

COMMENTARY

Climate migration and the UK

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Abstract: This article discusses the relationship between climate change and migration in the context of the UK. After a brief overview of climate migration scholarship, it examines the framing of climate migration as a crisis in UK policy discourse, highlighting the disjuncture between policy and academic scholarship in this respect. Subsequently, it examines the reasons for this schism, exploring both the framing of climate migration within the UK media landscape and the securitisation of the topic within UK government policy. Finally, the article explores how the UK's political landscape undergirds the political logic of climate finance, emphasising the role of British domestic politics in shaping the boundaries and direction of climate change as it manifests in governance. The article closes by exploring potential new directions in UK climate migration policy.

Keywords: Climate change, migration, climate migration, securitisation, climate finance.

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Executive summary

Climate migration is increasingly viewed as a major global challenge. Growing media coverage of the issue reflects both the issue's rising prominence within policy discourse and a rare ability to capture audience attention across the political spectrum. Nevertheless, despite its profile as a topic, the concept of climate migration remains definitionally and politically uncertain. Early work on climate migration, emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, has been heavily critiqued in recent years and clear frameworks of analysis have yet to be agreed upon.

In the UK, public and a significant proportion of policy attitudes towards climate migration stem from the idea of climate migration as crisis. This is exemplified and entrenched in media narratives and the visual imagery that surrounds them. However, this positionality does not emerge from the media alone. Rather, academic analyses of climate migration themselves reflect deeply embedded assumptions over the geography of the phenomenon, thereby contributing to crisis narratives and the wider framing of the issue.

More specifically, the widespread securitisation of climate change as a policy issue, much criticised in academic circles, undergirds the interpretation of climate migration in UK politics. In particular, the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been a key global proponent of securitised framings of climate migration: conceptualisations that view the impact of the climate on migration predominantly in terms of the threat it may pose to other countries, including undocumented migration, economic instability, and terrorism. Nevertheless, this is neither incidental, nor purely instrumental, but rooted in the landscape of UK politics and aid. Specifically, the Conservative Party's 'green growth' framing of the climate crisis in recent years has seen the issue primarily attended to through the prism of international aid. Given the pivot in UK overseas aid since 2015 towards fragile states and the explicit goal to 'tackle global challenges in the national interest'¹ a securitised framing is to some extent inevitable.

The result is a growing disjuncture between academic work on climate migration, and UK policy and media discourse. Nevertheless, this need not undermine the issue of climate migration as a practical concern. Rather, the much-criticised flexibility of the concept offers an opportunity to recast the key questions of climate migration policy, harnessing the power of a concept with considerable discursive pull in the service of more nuanced policy goals related to mobility in a changing climate. Ultimately, climate migration's political currency offers the opportunity to recast the securitised lens through which it is viewed, shifting the terms according to which security in a changing climate are addressed.

1. Introduction

Since its reintroduction to policy discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, the issue of climate migration has grown rapidly in stature to become, in the eyes of some, 'one of the major humanitarian causes of our time'.² It is an issue now regularly featured

¹HM Treasury & DFID (2015).

²Mayer (2016: 6).

in the UK press,³ as leading figures on both sides of the political divide have called for concerted action to address, curb, or limit the flow of climate migration.⁴ Moreover, the UK has played a key role in promoting the issue of climate migration on the international stage.⁵ With its Foresight report in 2011, the UK Government Office for Science helped to publicise the issue as a global and national concern,⁶ and the addition, in 2018, of climate change as a key driver of migration in the UN Global Compact on Migration has entrenched it within the landscape of global governance.

Yet, even as interest in the topic of climate migration has grown rapidly worldwide,⁷ efforts to clearly define, quantify, and track climate migration have run up against significant opposition. Decried as ‘alarmist’,⁸ ‘vague’,⁹ and ‘inherently flawed’¹⁰ by scholars critical of the agenda and its uptake, academic opinion remains divided on whether the issue is a key nexus of climate policy, or merely a catalyst for its transformation into a ‘securitised’ issue, centred on the threat posed by climate migration to (predominantly) Global Northern borders, economies, and citizenries. Early work on climate migration in particular has been heavily critiqued for reflecting the political agendas of the organisations funding the reports,¹¹ with some of the most influential and widely publicised figures on climate migration, such as Myers’ (2002)¹² estimate that 200 million people would be displaced by 2050, ‘widely viewed as lacking academic credibility’.¹³

Approaching this debate from a UK standpoint, the purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of climate migration as a theme within UK policy and public discourse. It begins by exploring the history of climate migration in theory, followed by an examination of its portrayal in the UK media, and its relationship to UK politics and policy. Rather than offering a state-of-the-field account of migration scholarship in general, this commentary therefore aims to highlight the interrelationship between research and scholarship, media portrayals, and political discourse on climate migration in the UK, demonstrating how preconceptions and dominant ideas in each sphere shape action and thinking in the others. Finally, it will consider

³ Sakellari (2019); Randall (2017).

⁴ King *et al.* (2016); Barnes (2013).

⁵ Warner & Boas (2019).

⁶ Foresight (2011).

⁷ Piguat *et al.* (2018); Climate and Migration Coalition (2015).

⁸ Klepp (2017: 7).

⁹ Mayer (2016: 28).

¹⁰ Boas *et al.* (2019: 902).

¹¹ Gemenne (2011).

¹² Myers (2002).

¹³ Barnes (2013).

what lies ahead for climate migration as concept and policy tool in the UK, mapping potential pitfalls and opportunities as the field gains traction in the policy and the public imagination.

