

Thematic Reading

Climate Change, Migration and Conflict April 2015

Overview

Associations between climate change, migration and conflict are complex. Migration is inherently multi-causal, which precludes accurately identifying and quantifying solely ‘climate’ migrants. Most climate- or environment-related migration is likely to be internal, temporary and gradual. Climate impacts may also limit migration by reducing the capital required to move, and trapping some populations in vulnerable areas. Populations will relocate towards as well as away from vulnerable zones, e.g. floodplains in urban areas. Such population movements create climate-fragility risks mainly through their interaction with livelihood security and uncontrolled and badly managed urbanisation.

Key Reading

United Kingdom Government Office for Science, ‘Migration and Global Environmental Change’

This report provides the most comprehensive and nuanced overview of environmental change and migration linkages, as well as policy frameworks for responding.

Among its strongest arguments are that environmental change is equally likely to make migration less possible as more probable, creating populations trapped in vulnerable circumstances which present an important policy concern. Not relocating to another area is likely to increase humanitarian suffering, vulnerability and reduce livelihood security, and ultimately increase the likelihood of people being displaced or migrating in more vulnerable circumstances.

The report also makes the case that planned and well-managed migration can be one important way to reduce risks and increase resilience. The authors argue that proactively facilitating migration will prevent a worse and more costly situation in the future; some degree of planned and pre-emptive migration of individuals or groups may ultimately allow households and populations to remain in situ for longer. The authors question the assumption that migration is the negative and unwanted consequence of a failure to mitigate or reduce environmental change.

The importance of urban areas is emphasized in the report; improving living conditions, resilience and the capacities of cities to prepare for and adapt to population influx are listed among the most effective policies to address tensions and conflict. It proposes considering the establishment of new urban centres, due to the severity of existing urban planning challenges in many destination cities.

The report provides a strategic policy framework for a highly uncertain future, usefully targeted at national-level governance. This recommends a more comprehensive perspective than attempting to restrict migration, one that focuses on reducing the impact of environmental

change, planning for and responding to both migration and non-migration (immobility or being 'trapped') influenced by global environmental change, and recognising opportunities for migration as an adaptation strategy that can increase individuals' long-term resilience to environmental change.

>> United Kingdom Government Office for Science (2011): ['Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change - Future Challenges and Opportunities'](#), Final Project Report, The Government Office for Science, London.

Additional Reading

No other exploration of the climate, migration and security nexus is as comprehensive as the key reading. These additional reports demonstrate in detail how these effects are manifesting in regions where climatic changes are already evident.

United Nations Environment Programme, 'Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel'

This report examines one of the regions most often cited as vulnerable to the dynamic of climate change, migration and conflict. Chapter 4: 'Understanding climate-related conflict and migration trends in the Sahel' is the most relevant section, succinctly illustrating farmer-herder conflicts, competition over scarce resources and migration patterns, with detailed case studies grounded in field observation.

Climate change is framed through its impacts on the natural resource dependent livelihoods of herders, farmers and fishermen, as greater competition increases tensions and violent conflict between livelihood groups and ethnic groups. Urban areas are identified as pressure points, as receiving cities are frequently ill-equipped to absorb new populations and struggle with issues of infrastructure, along with larger challenges associated with integration and inequality.

>> United Nations Environment Programme (2011): ['Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel'](#), United Nations Environment Programme, Geneva.

Center for American Progress: 'Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict in South Asia: Rising Tensions and Policy Options across the Subcontinent'

This report's examination of tensions and vulnerabilities in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh provides insights into the underlying demographic, economic, disaster vulnerability and security trends shaping the region and the risks posed by long-term climate and migration trajectories. Focusing particularly on the Indian border state of Assam, it outlines how unauthorised Bangladeshi migrants – actual or perceived – have long been a source of interethnic and border security tensions, and how climate-related pressures on livelihoods, disasters and urbanisation could exacerbate these. Although oriented toward the US policy context, its policy recommendations are relevant more widely.

>> Bhattacharyya, Arpita / Michael Werz (2012): ['Climate change, Migration, and Conflict in South Asia: Rising Tensions and Policy Options across the Subcontinent'](#) Center for American Progress, Washington DC.