

Protecting People from Climate Change Harm

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Abstract. This paper outlines the key concepts and issues in approaching climate change through the lens of protection, focusing on the harm inflicted on coastal populations due to sea-level rise. I begin by explaining how and why climate change can be seen as a protection challenge through an examination of the impacts of sea-level rise in Guyana. I then summarize the main elements and developments of “protection” approaches in the study of humanitarianism and argue that they are rooted in changing ideas of suffering. I then consider, first, what are the key issues in defining what adequate protection from climate change harm means? Second, who should have the responsibility to provide such protection? Third, what factors can explain states’ failure to protect their citizens from climate change harm? In doing so, I propose that conceptualizing climate change through the lens of protection can offer a deeper understanding of the conditions under which vulnerability develops over time while asking pragmatic questions about who should be granted aid and how.

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Introduction

In its Fifth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimated that sea-levels might rise by one meter by the end of this century, as a result of anthropogenic climate change. In low-lying coastal zones, this is expected to compound other development challenges and environmental risks, with negative implications for human health, access to basic services, food security, and the pursuit of traditional livelihoods.

Because of the uneven distribution of risks, affecting primarily those living in poverty, a large body of interdisciplinary academic research has focused on the structural conditions that compound their vulnerability and how governments and international agencies can foster adaptation (e.g. Adger, 2000; Oliver-Smith, 2009; Pelling, 2003; Vaughn, 2012). While these studies acknowledge that these disruptions are rooted in an unequal provision of social protection, they have largely ignored the question of state responsibility and ability to protect their citizens from climate change harm. Furthermore, by focusing on physical suffering, these studies often fail to appreciate the biographical impact of climate change on affected people, and the conditions in which climate change adaptation policies are enacted or their rationale.

This paper seeks to conceptualize climate change through the lens of protection, with a specific focus on the harm inflicted against coastal populations. Protection, here, will be understood as the mechanisms designed to mitigate or respond to levels of suffering

that are deemed unacceptable in a given polity. In particular, the present approach conceptualizes suffering as deprivation, and posits that “climate change deprivation” should be seen as the product of both biological or physical factors, and broader gaps in accessing basic capabilities. From that perspective, a capabilities approach to protection asks how environmental change affects people’s freedom to live the way they choose, which is rooted in instrumental freedoms such as political freedom, access to social opportunities, economic facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security (Sen, 1999: 38-40). From a methodological perspective, the paper is based on an extensive review of the existing literature, both theoretical and empirical, and complemented by field observations. Because it intends to offer an overview of this theoretical approach to a non-specialist public, its scope will be restricted to offering an up-to-date understanding of some core issues in current climate change and development research.

I will begin by explaining why climate change harms can be seen as rooted in broader gaps in (social) protection, which will be illustrated by a short account of the impact of sea-level rise in Guyana. I will then outline the specificities of this approach, before considering three questions: first, what are the key issues in defining what adequate protection from climate change harm means? Second, who should have the responsibility to provide such protection? Third, what factors can explain states' failure to protect their citizens from climate change harm?

In doing so, I propose that conceptualizing climate change through the lens of protection can offer a deeper understanding of the conditions under which vulnerability develops over time, while asking pragmatic questions about who should be granted aid and how.

1. Defining ‘protection’

Conway, de Haan and Norton defined social protection as “public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk and deprivation, which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity or society” (in Barrientos and Hulme, 2008: 3). In that perspective, social protection is rooted in both moral and legal arguments: to design protection policies is, fundamentally, to render a judgment on the levels of deprivation or suffering that are considered acceptable. In other terms, social protection mechanisms are rooted in a set of morals.

These morals of suffering are often, though not always, stated in legal terms (natural law, constitutional and international law, human rights) (Barrientos and Hulme, 2008), which is why “protection” is generally understood as legal protection, and is associated with entitlements provided under law, and that individuals can claim through specific mechanisms. Therefore, “an inquiry into whether a population has ‘protection’ is an examination of the fashion in which the pertinent authorities comply with the entitlements of individuals under [...] law, and the manner in which these legal precepts are implemented and respected” (Helton, 2003). Providing “protection” can,

therefore, mean two different but interrelated things: providing insurance (protecting citizens against contingencies) and assistance (providing support to those in poverty) (Barrientos and Hulme, 2008), or establishing legal mechanisms to provide redress and maintain physical security (Helton, 2003).

According to Fassin (2012), both these legal and non-legal instruments have been developed in response to changing ideas about suffering in the early 1990s. While governmental action was previously motivated by a focus on public order and justice, the author argues, the end of the 20th century marked the rise of compassion as a valid precept of intervention. In particular, social problems started to be articulated in the vocabulary of mental health; policy was motivated by a universalist desire of protecting and assisting others on the basis of belonging to a single human community (see e.g. Rosanvallon and Harshav, 2000). In practice, these changing conceptions of suffering and the new emphasis on protection have given rise to what Fassin (2012: 1) calls the “humanitarian government”, which is defined as “the deployment of moral sentiments (the emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others) in contemporary politics”. In particular, Fassin highlights that the study of any humanitarian government should entail exploring two overlapping fields of inquiry. First, humanitarianism encompasses the idea of humankind (sharing one human condition) and humanness (being drawn to other humans), from which follow the obligation of assistance. Second, it entails the study of government as a “set of procedures established and actions conducted in order to manage, regulate and support the existence of human beings” (Fassin, 2012: 1).

