Climate Change and Migration Crises in Oceania

Christiane Fröhlich and Silja Klepp

Abstract

"Climate-induced migration" is often perceived as potentially leading to political instability and violence, and thus, as critical. Oceania is considered a prime example for this assumed linear causality, since sea level rise and other effects of anthropogenic climate change are threatening to displace large numbers of people in the region. The policy brief scrutinises this perception by critically engaging with the securitization of climate-induced migration in the Pacific region, with a particular interest in who defines what a crisis is, when and where. Its central claim is that without contextualised knowledge of the relevant power structures which determine a) who defines what can be considered a (migration) crisis, b) how human mobility challenges pre-established ideas of citizenship, belonging and national identity, and c) how climate change figures in these topical fields and political processes, we cannot fully understand the potential effects of climate-induced migration.

Introduction

Climate Change is one of the key challenges of our time. Its effects are seen as critical, as they are expected to overstretch many societies' adaptive capacities within the short- to midterm, potentially leading to destabilization and violence (WBGU 2007; UNSC 2007; UNGA 2009; Goldstein 2016). Among the most critical potential effects are the deterioration of the governance capacities of formal and informal institutions and the increase in horizontal inequality among groups (Gleditsch 2012; Scheffran et al. 2012).

One central intermediate factor connecting global warming and critical societal processes is human mobility. Large migration movements are frequently being presented as threatening national and international security, in particular when the movement is from the Global South to the Global North (Adamson 2006; Alexseev 2006; Huysmans 2000). Consequently, as large numbers of people have been predicted to be displaced by climate change, so-called 'climate-induced migration' (CIM) is often considered one of the main security risks of global warming (Brown 2008; Myers 2005). Beginning with the Intergovernmental Panel

on Climate Change's (IPCC) first assessment report (IPCC 1990), climate migration has been repeatedly presented as a phenomenon causing a multitude of crises on different levels, in the worst case leading to political instability and violence (Piguet, Pecoud, and de Guchteneire 2011; McLeman and Gemenne 2018; Klepp 2017 offer good overviews).

However, there are few systematic studies researching this causality (Raleigh and Jordan 2010; Reuveny 2008). In fact, academic research has been predominantly critical about such predictions (Black et al. 2011; Black, Kniveton, and Schmidt-Verkerk 2011; Brzoska and Fröhlich 2016), as migration has been proven over and over to be a complex phenomenon depending on several factors other than environmental ones, including adaptive capacity, vulnerability, and the respective political, social, economic and cultural context. Counter-intuitive research results further illustrate the phenomenon's complexity: Voluntary and involuntary immobility is much more common than is usually assumed (Foresight 2011; Black et al. 2013; Collyer and Black 2014; Black, Kniveton, and Schmidt-Verkerk 2011; Zickgraf et al. 2016; Adams 2016). What is more, forced displacement mostly takes place a) within the Global South, and b) within states (internal displacement), so that the widespread securitization of movement from South to North lacks an empirical base (Baldwin, Methmann, and Rothe 2014; Bettini 2013).

The goal of this paper is to outline how climate change and migration crises might be linked in Oceania, with a critical view on securitization tendencies and the role of underlying power structures (McDonald 2018). All states in the region are envisaged to suffer from the effects of global warming, with the likelihood or requirement of migration rising relative to the adaptive capacities and vulnerabilities of a given state or community (Barnett and Campbell 2010). The main issue in the region is habitability (Locke 2009), but the region's Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are also threatened with regard to land availability, food production and commercial activities (Campbell 2014, 4–5). Bigger states with higher altitude territories have an advantage over the smaller atoll states, as they will mostly experience only temporary, internal, rural-to-urban migration from lower to higher altitudes (Tabucanon 2013). SIDS like Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu, in contrast, might vanish completely, thus threatening to displace entire populations (Barnett and Adger 2001). Potentially irreversible processes like sea level rise and the destruction of fresh water resources through salinization will most likely require some kind of international resettlement.

