Earth System
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Discussions

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Interactive comment on "Perspectives on contextual vulnerability in discourses of climate conflict" by U. T. Okpara et al.

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Dear Editor, we present below our responses to the issues raised by referee #3.

Uche Okpara (on behalf of co-authors)

Generel comments:

Referee: This is an original, well-written and clearly structured paper that can (potentially) make an important contribution to the debate on climate change related conflict. In my view, the particular strength of the paper is its combination of an empirically-rich meta-study of the climate conflict literature with an attempt to advance the notion of vulnerability in the same literature. I very much sympathize with the proposal to advance the concept of contextual vulnerability and in general would strongly encourage

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such endeavors. While I found the author's empirical empirical findings very convincing I was less convinced of the way they got there, i.e. of their methodological and conceptual approach as I would like to elaborate in the following.

Response: We thank the reviewer for finding our study interesting/empirically-rich. Following the issues raised, we show below how we arrive at our findings - which are based on our methodological choices guided by the discourse components framework presented in Table 2.

Specific comments:

Referee: In my view Foucault's discourse analytical approach comes off badly in the conceptual part of the paper. Equally, mentioning Hajer and Foucault in the same breath appears a bit odd to me because after all in his argumentative discourse analysis Hajer mainly draws on Foucault. Furthermore, there is no "singular Foucault" - other than suggested by the authors his earlier archeological works actually provides some analytical concepts for a text-based discourse analysis.

Response: We agree that Hajer's arguments on discourse analysis were inspired by Foucault's ideas. The intention of a Foucauldian discourse analysis is to construct critical narratives of stories about 'realities' or 'regimes of practices' that may constitute a discourse. Hajer takes this further by emphasising the notions of 'metaphor', 'storyline' and 'discussion coalition'. These are the important insights we bring into our approach, particularly Hajer's notion of 'storylines'. The insights led to our choice for studying distinct discourse elements/analytical categories drawn from Adger, Dryzek and McDonald. To reflect, in clearer terms, how insights from these authors (Hajer and Foucault) feed into our analysis, we have restructured our representation of their ideas in Section 3. See the way we have restructured paragraph 2 of section 3 below:

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"A discourse approach explores commonalities across multiple discourses competing

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to shape the way people, communities and authorities engage with a particular issue, including the dynamics of that competition. It provides insight into the interplay of messages, narrative/argumentative structures and policy perceptions (Rafey and Sovacool, 2011). Several approaches to discourse analysis in the environmental realm follow the works of Michel Foucault (1979, 1991). His exploration of social phenomena is often presented as classic in approaches to discourse analysis, (usually in the frame of 'regimes of practices' and power/knowledge nexus), pointing to the need to construct critical narratives of distinct stories of 'realities' that constitute a discourse (Hewitt, 2009). Inspired by Foucault's idea, Hajer (1995) provides insights concerning this aspect, particularly in relation to what should constitute the objects/elements of a discourse analysis, e.g. metaphor, storyline and discourse coalitions. He suggests that everything we perceive as discourses, which influence how societies engage with an issue (e.g. climate change), should be analysed in the context in which they are discursively constructed. McDonald (2013) for example, has focused on the use of textual and speech storylines/dimensions based on insights from Hajer's (1995) writings in his critical synthesis/analysis of discourses of climate security. Ideas from these previous studies inform our analytical approach for climate conflict discourses. Specifically, we focus on units of textual communications for climate conflict storylines using distinct categories of discourse components (i.e. sets of key discourse elements - Table 2) drawn from a synthesis of the fundamental discourse components outlined by Adger et al. (2001), Dryzek (2005) and McDonald (2013) for the analysis of the broad sweep of environmental security discourses. Similar to Doulton and Brown (2009), we find the discourse components (Table 2) framework particularly useful for a more explicit portrayal of the basic storylines across different climate conflict discourses, and also because they give a less subjective basis from which to assess discourse lines. Although this study does not emphasise the range of actors articulating a particular discourse or the political agenda they pursue, it nonetheless recognises dominant discourses and the vulnerability thinking that they encourage".

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Referee: The second conceptual point refers to the analytical categories that were deduced from different discourse analytical approaches (Adger, Dryzek, McDonald). It is not sufficient to simply list the heuristic categories in the appendix (as it is in the present version of the article). They need to be explained in the text. Here the author's should also make clear why they have selected exactly these categories and not others.

Response: Table 2 (containing the categories of the discourse components that we used as a framework for our discourse analysis) is not intended to appear as an appendix. It will be an integral part of section 3 after this peer-review process is completed – i.e. when the final article version is released. On page 2551 (lines 15 − 20), we outline why we selected these components: that is, we find "the discourse components particularly useful for a more explicit portrayal of the basic storylines across different climate conflict discourses, and also because they give a less subjective basis from which to assess discourse lines". This is in agreement with previous studies that used similar categories of discourse components - e.g. Doulton and Brown (2009) in discourses of climate change and international development.

Referee: With regard to the methodological approach developed in the paper I was wondering about the added value of the "vulnerability interpretation diagnostic tool"... how is this related/linked to the discourse analytical approach developed by the authors? And why do we need a particular "tool" to analyze understandings of vulnerability? In my opinion, there are many discourse analytical approaches that would be suitable for such a task.

