples in Latin America:

- The Maya Q'eqchi' community in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala opposed the illegal construction of two hydroelectric dams by Spanish companies, which failed to consult local communities before construction started: legal obligation. The construction project led to the drying up of the river Cahabón, vital for the life of over 30,000 people, and led to large-scale displacement (Alternativa, 2023). Bernardo Caal Xol, the Mayan activist leading peaceful opposition to these constructions was convicted to seven years in prison.

- Lolita Chávez, a K'iche environmental activist from Guatemala, claimed asylum in Spain in 2017, after receiving multiple death threats and suffering repression from state and transnational companies.
- Berta Cáceres, Honduran indigenous leader and activist who was fighting the construction of a hydroelectric dam was murdered in 2016. Six hired assassins and two executives of a firm promoting the dam's construction were later convicted.

Extractivist activities in Latin America are leading to large-scale displacement of indigenous communities. In Guatemala's northern lowlands, the expansion of plantations has led to the displacement of 42 communities in Sayaxché, the largest palm producing municipality in the department of Petén (Raftopoulos, 2022).

However it could also be argued that extractivist activities are affecting populations beyond the indigenous communities. Guatemala, Colombia, Bolivia, Honduras, Haiti, and Nicaragua are amongst the countries most affected by extractivism, climate change and violence, arguably being propagated by state trade policy. In Nicaragua, the government stated that more than 7.1 million acres are available for mining concession – equivalent to over 60% of the country's territory –

despite the presence of Canadian, Australian and English mining companies. These nationalities are the most represented in migrant communities from Latin America in Spain, and that are attempting to cross the increasingly securitised US-Mexican border.



Berta Cáceres, Honduran indigenous leader and activist who was fighting the construction of a hydroelectric dam, murdered in 2016

CONCLUSIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

There is a lack of 'applied' research between climate migration and religion because climate-driven international migration – which produces situations where different religions may come into contact – is still only 'theoretical'; the vast majority of those displaced by climate are displaced internally.

Additionally, it is difficult to predict whether climate change will displace individuals internationally– from Global South to the Global North, and in particular Europe, as some – as media speculation suggests. It could be argued that these narratives are being used as justification to further securitise borders and further endangers the lives of migrants. European migration management and policies have been referred to as "Fortress Europe", to denounce the externalisation, securitisation and militarisation of European borders. Across the globe, like in the Mexican-US border, the lack of safe legal migration pathways endangers the lives of asylum seekers and makes it impossible for them to be able to move countries safely.

Nevertheless, the relationship between migration and climate change is being engaged consistently at international level; however resistance to extend the definition of a refugee to climate migrant is a significant blocker to progress. If the predictions of 'mass migration' are correct, there needs to be a change to the current securitarian model into a humanitarian one, one that protects individuals on the move and understands how climate change is affecting migratory patterns.



Religion and belief is predominantly left out of mainstream debate about climate change and migration – arguably down to prevailing secularism within Western European governing institutions – however it is important in future policy development about climate and migration because religion is entangled with the human experience, and whilst it has potential as a tool for 'integration', it can also exclude migrant communities.

From this scoping paper, we conclude further research should be conducted on the extent and of patterns of international climate migration; how gender comes into play when discussing migration and climate change; and how religion and belief can provide frameworks for climate action and justice.

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