Against the backdrop of such climate scenarios, powerful discourses have evolved in (and about) the Pacific region that perceive human mobility as a critical outcome of global warming in Oceania. As they predominantly point towards the future, however, and as it is not yet clear whether the region's climate crisis will also evolve into a migration crisis, this article aims to uncover how, why and by whom human mobility is perceived and/or presented as 'critical' in Oceania. The key element of such discursive patterns is the securitization of climate-related migration, i.e. the presentation of such mobility as something that existentially threatens the security of a given audience. If such a securitizing move is accepted by the targeted audience, extraordinary political responses to the securitized object become possible which hitherto would have been outside of common political practice (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). It is thus crucial to understand who defines what a crisis is, which actors securitize climate migration how and when, and which counter-discourses exist.

This paper will first define the relevant terminology. It will then apply its approach and research questions to the Pacific region. Finally, it will outline alternative ways of framing the relationship between anthropogenic climate change and human migration in Oceania by addressing global warming as an "'imaginative resource' (…) for our collective futures" (Klepp 2017, 3), which may lead to migration-friendly solutions that incorporate aspects of climate justice.

Coming to Terms with 'Climate Migration' and 'Crisis'

Crisis is here understood as a critical event that may turn into a disaster or catastrophe, should it not be handled in a timely and appropriate manner. How a crisis is being addressed thus decides its outcome. A *migration crisis*, then, is the movement of a group of people from one place to another, either within a given country or across state boundaries, which may generate conflict on different societal scales and which, depending on how it is addressed, may lead to disastrous outcomes.

Whether a migration movement is considered critical depends in large parts on whether it is seen as a security issue. The degree of securitization thus determines how a government or other actors respond to a crisis. Processes of securitization indicate the centrality of perceptions, underlying power structures and positionality for the interpretation of a crisis as minor or existential, which in turn is central for the range of possible responses (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018). The securitization of migration from the Global South to the Global North is a case in point: such movements are successfully being securitized in Europe and elsewhere, opening up space for political measures which would otherwise be outside of the political toolbox, like *refoulement* and border violence. Which issues are being securitized for which audience largely depends on the respective socio-political contexts and the understandings of security connected to them (McDonald 2013, 2018).

Constructing 'climate migration' as critical relies on two important concepts: *vulnerability* and *adaptive capacity*. The latter concept refers to activities that aim to amend or avert negative consequences of climate change. It thus focuses on the agency of affected states or peoples and societies. Importantly, this has led to migration sometimes being seen as a "self-help tool" of sorts, effectively passing on the responsibility for responding effectively to climate change to the (potential) migrants themselves instead of creating incentives for political and economic reform (de Haas 2012). Adaptive capacity is central to the other concept, as individual vulnerability is the function of an entity's adaptive capacity and the expected impact of climate change. Vulnerability thus increases when climate change puts stress on the natural resource base and the resulting challenges occur in an environment where effective governance is lacking and adaptive capacity is low. In such a context, it is a rather small step towards assumptions about decreasing socio-political stability and effects like political unrest or state fragility. It remains an open question whether it is predominantly a lack of adequate behaviour that leads to ecological disasters (behavioralist paradigm), or whether it is deeply ingrained societal structures that determine individual vulnerability and access to power and resources (structuralist paradigm) (Black et al. 2013).

In order to understand how and why climate change and its effects are being securitized, it is therefore necessary to uncover a) who defines what a (migration) crisis is, b) how human

mobility challenges pre-established ideas of citizenship, belonging and national identity, and c) how climate change figures in the connected political processes (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018).

Climate Migration in Oceania

The Pacific region is already suffering from the effects of climate change. With its low-elevation island nations, it has long been considered particularly vulnerable. All states of the region are expected to be affected to some extent, but the small atoll islands of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu are considered at the frontline, with their population threatened by impacts ranging from resource degradation and weather extremes to irreversible sea level rise. Commonly underrepresented in research, but central for local and regional efforts to address climate change impacts is the social meaning of land for processes of identity and place-making as well as notions of belonging in the region. The identity of Pacific Islanders is built around the land of their ancestors and related ideas of home, so that the loss of land potentially causes deep alienation (Kempf and Hermann 2014; Stratford, Farbotko, and Lazrus 2013; Teaiwa 2005). It would be a misunderstanding, however, to assume a predominantly sedentary idea of home and belonging as common for people in Oceania. On the contrary, both rootedness and migration are key elements of their identity development, and both phenomena are deeply transnational in character (Burkett 2011).

