

# One step forward, two steps back? The fading contours of (in)justice in competing discourses on climate migration

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In recent debates on climate change and migration, the focus on the figure of ‘climate refugees’ (tainted by environmental determinism and a crude understanding of human mobility) has given ground to a broader conception of the climate–migration nexus. In particular, the idea that migration can represent a legitimate adaptation strategy has emerged strongly. This appears to be a positive development, marked by softer tones that de-securitize climate migration. However, political and normative implications of this evolution are still understudied. This article contributes to filling the gap by turning to both the ‘climate refugees’ and ‘migration as adaptation’ narratives, interrogating how and whether those competing narratives pose the question of (in)justice. Our analysis shows that the highly problematic ‘climate refugees’ narrative did (at least) channel justice claims and yielded the (illusory) possibility of identifying concrete rights claims and responsibilities. Read in relation to the growing mantra of resilience in climate policy and politics, the more recent narrative on ‘migration as adaptation’ appears to displace justice claims and inherent rights in favour of a depoliticised idea of adaptation that relies on the individual migrant’s ability to compete in and benefit from labour markets. We warn that the removal of structural inequalities from the way in which the climate–migration nexus is understood can be seen as symptomatic of a shrinking of the conditions to posing the question of climate justice.

KEY WORDS: adaptation, climate refugees, migration, climate justice, resilience, development

## Introduction

Migration is a powerful source of anxiety in collective imaginary and consciousness. The recent events in Europe and its latest ‘refugee crisis’ have generated powerful shock waves. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2015) aptly diagnosed a widespread ‘moral panic’, fuelled by the spectre of invasion and accompanied by the scapegoating of the ‘Other’ – regressive reactions materialised in the walls and fences erected around Europe. To be sure, the anxiety accompanying migration has a number of undercurrents. The crisis is also made particularly thorny by the fact that the dire fate of the displaced is

a strong reminder of one’s own vulnerability. And we should not forget that responsibility, care and justice (as well as guilt) are also among the sentiments stirred up by the unfolding of the drama of displacement. Indeed, what makes ignoring the ‘crisis’ so difficult is also a widespread sense that not responding to a request of hospitality from people escaping war, slaughter or even ‘just’ poverty, is morally wrong. This is not least because mass movements of people are often caused by expulsions linked to globalised socio-economic inequalities (Sassen 2014) and to the postcolonial character of the present. Responsibility and care, although sometimes well hidden, survive in the public conscience even at the apex of negative

sentiments over migration, as some opinion polls indicate (e.g. TENT Foundation 2016).

This paper starts from the conviction that this intricate affective knot has also had an important role in the way so-called 'climate migration' has emerged as a salient policy issue – with the prospect of large-scale movements of people triggered by climate change generating both fears and calls to protect those affected. While gathering momentum and evolving into a recognised phenomenon in established scientific and policy arenas<sup>1</sup>, the climate–migration nexus has been understood in a number of different ways<sup>2</sup>. Various studies illustrate the *coexistence* of framings that depict the affected populations as victims or security threats (with the nexus understood in terms of displacement), as adaptive agents (with migration seen as a coping mechanism or adaptation strategy), and as political subjects (for an overview of these framings, see Farbotko and Lazrus 2012; Mayer 2014; McNamara and Gibson 2009; Ransan-Cooper *et al.* 2015).

Resonating with the recurrent waves of alarm and alarmism on migration and asylum (of which the recent events in Europe are a paradigmatic example), the framing of the climate change and migration nexus in terms of mass displacement, 'climate refugees' and security has proved very resilient. This framing – close to what earlier literature identified as the *maximalist* (Morrissey 2012; Suhrke 1994) or *alarmist* approach (Gemenne 2011) – has been very influential, if not dominant, in academic (Biermann and Boas 2008; Myers 2002; Reuveny 2007; Stern 2007; Westra 2009), advocacy (Christian Aid 2007; Environmental Justice Foundation 2009) and policy (Council of the European Union 2008; WBGU 2008) arenas, and is dominant in the portrayal of the issue offered up by the media. The 'success' and problematic character of the maximalist approach are witnessed by the frequency with which violence and conflict in several parts of the world (and the surge in the number of arrivals at Europe's borderland) are associated with environmental and climate change. While a few scientific studies (Cook *et al.* 2016; Kelley *et al.* 2015) have explored the linkages between climate change and the Syrian crisis (for a more accurate account, see Fröhlich 2016), some media coverage has propagated a simplistic version that links the conflict and related displacement to climate change (rather than to a number of economic, social and political matters), making the Syrian situation into a worrying anticipation of what is (said) to come with an escalating global warming<sup>3</sup>.