2. A brief history of climate migration scholarship

*Besides the danger of a boisterous and unknown sea, who would relinquish Asia, Africa, or Italy for Germany, a land rude in its surface, boisterous in its climate, cheerless to every beholder and cultivator, except a native?*¹⁴

The idea that the histories and human movements are linked intrinsically to their natural surroundings extends well into antiquity. Commentaries by ancient scholars from Tacitus to Pliny the Elder have inspired a well-worn discourse on the environmental determinants of history that remains highly influential to this day. As Harper posits of the fall of the Roman empire, for example, having ‘stretched their empire to its limits, they had no idea of the contingent and parlous environmental foundations of what they had built’.¹⁵ Falling agricultural productivity¹⁶ and the immigration it instigated¹⁷ would soon accelerate the empire’s decline, changing the course of European history with it. Elsewhere, similar climatic shifts have been held responsible for a millennium of imperial instability in China,¹⁸ and for precipitating the once regionally dominant Khmer Empire’s ultimately ruinous transfer of its capital from Angkor Wat to Phnom Penh.¹⁹

Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the social sciences had little trouble with this account. Indeed, ‘beginning with Friedrich Ratzel [in 1882], the founders of migration studies all mentioned the natural environment as an important determinant of human mobility’,²⁰ a relationship which found arguably its fullest early expression in Huntington’s (1907) exposition of the ‘geographic basis of history’²¹. Soon afterwards, however, this primacy of the environment in accounts of human mobility would rapidly diminish in favour of an economic migration paradigm that would dominate subsequent decades,²² to the point that environmental factors were ‘largely disregarded

¹⁴Tacitus (2019: 7).

¹⁵Harper (2017: 15).

¹⁶Harper (2017).

¹⁷Drake (2017).

¹⁸Fang & Liu (1992).

¹⁹Buckley *et al.* (2010).

²⁰Piguet (2013: 148).

²¹Huntington (1907).

²²Piguet (2013).

during most of the 20th century'.²³ From Lewis's two-sector model, via the Todaro model and Zelinsky's mobility transitions, subsequent decades saw the driving force of human mobility firmly resituated onto factor price differentials, with little to say on the dynamism of the natural environment itself.²⁴

Nevertheless, deposed though it has been from historical and developmental accounts of human movement, the environment would ultimately return via a different route. From the 1980s onwards, El Hinnawi's, Jacobson's, and the IPCC's landmark labelling of 'climate refugees' in the late 1980s represented an effort to sidestep the economic character of migration studies in favour of the rights-based discourse on refugees and forced migration: a change of direction with two consequences.²⁵

First, it led to a rapid uptick in research into the causes and extent of climate migration.²⁶ In seeking to interpret and quantify the phenomenon, key debates emerged over the role of rainfall in driving outmigration, with Barrios *et al.*, van der Geest, Warner & Boas, and Kniveton *et al.* drawing positive correlations, whilst Henry *et al.* and Smith found less convincing linkages.²⁷ Sea-level rises, too, were the subject of concerted modelling efforts, with McGranahan *et al.*, Anthoff *et al.*, and IPCC modelling the positive correlations onto future rises, whilst Black *et al.*'s landmark study sought to combine figures from single-factor approaches such as these.²⁸

The second impact was to draw significant media and policy attention to the nexus of climate change and migration, beginning a significant academic backlash against 'alarmist' narratives of environmental displacement. Critics accused climate migration scholarship of being characterised by 'a cacophony of terms and labels',²⁹ calling for a shift away from categorical concerns and above all 'an abandonment of the futile search for the ultimate causes of migration brought about by climate change'.³⁰

The subsequent two decades of contestation between 'alarmist' and 'sceptical' narratives of environmental migration saw a range of approaches applied to the issue. On the one hand, large-scale quantitative studies produced widely publicised and growing numerical predictions on climate migration, from 200 million up to a billion in three decades' time.³¹ On the other hand, the methods employed to produce such figures were consistently problematised and refuted by sceptics arguing against what they viewed as exceptionalism and determinism, as well as a failure to account for the

²³ Mayer (2016: 6).

²⁴ Lewis (1954); Harris & Todaro (1970); Zelinsky (1971).

²⁵ El-Hinnawi (1985); Jacobson (1988); IPCC (1990).

²⁶ Mayer (2016).

²⁷ Barrios *et al.* (2006); van der Geest *et al.* (2010); Warner & Boas (2019); Kniveton *et al.* (2012).

²⁸ McGranahan *et al.* (2007); Anthoff *et al.* (2006); IPCC (2007); Black *et al.* (2011).

²⁹ Nicholson (2014: 152).

³⁰ Faist & Schade (2013: 4).

³¹ Jacobson (1988); Myers (2002).

socio-economic, political, and cultural factors that structure mobility of any kind. Ultimately, however, this debate saw early ‘alarmist’ perspectives progressively undermined as ‘a consensus slowly emerged in favour of a rather “sceptical” analysis, in particular through a general recognition that “environmental migrants” could not generally be distinguished from other migrants’.³²

Emerging from this problematisation of climate migration as a category, recent scholarship has moved concertedly away from the securitised narratives that dominated early framings. Yet this is not to say that security has ceased to be an issue. Indeed, following Thomas Homer-Dixon’s influential work on environmental scarcity and violence in the early 1990s,³³ the nexus of climate change and conflict continues to receive considerable attention, most notably in the Middle East.³⁴ Rather, it reflects a growing consensus in climate migration scholarship that the conditions shaping mobility under climate change are not *exceptional*, but rooted in political and economic factors as well as environmental ones. Thus, climate migrants have come to be viewed by scholars less as the ‘barbarians at the gate’³⁵ portrayed in early models, and more as integrated agents within national and international economies and societies. Even where conflict, mobility, and climate change are causally linked, therefore,³⁶ separating that part of mobility attributed specifically to climate change is usually both impossible and undesirable.

The contemporary result of this scholarly realignment is a far more nuanced interpretation of environmental migration than either that which dominated the early part of the 20th century or the revived iteration of the late 1980s. Arguing that ‘predictions of mass climate-induced migration are inherently flawed’,³⁷ the current ‘sceptical’ approach to climate migration scholarship takes the view that ‘movement and migration are inherent to the highly interconnected world we live in and a standard element of social life’.³⁸ Seeking to situate environmental drivers within this wider milieu of social action, academic approaches increasingly integrate cultural factors into their analyses,³⁹ whilst interest has grown in climate change perception as a socio-culturally articulated driver of migration which is linked to but somewhat distinct from the climate itself.⁴⁰

³² Mayer (2016: 7).