The very real threat of climate change impacts in the Pacific region has resulted in a perpetual language of crisis, with migration movements being understood as 'critical' by default, at least in the hegemonic, often Northern-dominated discourse(s) (McNamara and Gibson 2009). Counter discourses, mostly of local and regional voices, do not tire to point out that migration is not a new practice in Oceania, however. As Epeli Hau'ofa has traced for pre-colonial times, the region has always been characterised by migration movements, as illustrated by the diverse social and trade networks existing there (Hau'ofa 1993). Both oral tradition and archaeological findings are a testament to islanders navigating spaces far beyond their home islands to find suitable areas for new settlements, to build friendships and familial ties and for successful trade relations (McCall 2006). This is not much different from the current situation, where many Pacific Islanders lead transnational lives, and ties are being sustained and fostered through remittances, festivities, cultural traditions, and social media. Even those who cannot afford to go home from the diaspora build their lives around the spiritual and social significance of their home states.

Looking at history, it becomes clear that environmentally-motivated migration movements have been a common practice and successful means of adaptation in the region, and that migration is not commonly considered anything other than normal (McNamara et al. 2016). In this, the population of Oceania does not differ from populations in other regions of the world, as migration is an integral part of human history (de Haan 2000). It is, however, contrary to the 'Western/Northern' discourse, which routinely underlines the vastness of the Pacific and the Pacific islands' isolation (Lee 2009), and which is built largely around the idea of the Westphalian state, which includes the idea of a sedentary citizenry and in which migration is considered an outlier, an exception to the rule and therefore potentially critical (Brettell 2015). The territoriality which is inherent in the Westphalian state model is fundamentally questioned and challenged by large-scale migration movements, as are the

model's underlying ideas of cultural pluralism, tolerance and collective rights (Bordoni 2013). Migrants – regardless of whether their movement is voluntary or forced – challenge national boundaries, defy legal and political categories and question dominant understandings of national belonging and citizenship. The migrant thus becomes a figure that questions a state's ability to control its borders, political institutions and citizenship regulations. The understanding of (environmental) migration as 'critical' is thus a function of a predominantly sedentary understanding of human society (Hastrup and Fog Olwig 2012) which is, however, ahistorical in that it ignores the key role that migration movements have played over the course of human history. The sedentary paradigm also points towards the power structures which lead to a specific migration movement being considered critical or not (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018). These structures' genesis and dominance can be traced back to colonial times and hint at how political, legal and academic discussions of human mobility continue to be heavily influenced by colonial decision-making processes and structures (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018).

Colonial Histories

In colonial times, Oceania experienced large-scale labour migration and forced relocations initiated by the colonial governments. The former initiated a deep demographic reconfiguration of many societies in the region, for instance through the practice of kidnapping Pacific Islanders from their home islands to force them to work on plantations in Australia or Fiji, also known as blackbirding. This was a common practice and could be considered one of the first migration crises in the Pacific, at least from the perspective of local communities, with nearly one million members affected between approximately 1860 and 1940 (Weber 2015). This is not to mention the 500,000 Asians who were also part of the Pacific labour trade (Weber 2015). In addition to the kidnapping, men were also recruited to work on sugar cane and cotton plantations or to work on whaling ships. Many of them never returned.

