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Abstract

The UK's Government Office for Science has recently released an important report, produced by its internal think tank Foresight. Over seventy peer-reviewed studies have been commissioned and some 350 experts and 'stakeholders' have been involved in creating Migration and Global Environmental Change (Foresight, 2011). Its lead authors have recently published a summary of the main conclusions in the leading scientific journal Nature (Black et al, 2011), and the report has already received extensive media coverage. By virtue of its scope and authorship, the report can be considered a milestone in the scientific and practitioner fields related to environment and migration. It is targeted at a wide readership, both in academia and in policy-making circles.(1) An attached 'action plan' suggests that the report's findings and recommendations are already being disseminated widely within international organisations and governance networks worldwide.

Keywords

adaptation, foreclosure, environmental, foresight, neoliberalising, change

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Commentary

Neoliberalising adaptation to environmental change: foresight or foreclosure?

The UK's Government Office for Science has recently released an important report, produced by its internal think tank Foresight. Over seventy peer-reviewed studies have been commissioned and some 350 experts and 'stakeholders' have been involved in creating *Migration and Global Environmental Change* (Foresight, 2011). Its lead authors have recently published a summary of the main conclusions in the leading scientific journal *Nature* (Black et al, 2011), and the report has already received extensive media coverage. By virtue of its scope and authorship, the report can be considered a milestone in the scientific and practitioner fields related to environment and migration. It is targeted at a wide readership, both in academia and in policy-making circles.⁽¹⁾ An attached 'action plan' suggests that the report's findings and recommendations are already being disseminated widely within international organisations and governance networks worldwide.

We take the opportunity of its publication to consider critically the messages the report communicates. Of course, one cannot predict how its findings and recommendations will 'travel' and be 'translated' in different policy-making contexts: policy transfer and mobility studies have taught us to be careful in considering the relations between 'global' recommendations and their differentiated uptake at the national or subnational levels. However, in our view, the report's language, logic, and take-home lessons are consistent with—indeed symptomatic of—the wider diffusion of neoliberal views in contemporary environmental governance circles. This is despite the fact that some scholars and commentators have talked of a possible 'post-neoliberal' moment coincident with the global financial crisis and its aftermath. However cautiously optimistic such talk may be, we would point to neoliberalism's zombie-like survival in spite of ongoing economic and social turmoil (Fine, 2009; Peck, 2010). Neoliberal thinking has penetrated so deeply into all aspects of social life [especially here in Britain (cf Hall 2011)]—and into much social science discourse too (often surreptitiously)—that it would be surprising *not* to find neoliberal ideas animating a policy document sponsored by any UK government department.

Our commentary is not a complete assessment of the report but, rather, an attempt to highlight its philosophical basis, especially the precepts of the concept 'migration as adaptation'. This concept features most prominently in the report's eighth chapter (pages 173–187), but is evident elsewhere. It can plausibly be interpreted as an extension of the neoliberal mind-set prevalent in other areas of environmental policy. It might, in the long run, help precipitate yet another 'neoliberal environmental fix' (Castree, 2008, pages 146–149), in this case one focused on producing 'adaptable' human subjects: that is, people able to respond tactically to anthropogenic alterations of the biophysical world while becoming ever more the subjects of capitalist market relations.⁽²⁾ The Foresight report is the most recent articulation of ideas and proposals about environment and migration that have been floated in international policy-making circles in

⁽¹⁾ It cites "local authorities (including district and city governments), national governments around the world, and various international and inter-governmental organisations" (page 26).

⁽²⁾ The notion of the framing of the 'environmental refugee' as an 'adaptable subject' features prominently in McNamara's pioneering work (2006). However, her research was conducted before the 'migration as adaptation' paradigm was developed.

recent years. However, their roots are older, tracing complicated and contradictory lineages to discussions about ‘development’, environmental management, migration, and neoliberalism.

After an assessment of the relations between environment and migration and the methodological way in which to treat this relation, the report proceeds to a policy-oriented part which deals essentially with three questions: “Reducing the influence of global environmental change on migration” (pages 133–147), “Planning for and responding to migration influenced by global environmental change” (pages 149–171), and the above-mentioned notion of migration as adaptation. In this last part the report encourages policy makers to promote migrations (both internal and international) that can benefit both potential and actual migrants by allowing them to ‘escape’ areas that are suffering adverse environmental change (with a special focus on ‘trapped’ populations), to bring developmental benefits for their territory or community of origin (notably through remittances), and to have a positive impact on the countries of destination [by introducing a younger and more entrepreneurial workforce than the domestic one (see page 175)]. Furthermore, migration is held to build “long-term resilience to environmental change” for individuals, households and communities (pages 130 and 144–142). Some negative impacts are also highlighted but, overall, the promotion of migration as a “transformational and strategic approach to adaptation” (page 200) is evident. Furthermore, it is argued that “[n]ot moving is likely to increase humanitarian suffering, vulnerability and reduce livelihood security, and ultimately *increase* the likelihood of people being displaced or migrating in vulnerable circumstances” (page 173, italics in original).

The concept of ‘vulnerability’ is foundational to the report’s theoretical model (page 29). Here, it entails the belief that the individual (and his or her ‘community’ and/or ‘territory’) must somehow deal with environmental change. The latter is seen to *happen* or *exist*, while no real analysis of its origins is offered. This shifts the analytical attention away from the socioenvironmental context and refocuses it onto the individual’s qualities and his or her ‘capacity to adapt’. Therefore, although the existence of ‘poorer’ people (defined as those lacking in “social, political, and economic capital”),⁽³⁾ and who actually happen to be the ‘most vulnerable’ and the ‘less mobile’, is readily acknowledged, this is done in a context in which all social actors are presented as having basically the same interests, rationality, and aspirations—differing only in the level of ‘assets’ they command (and thus in their ‘adaptive capacity’). There appear to be few social divisions and no social classes, nor contradictory or conflicting social interests [except for an understanding of violent conflicts linked to resource scarcity, environmental degradation and the disruption of social cohesion (pages 73; 113–116; 161–167); for a critique see Hartmann (2010)]. Broader processes of capital accumulation, dispossession, exploitation, oppression, commoditisation, privatisation, liberalisation, market-led agrarian reform, debt crisis, or structural adjustment programmes—in short, all those elements that have been associated with the multiple crises in the Global South during a period of ‘neoliberal globalisation’—are conspicuous by their absence.