³³ Homer-Dixon (1991, 1994).

³⁴ See Abel *et al.* (2019); Gleick (2014); Zeitoun, (2008).

³⁵ Bettini (2013).

³⁶ As by Abel *et al.* (2019).

³⁷ Boas *et al.* (2019: 902).

³⁸ Boas *et al.* (2019).

³⁹ Adams & Kay (2019); McCarthy *et al.* (2014); Adger *et al.* (2013).

⁴⁰ De Longueville *et al.* (2020); Zander *et al.* (2019); Parsons & Chann (2019).

Emerging into this context, two major reports have driven a concomitant shift in policy discourse on climate migration, away from the influential climate-refugee framing and towards a more nuanced and less securitised narrative. The UK Government Office for Science's Foresight report,⁴¹ was key in this respect, conceding as it did that 'the range and complexity of the interactions between these drivers means that it will rarely be possible to distinguish individuals for whom environmental factors are the sole driver ("environmental migrants")'. More recently, the World Bank's Groundswell report sought to shift the framing of climate migration still further from securitisation, arguing that 'there is increasing recognition that far more people are migrating within their own countries than across borders' as a result of environmental change.⁴²

Both the Groundswell and Foresight reports represent landmark recognitions of 'climate migration' not as a clearly bounded category, but as an area of thematic concern subject to the same political-economic structures through which climate change is articulated. Nevertheless, key to interpreting the importance and implications of climate migration in a wider sense is the vast disjuncture between climate migration as conceived by academics and technical experts, and climate migration as a topic in lay and political discourse, where the influence of early, large-scale quantitative studies continues to loom large in policy, politics, and the public imagination.

3. Climate migration in the UK media

Within the variegated landscape of climate change reporting, the 'explosive combination' of climate migration has attracted considerable public attention in recent years.⁴³ As exemplified in Figure 1, 'climate-linked migration has become an increasingly popular way for journalists to engage their readers on the topic of climate change'.⁴⁴ Yet, despite significant differences in the tone of coverage on climate migration, the underlying characteristics of its presentation differ as a whole from the broader debates over climate change, absorbing as they have much of the wider discourse on migration and border security.

⁴¹ Foresight (2011: 9).

⁴² IBRD & World Bank (2018: xix).

⁴³ UKCCMC (2012: 3).

⁴⁴ Randall (2017: 333).

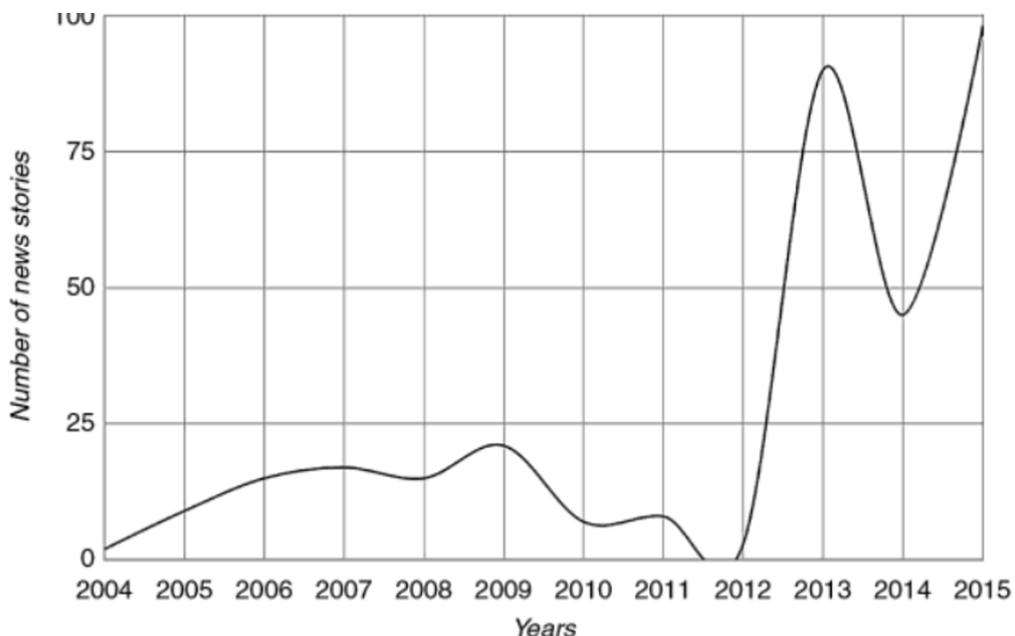


Figure 1. News stories in the UK media on climate-linked migration over time (Randall 2017).

According to Sakellari’s analysis of climate migration in the UK media, four narratives on climate migration have come to dominate journalistic portrayals of the topic: *catastrophe*, wherein the current world order itself is significantly threatened by the issue; *crisis*, whereby the issue is framed as a pressing, but localised, humanitarian issue; *adaptation*, wherein climate migration is presented as a managed response to changing conditions; and *uncertain future*, where stories of climate migration are humanised and individualised through personal accounts. Within these four narratives, however, discourses on *catastrophe* and *crisis* are overwhelmingly dominant across the media spectrum, comprising 51 per cent and 31 per cent of articles on climate migration, respectively.

The linked *crisis* and *catastrophe* narratives in UK climate migration reporting are underpinned and reinforced by the limited range of sources on which media reports depend. Although expert sources such as the IPCC and Professor Neil Adger of Exeter University are invoked regularly, the nuance of the original sources is rarely communicated, replaced in many cases with the more securitised lens put forward by government sources such as the US government and the Pentagon.⁴⁵ The resultant

⁴⁵Randall (2017).