However, the last few years have also witnessed what we could call a change in the 'power balance' among the framings, with the affirmation of discourses that articulate the climate change and migration nexus in the context of the emerging neoliberal governmentality of adaptation and resilience (cf. Bettini 2014; Felli 2013; Methmann

and Oels 2015; Turhan *et al.* 2015). The idea that migration can represent a legitimate adaptation strategy has gained ground (Black *et al.* 2011; Tacoli 2009; UK Government Office for Science 2011; Warner *et al.* 2012), witnessing a partial but important relocation of migration from the domains of security and humanitarian emergency management to that of development (Bettini and Gioli 2016). At least in academic and policy contexts, there has been a shift of focus from 'climate refugees' to 'climate migration' and a broader array of mobility responses.

How do these different framings and discourses on the climate–migration nexus relate to the intricate tangle of reactions that migration and displacement raise? With such a question in mind, this article focuses on a rather underexplored issue, namely the different ways in which competing framings respond to and integrate the sense of justice, (in)equality, guilt and responsibility discussed above. In particular, we question how the shift from climate refugees to climate migration could signal a marginalisation of the very problem of 'climate justice' in the debate on the climate change and migration nexus, symptomatic of broader tendencies in climate politics. Indeed, we will document a move away from inherent rights, towards the idea that risk should be governed through the fostering of individual preparedness, which in this case falls on the shoulders of (potential) migrants. The debate becomes less about institutional agents (States and the international community) securing the inherent human rights of some kind of (potentially dangerous) victim, and more about the ways in which individuals can utilise migration to become resilient. This article discusses the risks that the emerging narrative on 'migration as adaptation' entails in terms of a shrinking of the space for the identification (or reclamation) of rights and responsibilities, which are among the ingredients of the problematisation of climate change in terms of international and intersectional justice.

The following section contextualises the evolution of the debate on climate migration within the broader trend towards resilience in international policy discourses, both of which we will argue are manifested in the 'migration as adaptation' narrative. Following from this, we discuss how climate justice is problematised in relation to the linked issues of climate change and migration. The fourth and fifth sections consider the 'climate refugees' and the 'migration as adaptation' narratives in turn and detail how rights and responsibilities are configured, pointing to what this means for how inequalities are understood and (potentially) acted upon.

We conclude that the climate change and migration nexus is moving away from an approach based on inherent rights and justice to a self-help approach to climate change adaptation based on resilience and preparedness. Remedying the inequalities that underscore how the negative effects

of climate change are distributed slips under the radar, and instead, people are expected (or perhaps forced) to overcome the difficulties posed by climate change by living up to the opportunities afforded to them by labour migration.

### Post-interventionism and resilience

Discourses on the climate change and migration nexus are not evolving in a vacuum. Rather they reflect broader shifts that are underway in how risk is conceptualised and governed in terms of resilience (Chandler 2014; Evans and Reid 2014), and in how climate change is governed through the 'holy trinity of vulnerability, adaptive capacity, and resilience' (Taylor 2015, 53; see also Grove 2014a; Watts 2015). The concept of resilience, which can be traced back to a peculiar cross-breeding between ecological and economical rationalities (Reid 2012), has proliferated in a number of policy domains such as those concerned with global environmental change, humanitarian interventions, and international development (Dunn Cavelty *et al.* 2015, see also the Themed Section on *Vulnerability, Resilience and Adaptation* in this Journal, vol. 182(2)). Resilience generally refers to the ability of an individual or community to withstand, adapt to, and recover from external disturbances – of which climate change is a prominent example. This definition poses climate change as an unavoidable external disturbance to which individuals and communities must adapt. Therefore, some authors have warned that the focus on resilience may draw attention to adaptation at the expense of the mitigation of climate change (Methmann and Oels 2015).

