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Authors: Steve Vertovec, Robert McLeman

Policy Briefing Note Nr. 2: Embracing complexity when discussing the impacts of climate change on migration

Networking Unit
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(NUPS)

Working group 3
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Challenge

Policymakers, media and a general public often seek simple explanations and solutions to complex challenges. The impacts of climate change on migration – and the potential responses – are context-specific, and generate a wide variety of potential outcomes. How can researchers explain this complexity in ways that don't alienate the audience?

Background

Climatic events and conditions – particular floods, extreme storms, droughts and wildfires – have direct and indirect impacts on migration and displacement. The specific nature of the outcomes varies considerably from one location or event to another, and may include:

- Decreases in the number of people migrating
- Increases in the number of people migrating
- Changes in the timing or duration of migration
- Changes in migration source locations and destinations

There are several reasons for this wide range of potential outcomes. First, different types of climatic events have different impacts. Sudden-onset events, such as floods, storms and fires, damage housing and infrastructure, necessitating short-term evacuation from affected areas. When – and if – people return depends heavily on the scale of damage and the speed and effectiveness of recovery efforts, which in turn depend heavily on institutional disaster recovery capacity. By contrast, slower emerging hazards like drought allow more opportunity for adaptation, with migration emerging only after other options have been exhausted.

Second, climate adaptation and migration options are heavily mediated by wealth, physical wellbeing, age, gender roles, community relationships, social networks, and other factors that vary considerably from one household to another. As a result, what may be a manageable climate hazard for one household may displace another that is less adaptable.

Third, larger scale economic, social, political, and demographic processes are continually changing, and the attributes of populations exposed to climatic hazards changes with them. In many countries, population growth rates are highest in urban centers situated in low-lying coastal areas and river valleys. In other words, more people are living in increasingly hazardous locations each year. These higher level processes also shape where migrants may wish to move, and where they can move. Even though there is unmet labour market demand for workers in many OECD countries, many of these same countries erect legal and physical barriers to would-be migrants for political reasons.

Policy decisions that fail to recognize the underlying complexity of climate-migration interactions have weak potential for success in building adaptive capacity in areas exposed to climatic risks, and may potentially increase the vulnerability of households and communities.

Responding to the challenge

Policy discussions focus heavily on how to define climate-related migration – often as narrowly as possible. A common debate is whether people involuntarily displaced by weather and climate events should be added to the categories of people protected under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or whether a new, separate international agreement should be drafted. This in many ways misses the point. Because most climate-related population movements are multi-causal, finding a single definition to describe them all is inevitably contentious. It also distracts attention from the need to pursue actions to reduce the vulnerability of people to climate hazards, to build adaptive capacity so that fewer people are displaced by such events when they occur, and to create pathways for safe, legal and orderly migration by people who wish to access labour markets so as to earn and remit money to build resilience in their home communities.

Fortunately, the necessary international agreements and policy making tools to respond to climate-related migration, both voluntary and involuntary, already exist. Best practices for preventing displacement and humanitarian crises due to sudden onset weather events are laid out in the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction. On top of committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – which is at the root of the challenge – signatory countries to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have agreed to build adaptive capacity in vulnerable countries and to work toward reducing the risks of climate-related displacements.

There is even a Task Force on Displacement whose role is to enhance cooperation and facilitation among signatories with respect to migration, displacement and planned relocations. There is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which provides expert guidance to UN member states on migration in its many forms, including climate-related migration and displacement. And finally, there are the Sustainable Development Goals, the successful achievement of which would go a long way to building climate resilience in low- and middle-income countries and reducing future risks of involuntary displacements.

A key role for the research community is to provide tangible examples to governments and the wider public of how these and other policy tools that already exist can address the risks of climate change whilst simultaneously facilitating high-agency migration that supports climate resilient development pathways. The best mix of policies and actions will often vary from one situation to another, and providing decisionmakers with guidance on how to select the appropriate responses is another area where researchers can contribute. The relationship between climate and migration is inherently complex and requires integrated responses that draw upon multiple policy domains, the good news is that pathways forward are readily identifiable.

Further reading

Cissé G et al. 2022. Health, Wellbeing, and the Changing Structure of Communities. In *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Pörtner H-O et al. (eds). Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

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