Figure 2. Local villagers seen on a dried riverbed in Satkhira, Bangladesh, in 2015. This image was used to illustrate a *Guardian* article claiming that ‘Devastating Climate Change Could Lead to 1m Migrants a Year entering EU by 2100’ (Harvey 2017). Photo: Zakir Hossain Chowdhury / Barcro / Barcroft Media via Getty Images.

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/local-villagers-seen-on-the-dried-river-bed-on-january-12-news-photo/506406428>

combination of ‘inaccurate reporting of the relationship between climate change and migration’ with ‘existing inaccurate reporting of wider issues around migration’⁴⁶ results in the UK media tending to present climate migration as ‘being large scale, a threat, and across international borders’.⁴⁷

Moreover, this is a message strongly underpinned by the geography of reporting on the issue. An overwhelming contextual focus on Least Developed Countries and in particular on island nations, accompanied by a well-established iconography of displacement focused on non-white women and children removed from their homes and livelihoods,⁴⁸ positions climate migrants as either ‘victims’ or ‘drivers of conflict

⁴⁶ Randall (2017: 342).

⁴⁷ Randall (2017: 338).

⁴⁸ Methmann (2014).

and terrorism'.⁴⁹ Numerous visual tropes—as exemplified in Figure 2—underpin this narrative. In particular, though, the habitual representation of broken infrastructure, floods, droughts, and deprivation which accompany stories on climate migration convey a consistent 'aesthetic of abandonment, destruction, and emptiness [which] performs a profound distancing between the viewer and the subject',⁵⁰ casting the climate migrant in the round as 'a threatening, monstrous figure from the future'.⁵¹

Nevertheless, though enhanced and deepened by its portrayal in the UK media, this securitised, othered, and 'premeditative'⁵² characterisation of the climate migrant has its roots not in public dissemination, but in the undergirding assumptions that guide its scientific analysis. Indeed, as shown by Piguet in a recent analysis,⁵³ the geography of climate migration research itself reflects deeply entrenched scientific inequalities and biases which frame climate migration as an 'intrinsically "southern problem" and as a security risk for the North'. As shown in Figure 3, for example, there is a marked discrepancy between the predominantly Northern funding and lead authorship of climate migration studies, and their overwhelmingly Southern context: a situation in direct contrast to climate change research more broadly, where the data quality and quantity in the North are far higher.⁵⁴ As Piguet himself puts it, 'climate change is global and borderless, but climate science is not!'⁵⁵

Not only does this create 'a Promethean illusion of immunity' around the Global North as a source of climate migration, but it serves also to reinforce and energise a research agenda focused on Global Southern vulnerabilities and international flows.⁵⁶ If Northern funders are to be convinced of the relevance of work on the Global South, then securitisation—the idea that Global Southern climate migrants pose a tangible *threat* to Global Northern nations—is a powerful line of argument. This is an influence which, though not necessarily instrumental in itself, demonstrates something of the processes by which 'politics gets built into science at the upstream end'.⁵⁷ How that politics is itself constructed is the subject of the following section.

⁴⁹ Randall (2017).

⁵⁰ Sakellari (2019: 9–10).

⁵¹ Baldwin (2016: 80).

⁵² Baldwin (2016: 79).

⁵³ Piguet *et al.* (2018: 357–8).

⁵⁴ Gubler *et al.* (2017).

⁵⁵ Piguet *et al.* (2018: 358).

⁵⁶ Piguet *et al.* (2018: 372).

⁵⁷ Demeritt (2001: 307).

