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Migration Theories and Approaches:
Bringing the Environment in

Bringing the Environment into Migration Theory:
Theoretical approaches, sectoral debates and
controversies on migration and the environment

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Abstract

Migration theory has gradually evolved in Europe and in North America in the context of different scientific disciplines (demography, economics, political science, sociology, geography, history, psychology, anthropology, law) with a focus on the migrant (as emigrant, transmigrant and immigrant) and refugee. European migration theories have initially focused primarily on the emigrant and since the 1960s increasingly on the immigrant, as have the debates in the US, Canada and Australia. The scientific discourse on migration theories has addressed four functional linkages between migration and development, the environment, security, and gender. However, until recently migration specialists in their theories and statistics did not analyze the environment or climate change as a cause, trigger or multiplier of forced or distress migration, while environmentalists in their scientific discourse and policy debate have claimed a causal linkage. This paper assesses different theoretical approaches in the four functional debates by migration and environmental specialists in the English and German speaking countries in Europe, North America and in Australia that have tried to bring the environment in or continue to ignore environmental factors. Environmentally-induced emigration has often been conceived as a human security concern, while climate-triggered immigration is interpreted as a national security threat.

Keywords: migration theory, approaches, environment, climate change, environmentally-induced migration, development, migration, security, gender, North America, Europe