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Editorial: Climate migration research and policy connections: progress since the Foresight Report

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Climate migration research and policy connections: progress since the Foresight Report

The Foresight report on Migration and Global Environmental Change ([Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change, 2011](#)) was a first major effort to build the evidence base on the linkages between environmental changes and migration and explore the policy options to promote adaptive migration, avoid forced displacement and provide protection for displaced people and “trapped populations.”¹

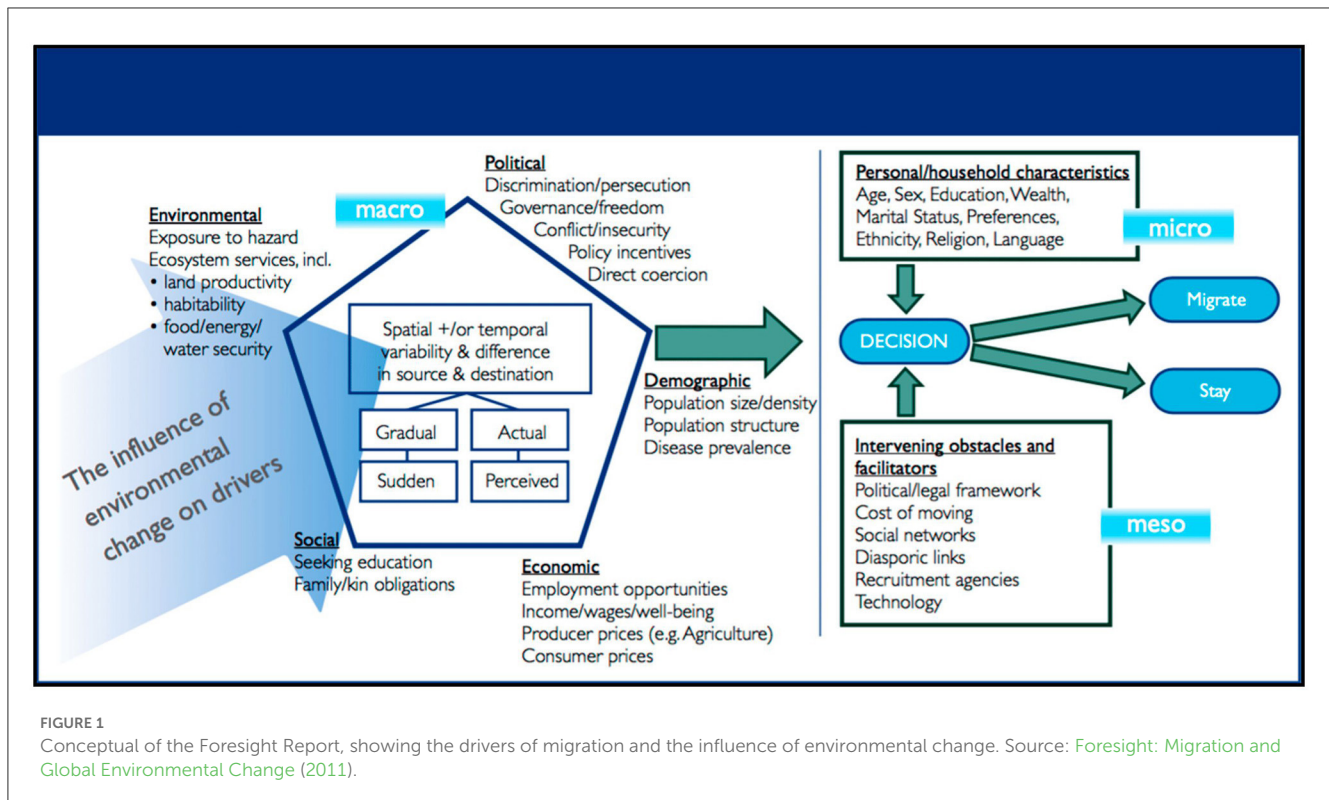
This first Research Topic of *Frontiers in Climate Mobility* sought to revisit the Foresight Report and its recommendations, and to identify key developments and new insights in this field of research, with a particular emphasis on policy-relevant findings and studies that examine policy approaches to addressing climate mobility. A strong example of a study doing exactly this is the article by [Dyer and Neef](#) in this Research Topic. They analyze how New Zealand’s policy response to climate-induced migration and displacement in Pacific islands has evolved over the last 15 years ([Dyer and Neef](#)).

Foresight MGEC: three lasting policy impacts

Twelve years after the publication of the Foresight Report, some achievements with lasting impact are discernible. Here, we highlight three, which continue to hold a direct influence on policy debates.

First, the report helped to attenuate the influence of environmental determinism in academic and policy debates and generated more sophisticated approaches that acknowledge the complexity of the relations between environmental change and migration. Foresight’s conceptual framework ([Figure 1](#)) played a central role in this achievement. The framework

1 The preferred term nowadays is “involuntary immobile” ([Van Praag, 2021](#); [Yee et al.](#)).



emphasizes that environmental change influences migration patterns largely indirectly by affecting existing drivers of migration. By acknowledging this complexity, the report helped combat so-called “maximalist” approaches and alarmist predictions of “climate refugee” crises (Morrissey, 2012; Bettini, 2013; Durand-Delacré et al., 2021).