In exploring the concept of human security, Chandler contrasts resilience practices with 'high-profile debates and discussions of humanitarian intervention and human rights in the 1990s' (Chandler 2012, 213), which marked the peak period for enthusiasm regarding interventionist 'humanitarian operations' where human rights (and the inability or unwillingness of the state in question to protect these human rights) were propagated as the reason for intervention. However, Chandler charts a move away from this liberal internationalist paradigm and its claims on the West to act as protectors or humanitarian interveners, towards more decentralised (although not necessarily less violent) mechanisms fostering the self-securing agency (i.e. the resilience) of people considered to be vulnerable (Chandler 2012).

The interventionist paradigm of the 1990s and the resilience paradigm that has been replacing it interpellate very different subjects. As Joseph points out, not without optimism, the concept of resilience 'encourages the idea of active citizenship, whereby people, rather than relying on the state, take responsibility for their own social and economic

well-being' (Joseph 2013, 42), in contrast to the 'victimhood' conferred on subjects under interventionism. The recognition of local agency has been welcomed from many quarters as a positive development in comparison both to the paternalism associated with the status of a 'victim', and to the perils to which those identified as threats are exposed. However, as others highlight, the resilient subject is in effect deprived of a number of 'inalienable rights' (Evans and Reid 2013, 91); rather than a stable rights-holder, the resilient subject is primarily an 'adaptation machine' (Grove 2014b) compelled to learn (if s/he is to gain the right to survive) the art of navigating through a precarious and dangerous existence (Evans and Reid 2014). The resilience discourse does not share one of the core elements of the liberal interventionist paradigm, that is the expectation (more or less frequently fulfilled) that States should take on the responsibility to secure their population and prevent human rights violations within their borders, and also to intervene beyond their borders when other States are unable or unwilling to do the same. There is a shift in how agency and responsibility are understood to operate, as people become responsible agents themselves, expected to mobilise their capabilities to become resilient and thus significantly reducing the expectation of an intervention by States.

### Resilience and adaptation: what room for climate justice?

In line with the broad shifts at play in international relations, climate change politics is also witnessing a move towards resilience and adaptation. This shift has the potential to reconfigure (or eclipse) the ways in which equality and justice are posed as questions of political and ethical relevance in the context of climate change.

Traditionally, questions of distribution and transfer of resources ('responsibility' and justice) have been at the crux of climate change politics, both in and outside the fora of climate negotiations. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities was a cornerstone of the original text of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 1992, 3.1), and the heavily caveated inclusion of 'climate justice' in the preamble of the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2016) indicates that these discussions remain greatly contested. Importantly, (in) justice and responsibility are the keywords and banners that have mobilised powerful social movements around climate change (Bond 2012; Chatterton *et al.* 2013; Schlosberg and Collins 2014).

Posing the question of justice and responsibility rests on a logic that is straightforward: (a) climate change may cause harm to humans; (b) the harms caused are widely considered unjust (see for instance chapter 4 in Broome 2012), as not everyone

contributes to the same extent to the creation of the negative impacts of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, not everyone enjoys equally the related benefits, and not everyone has the same means to cope with the impacts; (c) the wrong should be repaired in ways that take into consideration (b).

