

## ➤ Are “Climate Migrants” Real?

Alex de Sherbinin, Associate Director for Science Applications, Center for International Earth Science Information Network, The Earth Institute, Columbia University

Scholarship on climate-induced migration and displacement is evolving, with ever greater recognition that—with the exception of direct displacement owing to climate extremes—it is virtually impossible to distinguish “climate migrants” from other types of migrants.<sup>1</sup> In the developing world, underlying vulnerabilities, aspirations, and capabilities fundamentally shape the potential for migration to develop as an adaptation to climate impacts.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, those same vulnerabilities and impacts from multiple successive shocks may limit the capability to migrate, resulting in trapped populations.<sup>3</sup> Climate factors may thus be added to a list of drivers that includes underlying inequalities, conflict, failed governance, political disenfranchisement, and inadequate attention to local development.

Where climate variability and extremes contribute to migration, they should be seen as the straw that breaks the camel’s back, and not as the primary driver. The most comprehensive report on environmental migration to date, the UK Government Foresight report, frames environmental factors as working through existing proximate social, economic, political, and demographic determinants of migration.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the parlance of the climate security community, climate factors might be seen as “risk multipliers” that increase the propensity to migrate owing to the other factors (e.g., failed crops increase the economic motivation for migration). Yet, a real risk lies in “blaming” climate change for migration, insofar as it allows political and economic elites to

dodge the issue of responsibility for the systems that generate underlying vulnerability (or propensity to migrate). Others have argued that a focus on climate only heightens already high levels of anxiety among those in precarious circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

As someone who has helped to generate widely cited estimates of future climate migration using modeling techniques, this de-emphasis of climate factors and rejection of the term “climate migrants” may appear to be a contradiction.<sup>6</sup> The World Bank’s Groundswell report was intended to raise the profile of the issue among policymakers in developing countries so that proactive interventions in potential migrant sending and receiving areas may be taken. By defining spatial hotspots of future in- and out-migration, the report went beyond past efforts that developed crude estimates by providing policymakers with some guidance on where interventions might need to be developed (not just what needs to be done).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it was couched in terms that deliberately avoided alarmism regarding mass migration from the Global South to the North by specifically focusing on internal population redistribution within countries of the South. The main message of the report is that while climate impacts by 2050 have the potential to severely alter productive systems in many regions, “climate migrants” will be indistinguishable from other migrants, and they therefore deserve the same protections.

A strong argument can be made that migration, when properly managed, can assist in adaptation by increasing the resilience of migrants and sending communities.<sup>8</sup> First, migration of individuals or households to less risky or more suitable environments can reduce exposure to climate hazards. This can be true in a number of environments, such as agricultural areas suffering recurrent droughts or coastal areas repeatedly affected by storm surge and flood. Second, at a household-level, migration of one or more individuals can be part of a livelihood diversification strategy, whereby remittances from household members in destination areas help to support the economic unit and smooth out household consumption during times of local deficit. Third, migration can increase household assets and thereby resilience to climate change. Fourth, migration can reduce the number of mouths to feed in a household, especially during the dry season in agricultural regions, thereby increasing food security for those who remain behind. Lastly, return migrants can bring new skills and technologies back to the communities they left.<sup>9</sup>

It would be a misinterpretation to say that if climate migrants are not a separate category, then no development interventions are needed to improve living standards in source areas or to adapt to climate impacts. By the same token, it would be wrong to say that development actors do not need to address the impacts engendered by a potential increase in numbers of migrants in destination areas. As Barnett and Adger point out, “although migration may be a means to adaptation to environmental change it is no substitute for investments in adaptation such that people have the right to choose whether to

migrate.”<sup>10</sup> In most rural areas, more people stay than migrate, and many do not wish to migrate.<sup>11</sup> Improving lives in rural areas is a moral obligation. On the other hand, small, medium, and large cities are likely to be destination areas for migration, and efforts need to be made to facilitate the integration of migrants and avoid discriminatory practices.<sup>12</sup> The Global Compact for Migration has a number of measures embedded in it that promote migrant protections.