Forced relocation severely affected Gilbertese (today Kiribati) who were deported to the Solomon Islands and to Fiji. Samoans and Solomon Islanders were also brought to Fiji (McCall 2006). Forced relocation also went both ways: Up to 60,000 islanders were working in Australia's sugar cane fields until 1901, the year of their deportation back to their homelands (McCall 2006, 34). Forced relocation also happened in Banaba, a part of Kiribati, where phosphate mining was a major source of income between 1900 and 1980. The mining rendered the island partly uninhabitable, as the formerly fertile soil in the area of the phosphate fields was destroyed completely. The population of Banaba was compelled by Japanese forces to move to camps in Naurua, Kosrae, and Tarawa at the height of the second world war, and was again relocated to Rabi Island, Fiji, in 1945, this time by the colonial government (Teaiwa 2005, 178). Moreover, the 167 inhabitants of the Bikini atoll in the Marshall Islands left on the promise of a quick return before the US commenced its testing of nuclear weapons in its 'Pacific Proving Grounds'. The atoll was hit 23 times by US American nuclear bombs alone, plus by weapons from other nations, making it absolutely uninhabitable, with contaminated ground water, land, and sea: up to this day, all food and water has to be imported. The promised 'quick return' thus never materialised; instead, Bikini's inhabitants were involuntarily relocated to inhabitable parts of the Marshall Islands, and are suffering from the effects of the radioactive fallout (Kiste 1968).

The last century was probably one of the most migration-intensive in the region. Pacific Islanders from the Cook Islands and Samoa migrated in large numbers to New Zealand to work there. In fact, a mere 17,000 inhabitants remain on the Cook Islands, while more than the same number have settled elsewhere around the Pacific Rim. Samoa has fared only slightly better, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants remaining; however, well over 100,000 Samoans have moved overseas. The territories that had been administered by Japan before World War II were taken over by the United States of America after 1945, resulting in a movement of larger groups of people from Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands to the United States. The list goes on, and as mentioned above, the life of Pacific Islanders abroad is very much a transnational one, with strong ties back to their homeland.

Today, the most notable migration movements in the region are rural to urban and from Outer Islands to metropolitan zones, mostly for better education and health. Nevertheless, the impact of migration patterns created by colonial expansion and imperial histories can still be felt in the region, both in contemporary politics and in international relations. What is more, regional migration movements are also motivated by the modern capitalist system, which relies on labour mobility, but is also caught up in the ongoing efforts to control it (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015, 61).

So the question is: What do the legacy of colonial and post-colonial migration and the efforts to control it mean for the expected future migration movements in the region? What does the continuing securitization of human mobility tell us about the asymmetries and divergent interests in the international system and about the "on-going colonial present", as Bhabha called it (Bhabha 1994, 183)? Borders and migration regimes can be considered touchstones for civil rights and civility (Balibar 2003); the practices and ideas of inclusion and exclusion inherent in them uncover social processes and orders which form the basis for negotiating climate migration, crises, and refugee regimes. How can they be influenced and redesigned to address and solve so-called 'migration crises' in the context of climate change in Oceania?

Migration-Friendly Solutions

As even optimistic climate scenarios expect the Pacific Island States to lose part of their habitable land, affected populations and their governments have developed proactive plans for resettlement. Mostly these plans are for resettlement within a given country, while so far there are no plans for international/cross-border resettlement. One exception might be the case of Kiribati. Its government bought over 2000 ha of land in Vanua Levu Island, Fiji, so that it could sustain agricultural as well as fisheries development for its people, and maybe also to use the land for resettlement (Campbell and Bedford 2012; Hermann and Kempf 2017). Examples for in-country resettlement can be found in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. In Fiji, for example, the village of Vunidogoloa has been relocated recently. Other communities have been actively trying to relocate, like the Carteret Islands inhabitants in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea (McNamara and Des Combes 2015). Nothing is as evolved (at least in theory) as Kiribati's "migrate with dignity"-strategy though. It includes regional migration programmes, plans for community relocations, an education campaign, and aims to promote "self-

determined, culturally sensitive and solidarity expressing way[s] of coping with (…) current and future effects of climate change" (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018), explicitly trying to avoid that Kiribati's people will become refugees (Klepp and Herbeck 2016). It centres on arguments for climate justice, and thus departs from dominant Northern debates that characterise climate change-induced migration as a security threat or a purely humanitarian issue. "Migrate with dignity" can be considered an innovative climate migration strategy that could help avoid future 'migration crises' by giving agency back to those affected by the changing environment.