This reasoning is easy to comprehend, widely shared, and compatible with most ethical standpoints. Nonetheless, the precise definition of the terms, let alone the translation of such reasoning into action, is far from straightforward (an issue to which we will return in relation to the climate refugee figure). This is for a number of non-banal reasons – and not only because actors (States, private companies, investors, individuals) are not keen to accept responsibilities (and related costs). The very definition of responsibility has sustained a lively debate within philosophy (for definitions and alternative approaches, see Broome 2012; Caney 2014). In political and geographical studies, there have been extensive discussions on the scale of action. While there has been a sort of ‘carbon nationalism’ (states have been the unit for the calculation of historical cumulative emissions, scenarios and quotas), there have been numerous proposals to focus instead on producers (Frumhoff *et al.* 2015) or even individuals (Chakravarty *et al.* 2009). The intergenerational dimension associated with permanent or long-term change adds another layer of complexity (Gardiner *et al.* 2010).

Despite such conundrums, the bottom line is that climate change has emerged as connected to a potential ‘wrong’, in theory quantifiable, measurable and attributable, which should be avoided as far as possible through climate mitigation measures. Crucially, this understanding and the invocation of climate (in)justice (Roberts and Parks 2007; Schlosberg and Collins 2014) mirror a problematisation that poses, or at least enables, questions of inequality and redistribution. The result is that ‘civil society’, States and the ‘international community’ are said to have a responsibility to (re)act in order to protect those most exposed to the adverse impacts of climate change (as posited by the interventionist paradigm).

Human rights have played an important role in this problematisation of climate change. Despite the gulf between the idealistic goals of the international human rights regime and the realpolitik behind its genealogy and operation, it is a discourse that carves out some space for the problem of ‘injustice’ – and indeed most definitions of climate justice contain some kind of reference to human rights. The formal premise of equality of rights allows for the problematisation of events or structural factors which threaten to disturb equality of rights as ‘wrongs’ – and this is often a foundational argument for protection initiatives and interventionist actions (however problematic both may prove to be). Equality is also a crucial component of rights-based

calls to protect people from the harmful impacts of climate change.

The shift towards resilience can change the very problematisation of climate change. This is not only because it goes hand in hand with the growing focus on adaptation and on loss and damage (*vis à vis* mitigation), justified by the increase in scientific warnings that a certain amount of climate change is ‘locked in’ and that even adaptation will be unlikely to absorb all impacts (Roberts and Huq 2015). More importantly, it undermines the possibility for the inequalities associated with climate change (in terms of historical responsibilities, exposure, coping capabilities) to be understood as a ‘wrong’; instead of being inequalities, they become differences. These different conditions become ethically neutral circumstances, a result of the roll of the dice inherent in human existence. The adverse impacts of climate change are re-signified as disturbances to which the resilient subject adapts as s/he learns ‘the art of living dangerously’ (Evans and Reid 2014). Once enrolled in the struggle to become resilient, people become responsible for overcoming these challenges themselves. In practice, rather than States being (formally) compelled to reduce inequalities because of their responsibility to intervene to repair a wrong and protect against its impacts, post-interventionism means that people, including potential climate migrants, are not seen as exposed to structural injustice, and instead are expected to be able to secure themselves against the odds they are facing.

Resilience does not rest on the premise of (or search for) equality: whilst the negative effects of climate change may have catastrophic consequences for some people (those who are not resilient), others will be able to withstand, adapt to and recover from these external stressors. A right to be protected is thus pushed to the background and the argument for such responsibilities, which is so core to climate justice, is replaced by initiatives to promote resilience.

### Climate refugees

The logic outlined above, of climate change as a ‘wrong’ causing harm in a way that is fundamentally unjust, impacting negatively on the rights of those who are affected and thus requiring action, is clearly visible in the figure of the climate refugee. The idea is simple, even simplistic: beyond a certain threshold, climate change (via desertification, sea-level rise, droughts, extreme weather events, etc.) will render several vulnerable areas uninhabitable. These ‘vulnerability hot-spots’ (often visualised by maps, e.g. WBGU 2008) will generate waves of climate refugees – victims of climate-induced displacement (notably from the global South) in search of shelter (in the global North). This is the figure of climate refugees in a nutshell.