Second, the report highlighted that millions of people will be unable to move away from locations in which they are extremely vulnerable to environmental change. This led to the birth of a new area of research on “trapped populations” or involuntary immobility (Ayebe-Karlsson et al., 2018; Nawrotzki and DeWaard, 2018; Zickgraf, 2018). In recent years, new research is also emerging on *voluntary* immobility, including resistance to planned relocation in the context of climate change (Adams, 2016; Farbotko et al., 2020; Blondin, 2021; Boas et al., 2022). In this Research Topic, Yee et al. examine voluntary immobility in Serua Island, Fiji, where indigenous people resist climate-driven planned relocation. Piggott-McKellar and Vella also look at planned relocation in Fiji and Australia. They also express concern about government-enforced planned relocation, and emphasize that people should have the right to refuse. However, with their analysis of a range of relocation schemes across the two counties, they also show that planned relocation can be “a successful adaptation option if planned well with strong participatory governance” (Piggott-McKellar and Vella).

Third, the Foresight Report helped frame migration in the context of global environmental change not just as a problem or risk, but also an opportunity. The notion of “migration as adaptation” (Black et al., 2011) has attracted attention from a range of climate mobility scholars (Afifi et al., 2016; Gemenne and Blocher, 2016; McLeman, 2016; Oakes et al., 2020; Vinke et al.,

2022). In this Research Topic, Abu et al. look at the relation between adaptation capacities and migration intentions in Ghana’s Volta Delta. They find that people with ecosystem-based livelihoods who are particularly exposed to climate impacts, are less inclined to migrate because they lack viable options to improve their lives in destination areas (Abu et al.).

The idea that migration can be an effective way to adapt to climate change has also landed well in select policy circles, such as UN’s organization for migration (IOM), and is to some extent reflected in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. However, the “migration as adaptation” framing has also been critiqued for putting the burden on vulnerable populations to adapt to changes to the climate that they have not caused (Bettini and Gioli, 2016). Also, in most policy circles, particularly at national level, migration continues to be seen primarily as an adverse effect of climate change and as a security risk (Boas et al., 2019). In this Research Topic, this is clearly shown by Mombauer et al. who analyzed how migration features in countries’ NAPs and NDCs. They conclude that countries primarily focus on migration as a problem or challenge, while only few incorporate positive aspects (Mombauer et al.).

Key developments since 2011

Since the publication of the Foresight Report in 2011, the literature on environmental change and migration has burgeoned (for a good overview, see Piguet, 2022), with a strong increase in studies looking at the role of climate variability and change. Here we highlight some key developments.

Climate mobilities: More and more scholars have started to prefer the term “climate mobility” over “climate migration”. Research on human mobility in the context of climate change recognizes the multiple ways in which people are mobile. Commonly, scholars distinguish these four types of mobility: migration, displacement, planned relocation and immobility. The “mobilities approach” emphasizes that human mobility should not be studied as something exceptional. Rather, it sees mobility as “normal” in a highly interconnected world, and therefore climate mobility research should focus on the role of climate hazards in altering *existing* mobility patterns (Boas et al., 2019, 2022).

Systematic reviews and meta analyses: Following the surge in publications of empirical studies on environmental change and migration (Piguet, 2022), a significant number of meta analyses and systematic reviews was conducted in the late 2010s (e.g., van der Land et al., 2018; Borderon et al., 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2020; Šedová et al., 2021). These help to reveal patterns beyond the unique and context-specific findings of localized case studies. These review papers find, for example, that climate and environmental change are primarily factors in driving migration from rural areas; in low- and middle-income countries; and in agricultural economies. These analyses also tend to find that environmentally-induced human mobility occurs mostly within country borders.

Sometimes, review papers can also take a narrower perspective and look at specific aspects of climate mobility. In this Research Topic, for example, Thornton et al. conduct a systematic review of policy documents from Latin America and the Pacific to examine approaches to address immobility in the context of climate change. They conclude that generally, there is very little policy guidance on this topic in human rights frameworks, disaster risk reduction and migration policy, and they recommend more proactive approaches (Thornton et al.).

Aspirations and Capabilities: A strong advance in theory about migration decision-making has been the “aspirations and capabilities framework” (Carling and Schewel, 2018; De Haas, 2021), which posits that people move (1) when they perceive it is in their interest to move (aspirations) and (2) when they are able to do so (capability). While not developed to study climate mobility specifically, more and more scholars have started to use this framework to better understand mobility as well as immobility in relation to environmental stress and climate change (Suckall et al., 2017; Van der Land, 2017; Zickgraf, 2021). Vice versa, the uptake of this framework by climate mobility scholars can enrich the model by enhancing understanding of forced migration and disaster displacement (de Sherbinin

et al., 2022). To achieve this, a stronger emphasis on people’s *needs* to move (alongside their aspirations and capabilities) is required.

Cross-cutting themes: As the field of environmental change and migration research matured, a range of studies emerged that examined how environmental change and human mobility relate to a number of cross-cutting themes, such as health (McMichael, 2020; Issa et al., 2023), conflict (Hermans and Ide, 2019; Thalheimer et al., 2023), habitability (Horton et al., 2021) and gender (Gioli and Milan, 2018; Ayebe-Karlsson, 2020; Evertsen and van der Geest, 2020).

This is a clear sign that since the publication of the Foresight Report in 2011, environmental and climate mobility has evolved from a niche topic to a mature field of research.

Author contributions

The original idea for this Research Topic came from KW. AS prepared the call for papers for the Research Topic, with inputs from all authors. KG created a first draft of this editorial introduction, building on the call for papers, and the articles published in this Research Topic. FG and AS commented on the first draft and provided additional text, after which KG integrated the comments and edits, and submitted the final version. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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