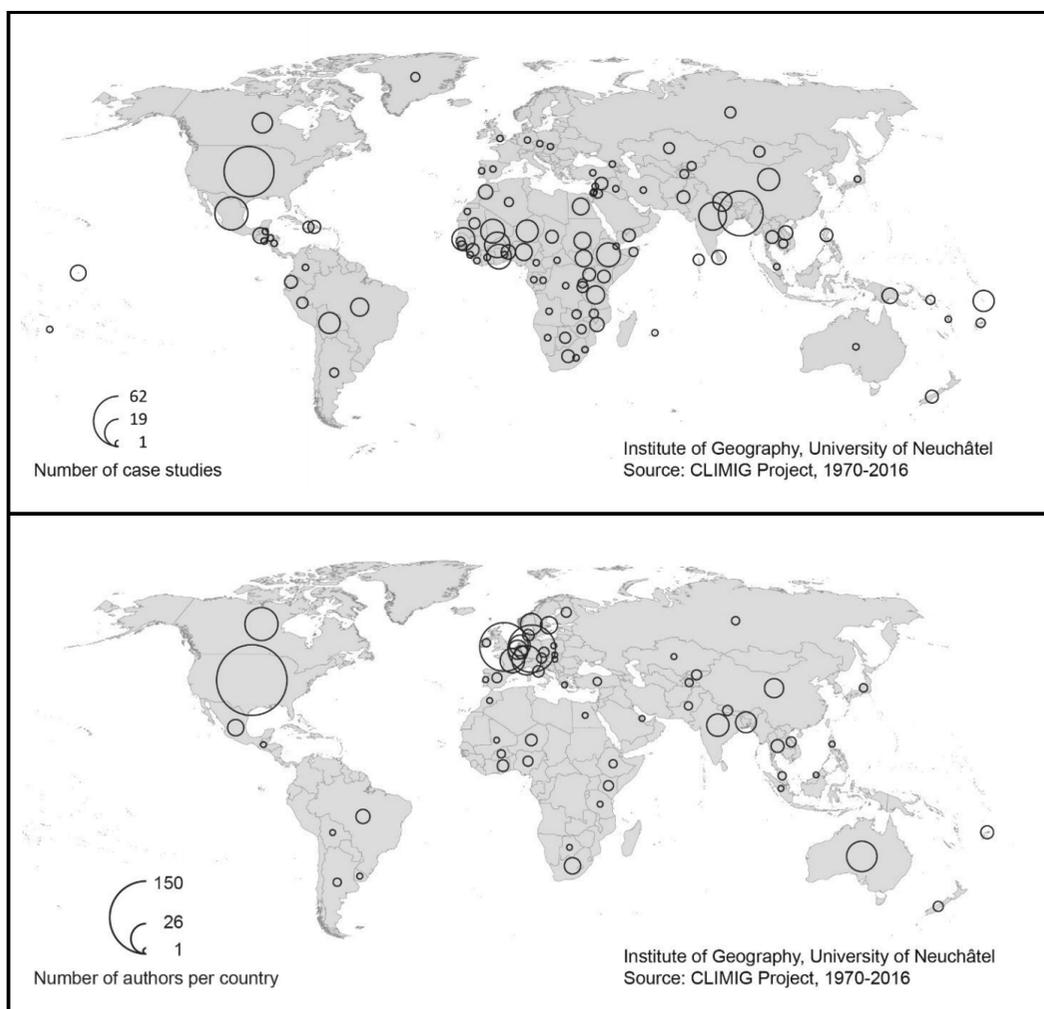


Figure 3. Location of climate migration case studies (upper panel) and origin of authors (lower panel). CLIMIG Project, University of Neuchâtel (Piguet *et al.* 2018).

4. Climate migration in UK politics

In UK public discourse, climate change is a notably politicised and differentiated topic. Public ‘belief’ in and concern over climate change are strongly influenced by social, demographic, and cultural factors, whilst political orientation and ideology are ‘amongst the most significant influences on climate change’.⁵⁸ In the UK, as shown in the British Social Attitudes Survey, younger people are more likely than older people to be concerned; those with more education more concerned than those with less; and

⁵⁸ Whitmarsh & Corner (2017: 122).

women more concerned than men.⁵⁹ Concern over—and conversely dismissal of—climate change is therefore drawn from something closer to a coalition than a single bloc.

Nevertheless, although there is a wider nuance to their manifestation, attitudes towards climate change have in recent years been amalgamated into a set of political rallying points. In particular, it has long been noted that ‘there is a concerning alignment of right-wing politics with climate change denial’,⁶⁰ reflecting the integration of particular perspectives on the issue into wider sets of political viewpoints. Though less starkly divided on the topic than the 63-point difference between the most conservative Republicans (32 per cent) and the most liberal Democrats (95 per cent) in the United States,⁶¹ the British Social Attitudes Survey (2019) highlights consistent differences according to party affiliation. Brexit voters, for example, are half as likely (16 per cent) as remain voters (32 per cent) to be ‘concerned’ or ‘extremely concerned’ about climate change, whilst Liberal Democrat voters (35 per cent) are almost three times as likely as UKIP voters (13 per cent) to do the same, as shown in Table 1.⁶²

Table 1. Level of worry about climate change, by party identification.

Party identification	Per cent					<i>Unweighted base</i>
	Extremely worried	Very worried	Somewhat worried	Not very worried	Not at all worried	
All	6	19	45	22	6	1858
Conservative	3	15	47	28	5	548
Labour	6	23	48	17	4	512
Liberal Democrats	6	29	51	9	2	130
Scottish National Party	5	22	44	25	3	57
Green Party	28	23	40	11	—	53
UKIP	4	9	35	40	8	114
None	6	17	42	23	10	414

Source: European Social Survey (2016).

This is a situation not lost on political planners. Following a brief flirtation with cross-cutting centrism during the David Cameron years, when an oak tree was adopted as the party logo and the slogan ‘vote blue, go green’ came to prominence, climate change has recovered something of its former partisan divisiveness. As the *Guardian* reported in 2019, the Conservative manifesto which saw Boris Johnson elected with a landslide majority of 80, mentioned the word ‘climate’ only 10 times, compared with

⁵⁹ Phillips *et al.* (2018).

⁶⁰ UKCCMC (2012: 4–5).

⁶¹ Gustafson *et al.* (2019).

⁶² Phillips *et al.* (2018).

59 times in the Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos and 33 times in the Scottish National Party's manifesto.⁶³

Climate migration, however, is a more complex issue. Whilst its widely securitised interpretation in the UK media is potentially appealing to those concerned with the management of immigration, an issue traditionally associated more with the conservative right, the same group are 'typically less concerned, more sceptical, and correspondingly less receptive to messages about climate change'.⁶⁴ Consequently, political attitudes towards climate migration have not mapped directly onto the traditional spectrum of British politics. Rather, an unbalanced spectrum has emerged whereby a rights-based, 'climate justice' discourse predominates across much of the left,⁶⁵ in contrast to a far more differentiated agenda on the right—from climate scepticism on the centre right,⁶⁶ towards climate change denial on the far right,⁶⁷ and finally the emerging phenomena of 'avocado politics (green on the outside, brown(shirt) on the inside)'⁶⁸ and 'eco-fascism' on the extreme right.⁶⁹

Although economic and patriotic arguments have been shown to be effective tools in engaging the centre right, high levels of scepticism and relatively low political prioritisation have seen climate migration remain, as with climate change more generally, a predominantly left-wing issue.⁷⁰ During the 2019 election, this was exemplified by the Labour Party manifesto's inclusion of explicit provisions on climate migration, with one of the nine pillars of the Green New Deal offered by Labour cited as 'welcoming climate refugees and preventing displacement'.⁷¹ Emphasising the contributions made by the UK's colonial legacy through 'both historical and ongoing contributions to global emissions and border related violence', the manifesto framed the issue of climate migration explicitly in climate justice, asserting that 'climate justice is migrant justice, and a Green New Deal must therefore support both the right to move and the right to stay'.⁷²

By contrast, whilst acknowledging that 'the climate emergency means that the challenges we face stretch far beyond our borders', the Conservative manifesto discussed the climate crisis using a fundamentally different framing to the climate-justice

⁶³ Duncan & Harvey (2019)

⁶⁴ Whitmarsh & Corner (2017: 122).