Rights (and their rooting in the premise of equality) have been an essential ingredient of these debates. Human rights have offered a key tool with which to gauge the desirability of competing measures, with the defence of human rights from the impacts of climate change representing a goal for policy (see Leighton 2011; McAdam 2012; Schade 2013; Westra 2009). Rights also provide normative legitimacy and formal justification to proposed policy interventions, with human rights advocates emphasising the figure of climate refugees as the 'human face' of climate change. The responsibilities accompanying these human rights concerns are two-fold: ensuring that climate refugees are not created in the first place (bringing climate change mitigation and *in situ* adaptation under consideration); and introducing mechanisms to protect those people who are nevertheless displaced. The operationalisation of the idea of 'protecting climate refugees' has passed through two avenues: some have advocated an extension of the Geneva Refugee Convention to include climate-displaced persons (Conisbee and Simms 2003; Williams 2008), while others propose development of an *ad hoc* protocol or convention tailored to recognise the rights of 'climate refugees' (Biermann and Boas 2010; Docherty and Giannini 2009). What we see is a combination of human rights (with States and the international community having a duty to prevent the human rights violations that occur in a situation of climate change-induced displacement); humanitarian principles (those most vulnerable are also those with the least means to cope); and historical responsibility (industrialised countries are identified as disproportionately responsible for causing the problem, based on historical carbon dioxide emissions). The calls for action to protect climate refugees are resonant of the interventionist framing of human security that Chandler describes as prevalent particularly in the late 1990s, in which States and the international community (are said to) take on responsibility for preventing human rights violations and humanitarian catastrophes (Chandler 2012).

The framing of the climate–migration nexus through the figure of climate refugees has been heavily criticised. To begin with, the very identification of the 'climate refugee' is far from straightforward, in that it assumes the possibility of singling out an environmental stressor as the sole cause of a movement *and* of attributing that stressor to climate change. The underlying idea is that when the impacts of climate change pass a threshold they will 'automatically' originate displacement. This conception builds upon an environmentally deterministic and mono-causal understanding of human migration that pathologises it (Castles 2002; Hulme 2008; Jakobeit and Methmann 2012; Oels 2010). It silences those 'expected' to move (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012;

McNamara and Gibson 2009) and in effect has clear racialised traits (Baldwin 2013). Various critiques have questioned the conceptual and practical compatibility of the idea of 'climate refugees' with existing legal systems and human rights regimes (IOM 2007; Kálin and Schrepfer 2012; UNHCR 2009; Zetter 2010), often pointing to the fact that most climate-related movements can be expected to take place within national boundaries (Tacoli 2009). Moreover, by emphasising a spectre of mounting waves of climate refugees, these narratives risk facilitating a securitisation of migration in destination countries (Bettini 2013; Elliott 2010; Hartmann 2010; Smith 2007).

### Migrants as agents of adaptation

The conceptual coupling of climate change with displacement has gradually moved from centre stage, at least in academic and policy contexts, freeing up space for new discourses focusing on adaptation (Warner 2012). The publication of the influential Foresight report on migration and global environmental change, commissioned by the UK Government Office for Science (2011), had a crucial role in affirming a broader view on the climate change and migration nexus: cross-border displacement is seen as only part of the problem, with 'forced' *immobility* also listed among the possible negative outcomes of climatic stressors (Black *et al.* 2012). In particular, *governed* migration has been promoted as a potentially positive form of adaptation and as a strategy for managing risks associated with changing environmental conditions (ADB 2012; Black *et al.* 2011; Warner and Afifi 2014; Warner *et al.* 2012), with the vulnerable no longer portrayed only as passive victims in need of international protection, but also as 'agents of adaptation'. Largely mimicking existing debates on 'migration and development' (see Gioli *et al.* 2016; in particular Bettini and Gioli 2016; Wrathall and Suckall 2016), this boils down to looking at the role of labour migration, and of individual or collective financial and social remittances, as buffers during environmental disaster (for a review see Le De *et al.* 2013) and as a means for climate adaptation.

