Simonelli: Governing Climate Induced Migration and Displacement

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Governing Climate Induced Migration and Displacement: IGO Expansion and Global Policy Implications, by Andrea C. Simonelli, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, ISBN 978-1-137-53866-6, p. VII, 192.

In *Historia Anglorum* (c1129), Henry of Huntingdon records King Canute's request that his throne be carried down to the shore. The Viking despot ordered the waves "not to flow over my land, nor presume to wet the feet and the robe of your load." The tide came in regardless. Canute concluded that the power of kings is empty and worthless, and the sea obeys eternal laws. That is the sense one gets from reading Andrea C. Simonelli's *Governing Climate Induced Migration and Displacement: IGO Expansion and Global Policy Implications*, which is a worthwhile contribution on this important topic.

The plot is familiar: Sea levels are rising due to climate change, and this will necessarily cause dislocation for some islanders who are gradually being flooded out of their territories. What is to be done? Apparently people have to relocate. The reader gets the impression that they stand at the ready, bags packed, and nowhere to go.

In chapter 2, Simonelli maps the landscape: Where issues of climate change induced by migration are looming. In this chapter, the author concentrates on Small Island Development States (SIDS)—all with tiny populations—whose plight she subsequently appears to equate to populations of large deltas, including Bangladesh, where the rise in sea level is projected to displace tens or even hundred of millions of people worldwide. The underlying premise seems to be that the latter populations can flee inland, whereas the population of SIDS have nowhere to go. Whether one buys into the rest of the book hinges on the problem of infinite regress: Is that assumption tenable. In theory, Simonelli's is a testable nil hypothesis; in practice, the situation is historically unprecedented. Therefore, the book is predicated on a speculation that is not (yet) empirically falsifiable.

Chapter 3 astutely counters alarmist hyperbole around lands that are somehow about to disappear out of concern that this may become a self-fulfilling prophesy that ignores "local means of adaptation and social resilience" (p. 30). That seems a puzzling implication for Simonelli to arrive at, because her own view of "lost agency and human security" (p. 30) is highly contingent on a migration paradigm. As I explain below, that understanding of adaptation and resilience to rising sea levels has its limits.

Chapter 4 operationalizes the concept of migration by differentiating voluntary from forced migration, as well as refugees, environmental, and survival migration. The chapter's point is that the populations of SIDS that are affected by rising sea levels due to climate change do not fit any of these categories neatly and are at risk of falling through the cracks.

Chapter 5 reviews the literature on IGOs and the conditions and theories (the firm and neofunctionalism) under which IGOs expand, presumably to take on new tasks, such as the aforementioned people that are falling through the cracks. Chapter 6 surveys three "old governance," largely hierarchical, state-driven organizations—the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the UN

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)—to show that they are unlikely to "expand" to take on the plight of the SIDS populations that may end up being flooded out. Chapter 7, by contrast, explains why the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is best positioned to up the cause: It is a "new governance" organization whose expansionist dynamics and logic differ due to the more prominent role of non-state actors. As a result, Simonelli contends that it has an inherent institutional and normative expansionist potential to "bridge the gap" in the Loss and Damage Mechanism, eventually codified in the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM), by spawning an international regime that could accommodate SIDS populations threatened by the rise of sea levels.

Philosophically, Simonelli's argumentative strategy is brilliant, because it is, thus far, impossible to test her case. As a hypothetical plausibility probe, however, the argument's foundation is shaky. The remit of adaptation and resilience is broader than Simonelli lets on. Climate change may be destiny but not necessarily its effects. Consider the following cases.

A quarter of the Netherlands lies below sea level—and has for centuries. The Royal Palace in Amsterdam stands as a tribute to architects and engineers who have long prevailed against climate-change predestinationists. In the mid-seventeenth century, long before the technological marvels of today, builders had the ingenious idea of spreading the load. They drove 13,657 timber piles deep into the swamp-like soil to ensure the building would not sink.

Levees and pumps keep much of the country dry. Delta Works, the country's $6 billion program of dykes, levees, and seawalls built over four decades includes the eight-kilometer-long Eastern Scheldt storm surge barrier off the coast of Zeeland. Indonesia's capital Jakarta is experimenting with a "sea wall city" to be built over three decades and is estimated to cost $40 billion. It will be a forty-kilometer-long, twenty-five-meter-high barrier connecting a string of seventeen artificial islands to support houses, malls, and office space.

Rotterdam is among the lowest-lying cities in the world and free-floating homes are common. It also has some of the most robust flood-resistance measures, including the Floating Pavilion—three geodesic domes bobbing in the harbor. They symbolize a paradigm shift: Embrace the water rather than contest. "Floating foundations" technology, made of foam and concrete that moves up and down on piles, can support big structures.

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, Barack Obama's Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force tendered for competition a three-kilometer "living" breakwater off Staten Island. The structure is designed to protect against wave damage and flooding. It will also provide habitat for species, such as lobsters and oysters, that once thrived in the bay. The breakwater is designed to be adaptive. How much the sea around New York will rise is uncertain; so, rocks can be added to the breakwater to raise its height.

No longer is such innovation the exclusive purview of the first world. In Makoko, a labyrinthine settlement was built on piles of brackish water of the Lagos Lagoon. Architect Kunlé Adeyemi built a floating school there as part of the African Water Cities Project. Two hundred and fifty plastic barrels keep the three-story triangular timber structure afloat. In Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta, Adeyemi is currently building a radio station and cinema that resembles a giant steel seesaw. One end of the structure lifts off the ground while the other bobs on the water's surface like a jetty.

For the Maldives, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, none of these innovations solve the immediate threat of the contamination of groundwater by intruding seawater, an issue far more pressing, because it risks making their territories uninhabitable long before they are consumed by the ocean.

These examples show that water is not destiny. Politics, however, is. The Maldives has a history of sketchy politics. Tuvalu is deeply embroiled in the FIFA corruption scandal. Until 2011, Kiribati let the People's Republic of China run a surveillance base. Yet President Anote Tong wondered why his calls to the West went unheeded. If Germany can take in a million

refugees in a year, might there be more to the story of why the world has thus far been unable to bring itself to take in a few thousand people from endangered SIDS?

In social science methods lingo, one might say that Simonelli's fine book is somewhat diminished by unacknowledged selection effects and omitted variables. To be fair, local politics is not the focus of her study, but to ignore endogenous effects and path-dependency altogether because it crimps her liberal-institutionalist style does not help her case. The air force likes to say that everything looks the same from thirty-thousand feet; it turns out that when explaining institutionalist behavior, local nuances matter. All politics are local—even the politics of climate change. The book assumes that people are better off relocating, and that they would, except for a lack of international governance mechanisms to open that avenue. The book would have been stronger had it given a more balanced consideration to a broader universe of available evidence, such as innovative technology and architecture that might allow people to stay. If the author does not believe these to be realistic options, it would have helped to justify that position. As with King Canute, Simonelli's argument is vulnerable to criticisms of reductionism that needlessly distract from what, at its core, is an important and innovative contribution to the overall debate.