In development studies, Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach has gained prominence in analyzing gaps in social protection and rectifying suffering. Suffering, in Sen’s perspective, is understood as (relative) deprivation, which entails that “being poor has clearly much to do with being deprived, and it is natural that, for a social animal, the concept of deprivation will be a relative one” (Sen, 1999: 15). Poverty, from that perspective, is seen as a deprivation of basic capabilities, that is “the substantive freedoms [one] enjoys to lead[ing] the kind of life he or she has reason to value [...], rather than merely a lowness of income, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty” (Sen, 1999: 87). In his earlier works on famines and starvation, Sen has developed an “entitlement approach” that concentrates on the ability of people to command food through the legal means available in the society (1981: 45), which he later labelled as “capabilities”. From that perspective, a multidimensional approach to poverty considers both legal and non-legal entitlements.

In particular, deprivation is conceptualized as relative, which means that one can only be poor in relation to certain standards defined by society (hence, some deprivations can be considered absolute), and to other human beings. Social justice is at the core of this approach because it follows that inequality is a cause of suffering. One could argue, however, that deprivation (and suffering) is also relative in time. Suffering occurs in

relation to events of the past (nostalgia), and to a sense of longing (for the future). For that reason, suffering is not only situated in relation to space (changes in the environment), but also as a reaction to interruptions in “normal times”: humans suffer in relation to something, and things are connected in ways that go beyond the physicality of things. This is very apparent in literature (e.g. Philip Pullman, *The Secret Commonwealth*) and has been explored in anthropology (e.g. Appadurai, 1989;; McLean, 2009; Hastrup, 2009, 2014). Suffering is related to imagination and immaterial connections. The loss of the farmer faced by a great flood, for instance, goes beyond a loss of income. It is also the loss of meaning associated with the practice of his activity as a farmer, which might be vocational, or gifted to him by his father, or the activity that allows his children to go to school, or the practice that connects him to his ancestors, and the very way that time subjectively unfolds. Humans live this world in a way that reflects their understanding of their position in history. For that reason, any conceptualization of suffering should entail a historical (or biographical) dimension.

Overall, “protection” has been conceptualized in different but complementary ways; on one hand, Fassin outlines the role of morals in allocating aid and designing humanitarian or social assistance programmes, and the procedures or rules under which they are enacted. Barrientos and Hulme, on the other hand, focus on these rules and mechanisms through which individuals gain access to entitlements, an issue that has been further investigated by Sen in his capabilities approach. In the perspective of this paper, analyzing climate change through the lens of protection thus entails considering the ways in which climate change impacts can be attributed to gaps in social protection mechanisms. In particular, the present approach focuses on mechanisms that ensure access to basic entitlements (or capabilities). Fundamentally, it dedicates special attention to conceptualizations of suffering, which is seen as both a historical (or biographical) and biological process. The next sections will aim at illustrating the need for such an approach (section 2) and exploring how the ideas developed in this section can be conceptualized in the study of climate change (section 3).

2. Sea-level rise as a protection challenge: the case of Guyana

According to the IPCC (2014), sea-levels could rise by one meter globally by the end of this century, as a result of thermal expansion, glacial melt and changes in terrestrial water storage (Oliver-Smith, 2009). In Guyana, projections indicate a predicted rise in sea levels of one (1) meter by the end of this century (IPCC, 2014), with a related increase in storm surges of about five (5) meters, expected to affect more than 22,000 hectares of coastal zone through further inundation and erosion (GoG, 2018). The threat is considered imminent given the country’s low-lying coastline, at two (2) meters below sea levels in some areas, and is home to 90% of its population and their main livelihoods, economic activities and infrastructure. Moreover, existing sea defence structures are not considered adequate to tackle these risks (GoG, 2018), as the coastal

landscape also faces other pressures - e.g. erosion, coastline transgression, beach and shell removal for economic profit, inadequate maintenance of drainage infrastructure, and unimpeded land use development alongside the sea defence structures (GoG, 2018). In addition, sea-level rise is suspected of causing flooding further inland, as “the combined effects of low wave energy and the inland tidal effects” reduce the capacity and rate of flow of the drainage systems, especially in periods of heavy rainfall (GoG, 2018).

Indigenous people have occupied the northwest of Guyana for around 7,000 years. In particular, archeological evidence indicates the arrival of the Arawak (Lokono), Carib and Warao people around 3,000 years ago (Atkinson, Wilson, Silva et al., 2016). According to a study conducted by Williams and Kalamandeen (2013), recurring flooding has disrupted local indigenous livelihoods over the past few years, and in particular in Region 1 and 9, which are deemed the country’s poorest regions. According to the GBPI (2017), rural coastal areas host 60% of the country’s population, among which 4 in 10 people live in poverty. In addition, a report by Atkinson, Wilson, Silva et al. (2016) reveals that indigenous communities’ adaptive capability is further limited when they do not own title to their lands, restricting their autonomy in sustaining their livelihoods.

This section aims to illustrate how and why climate change can be seen as a protection challenge, as conceptualized above. It is based on a field visit conducted in Guyana over the summer of 2019, which aimed to investigate how sea-level rise or coastal environmental change is experienced in indigenous communities living along the coast, and in particular in Region 1 (Barima-Waini). Informal interviews with governmental officials, international agencies and local leaders were conducted in order to explore what was their perception of these changes, and what the current policy landscape around sea-level rise looked like. Three communities were selected (Warapoka, Moruca, Almond Beach). The location of these communities was determined under the recommendation of local partners, who have worked in the field of marine conservation for many years in the region. The three communities exhibit different characteristics in terms of location (Warapoka and Moruca are not located directly on the coast but along rivers, while Almond Beach is directly adjacent to the sea; Warapoka and Moruca are titled communities while the Almond Beach community does not hold title to their land). Furthermore, all three communities are said to have experienced direct and indirect effects of sea-level rise and coastal erosion, and are located in or adjacent to the Shell Beach Protected Area (SBPA).

