

## ***The making of the 'climate migrant': an analysis of a circulating label***

### **Project Rationale**

How we categorise migrants matters. The implications of different labels such as 'political refugees', 'economic migrants' or 'illegal aliens' are important because each conditions the rights of the people so designated. The 'climate migrant' label and its many variations emerged in the mid-1980s in response to concerns about the potential impact of anthropogenic climate change on the mobility of human populations. It has since then gained growing traction in certain academic, policy and media circles.

The emerging field of 'environmental migration' has been shaped by a debate between so-called 'maximalists' and 'minimalists'. The former argue that we can identify and designate 'climate migrants' through quantitative and qualitative methods. In doing so, we can design policies to protect the people affected by climate change and tackle the root causes of forced migration. Minimalism opposes this view. In its strongest forms, it argues that the 'climate migrant' label is analytically flawed because it fails to account for the complex multi-causal nature of mobility, and is therefore of little use for policy, sometimes even detrimental to migrants. It concludes that the 'climate migrant' label should be dropped, to focus instead on guaranteeing the rights of migrant and meeting their needs, regardless of the cause of their mobility.

What this fails to account for is the *work* the 'climate migrant' label does. Even if we accept the diagnosis of minimalism, it remains that the label is being used and may be institutionalised. Because of this, it has important implications for the people it designates, regardless of its analytical pertinence. Recognising this, the literature in 'environmental mobilities' points to the various ways in which the label is conceptualised, contested and used. It has shown that the label has a history, that it acquires different meanings according to the socio-political contexts it occurs in, the power relations that characterise these contexts, and the relative success of actors who seek to impose their own definition of 'climate migration' with opposing knowledge claims, narratives and representations. These dynamics need to be understood if we are to evaluate the usefulness of the 'climate migrant' label.

### **Project Aims**

The objective of this PhD project is to take the 'environmental mobilities' literature a step further by studying how and why the 'climate migrant' label *circulates* within and across contemporary academic, media, policy-advice and policy-making circles. By looking at the label as *mobile* – embedded in documents, images, models and news stories that are carried across sites by actors and their communications – it posits that we can better understand how its meaning and applications are being negotiated, why it 'sticks' to certain people or situations but not others, and with what effects.

On a theoretical level, it will contribute to interdisciplinary literatures on 'mobilities' and the travel of ideas and policies. It will also inform our understanding of migrant labelling as it is currently practiced. Ultimately, the research will provide insight into the potential usefulness of the 'climate migrant' label in designating mobile people whose complex trajectories are irreducible to a single cause.

### **Methods**

The research will establish how persons or groups come to (or fail to) be authoritatively designated as 'climate migrants', by analysing the circulation of: (a) the scientific/taxonomic activities used to design frameworks for setting categories and the boundaries between them (e.g. models, maps, qualitative studies...); and (b) the discursive practices and representations (narratives, metaphors, images...) that give these inherently unstable frameworks authority, legitimacy and stability in the face of hard-to-pin-down mobilities.

The primary empirical focus of the research project is on France in relation with the Sahel, although relevant threads will be followed out in order to account for the external influences on and globalised nature of this debate. In practical terms, this will involve in-depth interviews with expert actors who contribute to the construction of the 'climate migrant' label, i.e. analysts, academics, journalists, policy-makers, institutional representatives from NGOs, INGOs and international institutions. The sources they appeal to, the knowledge claims they make, the stories they tell will be traced and compared. This will be supported by media analysis (using a mixed method iteratively confronting quantitative and qualitative analyses), examination of key studies and policy documents, and cultural analysis of various representations (documentary films, photographic reports, visuals drawn from data-driven models...).

### **Disclaimers**

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