⁶⁵ Whitmarsh & Corner (2017: 122).

⁶⁶ Whitmarsh & Corner (2017).

⁶⁷ UKCCMC (2012).

⁶⁸ Gilman (2019).

⁶⁹ Manavis (2018).

⁷⁰ Whitmarsh & Corner (2017).

⁷¹ Labour Party (2019: 2).

⁷² Labour Party (2019: 3).

approach favoured by Labour.⁷³ Emphasising early on that ‘we believe that free markets, innovation and prosperity can protect the planet’,⁷⁴ the manifesto states that ‘we will lead the global fight against climate change by delivering on our world-leading target of Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050’,⁷⁵ a commitment underscored by the upfront placement of ‘Reaching Net Zero by 2050’ within the six core pledges of the manifesto.⁷⁶ Thus, in contrast to the climate-justice framing employed in the Labour manifesto, an explicitly green-growth approach is adopted here, emphasising ‘free markets, innovation and prosperity’ as key to continued emissions reduction. No reference is made, by contrast, to the political or humanitarian dimensions of climate policy, with climate migration—or even climate impacts more broadly—remaining untouched upon.

Clearly, these two policy documents come from very different standpoints, yet in articulating such divergent visions of the climate crisis and its remedies, they reflect the mechanics linking national politics to the framing of climate migration policy. Specifically, the green-growth framing, which has in recent years proved the default approach under the dominant Conservative Party, has little to offer on the issue of climate migration, which by virtue of its wider economic contextualisation becomes subsumed within wider economic framings of mobility detailed in Section 2 above. By contrast, the climate-justice framing offered by the Labour Party in 2019 has yet to find an electable coalition in the UK, leaving the issue somewhat marooned within the securitised framing which predominates in the media.

Indeed, the manner in which this securitised framing shapes the terms of the debate—determining not only the policy that is formulated, but the very questions that are asked and answered in order potentially to modify that policy—was exemplified in early 2020 by the EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee meeting on Climate Migration. As reflects wider public and policy discourse on the issue, questions asked of the expert panel were framed in the language of problematisation (for example, ‘How great a problem does climate change and migration pose?’), categorisation (for example, ‘How do you think this type of migrant should be classified?’), and securitisation (for example, ‘Should countries including the UK be preparing for large-scale influxes of people migrating as a result of climate change?’) However, in the course of the hearing, some useful summary insights arose from the questioners as to the power relations through which policy on climate migration is formed. As one questioner, Lord McNally, explained:

⁷³ Conservative Party (2019: 55).

⁷⁴ Conservative Party (2019: 55).

⁷⁵ Conservative Party (2019: 55).

⁷⁶ Conservative Party (2019: 1).

... If you look across sub-Saharan Africa, there are a number of countries there that all have high birth rates, large scale poverty, are basically Islamic states and are also suffering from climate change, because it's not just one element. I noticed recently that there's talk of putting together some sort of Western defence programme, because these countries could and are already becoming a seedbed for a new centre for Islamic fundamentalism. And so when you say what's coming, what happens next? What happens next is we'll pour lots and lots of money into sending troops into that part of the world and fighting endless wars as we have in the Middle East. But how do we change the debate? It's so compartmentalised. On the one hand it's climate change. On the other, it's the compassion industry and so forth. We're not going to solve these unless we can draw these arguments together.⁷⁷

'What happens next is we'll pour lots and lots of money into sending troops into that part of the world and fighting endless wars as we have in the middle East.'

As Lord McNally's summary neatly outlines, achieving action on climate migration requires a cohesive framing which speaks in an integrated manner to multiple areas of a parliamentary coalition. Yet, in recent years, the only workable narrative in this respect has been the securitised framing which has dominated public and policy discourse on climate migration and which the UK has been 'amongst the leading actors' in promoting.⁷⁸ The securitised discourse on climate migration which we currently employ is therefore not only a culturally mediated one, but also one dictated by the structures of parliamentary democracy. As outlined by John Ashton, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's representative on climate change from 2006 to 2012:

When a negotiator goes off to a UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] negotiation, what really matters is their mandate and their mandate comes from domestic politics. You cannot change those alignments and mandates by the negotiation itself. You have to get into the domestic politics.⁷⁹

Even on the international stage, therefore, no policy can be enacted without appeal to the logic of a strong domestic power base, leaving climate migration as a progressive agenda effectively stranded in parliament. That the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been 'amongst the leading actors in the attempt to securitize climate change, both within the UK and abroad'⁸⁰ is therefore no mere accident or expedience, but rather an 'instrumental' narrative shaped in part by the demands of domestic electoral

⁷⁷The Right Honourable Lord McNally, EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee meeting on Climate Migration, 12 March 2020, 12:12.

⁷⁸Warner & Boas (2019: 1476).

⁷⁹Ashton, cited in Warner & Boas (2019: 1477).

⁸⁰Warner & Boas (2019: 1476).

politics.⁸¹ What follows will exemplify the broader geopolitical context within which this securitised policy narrative continues to play out.