Response: To clarify, 'vulnerability portrayal' is one of the discourse components (see the 5th item in Table 2) that we employ to categorise discourses into climatic determinism, context centrism and denial claims. Because it is in the interest of this study to understand representations of vulnerability across these categories, we devise a diagnostic tool based on previous vulnerability research (see page 2551, lines 23 − 29). O'Brien (2004, 2007), for example, used a similar tool in climate vulnerability studies to emphasis why different interpretations/conceptualisations of vulnerability matter. Since

vulnerability conveys different meanings, a means of understanding how it is portrayed is needed to guide climate impact studies and to demonstrate the need for studies to be explicit and transparent in the interpretation of vulnerability that they employ (see page 2550, lines 3 -5). The tool we use (Table 3) is linked only to the vulnerability component of our discourse analytical approach (Table 2) to enable a clearer identification/delineation of the meanings ascribed to vulnerability across the three climate conflict discourse categories (i.e. Table 3 only addresses item 5 in Table 2). While there may be several other approaches for this purpose, our study advances/demonstrates a particular approach, and we have justified why this approach/tool is suitable for this particular study (see page 2547, lines 1 – 5).

Referee: Secondly, I was a bit confused by the author's claim that the "vulnerability interpretation diagnostic tool" would make the analysis "less subjective". Would that mean that it becomes more objective? I would honestly doubt that. Maybe one could say that the analysis becomes more structured and transparent, which might increase the replicability of the analysis (to stick with positivist terminology) , but that doesn't make the analytical choices to be made less subjective.

Response: The tool is all of these in that compared to previous research approaches it is: less subjective, and allows for a structured, transparent/replicable assessment. What is considered 'less subjective' in the context of a diagnostic tool can be a subject of differences in opinion. A verifiable pattern or process of judgement that can help us understand representations of a concept is less subjective. We believe that the 'diagnostic' nature of the tool makes our perspectives of the vulnerability interpretations underpinning climate conflict discourses less subjective, and advances understanding of how vulnerability may encourage a particular discourse.

Referee: As mentioned before I really liked the empirical analysis presented in the paper. However, I see a couple of omissions here. A first one refers to the debate on climate-induced migration and conflict, as already mentioned by reviewer 2.

Response: We copy the response we presented to reviewer 2 here to reflect our position on this – "We disagree and think that the reviewer is identifying sub-categories of discourses. To clarify, statements pointing to migration and displacement are often embedded in a context centrism discourse (see Section 4.2). In order words, climate-induced migration does not constitute a stand-alone discourse, but represents one of MANY pathways from climate change/variability to conflict that is 'adequately' captured within a context centrism discourse frame".

Referee: Secondly, the recent rise of resilience is completely ignored. There is a growing body of literature arguing that resilience has become the dominant concept/storyline in climate security/conflict discourses and has actually replaced vulnerability as a nodal point in these very debates. So, the authors need at least to show that they have taken note of this debate and should also argue why it is in their view still important to focus on vulnerability.

Response: Our study is situated on the premise that "climate conflict reflects a continuum of conditional forces that coalesce around notion of vulnerability" and focuses on how "different portrayals of vulnerability influence the discursive formation of climate conflict links' – these justify our focus on vulnerability (note also that our research motivation draws from Gemenne et al., 2014 where the need for vulnerability is emphasised).

The point about resilience replacing vulnerability as a nodal point in the debate is an interesting point, but one that is subject to debate based on disciplinary persuasions. For example, studies emphasising 'migration' tend to invoke a discursive shift towards resilience (e.g. Scheffran, Marmer and Snow, 2012; Methmann and Oels, 2015). Others demonstrate that resilience and vulnerability are inextricably linked - since to reduce vulnerability to climate conflict is to strengthen resilience (e.g. Vivekananda et al. (2014)). While our study is not concerned about which of resilience and vulnerability is dominant in climate conflict debates, we demonstrate implicitly, that the subject of resilience cannot be completely ignored in discussions about vulnerability and climate

conflict (in fact vulnerability seems to have emerged alongside resilience in climate conflict debates). Our analysis points to a context centrism discourse in which discussions on vulnerability often raise issues about climate adaptation, peacebuilding and humanitarian aids programme, which are often geared towards enhancing capacities for resilience (see page 2558, lines 15 – 19). Similarly, it can be deduced from our paper that it is the context centrism discourse that may best demonstrate the resilience storyline. Here, resilience may be conceived where vulnerability is framed as a transformative process based on an understanding of local realities and vulnerabilities – a framing that serves as a means to building the resilience of areas affected by climate conflict, which in our study points to the needs-based agenda which can be shaped by combining notions of vulnerability and resilience.

We show on page 2562, line 24 (i.e. an added sentence in the revised manuscript), the emerging interests on resilience, pointing the reader to key literatures that are shaping discursive shifts towards resilience.

Referee: Finally, some key literature on the emergence of climate change and security/conflict discourses is missing, e.g. the works of Brzoska (e.g. 2009), Oels (e.g. 2013) or Rothe (e.g. 2015).

Response: These are very interesting studies. Collectively they inspire and are inspired by the articles we have cited in this paper. Because our study is concerned about general stances within the taxonomy of climate conflict discourses, and how different portrays of vulnerability influence the discursive formation of climate conflict relations (and not necessarily the emergence of discourses), there is a limit to the range of articles we are able to include. Overall, your suggestion is greatly appreciated.