In terms of methods, this field visit was most of all informal and had the initial aim of determining the suitability of the field sites. The following observations should thus be seen as reflections informed by the visit and informal interviews conducted with village councils, a number of governmental and non-governmental agencies, including

Conservation International (CI), the UNICEF country office, the European Commission and the Guyana Marine Conservation Society (GMCS).

2.1 Preliminary observations

All communities could be affected by sea-level rise in a similar fashion. The two main impacts of sea-level rise in these villages would be population displacement due to flooding and coastal erosion, and food and water security issues or a loss of traditional livelihoods, through a loss or alterations in marine biodiversity. The specific threat posed by these factors differs from a community to another. Warapoka, for instance, is less vulnerable to flooding due to its location further inland. Sea-level rise, however, could still have important implications for the community because sea-level rise provokes erosion, which affects the sedimentation process. Therefore, as the community is connected to the ocean through a network of rivers, it would affect the composition of the water, and thus could hypothetically affect both fauna and flora further inland. As the community is remote with limited access to markets, its inhabitants still rely on farming and fishing as subsistence activities, which could be disrupted by a change in local biodiversity.

A similar argument could be made about Moruca, though with different implications. Moruca is the main town of the region, and that is where its inhabitants go to access all basic services (hospital, secondary school, supermarket, police station). Many Morucans are small business owners, whether they are boat services, guesthouses or catering services. All these businesses would be affected by a change in the environment of some sort. Boat services would be affected by a rise in sea levels by affecting river levels, and thus possibly river routes. Catering services often rely on local farmers, and both would be affected by sea-level rise in the same fashion as in Warapoka, through alterations in hydrology and potential loss of habitat for local species.

Of the three communities under study, Almond Beach has possibly experienced the most direct effects of sea-level rise and climate change. The community has already been displaced by a storm surge in 2017 and had to move all its installations about a few hundred yards away. Its inhabitants depend on fishing and coconut harvesting, both of which could be affected by sea-level rise. Sometimes these activities are not directly aimed at subsistence; instead, fishermen and farmers sell their catch or products at the local market in Mabaruma. Their business could thus be affected in the same fashion.

2.2. Interpretation

As shown in the previous section, the communities under study are mainly composed of indigenous peoples, some of which sustain their livelihoods through traditional practices and subsistence activities. For that reason, all these potential effects of sea-live

rise are tainted by an extra dimension: the potential loss of traditional livelihoods and meaning. These losses should be apprehended in the light of a broader history of indigenous exclusion in Guyana and the historical loss of their lands (see e.g. Colchester, 1997). They could be said to be compounded by the establishment of the protected area, which limits their access to hunting grounds and other natural resources previously used for survival or religious purposes (see e.g. Atkinson, Wilson, Silva et al., 2016).

Though the local leaders and villagers have expressed concern for the impacts of climate change, they usually associate them with unsustainable patterns of resource use that are not directly related to the state of the global climate (e.g. deforestation, over-harvesting of forest resources, logging, mining – see Whitaker, 2019). After spending time with the communities and observing their daily activities, I developed a very different perception of these impacts than what is usually reported in the news. The slow-onset nature of the threat makes it barely visible. Though it exists and should be taken into account in preparedness policies and planning, it seemed to me that most of the problems associated with climate change were, in fact, pre-existing the potential threats mentioned above. This is consistent with the discussions I had with the community and their emphasis on resource use or issues related to infrastructure. Indeed, these communities have less access to basic services such as healthcare or formal education, or to markets, in comparison to the rest of the Guyanese society. In the communities under study, I would argue that these are the determining factors of projected “vulnerability”. Indeed, one could argue that the environment has never been static and has changed continuously throughout history. The suffering that is expected “as a result of climate change”, seems instead to reflect broader issues in protecting these livelihoods in general, whether they are threatened by sea-level rise, climate change or something else. Before international attention turned to climate change, these communities perhaps were not even on the radar at all, while they were still suffering from similar problems.

3. Key issues

This section sets out to highlight key issues in approaching climate change through existing literature on the protection of civilians. I will first highlight a few issues in defining what “adequate” protection means, and in particular in defining harm and identifying the victims. Second, I ask who should be responsible for providing such protection and whether states and the international community have a responsibility to protect people from “climate change harm”. Finally, I will apply the theoretical approach developed in section 1 to the specific case of climate change, in order to offer an understanding of why states and international agencies might fail to provide protection in the context of climate change.

3.1. What does “protection” mean in the context of climate change?

The first challenge in developing a “protection approach” to climate change would be to define the nature of the harm, and describe whether this harm is specific to climate change, i.e. is “climate change harm” a distinct category. According to Humphreys (2010: 1), “[c]limate change will undermine the realization of a broad range of internationally protected human rights. Populations whose rights are poorly protected are likely to be less-equipped to understand or prepare for the effects of climate change”. The author highlights some issues in attributing and defining harm caused or compounded by climate change. From a rights-based perspective, the first issue lies in the difficulty to enforce the rights at stake (social and economic rights, the rights of migrants, rights protection during conflicts) due to the notion of indirect harm. Climate change impacts are often mediated by a variety of agents, which makes it difficult to establish causation (Quirico, 2018). This is problematic because if the source of the harm cannot be identified, it means that what one would label as “climate change harm” could well have nothing to do with climate change. This is why Betts (2013: 196), in his examination of the phenomenon of “survival migration”, argues that one “should not make the mistake of focusing on particular causes of displacement such as climate change or environmental migration because it would risk replicating the arbitrariness and exclusions of the status quo”. In other words, the author argues that it would be more desirable to focus on specific types of harm (for instance, forced migration or starvation), rather than attributing aid based on the causes of this harm. This is consistent with the overwhelming evidence pointing towards the need to look at the root causes of climate change vulnerability, rather than focusing solely on how environmental change impacts specific populations (e.g. Pelling, 2001, 2003; Adger et al., 2011; Wisner, 2001, 2012). Furthermore, and precisely because such a task requires a longer-term outlook, this statement would apply not only to aid attribution, but more generally, to the allocation of international and governmental funds for development or social assistance projects.