Consequently, responses to environmental degradation are not found in political–economic transformations, but are located at the individual/community level and essentially amount to increasing the ‘resilience’ of the affected populations to ‘external’ shocks (in other words, increasing their ‘capacity to adapt’), notably by promoting migrations. This is consistent with Chandler’s (2010) analysis of ‘adaptation’ to climate change, whereby it comes to mean the transformation of the individual in order for her or him to ‘respond’ to a changing environment. It contrasts with an extant understanding in which adaptation meant collective transformation of the environment,

⁽³⁾ On the necessary critique of ‘social capital’ as a pervasive concept in the social sciences and notably in the developmental literature, see Fine (2010).

as well as new economic development paradigms, to reduce or deflect the consequences of environmental change.

Thus, the most interesting element of the report, with regard to transformations in environmental governance, is its almost complete lack of interest in politics and (Southern) states, which are replaced by a notion of governance. The national state does not disappear, however, and its implicit role as the ultimate guarantor of social reproduction is acknowledged. Chapter 7 in particular devotes much attention to the necessity of planning for adaptation to environmental risks, larger populations, urban infrastructures, water quality, social cohesion, to preventing social tensions and conflicts, etc. It locates this steering capacity within the state or local governments. But, the concept of the state which can be identified throughout implies 'roll-out' neoliberalism, in which the state seeks to produce more 'autonomous' civil societies which will rely more on individual actions and market mechanisms than on coordinated institutions in the (re)production of their social lives, notably in relation to the biophysical world.

The report's policy recommendations focus on creating conditions in which people should be able to "protect themselves" from environmental risks, to "extricate themselves" or to "remove themselves" from a bad situation, and to "build themselves a better life" (pages 29, 120, 165, 173, 181, 182, 195). Migration is key among this set of ideas and the report advocates the recognition that "for many people it is an important way of bringing themselves out of poverty and out of vulnerability to global environmental change" (page 182). By 'migration' what is actually meant here, it seems to us, is peoples' incorporation into waged labour abroad or in other parts of their home country. Obviously, 'migration' as such does not yield any income. It is only because it leads the individual into value-producing relations of production that it creates a new form of revenue. Not to put too fine a point on it, the promotion of migration as adaptation strategy is consistent with the neoliberal practice of constituting a new global reserve army of labour (Taylor, 2009). Indeed, the promotion of migration as adaptation is not only justified with regard to the fate of 'trapped' or poor populations, but is also presented as having important benefits for the receiving states. The report is not advocating a policy of open borders but, instead, one in which migrations are encouraged as well as monitored and managed. This is especially the case with the seemingly uncritical promotion of "temporary and circular migration schemes". Their utility is justified with reference to the fact that international migrants may alleviate "skill shortages" and reduce "demographic deficits" in industrialised countries (pages 183–185), without acknowledging the often hugely detrimental effects of these schemes on migrant's and labour's rights and for migrants themselves (Ness, 2011; Wickramasekara 2010). Although the report recognises that this 'developmental' strategy actually produces further insecurities to impoverished populations by making them tributary to fluctuations in the world market, it nevertheless endorses them precisely because of their effects in producing adaptable individuals (page 184). Furthermore, the report leaves unexamined the gendered inequalities (migrant-sending men and nonmigrant-receiver women) reinforced by the neoliberal promotion of remittances as a developmental tool (for a critique see Kunz, 2011).

The neoliberal social philosophy underpinning the Foresight report is revealed most graphically in its definition of scenarios for the next fifty years and its subsequent assessment of the so-called 'robustness' of various policies in these alternative futures. Measures that promote individual actions (or are based on individual and community 'behaviour'), rather than collective responses, are found to be more 'robust' than those which rely on collective or state interventions (eg, pages 144–146; 167–169; 185–187). A key message of the report is the following:

“policies that offer scope for migration as adaptation are still highly or moderately successful across all scenarios. This is because, if done correctly, they have the effect of improving individual’s human capital and empowering them to lead resilient lives. If ‘roots’ are put down and social networks established through short-term or circular migration, this further increases resilience, potentially spreading to include the wider community. Individuals will be less reliant on external parties, such as the state, to coordinate itself and deliver complex policies, meaning that these policies are more resilient to the low-governance scenarios” (page 187).

The report, however, does not discuss under which conditions poor people could actually *use* their representative state bodies in order to implement suitable adaptive measures—for instance, developmental policies, welfare provision, redistributive social protection, and infrastructural investments. The state is presented as ‘external’ to the population and there is no meaningful discussion of democratic participation, of the democratisation of the state apparatus, nor of collective political actions realised through (or even against) the state. The engineering of ‘resilient lives’—notably through the management of migration, of which the Foresight report is an example—could well be the direction for the ‘neoliberal fix’ in the governance of adaptation to climate change and environmental degradation in the coming years. Ultimately, the question of whether our efforts should be directed toward adapting as individual migrants to increasingly unadapted socioecological conditions, or whether we support the possibility of changing these very conditions. Adapting to ‘global environmental change’ or changing the very nature of the global environmental order? Now *that* is a political question.

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