Four particularly salient features of the 'new' understanding of migration as adaptation should be highlighted here. The first is that, although loosely defined as *migration* or *mobility*, it is *labour* migration that becomes dominant in the new discourse. Second, and based on the New Economics of Labour Migration (Stark and Levhari 1982), *circular* mobility is seen as the most virtuous type of migration: the household is taken as the unit of analysis and only some members migrate and remit, keeping the ties with their household throughout the process (Stark 1991). Remittances are hence conceptualised as a 'risk mitigation strategy'

whereby labour migration is part of a portfolio of livelihood strategies that households use to shield themselves from various types of risk (e.g. economic, environmental, conflict). In this context, remittances have been described as a form of 'household sponsored insurance system' (Yang and Choi 2007). Third, this type of mobility is overwhelmingly practised in the global South, where access to financial instruments and products and other forms of social protection is scant (Schrieder and Knerr 2000). Additionally, informal work, precarious land rights, and inherently risky subsistence agriculture, severely limit the ability of people to cope with crisis, and remittances constitute a more reliable source of income which is not affected by local conditions. Having this scenario in mind, leading international bodies conceptualise migration in a way that prioritises circular migration (Hugo 2008; World Bank 2013) and increasingly, South–South types of movement. Fourth, migrant selectivity is crucial as human capital should match the goal of ideally maximising while diversifying incomes. Migrants involved in this circular kind of mobility, from and within the global South, are therefore healthy, young and predominantly men (for a critique, see Kunz 2011). This has several (gendered) implications, including the frequently highlighted fact that the costs of migration are high (in terms of both social and financial capital), and remittances seldom benefit the poorest households (De Haas 2005; Mazzucato *et al.* 2008), and may even exacerbate existing inequality and vulnerability in the context of disasters (Le De *et al.* 2015).

In sum, the idea of migration as adaptation has emerged in the wake of a more comprehensive understanding of the climate change–migration nexus. The narrow focus on the environment as a driver and root cause for displacement has given ground to a 'developmentalised' narrative that couches the question of climate and migration in the context of the complex and fast-changing processes currently reshaping the 'global South' – where (global) environmental change is but one among many drivers of change in general, and of mobility in particular.

In contrast to the wealth of critiques of the 'climate refugees' narrative which exist, remarkably few studies (among the exceptions are Baldwin 2014; Bettini 2014; Felli 2013; Felli and Castree 2012; Methmann and Oels 2015; Turhan *et al.* 2015) have explored the policy and political implications of this shift, and its relations to broader changes in the landscapes of climate politics, migration governance, and developmental interventions. This is a significant gap, as increasingly the integration between disaster risk, adaptation to climate change, and development is prescribed as a necessary step for meeting human development goals (Agrawal and Lemos 2015; Schipper and Pelling 2006), and the mainstreaming of

environmental concerns into wider policy agendas is actively pursued.

### The evaporation of (in)justice?

The shift we have outlined in the discursive landscape has profound implications *vis à vis* the very possibility of posing climate change as a problem of (in)justice. As we have seen, the two understandings of the climate change and migration nexus on which we have focused are emanations of different forms of governmentality and different international policy discourses – calling on different scientific expertise, policy arenas and imaginaries.

The figure of the climate refugee emanates from an outdated world map characterised by a 'simple' North–South line (in the Kyoto protocol, the world is divided between Annex 1 countries and the rest). The actors with key roles are States and an 'international community', torn between the benevolence of human rights and the 'noise of weapons' echoing from national security concerns. This framing silences those people who are directly experiencing ecological vulnerability, relegating them to the double role of agency-less victims and sources of danger. However, the discourse on climate refugees focuses on the inherent right to protection held by displaced persons as much as on concern for the implications of unregulated mass movements of people. One core element of this narrative, arguably one of the reasons for its resilience even among progressive actors, is that it addresses the sense of (in)justice that accompanies both climate change and displacement, and offers a clear although problematic route in which to channel it. To be clear we are not claiming that the figure of the climate refugee and the discourses built on it offer(ed) sound, sustainable and progressive mechanisms for the definition and 'implementation' of such responsibility. The conundrums surrounding responsibility for climate mitigation and adaptation that the literature highlights (see third section) are not resolved in any meaningful way by the figure of the climate refugee. Quite to the contrary, we are convinced that the figure of the climate refugee is analytically flawed, normatively problematic, and legally impracticable. Nonetheless, an important ingredient of discourses on climate refugees, and one with significant discursive effects, is that they pose the question of responsibility, which entails a problematisation of climate change and its impacts on human mobility that considers the issue of climate justice.