Following that logic, it may be useful to explore how specific kinds of harm (or what we could qualify as ‘social problems’) are compounded (if not created) by changes in the environment. A capabilities approach to protection, for instance, would ask how environmental change affects people’s freedom to live the way they choose; this freedom, according to Sen, is based on the achievement of instrumental freedoms such as political freedom, access to social opportunities, economic facilities, transparency guarantees and protective security (Sen, 1999: 38-40). From that perspective, identifying and defining climate change harm means assessing how environmental change affects this set of freedoms.

The second challenge in approaching climate change through the lens of protection lies in defining who are the subjects of this harm. One key issue here would be to assess whether the “victims” who would receive aid for climate change impacts are individuals or collectives. Indeed, and as suggested by Buxton (2019), there are two

options in identifying the “victims”: the individuals affected by climate change at a time, or the continuous group affected by injustice. It is important to note that, from a policy perspective, identifying the victim is inherently political; by choosing aid recipients, one makes a judgment on whose suffering deserves alleviation. Following Fassin (2012), defining “legitimate” victims thus entails a historical element. It further illustrates that time and our perceptions of it are a cross-cutting theme in analyzing climate change as protection challenge, because one can only distinguish victims of harm when (1) causation is established between a specific group or individual experiencing harm of climate change, and (2) when the circumstances in which the harm occurs are clear to the observer.

In other words, conceptualizing the victim as collective entails looking at patterns of historical injustice, for instance considering how racism, (neo)colonialism or inequality have prompted an unequal distribution of “adaptive capacity” or has created situations in which specific groups did not enjoy the same levels of protection as other groups. These historical patterns are transnational. Climate change, for instance, is considered to be anthropogenic, which means that it has been caused by human activity. It is, for example, widely acknowledged that Europe and North America are responsible for most of the greenhouse gases emissions that contribute to climate change (Buxton, 2019; Caney, 2009), which has allowed it to create wealth at a much greater pace. This is without considering colonial history and the responsibility of colonizers in degrading local environments in their colonies, which now compounds the vulnerability of these former colonies to climate change. By contrast, conceptualizing the victim as an individual raises questions about how one can determine the “vulnerability” of singular units (e.g. households), which entails looking at issues of measurement and thresholds. In particular, it means asking questions about vulnerability assessments, their methods, the indicators they use; in other words, it raises both ethical and epistemological questions.

3.2. Do States have a responsibility to protect their citizens against climate change impacts?

Once we establish what adequate “climate change protection” means, the next logical question to ask would be to determine who should be responsible for providing such protection. One way in which protection is related to questions of justice is through the idea that the existence of harm and victims derive from the existence of a perpetrator. Though it could be argued that natural hazards such as earthquakes or floods may induce harm without the existence of a perpetrator, such view is not consistent with the existing literature on the structural causes of vulnerability which emphasize the co-creation of risk (see e.g. Pelling, 2003). For that reason, this section intends to both review classic conceptualizations of the responsibility to protect, and criticize their content in order to unveil how this question could be explored in the context of climate change, and potential issues in doing so.

3.2.1. *State responsibility*

States have a primary duty to protect their citizens from harm. Since climate change is widely acknowledged to be a threat to human security, it logically follows that states should do everything in their power to protect their citizens from its impacts. Moreover, climate change is also considered to be anthropogenic, which means it has been caused by human activity including, presumably, that of the state itself. It logically follows that states have the responsibility to fulfil that duty to protect, both based on morals (states should protect citizens from harm) and justice (they should be held accountable since they can be considered as perpetrators of this harm).

There are, however, a number of problems with enforcing state responsibility for climate change harm, which are both objective and subjective (Humphreys, 2010; Quirico, 2018). First, and as mentioned in the previous section relative to the definition of harm, “the plurality of agents contributing to GHG emissions and intervening factors aggravating environmental phenomena” makes it difficult to establish clear causation between local changes in the environment and the action of specific actors. In other words, it is extremely difficult to assess whether these changes are caused by human activity or by other phenomena (Quirico, 2018: 186). Second, and because of this same plurality of agents, it is difficult to single out specific actors and hold them accountable. In particular, Humphreys (2010) argues that there is a problem of extraterritorial responsibility (local changes in the environment can be caused by activity pursued elsewhere) and local accountability (how can we determine the impact of local actions on the state of the global climate, and link them to observed changes in the environment?). For that reason, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has stated that “the physical impacts of global warming cannot easily be classified as human rights violations, not least because climate change-related harm often cannot clearly be attributed to acts or omissions of specific States” (OHCHR, 2009, paras. 16 et seq.). Therefore, it is complicated to hold states accountable for situations they have not created.

