

The power of imaginaries in steering environmental migration trajectories

The role of comprehension, negotiation and transformation in individual migration decision-making processes.

Abstract

In a context of increased occurrence of environmental hazards and a growing concern with migration issues, analysts have progressively linked the issue of climate change to human mobilization and migration patterns. Although future projections of environmental migration represent the urgency of the problem and the possible implications of environmental migration for international as well as internal relations, they obscure both the contextual structures and the agency involved in migration patterns. The dichotomous view of seeing nature and culture as two distinct entities neglects how changes in nature are mediated through political and socio-economic structures. The perceived causal relationship between environmental stress and migration on an aggregated level may therefore not hold at a smaller scale: providing little to no insight in the personal motives of people who migrate. Hence, drawing on political ecology theory, this thesis applies a pluralistic analysis of the embeddedness of environmental risks in multi-level processes that shape the migration decision of individuals. Based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with migrants and non-migrants in a flood- and drought-affected area in southern Mozambique, this study found that individual experiences of environmental risks are shaped by (i) socio-economic factors such as employment opportunities and home-ownership, (ii) socio-cultural factors including gender and religion and (iii) the resettlement process. Together with notions of belonging and identity, these experiences shape how people apprehend, negotiate and transform environmental risks. It is concluded that the resulting 'imaginaries' of environmental risks lead to diverse reactions of people all exposed to the same hazard in which some chose to migrate permanently, while others choose not to migrate or create new forms of circular migration. Therefore, this implies that migration should be understood as part of the broader context of social, political, economic and environmental transformation in which it takes place.

Keywords

Environmental migration – Multi-level processes – Political ecology – Individual migration-decision – Belonging – Imaginaries