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And the Amazon's burning...

Why we need to talk more about "climate migration" in Latin America

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Why we need to talk more about “climate migration” in Latin America

Bonn, 9 September 2019. The fires raging in the Amazon rainforest have the entire world holding its breath, and not only due to the diplomatic furore resulting from the G7 states’ offer of financial assistance for the fire-fighting operations. There is great concern about the potential consequences that the fires engulfing the “green lungs of our planet” could have for the global ecosystem. It is striking that the local impact of the blaze in the Amazon basin is rarely mentioned in European media coverage of this environmental catastrophe. Generally speaking, in Germany and Europe at least, Latin America plays only a subordinate role in discussions on the impact of environmental and climate change. Entering the search terms “climate refugees” and “Africa” in the German edition of Google News returns well over 2,000 hits, while the combination of “climate refugees” and “Latin America” delivers fewer than 200. When it comes to the issue of climate migration, most people tend to think of regions of Africa or Pacific island nations. However, disregarding Latin America in this context would be a mistake.

Latin America and the Caribbean are among the regions of the world most severely affected by the negative consequences of global climate and environmental change. In addition to the loss of forests, the more insidious consequences include glacial melt in the Andes, changes in rainfall patterns throughout Latin America, the risk of desertification in vast areas of Brazil and Chile, and rising sea levels. The latter phenomenon also threatens major cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. Added to this are sudden natural disasters, which are now more frequent and intense than in the past. Examples include flooding and hurricanes, the impact of which is felt most acutely in the Caribbean and parts of Central America. They not only pose a threat to human life, but also have a detrimental effect on agricultural production and water supplies. This primarily affects poor population groups, who are rarely able to adapt to severe changes at the local level. Consequently, this frequently leads to migration. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), at 1.7 million, the number of people in Latin America who were forced to leave their homes, at least temporarily, in 2018 as a result of natural disasters is around four times as high as the number of individuals in the region who are fleeing armed conflict. And even when it comes to

other forms of human mobility, such as labour migration, the consequences of climate and environmental change play an increasingly significant role, with migration almost always taking place within the affected countries or regions. Unfortunately, research on climate change-induced human mobility is not yet as advanced for Latin America as it is for other regions of the world.

At the political level too, hardly any work has been done to address the particular challenge of climate migration in a Latin American context. Take Brazil and the Caribbean island nation of Santa Lucia, for instance. While they do mention migration in their national programmes on climate-change adaptation, the declarations of intent in their plans are rather vague. As such there is a need to improve our understanding of this phenomenon. Migration also barely plays a role in the national climate change mitigation goals of the other South and Central American and Caribbean nations. This is remarkable as the impact of climate change, especially in the form of human mobility, certainly has the potential to further exacerbate social inequalities. And this in Latin America, where social issues have always been especially topical. Despite the good progress made in terms of social, economic and political developments in recent years and decades, social inequality remains highly pronounced in this part of the world.

Even if Europeans rarely think of Latin America when considering the effects of climate change, the free trade agreement concluded between the European Union and the South American MERCOSUR nations in June of this year makes one thing very clear: Germany and Europe as a whole attach great economic and geopolitical importance to Latin America. Consequently, investing in more research and political cooperation between these two regions of the world on matters of climate change and migration would be highly worthwhile in terms of creating more sustainable and socially inclusive development prospects. Finally, if policy-makers and researchers were to address these issues in greater depth, this would help the public in Germany and Europe as a whole to see climate migration more clearly as a phenomenon affecting all regions of the globe.