These issues illustrate fundamental hurdles in using existing literature on protection to conceptualize the responsibility to protect. An important issue with these conceptualizations lies in the multidimensionality of policy spaces. One implication of this multidimensionality is that not only is it extremely difficult to locate responsibility for climate change because it is diffuse, but because of the polycentric nature of environmental governance, it would not make much sense to require from states to fulfill such a responsibility. According to advocates of polycentricity as a model of environmental governance, it would not be desirable either (Oström, 1990, 2007). From that perspective, one major issue in conceptualizing climate change responsibility at state level involves defining the extent of such responsibility. This would, in practice, require a more comprehensive conceptualization of the state itself, exploring its duties

and to whom these duties are due. This enterprise is highly contextual, because states have different structures, histories and political ethos. It is important to note, indeed, that the idea of the nation-state itself should be looked at with some scrutiny, as it is a central feature of modernity and coloniality (Escobar, 2004). Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002), for instance, has argued that ideals of democracy and the human rights system have historically served the European imperialist project, which is why modernity should not be dissociated from coloniality. Following Nkrumah (1964), contemporary nation-states should thus be seen as “creolized” entities; they draw “on multiple strands of different spatiotemporal origins in the context of asymmetric power structures” (Uimonen, 2020: 93).

Though these are serious obstacles to attributing and conceptualizing state responsibility to protect from climate change harm, this reasoning mostly revolves around legal considerations, which is to say that it relies on a responsibility to protect that stems from the existence of a perpetrator. One could argue, however, that redress from harm does not necessarily need to come from the perpetrator of harm. There are moral arguments behind this responsibility since the state is widely acknowledged to be an instrument at the service of people (Roff, 2013). Fassin (2012), for instance, highlighted that the existence of suffering has increasingly motivated policy choices, which is why he developed the idea of humanitarian government in the first place. In other terms, compassion has increasingly been seen as a valid precept guiding governmental action. For that reason, one could doubt the necessity to establish the existence of a perpetrator in order to enforce state responsibility. Moreover, these studies on state responsibility to protect people from climate change mostly focus on a responsibility that stems from historical co-production of greenhouse gases emissions and climate change. However, the theoretical lens outlined in this paper takes a quite different approach to this question, as it considers the interaction between environmental change and freedom. While states might not be held entirely responsible for climate change as a global phenomenon, they can certainly be held responsible for ensuring and protecting the freedoms at stake. An extensive literature has been developed to argue that “natural disasters should be seen as a failure to ensure the right to life, personal security and livelihood on the part of the sovereign state and other actors” (Mutter and Barnard, 2010: 274). The case of Hurricane Katrina, in particular, has received extensive scholarly attention, as it highlights that the disaster was rooted in patterns of inequality, including a history of racism in New Orleans, and the inability of the US healthcare system to provide appropriate standards of living to its entire population (e.g. Adeola and Picou, 2017; Cowen and Cowen, 2010; Shrum, 2014). Rodriguez and Aguirre (2017), for instance, have argued that “health resources and services were insufficient to cope with the needs of the current population” at the time of the disaster, “not to mention pre-Katrina’s”. For that reason, it could be argued that the state can be held responsible for “climate change harm”, as it can be said to have co-produced such harm.

3.2.2. *International responsibility*

One major counterargument to enforcing state responsibility lies in the transnational nature of climate change. Europe and North America have a historical responsibility both in creating climate change and in establishing patterns of inequality in developing countries, through the process of colonization (Caney, 2009). Moreover, because of the transnational nature of the threat, individual states might be unable to fulfill their duty to protect due to a lack of resources. In these circumstances, one might ask whether the international community should be held responsible for helping these countries to fulfill their duties.

This international responsibility has been conceptualized under the doctrine of the responsibility to protect (R2P), which purports that “[e]very state has a responsibility to protect its inhabitants from mass atrocities [...] and this responsibility may fall to the broader international community ‘should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity’” (UN, 2005 in Paris, 2014: 563). According to Roff (2013), the notion has been developed following a major turning point in the way state sovereignty is conceptualized, in the early 2000s. With the ICISS report and Kofi Annan’s declaration establishing the R2P principle, “[s]tate sovereignty, in its most basic sense, is being redefined” (Roff, 2013: 34), as states are now understood as instruments at the service of the people; sovereignty, in that perspective, is conditioned to the protection of human rights (Roff, 2013). At the same time, the same decade saw further developments in the humanitarian doctrine, which placed human security at the core of international intervention. What it means is that while states are traditionally conceived as self-interested, and thus little concerned about “saving strangers”, the humanitarian doctrine and its morals (see section 1) has prompted the emergence of new ideas of justice that is seen as universal. Universal justice, as conceptualized by Kant, entails three levels of juridical action: the individual, the state and the cosmopolitan (see Roff, 2013). This view is rooted in the belief that citizens are “right-bearing members of a larger community”, that is, humanity (Skillington, 2015: 291).

It is important to note that there are a number of issues with the philosophical underpinnings of the R2P principle, and claims of universality should be looked at with some scrutiny. Kant’s cosmopolitanism, in particular, has been heavily criticized for its Eurocentricity, legitimizing European expansion and warfare, and conveying racist ontologies (e.g. Mignolo, 2000; Kleingeld, 2009). From that perspective, any inquiry into the nature and extent of international responsibility should thus investigate claims of universality upon which such responsibility is based, and consider alternative political philosophies. Uimonen (2020: 93), for instance, argues that Nkrumah’s consciencism, which draws from European philosophy and ideology and African tradition, “offered a blueprint for decolonization that embraced modernity, while denouncing colonial and

neocolonial power structures". The need for such work is not particular to the study of international responsibility for climate change impacts, but applies to the R2P principle in general.

There is another problem with approaching climate change through the R2P principle as it is currently defined. The definition emphasizes that the state has a primary responsibility to protect their populations from the threats outlined, and should it fail, this responsibility would fall on the international community as a last resort. One could argue that this is incompatible with the problems outlined in section 3.2.1. relative to state responsibility – why should the international community act as a last resort when states cannot be seen as entirely responsible for creating climate change in the first place? In other terms, is there a justification for this ordering of action?