At least in its humanitarian/progressive articulation, the figure of the climate refugee is a reminder that climate change enshrines a 'foundational' international inequality – both in terms of historical responsibilities and of differentiated adaptive capacities (however under-defined these aspects may

be); it represents a tacit recognition of climate vulnerability as the result of structural 'wrongs'. On these bases, States and 'the international community' are pinned down to their responsibility (and legal duty) to protect/house/welcome/offer refuge to ecologically vulnerable populations displaced by climate change. Indeed, the figure of the climate refugee has functioned in a number of campaigns (Environmental Justice Foundation 2009; Greenpeace 2008; WPC 2010) as a reminder of the fundamental injustice in climate change – a wrong to which someone is exposed, with someone having a responsibility for it, both in the sense of burden sharing and in the sense of harm avoidance (for an explanation of these two typologies of justice, see Caney 2014).

In relatively subtle ways, the question of (in) equality and the reparation of a wrong are displaced from the core of the more recent narratives around migration as adaptation. Rather than emphasising the inherent *rights* of people affected by climate change (rights that are to be protected), these narratives emphasise the *opportunity* to move. The focus shifts to the opportunities offered by labour mobility both for the individual migrant and at the aggregate, societal level. The question of responsibility takes on a very different shape than in the climate refugees narrative. Rather than preventing displacement or establishing mechanisms to protect those who have been displaced, the responsibility becomes one of allowing, and even enabling, (some) people to become mobile. This responsibility may 'simply' entail refraining from preventing people from moving rather than undertaking costly in situ adaptation measures or climate change mitigation, but could also entail providing visas to people trying to embark upon labour migration, or facilitating migration more actively<sup>4</sup>.

The migration as adaptation narrative mirrors the post-interventionist and resilience paradigms (see second section), and reproduces the latter's economised and neoliberal character (Reid 2013). Ecologically vulnerable populations are to be transformed into adaptive subjects, hoping to reach a dynamic form of socio-economic development based on the idea of resilience goals (Agrawal and Lemos 2015). States become enforcers and facilitators rather than active actors, with the market and self-organisation becoming key mechanisms. In the case of climate and migration, as for contemporary mainstream opinion on the governance of migration, the focus is on circular and/or temporary labour migration, not least because of the autonomous adaptation funding mechanism the remittances promise to represent. The (economic) migrant (from the global South, and moving within the global South) is centre stage, an industrious individual who, by gaining access to formal labour markets, increases his own resilience. The nation state and the international

community are to govern the movement of labour migrants in order for them to undertake adaptation measures and secure themselves. The horizon of this narrative is the fostering of resilience, which is achieved with the ability of individuals to improve their own situations. As the idea that those affected most by the negative effects of climate change enjoy a right to be protected is given less attention, the impetus for pursuing the allocation of responsibility and remedying the ills that climate change causes also weakens. Thus the very idea of responsibility (whether based on inherent rights, general humanitarian sentiments or the principle of historical responsibility) becomes less relevant, if not irrelevant. The existence of inequalities is depoliticised into difference. This is not to say that climate change is not taken seriously; indeed, quite the opposite, as it is being elevated into the highest ranks in political and economic fora. But however important, dangerous, and even potentially disruptive climate change is said to be (e.g. World Bank 2014), it is not posed mainly as a matter of (in)justice. Put in extreme terms, one could say that the idea of any 'wrong' fades away; inequality and injustice end up at the periphery, and no longer feature among the defining traits of the problematisation of climate change and migration, upon which the narrative on migration as adaptation resides.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the shift that has recently taken place in the way the climate change–migration nexus is predicated represents a step forward: at least, the improved understanding of migration and of the agency acknowledged in vulnerable populations together offer sounder and more refined bases to understand and discuss the issue, inside and outside the fora of international climate policy.

