



Climate Change and Migration: An Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners

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Climate change will have major ramifications for migration at every level: domestic, regional, and international. While most migration affected by climate change will be internal, the international system is unprepared and inadequate for the needs that will arise. This brief reviews issues faced in the governance of climate-affected migration at the internal, regional, and international levels and proposes policy actions in numerous spheres of action. Additional details are available in the related paper.

Key Policy Recommendations

Regional free movement should be facilitated

Most migration in the context of climate change remains regional. In several regions, free movement is already de jure established through agreed protocols, but requires implementation support. This is a high-potential governance option, allowing climate-vulnerable populations:

- ▶ Access to safe territory
- ▶ Rights in a foreign country
- ▶ Lasting solutions elsewhere
- ▶ Circular movement
- ▶ Pre-emptive mobility

RECOMMENDATIONS

Migration will be a feature of the era of climate change. To help ensure it promotes sustainable development and benefits vulnerable populations, policymakers should:

- Facilitate regional free movement
- Develop a new institutional arrangement for climate-conscious labour migration
- Support adaptive internal migration
- Prepare for internal migration
- Improve understanding of the impacts of climate change on displaced populations
- Step up engagement with diaspora groups to support climate adaptation

Crucially, regional free movement does not require migrants to justify the cause of their mobility. The regional economic communities implementing free movement may however lack implementation capacity. Where possible, this should be supported. Actors external to the region supporting border securitisation should consider whether this maintains policy coherence with development and climate adaptation objectives. Actions to support regional free movement include:

- ▶ Supporting capacity-building of secretariats
- ▶ Supporting increased access to travel documents
- ▶ Facilitating bilateral pilot free movement regimes, to be scaled up
- ▶ Undertaking bilateral border fee waivers
- ▶ Reducing border corruption
- ▶ Ensuring that populations are aware of their rights within free movement areas

A new institutional arrangement for climate-conscious labour migration is needed

Beyond the regional level, few options currently exist for adaptive international movement in the context of climate change. The refugee system does not protect those moving due to disaster. Reforms are unlikely to be possible. Any effort to introduce a protection category for ‘climate migrants’ or similar would face major conceptual and operational challenges.

There are currently three main pathways through which protective stay in third countries can be made possible:

- ▶ Humanitarian pathways broadly defined, most prominently asylum under the 1951 Convention
- ▶ Family reunification
- ▶ Labour visas

Humanitarian pathways face political challenges and operational issues. Family reunification will very seldom offer access to adequate numbers of people in need of mobility. Educational pathways are not mentioned due to their temporary nature.

Labour pathways are the sole realistic means of providing international mobility to climate-affected persons moving beyond their region or living in regions without free movement agreements.

Labour pathways are however institutionally wholly demand-driven. We propose that states should urgently incorporate supply-side needs, assessing the need for and benefits from movement in areas of origin in a timely manner. This would allow states to prioritise certain populations for access to movement. Implementing this requires:

- ▶ A labour migration research agency with a mandate and capacity to assess the external as well as internal impacts of migration
- ▶ Either a whole-of-government approach to labour migration or, more likely, an Office of the Special Commissioner for Migration, learning from trade policy to govern migration coherently

Mobility could be permanent, from an uninhabitable area, or temporary, allowing remittances for reconstruction and adaptation.

Adaptive internal migration should be supported

For populations vulnerable to climate shocks –such as those dependent on agriculture; members of marginalised communities; or those in debt– internal migration can spread risk and allow adaptation. Internal migration may however be inaccessible due to lack of information and high costs.

Governments should evaluate assisting populations in undertaking circular internal mobility, especially during agricultural communities’ ‘famine seasons’. This can be supported through:

- ▶ Subsidised rural-urban transport
- ▶ Training for urban jobs in rural areas or upon arrival
- ▶ Assistance with finding jobs in areas of destination
- ▶ Facilitated skill recognition portability
- ▶ Provision of information on jobs and wages outside the area of origin

Preparations for internal migration must be made

Migration can be highly effective, even transformative, for climate-affected households. It can however cause negative externalities. These include the spread of infectious diseases, which may accelerate as climates continue to warm; strain on urban services; and exploitation of migrants themselves.