Here, it would be necessary to emphasize that the R2P principle has been developed as a guiding principle for foreign military intervention. When considering whether this principle could extend to climate change impacts, or inspire another set of related principles, one should thus ask what kind of action such principle would prompt the international community to take. Following the R2P logic, this responsibility would take the form of military intervention in response to natural disasters as a visible symptom of failure of states to protect their populations. One crucial difference between classical foreign intervention prompted by R2P, and the kind of intervention that would be required in response to climate change, is that the enemy would not be located in the human realm. Therefore, the intervention such principle would prompt would be humanitarian in nature rather than military. The R2P principle is, indeed, inherently intended as a response mechanism; as such, it suffers from the same shortcomings as short-term solutions to climate change. For that reason, it is incompatible with the present approach to protection, which is meant to understand long-term patterns and what kind of responsibility of the international community to produce them.

For that reason, one might ask whether the R2P principle would be a suitable instrument upon which a responsibility to protect from climate change impacts, in particular, would be enacted. I would argue that a reason why investigating the R2P principle in this context is beneficial is because more than an instrument, the R2P principle is also a moral precept, based on a claim of universality. This universality alone does justify the need for an international responsibility; in fact, the R2P principle does not rely on causation as justification for intervention. The reason why the international community has such responsibility does not lie in the fact that it has caused any of the afflictions outlined in its definition (though this view could be defended), but because it assumes that we form one same human community. Without passing judgment on either of these two models, the current emphasis on attribution and causation in determining international responsibility for climate change, from that perspective, is rather curious and would deserve some investigation.

Assuming that such international responsibility would not stem from universalist claims but from causation, four justice claims can be made about how the international community could fulfill it (Humphreys, 2010): corrective justice (international funding for the adaptation needs of vulnerable countries), substantive justice (technology transfer), procedural and distributional justice (fidelity to the process of negotiation on matters relative to the environment) and formal justice (e.g. Kyoto protocol: entitlements derived from prior usage – for carbon polluters). Again, there are a number of problems with enforcing responsibility to fulfill these claims. These obstacles are similar to the ones that impede the enforcement of responsibility at state level; in other words, they have to do with the difficulties in identifying the wrong-doer and establishing causation. There is a possibility, however, to think about international responsibility based on claims of reparative justice. When conceptualizing justice for climate refugees, Buxton (2019), for instance, compares compensation (which aims to remedy accidental damage), with reparations (which aim to rectify injustice). The author argues that this second option is more closely aligned with the experience of climate refugees because it is historically oriented and takes stock of the complexities of their experience. From that perspective, one could argue that reparations take a more holistic view to suffering than one that focuses solely on biological suffering, by examining the impact of climate change on the refugees' biographical lives (see Fassin, 2012). Souter (2013), for instance, conceptualizes asylum as a form of reparative justice because refugees sometimes flee conflicts that have historically been created or compounded by foreign intervention. From that perspective, providing aid for climate change impacts can be seen as an act of reparative justice.

Of course, basing international responsibility for climate change on claims of reparative justice makes a lot of sense given the diffuse nature of responsibility for causing climate change in the first place; however, it also makes sense from the perspective of the present approach to protection, which outlines that harm should be seen as the relationship between environmental change and its impact on a set of freedoms. There is indeed a strong historical component to the analysis of such impact in the developing world, through a history of colonization and resource exploitation; for that reason, it can be argued that not only Europe and North America hold responsibility in creating environmental risk (through greenhouse gases emissions), they can also be seen as responsible for having co-created the conditions under which Sen's instrumental freedoms are achieved.

3.3. How can we explain states' failure to protect their citizens from climate change?

Having outlined the basic elements of a protection-based approach to climate change, the next section considers the theories that can be used to understand failure to protect. It starts with Fassin's argument that any study of humanitarian government should consider the interplay between morals and procedure; the present section thus aims at

appraising how this interplay can be investigated in a study of climate change protection mechanisms. Doing so, I am building on previous literature on state failure, which shows that such failure cannot be solely explained by a lack of resources (e.g. Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

3.3.1. *Morals: imagined geographies of suffering*

Morals are dictating which levels of suffering are deemed acceptable. One could argue that this moral judgment is rooted in specific representations of reality itself. Morals, therefore, emerge in relation to representations of the world that are socially constructed. In the case of climate change, this suffering is located in space, which is also socially constructed. In particular, according to Said (1978: 55):

Space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. The same process occurs when we deal with time. Much of what we associate with or even know about such periods as “long ago” or “the beginning” or “at the end of time” is poetic – made up.

It does not necessarily mean that there is no such thing as “objective” history and geography, but rather that one cannot know all there is to know, which is why humans use their imaginations to enrich their understanding of reality. For that reason, Said (1978) developed the idea of “imagined geographies”, which has been defined by Gregory (2004) as representations of places, peoples and their environment, articulated to ideas and fantasies about their nature and their position in world power struggles. These representations create a distinction between us and the ‘others’. However, not only is reality continually constructed and reinterpreted, it could also be argued that it is plural. As such, ontology refers to the study of “reality” (Kohn, 2015), “being” (Heidegger), and “becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The “ontological turn” in anthropology examines the historical construction of nature, landscapes and forests (e.g. Balée, 1989; Raffles, 2002) and argues that there is meaning to be found beyond the physicality of things (e.g. Appadurai, 1989). While social constructivism posits that there is one reality that is constructed and perceived in different ways depending on the observer, ontology emphasizes that different observers can be immersed in different realities. From that last perspective, the world as an all-encompassing entity is made of multiple universes - of “pluriverses”.