5. Opportunities amidst the shifting geopolitics of climate migration

The above discussion has aimed to exemplify something of the conundrum facing climate migration as a theme within UK policy. Whilst academic accounts have in recent years moved concertedly away from securitised and exceptionalised narratives of climate migration, the figure of the climate migrant as a future threat remains firmly entrenched in public discourse and policy. Moreover, as outlined in Sections 3 and 4 above, this is a situation rooted in a variety of structural footholds: from the geography of climate migration's scientific analysis, via media discourse, to the need to effect its political framing according to an existing coalition of interests. Despite its

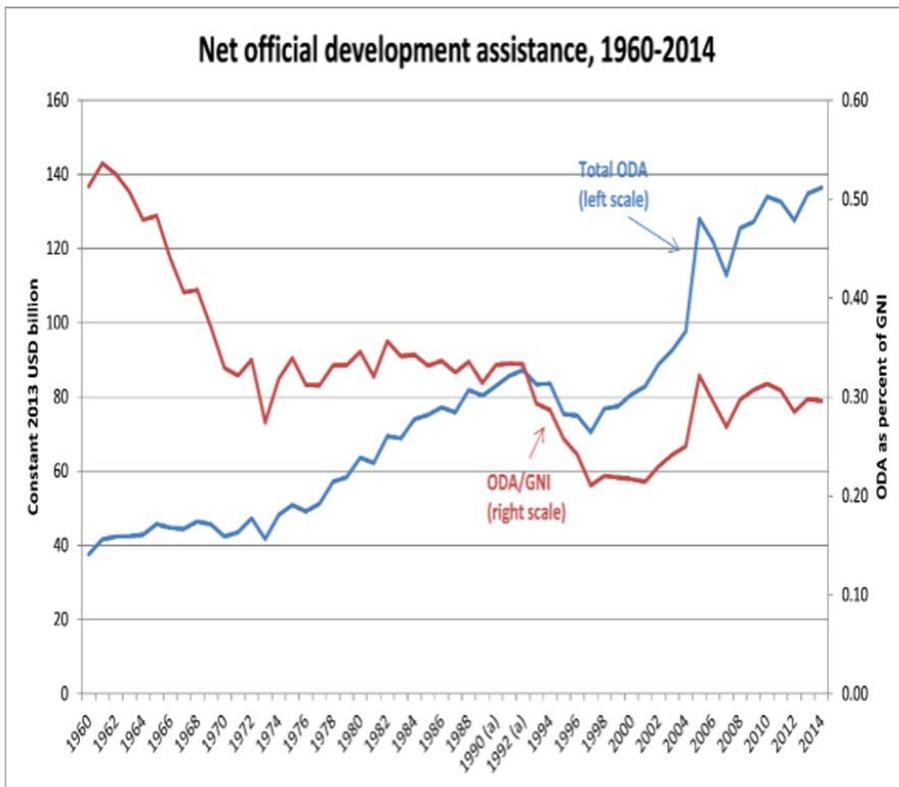


Figure 4. Net development assistance from 1960 to 2014 (OECD 2014).

⁸¹ Warner & Boas (2019: 1472).

growing divergence from academic consensus on the issue, therefore, this is a difficult narrative to escape or disentangle. Yet, this ‘explosive combination’ of public and political interest ought not to be dismissed outright.⁸² Rather, it offers two significant opportunities, tempered by a key analytical challenge.

First, securitised framings of climate migration remain not only powerful, but almost inevitable political tools in the UK. Overseas development aid, of which climate finance represents 8 per cent in the UK,⁸³ has never been a purely altruistic endeavour, reflecting instead strategic geopolitical aims of donor countries. For several decades, this meant shoring up bulwarks against the Soviet threat, with the majority of donor aid being directed towards areas of Cold War strategic importance. However, ‘after the Cold War, the global security agenda changed radically’.⁸⁴ As shown in Figure 4, the fall of the Soviet Union instigated a sharp drop in overseas aid between 1990 and 2001, until the twin towers attacks saw ‘numerous leading donors, including the United States ‘reorient their development assistance to sectors and countries that played a central part in the “war on terror”’.

The current securitised discourse on climate migration should therefore not be viewed as an endogenous characteristic of the topic itself, but rather part of the wider trend whereby ‘the “threat” of refugees produced by population growth and scarcity of resources [has been] promoted by governments and NGOs [non-governmental organisations] alike’.⁸⁵ This is exemplified in the geography of UK climate finance, shown in Figure 5, where sub-Saharan Africa (£826.4 million) and South Asia (£211.3 million) may be seen to receive the vast majority of the £1.38 trillion single-country climate change aid spending between 2011 and 2016. Although there is considerable crossover with vulnerability to climate impacts, the scale of the investment attributed to each country and region appears to have a strong rooting in broader geopolitical objectives, both economic and securitised, as expressed in particular in the DFID⁸⁶ pivot towards investment in ‘fragile states’ since 2015.⁸⁷

The second ‘opportunity’ of contemporary climate migration discourse is that its oft-criticised intangibility, underpinned by ‘a cacophony of terms and labels’,⁸⁸ is more of a two-way street in policy terms than it might appear. Although ‘predictions of mass climate-induced migration are inherently flawed’,⁸⁹ the enthusiasm with which

⁸² UKCCMC (2012: 3).

⁸³ Carbon Brief (2017).

⁸⁴ Warner & Boas (2019: 1473).

⁸⁵ UKCCMC (2012: 16).

⁸⁶ Department for International Development. In September 2020 DFID was closed and became part of a new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

⁸⁷ See HM Treasury & DFID (2015).

⁸⁸ Nicholson (2014: 152).

⁸⁹ Boas *et al.* (2019: 902).