At the same time, this article warns that emerging narratives and the solutions they envision may represent a step backwards in terms of the possibility of posing the question of justice. Our concern is that the growing relevance of the narrative of migration as adaptation, and the broader shifts it symptomatises might mean that the idea of a foundational wrong behind climate change, and the related responsibility to do something about it, is replaced by a depoliticised notion of resilience. If that were to be the case, the impetus or obligation also to determine politically any (re-)distribution of resources and to address the constellation of inequalities in relation to climate change would wane.

To be clear, there is no nostalgia for 'climate refugees'. The concept is flawed, and the map to which it speaks (carved by a linear South–North divide) no longer exists, nor captures contemporary networked geographies of socio-political inequality and injustice. Moreover, the debate on climate

change and migration can be expected to continue along the bumpy and twisted path on which it has travelled so far. In spite of the growing momentum gained by the narrative on 'migration as adaptation', the figure of the climate refugee is a die-hard character, which has been brought back into the limelight by recent events, not least in Syria and in the Mediterranean (see first section), and may well experience a renaissance in policy and academic arenas (see e.g. Gemenne 2015).

Nonetheless, our analysis highlights a number of concerning tendencies in relation to the politics of climate change and migration, with a possible marginalisation of the foundation for posing the issue of climate justice. Giving labour markets the responsibility to redistribute resources and regulate adaptation risks undermining the very possibility to identify and act upon the constellations of inequalities related to climate change. The risk is to fall for the depoliticised illusion that the tensions and structural injustices in debates about climate refugees have disappeared; of which the narrative of 'migration as adaptation' could be a sign.

Finally, the increasingly restrictive attitudes that both the EU and a number of European States have shown with regard to asylum and the rights of displaced persons only reinforce the awareness of the struggles necessary to 'force' the question of equality onto contemporary political landscapes. The large numbers of deaths in the Mediterranean and the push to securitise the borders within and around Europe are a warning against the conservative responses that could emerge against those 'disenfranchised' by the impacts of climate and environmental change (even when they might be in flight). What these deaths and broken lives warn against is the evaporation from contemporary mainstream political discourse of even the formal ideas of a responsibility to protect and to welcome, and of care and justice. When thinking about a future of changing climates, we see *these* as tendencies to fear – rather than the mounting numbers of destitute people on the move that agitate much of today's public debates.

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### Notes

- 1 The latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) devotes significant space to the phenomenon (see chapter 12 in IPCC 2014), while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) includes migration and displacement as human rights concerns in the context of climate change (OHCHR 2009). Several policy initiatives have urged for action to tackle and prepare for planned relocation (UNHCR 2014) and international displacement as a consequence of climate change (most prominently, the Nansen initiative, see Gemenne and Brücker 2015). Within the regime of the UNFCCC, human mobility features in the outcomes of the 2015 Paris Climate Summit (UNFCCC 2016) – as it did in paragraph 14(f) of the Cancun Adaptation Framework (UNFCCC 2010) and the Doha decision (UNFCCC 2013, 3/CP.18, 7(a)(vi)). The Paris Agreement establishes a task force on displacement under the remit of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (UNFCCC 2016, par. 49).
- 2 Contrary to the assumption (shared by many studies) that the polyphony (or cacophony) of definitions has represented an obstacle to the advancement of the debate, arguably it has allowed a number of disparate actors to address 'climate migration' in ways compatible with their agendas, thereby contributing to the recognition of the climate change and migration nexus as a phenomenon and a topic for science and policy.
- 3 See for instance articles in *The Independent* (Bawden 2014), *The Guardian* (2015), *The National Observer* (Dinshaw 2015), *Time* (Baker 2015).
- 4 For instance, in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami the Government of the Republic of Korea gave priority to migrants from affected areas in the 2005 roster of applicants for the Employment Permit System (IOM 2007).

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