The reason why such theories are useful to the analysis of protection mechanisms is that, by contrast to humanitarian action as it is conceptualized by Fassin (2012), which is guided by a set of morals in response to social problems, the study of climate change has an important spatial component. Not only are these mechanisms designed and enacted in relation to morals, which are rooted in representations of what is happening in the world, but also in perceptions of past, present, and future environments. These

perceptions can be seen as constructions, or as the product of the experience of different realities. In other words, climate change does not only alter the physical composition of the world but also its subjective composition; moreover, the way it affects reality is not uniform, because reality itself is not uniform. To understand this impact is to acknowledge that two people living on the same geographic coordinates, when being subjected to the same physical change in their environment, can see their reality being affected in different ways depending on their own ontologies. If one of these two people were to be a policy-maker who intends to protect other people from that physical change and from its impact on several aspects of their realities, but does not know that they live in different worlds than their own, the policy that would be produced would be likely to fail or would create different outcomes. The reason for that failure would be that this policy reflects one specific ontology.

This account is not incompatible with previous conceptualizations of the social construction of space, which also have implications for policy-making. The reason why constructivism can also be used in analyzing protection mechanisms is because of the importance of uncertainty and the unknown associated with climate change. From that perspective, one could argue that policymakers, who do not have access to the full information they would need to define the nature of the harm, will inevitably rely on their own subjective experience and representation of climate change in order to design and implement climate change adaptation or protection policies. Climate change, from that perspective, can be seen as a highly abstract concept; not only can it be something different to different people, it can also be constructed in different ways through imagination, to fill information gaps. The way this construction is enacted in turn depends on specific ontologies. This is not only true of climate change as a phenomenon, but also of the idea of protection itself, as it is loosely defined (Scott-Smith, 2019).

Taking stock of these theoretical considerations, I would argue that there are two main issues in the way suffering is conceptualized in the context of climate change.

First, there is a tendency in climate change or disaster risk research to focus on biological, visible suffering, a tendency that was already outlined by Fassin (2012) when examining humanitarian programmes. According to Fassin (2012: 254), “humanitarian reason pays more attention to the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence”. For that reason, the author argues that humanitarian government “fails to recognize the Other as a ‘face’” – a subject beyond subjection (Fassin, 2012: 255). In climate change research, this emphasis on “biological” suffering stems from a long history of environmental research and in the idea of “biolegitimacy” that has permeated much of the environmental discourse and practice, for instance in the field of environmental conservation. The reason why an emphasis on biological suffering is detrimental to achieving climate change protection can be explained by our definition of climate

change harm as based on both physical risks and the achievement of instrumental freedoms. This “face” mentioned by Fassin is the agency that these freedoms ensure – in other terms, a focus on biological suffering compounds loss of agency through subjectivization, which means that in the long run, protection mechanisms based on such conceptions make people more vulnerable.

Second, and in a similar perspective, a focus on biological suffering can not only lead policy-makers to ignore or compound suffering, but also to misdiagnose the specific ways in which such suffering can be alleviated or remedied. The reasons underpinning this claim are to be found in the above discussion on social construction and ontology. Suffering is, indeed, socially constructed. A good example of such construction has been given by Narang (2015: 268), who investigated population displacements in Tuvalu, generally considered as one of the world’s most “endangered nation”, and argued that population displacement and migrations on the island “are likely to be caused by government policy response anchored in the imagined geographies of fear rather than by material transformations in the environment”. Migration has been used by Tuvaluans as a strategy of adaptation in the past, but as shown by Shen and Gemenne (2009), hardly any Tuvaluan respondent reported being affected by climate change. According to Farbotko (2010: 56), inhabitants of these islands, “long marginalized, are denied their own agency in the climate change crisis. They are fictionalized into victim populations”.

Moreover, there is a tendency in the current discourse to label certain kinds of suffering as caused explicitly by climate change thereby creating “climate change suffering” as a distinct category. From the perspective adopted in this paper, this categorization is incorrect. Recalling previous literature on famines (e.g. de Waal, 1997; Sen, 1981), one might wonder how climate change is any different from other kinds of risks, and why it would require such a specific approach, as such suffering is not only compounded by pre-existed structures of inequality, but co-created by them. People face all kinds of risk every day, and framing climate change as “abstract acts of god” to be solved by changing the state of the global climate through mitigation policies misses the point that there are actually things governments could do now to fulfil their duty to protect. More specifically, and while it is true that climate change causes suffering by itself, it could be argued that most of this suffering pre-existed the “Anthropocene” (see Steffen et al., 2007; Rockström et al., 2014), rooted in an unequal provision of human rights. The real question that climate change poses, from this perspective, is that of the scale of human rights violations and their historical dimension.

3.3.2. Procedures: norms institutionalization and implementation

Climate change is associated with specific representations of the world, that are then enacted through discourse and consequently institutionalized. In other terms, discourse

is performative and can create new realities (see Foucault, 1972). In the context of climate change, this has two implications.

First, these representations can be translated into norms that are then institutionalized. Sets of norms that are set to govern a similar issue can be institutionalized into frameworks; at the international level, these are called “regimes” (Betts, 2013: 30). These norms can change over time, which means that regimes can then adapt or be replaced by a new one. For instance, Betts (2013) asked under what conditions the old refugee regime could adapt to address the new challenge of “survival migration” and stretch to meet new circumstances. In this context, a refugee protection regime pre-existed the advent of “survival migration”. By contrast, the Paris Agreement, which could be seen as the embodiment of a potential “climate change regime”, is often described as new and emerging (e.g. Stern, 2018), not because it is the first international agreement taking climate change as its object, but because it is the first to be legally binding (Saveresi, 2015). This means that though language has been developed over the years, in particular with the International Decade for Disaster Risk Reduction (IDDRR) in 1990, the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, these agreements had never acknowledged formal responsibility to take action (Saveresi, 2015; Zeiderman, 2012). Though the Paris Agreement was the first of its kind, it is important to recognize the process through which the norms underpinning this emerging regime has taken place, adopting a more historical perspective. In particular, one could argue that these norms started emerging prior to the IDDRR, as the idea of disaster risk reduction itself is rooted in broader concerns for human security (see Hannigan, 2012), which were already developed in other documents, perhaps even based on similar arguments as those underpinning the R2P doctrine.