As mentioned, climate-induced population displacements may be more directly attributable to climate change impacts than migration. Although the science of attribution of extreme events to climate change is still relatively new,<sup>13</sup> it is widely recognized that climate change is already increasing both the frequency and severity of extreme events.<sup>14</sup> The policy mechanisms for addressing this are largely in the area of disaster risk reduction (e.g., the Sendai Framework), while efforts such as the Platform for Disaster Displacement (PDD) are promoting regional inter-state agreements to provide refuge for those displaced across borders.

If pure climate migrants do not exist, then similarly, pure “climate refugees” are largely a construct that has sought to raise awareness of the potential importance of climate as a possible contributor to refugee flows.<sup>15</sup> Few refugees seek asylum in other countries owing to climate impacts in their home countries, despite some studies that have sought to draw causal linkages.<sup>16</sup> That said, there is legitimate concern about mass migration, and research in certain contexts does suggest causal linkages between climate factors, conflict, and refugee flows.<sup>17</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that the legal

system governing international refugee flows, designed for a different world in the aftermath of World War II, is broken.<sup>18</sup> Katz relates the story of a woman who was forced to leave Cameroon owing to political violence against English speakers:

“The leaders who created international refugee policy never envisioned people like Rose, a middle-class 39-year-old woman [who fled for safety to Japan] from a conflict the rest of the world isn’t paying attention to. Violent flash points rooted in all kinds of new phenomena—police corruption, climate change, gang warfare—now dot the Earth, creating the conditions for the worst protracted migration crisis since World War II. The pull to more stable corners of the planet is more potent now, too, given social-media postings from cousins and friends abroad who amplify (and often inflate) newfound opportunity. And given relatively affordable airline travel, plus the ubiquity of smartphones—which ease language, navigation, and homesickness challenges—moving is logistically easier now.<sup>19</sup>”

The article goes on to show how the standard criteria used by immigration services to screen fraudulent asylum claims no longer work in world where complex drivers intertwine and reinforce one another. The solutions for addressing the global refugee crisis are largely political in nature; devising new categories of refugees and designing legal protections for “climate refugees” are not likely to fix the system.<sup>20</sup>

While the potential for crossing borders has diminished owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, movement will likely pick up again once restrictions ease. As the world is expected to experience both increased

internal and international migration owing to multifactorial drivers (climate change and extremes among them), governments and aid agencies need to adopt a number of programmatic and policy approaches:

1. Enable people to adapt to climate change and increase their resilience to climate and other shocks through in situ adaptation measures that address sustainable livelihoods and disaster risk reduction;
2. For those who want to leave their home areas owing to declining local livelihoods, adopt policies that facilitate mobility (both internal and international) as a strategy to support adaptation;
3. Where residents are “trapped” owing to declining livelihoods and high levels of poverty, support people to move away from hazardous areas through planned relocation; and,
4. Prepare destination areas to better receive migrants.

In closing, while it is very difficult to predict the future with any certainty, my collaboration with climate scientists and familiarity with the literature on projected climate impacts has convinced me that the climate crisis is real and will be extremely disruptive. The world is likely to confront more messy situations with complex underlying causal mechanisms, and messy situations generate many people fleeing for safety or looking for hope somewhere else. Simple and politically expedient solutions (e.g., “build the wall!”) will consign much of the world to immense suffering, the roots of which can be traced partially to unfair trade policies, migration restrictions, and historic emissions in the

Global North. Messy situations demand more nuanced solutions. The deck is stacked against poor farmers in the developing world on multiple levels; migration is one of the few forms of agency available to them. We owe it to them to come to better, more equitable solutions.

#### Research Questions:

The following is a list of research directions that are emerging in the field:

- What is the role of perceptions versus “facts” related to climate change and climate impacts? In other words, are perceptions more important? If so, how are they influenced by experience, local narratives, and climate projections and other data?
- Since migration decision-making is complex and multifactorial, what methods can be devised to better understand the additional “nudge” of climate factors?
- Why do some people not move despite seemingly worsening conditions?
- What does “assisting” or “facilitating” migration look like in practice?
- How can towns and cities be better prepared for migration?
- While the potential source areas have been widely studied, what are the likely destination areas for migrants in the future—whether within countries, regions, or globally?

## Endnotes

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