Governments should be aware of the inter-relationships between migration and numerous other policy areas. Migration should be mainstreamed into other policy areas, and climate change should be mainstreamed into all policy areas. Preparations should include:

- ▶ Climate-conscious zoning of urban construction options, to avoid incentivising the construction of properties in areas vulnerable to future weather shocks
- ▶ Preparations of assistance in planned relocation, including establishing transparent criteria for movement and funding regimes for relocation
- ▶ Increased awareness of internal labour market needs, to support internal adaptive migration
- ▶ Support for urban areas in receiving migrants, including in service provision
- ▶ Reform of social protection arrangements where necessary, especially increasing the portability of social protection access
- ▶ Evaluating the risk of exploitation of migrant workers, and preparing processes for their protection
- ▶ Preparing healthcare systems for potential increases in transmission of diseases, by mapping the epidemiological profiles of areas of origin vs. areas of destination and preparing to provide health interventions where necessary
- ▶ Preparing targeted support towards those 'left behind' in areas of origin, who may (potentially for a short time) be more vulnerable

A better understanding of the impacts of climate change on displaced populations is needed

Most attention in the climate-migration nexus has been given to those perceived, or expected, to move *as a result of climate change*. Less research has been conducted on the impacts of climate change upon those already displaced due to conflict or other shocks.

Displaced populations are not necessarily more vulnerable than other vulnerable populations, but in many contexts they will be. Those living in camps may have less access to energy, healthcare, and food; they also, depending on their context, may have fewer rights, including the right to work or to move.

Camps may be located in areas that themselves face climate shocks, often through flooding. More research in this area is required. In the meantime, governments and other actors should:

- ▶ Ensure that where possible refugees and IDPs are not located in areas exposed to climate hazards
- ▶ Provide displaced populations with rights, including to work and to move
- ▶ Ensure that displaced populations have access to healthcare and adequate provision of water, sanitation and hygiene needs, which can become more challenging in flood-affected contexts
- ▶ Where possible limit the impact of displaced populations upon the local environment, such as by providing alternative energy sources to biofuels

Diaspora engagement for climate adaptation should be stepped up

Remittance flows far outstrip ODA and FDI provision. Where possible, governments should seek to engage with diasporas and migrants abroad to channel remittances towards adaptation projects. This should not be taken for granted:

remittances are private capital, the result of a household investment in mobility, and are used for the priorities of the migrant's local network. Nor should migration and remittance-sending be allowed to substitute for state actions.

Where options exist for mobilising remittances in ways that are attractive to migrants, their communities of origin, and governments, they should be pursued:

- ▶ The cost of sending remittances should be reduced, allowing migrants to send more in response to or in preparation for shocks
- ▶ Early-warning systems should be publicised to households in hazard-exposed areas, allowing them to request funds from migrant connections in advance of shocks for better results
- ▶ Circular migration programmes should incorporate efforts to increase 'non-financial remittances', training migrants for climate adaptation in their area of origin
- ▶ Diaspora networks should be tapped for their expertise
- ▶ Individuals deciding remittance uses in areas of origin should be engaged with to inform their choices, including via local community leaders, to avoid maladaptive investments
- ▶ Migrants returning can be provided with business support to create growth and diversification
- ▶ Green diaspora bonds could be trialled, allowing diasporas to invest their savings in adaptation efforts (dependent on conditions in the country of origin)
- ▶ Remittance matching programmes can provide a discount for state adaptation financing
- ▶ Crowdfunding initiatives can be used to pool funding and support enterprises or initiatives in countries of origin, potentially with returns for funders
- ▶ Remittances can be pooled at the community level or above to fund local public goods

Key Takeaways

The climate-migration nexus is complex. Climate change is having, and will have, multi-faceted impacts on a very wide range of issues. These will affect migration through direct and indirect pathways. Migration is multicausal, and while climate change will affect mobility choices, so too will many other factors. Attributing causality in cases of movement is therefore almost always hard.

The issue's complexity is not a justification for inaction. Preparations for the effects of climate change on migration must be made, and they must be holistic, without neglecting any of the many different affected policy areas.

Migration is mostly internal. Those moving in the context of climate change are most likely to remain within their country, moving in rural-urban circular patterns to make up climate-induced income shortfalls. This is not a universal rule: citizens of Small Island Developing States, for example, may ultimately need to leave their countries. In other contexts, similarly, the trend may not be permanent.

Where migration crosses borders, it generally remains regional. Persistent climate shocks reduce the assets of those exposed to them; this makes it harder to access long-distance migration. The spectre of a 'tidal wave' of international 'climate refugees' is to be treated with high scepticism.

At the international level, few options exist for those moving in the context of climate change. The refugee system offers scant protection to those not fleeing persecution, and there is little prospect of reform. While some humanitarian pathways are being created for those affected by sudden-onset disasters, people affected by slow-onset disasters are more numerous and have little recourse. New approaches are necessary. Labour migration options are the most likely to succeed, and should be adapted for emerging needs.

