

Migration as an Adaptation Strategy to Climate Change

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Increasingly, as attention is being devoted to the human mobility and climate nexus, we hear more and more calls from various actors – from states to civil society (<http://climatemigration.org.uk/migration-as-adaptation-new-briefing-paper/>) and academia (<http://collections.unu.edu/collection/UNU:1902>) to design and implement policies for climate adaptation that include a migration component. The sheer diversity of viewpoints on this topic reflects the universality of this concern and brings to the fore very tangible questions: what are the linkages between migration and adaptation and what can be concretely done to bridge climate and migration policy to support national adaptation efforts to climate change?

Let's begin by recalling the definition of 'adaptation'. In a recently published glossary on migration, environment and climate, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) decided to retain the definition of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): "In human systems, (adaptation is) the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects, in order to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities" (Reference (https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/special-reports/srex/SREX-Annex_Glossary.pdf)).

In simple terms, adaptation refers to any human response taken to cope with changes in the external environment in order to survive these impacts with minimal damage and improve living conditions in a given habitat. When people decide or are forced to move due to environmental and climatic changes – whether sudden or slow – their mobility is an adaptation strategy that allows them to **minimize harm for themselves and/or improve their overall lives**.

Of paramount importance to this discussion is the notion of vulnerability and resilience. Broadly speaking, we can identify three dimensions to the vulnerability/resilience nexus:

- i) **exposure** to climate impacts – generally depending on a given geographical location;
- ii) **sensitivity** or to what degree a given community is affected by climate change; and
- iii) the **adaptive capacity** of people and communities – that is their ability to adjust to climate change, taking into account their pre-existing social, economic or political vulnerabilities. All these dimensions together will determine the level of vulnerability, or the level of resilience, of people and communities facing a changing climate.

IOM has repeatedly outlined (https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mecc_outlook.pdf) that **the linkages between human mobility and climate impacts are highly complex** and that in many cases, we should refrain from making direct causal links between climatic change and the decision to migrate. Instead, it is critical to remember that, in most situations, people choose or are forced to migrate due to a number of factors – climate change can be the primary or one of many secondary factors that prompt an individual or a family to move.

Here we also need to remember that the decision, as well as the ability to migrate, are intrinsically linked to the question of pre-existing vulnerabilities – many individuals do not have the financial and social means to plan for and act upon their migration aspirations. In some cases, people may be unwilling to leave because of uncertain prospects elsewhere, or because leaving would result in losses in terms of land and assets; they may thus choose to stay in areas at risk, exposing themselves to even greater danger.

Taking into account these dimensions, linking migration and adaptation can be done through different policy actions:

- **Supporting local climate adaptation activities:** Well-designed projects (<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/NEWSLETTER%20Final%20Oct%202015.pdf>) that encourage livelihood diversification, infrastructure improvements and better energy provision support the improvement of in-situ conditions and reinforce the resilience of people to climate impacts. From a migration perspective, this gives individuals the choice not to migrate, especially in areas with already high out-migration rates. Successful adaptation to climate change will allow people to stay in their areas of origin.
- **Promoting livelihood diversification through facilitated migration:** Legal migration channels, in particular temporary and circular migration schemes can be put in place in areas facing gradual environmental degradation. Mitigation and adaptation efforts can allow populations to continue to live and strive in these areas and voluntary, well managed migration can be part of the solution. Legal migration opportunities can allow individuals to earn a decent income whilst filling labor shortages in destination areas – this has the potential for a “win-win” situation for communities of origin and destination as well as for the migrants themselves. Such schemes – still rare in practice - can be implemented at many different levels: internal, regional or international migration, as in the Australian 2012 Pacific Seasonal Workers Pilot scheme (<https://www.employment.gov.au/pacific-seasonal-worker-pilot-scheme>).
- **Reducing pressure on increasingly inhospitable areas through facilitated migration:** Migration can be planned and managed in areas that are becoming uninhabitable, where the degradation is irreversible and where communities are repeatedly exposed to natural hazards destroying their livelihoods. This planned migration can contribute to lifting pressures on ecosystems. Planned relocation of communities can also be considered in cases of irreversible damage and can be done in dignity and consideration of communities’ interests and rights. This can also reduce the likelihood or occurrence of conflicts around diminishing natural resources but also to prevent tragedies associated with irregular migration – from illegal smuggling through borders that lead to high death tolls (<http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>) to trafficking in persons.
- **Harness the potential of social and financial remittances from migrants and diaspora communities:** Remittances provide additional sources of income to communities affected by either slow or sudden climate impacts. A favorable policy environment would support more systematically the potential of these financial resources and encourage diaspora investments towards climate adaptation in their countries of origin. Furthermore, communities of origin can also benefit from the knowledge and skills/expertise of migrant communities to support their adaptation efforts.

Considering migration as one of the possible adaptation measures to climate impacts is not about claiming that migration is a panacea. It is very clear that there are many challenges associated with the uncontrolled movement of people, such as creating additional strain on overstretched infrastructures or increasing pressure on inadequate social services provision. What we argue is that many of these challenges can be reduced through well-designed policies.

With the right policies, we can prevent forced migration linked to climate degradation and protect the most vulnerable. People are already moving due to climate impacts on an ad hoc basis. Understanding what policy frameworks can achieve – or not – is key to ensure that people retain an element of choice and dignity in their migration journey in a changing climate.

See also Migration, Environment and Climate – Evidence for Policy (<http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/migration-environment-and-climate-change-evidence-policy-meclep>) (MECLEP) project find latest policy reports here (<http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/policy-briefs>).

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