

## ***Time to Mainstream the Environment into Migration Theory?***

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- *Extended Abstract submitted to 806:  
Innovative Application of Demographic Theory to Population-Environment Research*

Migration theory has been informed by a variety of disciplinary perspectives including Economics, Geography, Political Science and Sociology. Together, these perspectives have provided the lenses through which demographers have explored population movement – and they have done so relatively successfully for decades.<sup>i</sup>

What current migration theory lacks is explicit consideration of aspects of the natural environment that are increasingly shaping population redistribution. While context, broadly defined, plays a role in much theoretical understanding, it is the social and economic dimensions of context that receive primary emphasis. We argue that contemporary climate change, combined with an increasing body of evidence identifying an environmental ‘signal’ in migration, mandates that migration’s theoretical lens be “zoomed out” to better incorporate the natural environment as an important contextual component.

Policymakers have taken up the issue; for the first time in history, mention of migrants was formally included in an international document on climate change. The Preamble of the COP21 Paris Agreement reads:

- *“Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, **migrants**, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity”. [emphasis added]*

We contend that it is time for the migration research community to similarly respond by recognizing the consistent, and increasing, influence that environmental factors have on migration decision-making and population movement. In the context of contemporary climate change, not doing so may yield misspecified models that do not adequately account for the influence of “place” -- beyond the traditional social and economic factors.

In this paper, we review the environmental dimensions of migration, discuss the primacy of economics and distance in migration theory and explore the political, economic, and sustainable livelihoods approach to the study of migration. We further examine migration systems perspectives as well as the strong influence of social capital on population flows. We offer research examples illustrating innovations in the application of migration theory to migration-environment scholarship yet, ultimately, we contend that environmental factors must more centrally be integrated into mainstream migration perspectives. We conclude by exploring pathways to accomplish just that.

### **Migration’s multifaceted environmental influences**

Migration's socioeconomic and political drivers have many complex, intertwined dimensions, and its environmental drivers are no different. Human movement can be influenced by acute, short-term environmental stressors such as typhoons, or by chronic, long-term environmental strain such as slowly-unfolding drought. The former can yield displacement, while the latter may yield migration characterized by higher levels of agency as households adapt to environmental change.



Across the globe, environmental displacement due to natural disasters outnumbers that due to conflict and violence by three to one -- of the 31.1 million new internal displacements in 2016, fully 24.2 million were attributed to disasters (IDMC 2017). Indeed, since 2008, nearly 230 million natural disaster-related displacements have been recorded and these figures only represent individuals impacted by sudden-onset hazards such as typhoons, floods, and wildfires. And although these levels of displacement are unprecedented, these figures likely represent an underestimation of environmentally-related redistribution given that population movement due to slow-onset strain such as drought is not included (IDMC 2017).

Contemporary movement *across international boundaries* can also have environmental dimensions, although environmental factors typically intersect with economic, social and political contexts to ultimately influence migration (Black et al. 2011). These complex intersections underlie critique of the simplicity of "climate refugee" categorization (e.g. McLeman 2013), although environmental factors such as drought, heat and natural resource scarcity have been empirically associated with international migration from settings as diverse as Bangladesh, Mexico and Pakistan (e.g. Lu et al. 2016; Mueller et al. 2014; Nawrotzki et al. 2015; Obokata et al. 2014).

### The primacy of distance and economics

- Demographers have long theorized human migration, beginning as early as Ravenstein's late-1800s "Laws of Migration." Ravenstein's propositions remain astonishing in their prescience of how population redistribution would continue to unfold through subsequent decades, if not centuries. Based on tables of place of birth in British, North American and European censuses, Ravenstein classified migrants first by distance, contending that most moved to nearby destinations, although he estimated that 25% of all migrants traveled longer distances toward large industrial or commercial towns (Grigg 1977).
- Distance and environmentally-related migration.
- These economic dimensions of migration have continued to be emphasized by neoclassical economics migration theory, one of the most influential migration frameworks. At the macro-scale, neoclassical perspectives emphasize spatial differences in labor supply and demand and resultant labor migration. Wage differentials across locations shape labor migration which, then, moves toward labor force-poor regions offering greater opportunity and returns to capital.

- The emerging global economy altered migration patterns in ways that required adjustments to theoretical understandings. New Economics of Labor Migration.
- Environmental factors, however, intertwine with economics to influence both opportunities at home and elsewhere. *Examples of application of NELM to migration-environment research.*

### **The political economy of migration**

- World Systems Theory
- *Examples of application of political economic frameworks in migration-environment research.*
- Refugees, climate migration and political reception

### **Social capital's longstanding importance**

- Cumulative causation, network theory
- *Examples of application of social capital perspectives within migration-environment research.*

### **Migration systems**

- Relate to cumulative causation, regularity, entrenched, systemic
- Environmental factors (re)shape systems
- *Examples of application of migration systems perspectives within migration-environment research*

### **Sustainable Livelihoods**

- Not a migration theory, but one oft-used by migration-environment scholars
- Integrates political economy, HH capitals and migration as one among many strategies
- Role of natural capital
- *Examples of application of Sustainable Livelihoods Framework within migration-environment research*

### **FORESIGHT Framework and Ways Forward**

- A structure through which to envision theoretical pathways?
- Consider potential misspecifications
- Integrating environmental aspects does not require grand new migration theory. Instead, we argue for more central consideration of natural environmental factors within the broad categorization of "context".

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<sup>i</sup> A useful review of international migration theory was provided by Massey et al. (1993) and, more recently, disciplinary-specific summaries have been offered in the *International Handbook of Migration and Population Distribution* (White 2016).