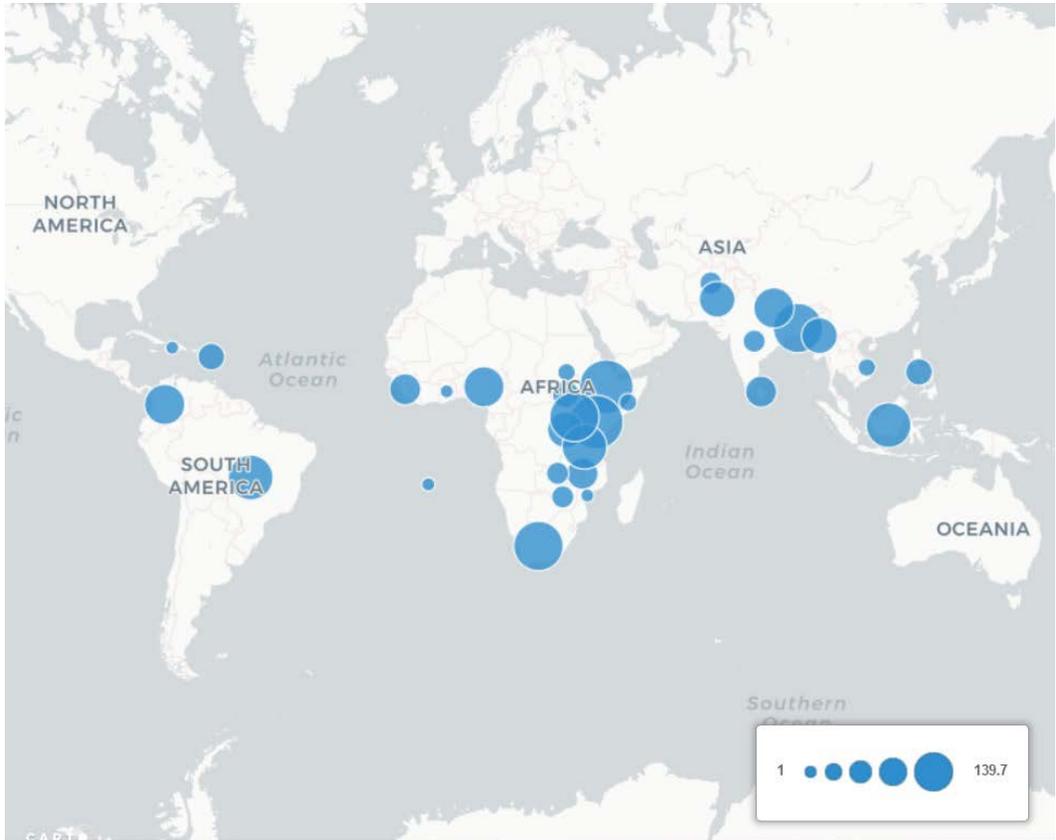


Figure 5. Map of UK foreign aid spending on climate finance (Carbon Brief 2017).

the theme has been embraced across the political spectrum may be ‘deployed to promote different—even clearly opposite—policy objectives’⁹⁰. Indeed, not only has the UK government’s ‘selling of climate change through framing it as a security issue ... not yet resulted in exceptional measures that cross the boundaries of the normal’,⁹¹ but an anti-migration agenda is far from the only plausible policy outcome for climate migration. To advance any agenda, ‘political opportunities matter’—and the issue of climate migration, even viewed through a securitised lens—‘has the potential to effect progress in international cooperation’.⁹²

There is ample precedent for this in the UK media. For example, a recent article entitled ‘Mass Migration From Africa Likely as Government Invests in Satellite Monitoring of Vulnerable Countries’ led with a quote from the project Principal

⁹⁰ Mayer (2016: 28).

⁹¹ Warner & Boas (2019: 1472).

⁹² Mayer (2016: 25).

Investigator Dr Chris Lee explaining that ‘global warming could lead to water shortages, droughts and famine, which could push vast numbers from their homes’.⁹³ By ‘selling’ the benefits of climate change impact monitoring to a potentially sceptical readership, this piece highlights the potential benefits of drawing on dominant narratives in the pursuit of wider goals. To at least a section of the *Telegraph’s* readership, not traditionally associated with their enthusiasm for overseas aid,⁹⁴ the narrative adopted by the article therefore offers a point of engagement with positive examples of overseas climate finance than might be otherwise accessible.

‘Global warming could lead to water shortages, droughts and famine, which could push vast numbers from their homes.’

Otherwise put, ‘climate migration is a weak analytical concept, but it has a particularly strong political currency’,⁹⁵ expanding the breadth of political interest and media discourse beyond the climate-justice framing favoured on the left, into a wider coalition of political interests. As a policy agenda, climate migration offers a key opportunity to instigate a fresh conceptual perspective on climate change and migration, as well to attract institutional and government support in tackling some of the most crucial challenges associated with climate impacts in the Global North and South alike. Speaking as it does to the very title of the current UK aid strategy, ‘Tackling Global Challenges in the National Interest’,⁹⁶ it offers a partially erroneous, but nevertheless powerful, capacity to attract funding and support for overseas mitigation and adaptation projects which might otherwise invite a more sceptical reception.

Nevertheless, key challenges remain in recasting climate migration as a topic of genuine impact. In particular, one of the major issues underpinning public and policy discourse on climate migration is that the ‘definitely deterministic and simplistic flavour’ that characterised its early incarnations in the 1980s and 1990s continues to shape the questions being asked by governments, policymakers, and funding bodies today.⁹⁷ Despite the application of far greater nuance in the recent scholarly analysis of climate migration, causal and quantitative agendas—*how many? when? who?*—remain key points of reference in relation to a climate-migrant figure that continues to suffer from ‘an excess of categorisation’.⁹⁸

If public and political traction are to be successfully harnessed in the service of academically rigorous and locally meaningful climate migration policy, then a new set

⁹³ Knapton (2019).

⁹⁴ Whitmarsh & Corner (2017).

⁹⁵ Mayer (2016: 26).

⁹⁶ HM Treasury & DFID (2015).

⁹⁷ Piguet (2013: 157).

⁹⁸ Baldwin (2016: 80).

of questions—*how?* and in particular *why?* and *to what end?*—must be brought closer to the forefront of climate migration policy, thereby shifting the ground on which both policy and research are situated. In doing so, the aim is to effect an underlying departure in tone from a deterministic model of climate migration and towards a perspective cognisant of the cultural, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of migration in response to the changing climate. In other words, whilst a degree of focus on security is perhaps inevitable within the current landscape of aid policy, neither the deterministic logic nor the geographical bias with which the topic is associated is inherent to the field. By moving towards a more nuanced perspective on climate migration, less geographically rooted in the Global South, climate migration as an agenda offers the opportunity to reshape not only how we think about the impacts of climate migration, but even the ways in which we frame the concept of security in a changing climate.

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