Predicting climate-affected migration is highly challenging. Both climate modelling and migration modelling present problems. Conceptual challenges regarding causality;

poor historical data; our inability to predict border governance choices; the inherent unpredictability of shocks; and uncertainty regarding future adaptation choices all hinder our ability to make accurate forecasts of movement.

If factors other than climate change militate against migration, international movement could go down. Other factors, such as border governance choices and economic trends, have a far bigger role in determining migration outcomes than climate events.

People most affected by climate hazards will often become involuntarily immobile. Those whose assets are depleted by sudden- or slow-onset disasters will have lower mobility capacity. In many areas climate change will therefore cause migration to decrease. Over the longer term, however, this may not be a trend that holds, and internal ‘distress migration’ of destitute populations away from areas of shattered livelihoods must be anticipated. Indeed, ‘distress migration’ is already happening in some areas, notably the Horn of Africa.

People highly exposed to climate hazards will increasingly need relocation support. Without support, they may face unacceptably degraded living conditions in areas of origin; injury and death; or movement without dignity into further vulnerability. Few governments are yet prepared for this, and private sector actors, such as insurance providers, are currently of greater importance in deciding who can move where. Action should be taken sooner rather than later to reduce vulnerability and limit future costs. This should be culturally and socially sensitive.

Migration can allow adaptation against climate shocks. Migration can offer an insurance option to those whose livelihoods are harmed by climate shocks and increased variability, allowing them to access wages in economies not correlated with their area of origin. Money remitted back to the community of origin can be used for adaptation, such as income diversification; the payment of healthcare costs; the purchase of food; and the reconstruction or reinforcement of dwellings.

Migration can also be maladaptive. Poverty exacerbated by climate change may also, for example, make affected populations more vulnerable to exploitation when moving. If this occurs, migration meant to aid adaptation could worsen the situation. Climate-affected populations are especially exposed to debt traps, trafficking, and human slavery. Support should be provided to vulnerable populations before vicious cycles become entrenched; credit providers and intermediaries should be carefully regulated; and abusive situations should be rectified.

Members of migrant-sending households may require support in areas of origin. Those who do not migrate may remain in situ out of preference. They can however often be vulnerable in the absence of household members, and local policy should be attuned to potentially heightened challenges, especially during the period before remittances start to arrive.

Remittances are the crucial mechanism by which migration assists vulnerable populations. Movement allows higher earnings, and money can be sent back to communities of origin. This money can be used to support households during and after shocks; to facilitate movement away from hazards; and to diversify incomes away from climate-vulnerable activities. Remittances are however often not used for climate-adaptive purposes.

Opportunities to earn remittances should be facilitated. At the internal level, this could mean that subsidised transport; vocational training; and information should be provided to vulnerable populations in climate-affected areas. At the regional level, free movement should be supported where possible. At the international level, climate-vulnerable populations should where possible be prioritised for mobility pathways.

The ease of sending remittances should be increased. Remittance-sending costs are currently too high. This reduces access to adaptation funding. Where fees can be reduced, they should be.

More can be done to channel international remittances towards climate adaptation, development, and disaster risk reduction. This should not be taken for granted: remittances are household assets, and most remittances will already be earmarked for vital household uses. Remittance pooling; crowdfunding; green diaspora bonds; and climate-anticipatory remittance mechanisms may however all present options. Success requires project transparency; accountability on the part of governments and other actors involved; and trust on the part of diasporas. Remittances may supplement state or international adaptation spending, but they are not adequate in themselves, and should not be viewed as a way to reduce state obligations.

International labour pathways should be targeted towards climate-vulnerable populations where possible. Earnings from international mobility, even in low-skilled jobs, can be transformational for adaptation. This requires attention to

comparative vulnerability and facilitated access for vulnerable populations. It is also likely to require new institutional arrangements.

Cities require preparation for climate-accelerated urbanisation. Rural-urban migration to support climate-affected rural livelihoods may put strain on urban services. Migrants may find themselves moving into urban sites of increased hazard, such as flood-prone informal settlements. Migrants may also become more vulnerable to shocks in urban areas, due to difficulties finding work; lack of knowledge of their new context; and disconnection from support networks and their identity. Local governments need to partner with vulnerable communities; the private sector; national government bodies; and international actors to prepare for climate-related migration into cities and intra-city movements due to climate events.

This brief is based on the CGD policy paper, “Climate Change and Migration: An Omnibus Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners” (Sam Huckstep and Michael Clemens, 2023). To read the full paper please visit <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/climate-change-and-migration-omnibus-overview-policymakers-and-development>

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