Second, these regimes rise and develop at multiple levels. According to Betts (2013), regime adaptation takes place at three levels: international bargaining, institutionalization and implementation. Implementation, he argues, has been historically neglected by international studies, which is why he investigates why the implementation of international norms varies between different national contexts. Doing so, he criticizes Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) norm life cycle model, which purports that norms are created and disseminated in five phases in which they emerge, cascade and then are internalized by states. The problem with this conceptualization, according to Betts, is that it assumes that norms are conceived as pre-defined and static, and then implemented by an ontologically coherent state. As a consequence, international institutions have national and local manifestations that potentially diverge and deviate from the global context, which means that “politics rather than principles determine the conditions under which millions of people get access to protection” (Betts, 2013: 195). In particular, one could argue that, through their programmes, agencies enact what Fassin called the “politics of life”, defined as “the evaluation of human beings and the meaning of their existence” (Fassin, 2007: 500-501). From that

perspective, in designing and implementing aid programmes, humanitarians decide “which existences it is possible or legitimate to save” (Fassin, 2007: 501).

There is, indeed, a tension in the vocabulary that is used in climate change and development research to talk about these policies and the recipients of aid or assistance in the context of climate change. Depending on the approach adopted by these studies, the authors would talk about “climate change adaptation”, “preparedness” or “disaster risk reduction” alternatively (Kelman, 2018). While there are some semantic differences between these terms, differences in the language used to talk about these issues can make it difficult for policymakers to assess what should be done and who should receive aid. There is no specific term to designate “people affected by climate change”, in the same fashion as there is an internationally agreed term to talk about “refugees”, however, flawed that definition is. This is a problem because, from a legal perspective, these groups need to be named to be entitled to a set of specific rights. In other words, we lack a conceptual language to clearly identify people who would be in need of “climate change protection”. Following that logic, the current government response is thus partly dictated by politics. In practice, this means that governments now decide who is entitled to aid, what are the rights that should be protected and for whom. It means that policies aimed at “reducing climate risks” might well reproduce historical patterns of inequality through the way government select “legitimate recipients” of their social protection or climate change adaptation programmes. For that reason, examining the interplay between morals and procedures not only entails scrutinizing specific policies or mechanisms and their rationale, but also replacing them into the broader institutional, historical and normative context in which they were developed.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the main issues and challenges in conceptualizing climate change through the lens of protection.

First, I have argued that “climate change harm” is rooted in broader gaps in social protection and that protecting people from such harm should entail protecting them from other kinds of harm that compound or co-create vulnerability.

Second, I have outlined the main elements of protection approaches, and have explained that humanitarianism enacts a set of morals, that are themselves rooted in specific ontologies. Given that climate change is an abstract phenomenon, I have argued that climate change adaptation policies are based on “imagined geographies of suffering”, which are performative through discourse. In particular, I have proposed that any analysis of the way in which protection policies are designed and implemented should ask ontological questions about time and suffering in order to offer a more holistic understanding of suffering that is not only perceived as physical but also biographical. Doing so, I have proposed that suffering is relative in time and relational,

which is why Sen's conceptualization of suffering as deprivation can be seen as a more recent development in protection approaches. I have also proposed that the capabilities and entitlement approach could be used as a way to define climate change harm by focusing on its impact on a range of freedoms, and because it focuses on both legal and non-legal aspects of protection.

Third, I have asked three questions to understand the main problems and issues that could arise from the application of protection approaches to climate change. I have first explained that any attempt at defining what "adequate" protection would mean should define the nature of climate change "harm" and "victims" and have argued that there are objective obstacles in achieving that goal, because of the transnational nature of climate change and the difficulty to establish causation. I have then explored whether the principle of the responsibility to protect could be enforced at state and international level, and have argued that, though they are subjective and objective obstacles in establishing responsibility, the state has a moral duty to protect because climate change harm is often co-created by other patterns of inequality. By contrast, the international community should have a moral duty to provide aid for climate change impacts as a form of reparative justice. Finally, I have asked what could explain states' failure to protect their citizens from climate change harm, and have argued that because there are discrepancies in the way climate change and protection are defined, politics rather than principles currently dictate who receives aid for climate change impacts and what this aid should look like. Such decisions, I have argued, are rooted in a plurality of ontologies that make assumptions about people's place in time and history, and about the state of past, present and future environments. These ontologies are then enacted through discourses, norms and procedures, to give rise to new realities that might not match people's experiences.

Overall, this paper has made the argument that approaching climate change through the lens of protection offers a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which it creates suffering, in a way that goes beyond biological suffering. Further empirical research, from that perspective, should be dedicated to understanding what kind of ontologies are enacted by states and international agencies, and how they determine the "legitimate" recipients of aid for climate change impacts. Though it has not offered a straightway forward in building a "protection approach to climate change", I hope this paper has outlined a preliminary account of what such an approach could look like and why it would be useful. There are, of course, many problems with the approach I have outlined, in particular because it bridges theories and concepts that have been developed in very different contexts. For instance, it is unclear whether climate change harm should be conceptualized as a distinct category. However, I hope I have been able to capture a few key issues and concepts to examine more pragmatic questions about who should be granted aid, and how.

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