Part of this counter-discourse on climate-related migration is the argument against the misuse of Oceania as the icon of climate change impacts, as the ultimate illustration of what climate change will do to human habitats. Connected to this is a critique of researchers, journalists and humanitarian actors, often from the Global North, who treat Oceania as a sort of experimental ground for 'what will happen if we do not curb global warming'. The continuous and alarmist victimization of the region and its inhabitants has created a distorted image of the Pacific area and has contributed to the securitization of climate change (Barnett and Campbell 2010; Farbotko 2010; Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Lazrus 2012). Instead of continuously picturing Pacific islands as vulnerable, isolated, and under-developed, as poor, small and basically on the backside of history, local actors, activists and scientists demand that more attention is being paid to islanders' interpretations of climate change, to their agency, and their potential strategies for responding to it (Barnett and Campbell 2010; Kempf 2009; Rubow 2009; Lazrus 2009). Carol Farbotko explains in this context that such practices of victimization and othering change the political agency of islanders and create a new "eco-colonial" perspective on their states (Farbotko 2010, 58).

It should not come as a surprise therefore that most island states reject the role of the victim, and instead demand that those states responsible for climate change implement effective policies to curb their greenhouse gas emissions (McNamara and Gibson 2009). The governments of Tuvalu and Kiribati as well as other SIDS have also used their moral power as those already suffering from global warming to influence UNFCCC negotiations, an endeavour in which the *Alliance of Small Island States* (AOSIS) has also been instrumental (Farbotko 2010). Both organisations have been advocating for effective climate protection policies and climate justice. Most importantly, they demand the necessary tools and resources for Island states to determine their own fate with regard to climate change effects. Other advocates of these goals include the *Pacific Conference of Churches* (PCC) and NGOs like *Many Strong Voices* (MSV) and *Climate Justice Now!*.

What becomes apparent in such voices and movements is that there is, in fact, an alternative to framing the link between climate change and human mobility in the Pacific region as 'critical' per se. It is possible to see global warming as an "imaginative resource" (Hastrup and Fog Olwig 2012, 2), in the sense that affected peoples and societies can "translate climate change discourses into new norms, demands and, crucially, into rights" (Klepp 2018, 155). This is only possible, however, if and when underlying power structures and securitization processes are a) uncovered and b) accepted as negotiable between equals. For such a discursive reframing of the dominant climate change discourse in the Pacific, however, it is necessary to re-politicise the debate so that climate change is not seen exclusively as a set of biophysical changes in the earth system, but as a phenomenon raising important

questions about citizenship, belonging, different concepts of space, the social meaning of land, and identity formation processes. This will require the active and continuous questioning of victimisation attempts, of alarmist views of climate change and migration, and of securitization processes. On this basis, migration-friendly policies could be developed which focus on human rights and dignified migration processes, on self-determination for (potential) migrants and their governments, and on finding new ways of framing their movement which can replace labels like 'refugee' and 'migration crisis' (Bedford and Bedford 2010; Boncour and Burson 2010; Campbell 2010; Klepp and Herbeck 2016).

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The Authors

Christiane Fröhlich is a research fellow at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg. She researches human mobility in the context of political and environmental crisis. She has done extensive field research on the impact of a prolonged drought period in pre-revolutionary Syria. She also inquires into the role of the Global North in current migration movements from the Global South from a postcolonial perspective. Her work has been published in, among others, Political Geography, Global Policy, and Contemporary Levant, as well as a number of edited volumes.

Silja Klepp is a professor of geography at Kiel University. She is a trained social anthropologist. In her research on climate change migration and adaptation, she integrates postcolonial perspectives and critical theories in the study of the effects of climate change. Silja's field research experience includes countries such as Kiribati, Vanuatu, New Zealand, Italy, Libya, Malta, and Zambia. Her fields of research include migration and refugees, political ecology of climate change, legal anthropology, borders, and STS.

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Contact Us
Toda Peace Institute
Samon Eleven Bldg. 5th Floor
3-1 Samon-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0017, Japan
Email: contact@toda.org