

Spotlight on Johannes Luetz Slowing the rising tide



Johannes Luetz's research has taken him across the globe in a bid to find more sustainable solutions for climate change migrants.

Johannes' PhD research on 'Climate change migration management', has been the result of four years of intensive research and travel.

His dissertation addresses knowledge gaps on the triggers of climate change-driven human migration by drawing on literature in several fields of inquiry, and by intentionally engaging with migration-affected populations to identify what preferred solutions they envisage. Taking a humanitarian 'preparedness' approach, this study identifies what migrants want so that appropriate policy instruments for equitable macro-managed migration processes can be discussed, developed, drafted and legislated well before they are needed. This research repositions climate migrants at the centre of a scholarly debate that has largely marginalised or even patronised them. The findings have impacts on international efforts focused on improved education as the sine qua non for all future migration preparedness.

"Every year millions of people are displaced by droughts, floods and storms," says Luetz. "Combined with global megatrends such as population growth, environmental degradation, resource depletion and sprawling slums in developing countries, it is beyond doubt that the coming years will see many millions more forced from their homes."

Luetz says scholarly debate has often marginalised and patronised climate migrants. "My thesis takes a humanitarian approach because I engaged directly with climate migrants to find out how they feel about

relocation and what solutions they envisage," he says.

Luetz's research shows that residents overwhelmingly want to remain where they live. He says this makes the introduction of adaptation measures in their countries an urgent priority. "Positive migration outcomes need to be led by migrants themselves but accountable and responsive government institutions also have a key role to play.

"Preparedness means getting ready before the need arises. This is always preferable to ad hoc displacements brought about by sudden floods and storms. Preparedness is a major success factor," he says.

After a pilot study on Tulun Atoll in the South Pacific, Luetz travelled to Bolivia to study drought and migration, then to slums in Bangladesh and India to study the effects of cyclones on migration. He has also assessed artificially raised concrete islands in the Maldives, and resettlement villages for typhoon flood victims in the Philippines.

Luetz's passion for climate change migration was first kindled in Papua New Guinea where he was conducting research for World Vision's Annual Disaster Report Planet Prepare in 2008.

"I met with Island Chief John Kela on the small island of Matsunga - parts of his island had already disappeared under the sea and several areas were showing significant signs of erosion," Luetz says. "Given sea level rise predictions are around one to two metres this century, it was easy to connect the dots: by the end of the century his island would simply no longer exist."

Berlin-born Luetz, who won the 2012 Three Minute Thesis (3MT) ASPIRE Award, deliberately chose Australia for his PhD study.

"Australia is a multicultural nation of migrants and migrant descendants and is a major per capita contributor to the climate migration issue," he said. "Australia is ideally positioned to become a world leader in the area of climate migration, both morally and practically."

Dr Johannes Luetz concluded a highly successful academic year by representing UNSW at the international workshop to further progress the establishment of the University of the Amazon -IKIAM; a project from the government of Ecuador.

PhD research in the media:

Sydney Morning Herald: 5 October 2013, p. 20

ABC Radio National: The Science Show, 20 July 2013

<http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2013/07/>

89.7 Eastside FM: Arts Wednesday, 7 August 2013

UNSW news: UNSW Newsroom, Slowing the rising tide, 24 July 2013

UNSW Science: <http://www.science.unsw.edu.au/news/research-slowng-rising-tide>