



CLIMATE CHANGE, INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND YOUTH*

Chapter 17

Climate change has the potential to uproot large numbers of people. In many cases these movements will represent part of a positive adaptation strategy for families seeking improved livelihoods and habitat. In other cases it will take the form of displacement resulting from acute natural hazards or competition-related conflict, while in still others people will be relocated from areas that are no longer able to sustain human life. Often the most willing to take risks to better themselves, youth are likely to be at the vanguard of those migrating in anticipation of further environmental decline in their communities. While much of this migration is likely to be internal, from rural to urban areas, an unknown – but likely significant – portion of young people will migrate internationally.

The impacts on youth and the communities to which they migrate will vary significantly depending on the circumstances in which these movements take place. With the aging of populations in many highly developed countries, some youth will fill jobs in important economic sectors. Some will be able to take advantage of work programmes and migrate legally, but others will find the front door of legal immigration closed and will attempt to migrate outside legal channels. Those who migrate because events foreclose other options may face protracted periods of displacement. Still others will move as part of planned relocation programmes that resettle them in distant lands.

Migration can have both positive and negative impacts on youth. As greater risk-takers, youth may precede other members of their households to new communities or countries and establish themselves before bringing others to join them. In some cases, they will prosper and be able to help others to adapt to rapidly changing environments. When they are able to migrate legally, the benefits are likely to be greater. When youth migrate irregularly, the experience will likely be less beneficial for all – except smugglers and exploitative employers. In these cases, a combination of protection measures and opportunities to gain legal status in their destination country can make their experience more beneficial.

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For adolescents and youth who find themselves in protracted situations of displacement – growing up in camps or impoverished urban settings with little access to education, livelihoods, or stable environments, or trafficked into sexual or labour exploitation – the impact of climate change will be highly negative. Finding solutions that render adolescents, youth and their families less vulnerable to long-term displacement and trafficking should be a priority for the international community.

POPULATION CHANGE, CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION

The interactions between population change, climate change and migration are complex. New population trends will have impacts on climate change and on the likelihood of migration. Moreover, different populations will be differentially affected by climate change and will either choose, or be forced, to migrate or to adapt to climate change.

The Foresight Project refers to five principal drivers of migration: political, economic, social, environmental and demographic, with each influencing the others and, in turn, influencing the scale and characteristics of migration. Demographic drivers “include the size and structure of populations in source areas, together with the prevalence of diseases that affect morbidity and mortality.”¹

Age structure, not just overall population size, is important to understand the drivers of migration. It is in this context that adolescents and youth play an important role. As noted elsewhere in this report around 27 million youth live outside the country in which they were born. Many of these young people are in developing countries, while many of the world’s jobs are in developed countries. Demographic factors intersect with economic ones when there is high unemployment or underemployment in source countries and unmet demand for workers in destination countries. The Foresight Report concludes: “young populations tend to be a source of migrants, whereas ageing populations in many European (and even Asian) countries may create a demand for migration.”²

Environmental drivers may compound the situation when such factors as prolonged droughts, rising sea levels and coastal erosion further reduce employment opportunities for youth. Little research has been devoted to the impact of climate change on youth employment. The State of the World’s Population 2009 Youth

Supplement, which takes an anecdotal approach, provides some instructive insights through profiles of several young people facing the results of climate change in different parts of the world.³ They represent dual sides of the climate change and youth nexus. Some are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to occupations that are common to youth worldwide. Others demonstrate youth resilience and willingness to experiment with new approaches and strategies. For all, migration from the effects of climate change represents both risk and opportunity.

Small island developing states are emblematic of this tension. The high rates of adolescent and youth migration from these states in the Pacific are harbingers of patterns that may well be intensified by climate change. “Data for Pacific Islands show much higher net losses starting as early as late teen ages, with one-third of female youth cohorts and close to 40 per cent of males 25-29 emigrating from Samoa (and a similar situation occurs in Tonga and Cook Island), 20 per cent and 25 per cent of respectively female and male Marshallese aged 20-24, and between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of 20-to-34-year-olds leaving Fiji.”⁴

Box 17.1. Climate change in Asia and the Pacific

The population in the three Pacific sub-regions (Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia) and the overall Pacific population will increase over the next decades. Young people will represent a large and mobile group, while the effects of climate change will also be increasingly felt, especially sea-level rise and increased incidence of cyclones. Thus having access to migration opportunities will be of increasing significance for these populations, in a region already dependent on remittances.

Source: Asian Development Bank, “Addressing Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific,” 2012.

The Foresight Report notes, however, that these very situations may leave large numbers of people unable to migrate due to lack of resources and may, in fact, produce a ‘trapped population’ that is unable to get out of harm’s way. Many adolescents and youth emigrate because they possess the educational and financial resources to do so, while the ‘trapped’ population may well be older individuals of both sexes who remain behind to take care of young children, or who lack the resources needed to migrate. These communities will resemble those already found in areas with prolonged high rates of internal and international labour migration.

OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND GOOD PRACTICES

The scenarios presented above have implications for several areas of policy making: adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies to address emigration pressures, immigration policies in potential destination countries and development policies. In each case, the migration ramifications of climate change for youth represent both opportunities and challenges.

Adaptation and disaster risk reduction

Adaptation and disaster risk reduction can involve either: (a) steps to reduce the need for individuals to migrate to get out of harm's way, or (b) migration as an adaptation or risk-reduction strategy, which allows a community or household to cope with changes and, perhaps, reduce risk for others. Adaptation refers to "initiatives and measures to reduce the vulnerability of natural and human systems against actual or expected climate change effects."⁵ Disaster risk reduction involves "systematic efforts to analyse and manage the causal factors of disasters, including through reduced exposure to hazards, lessened vulnerability of people and property, wise management of land and the environment, and improved preparedness for adverse events."⁶

The Copenhagen Accord adopted at the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2009 highlighted the importance of adaptation strategies:

Adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change and the potential impacts of response measures is a challenge faced by all countries. Enhanced action and international cooperation on adaptation is urgently required to ensure the implementation of the Convention by enabling and supporting the implementation of adaptation actions aimed at reducing vulnerability and building resilience in developing countries, especially in those that are particularly vulnerable; especially least developed countries, small island developing States and Africa. We agree that developed countries shall provide adequate, predictable and sustainable financial resources, technology and capacity-building to support the implementation of adaptation action in developing countries.

National adaptation programmes of action (NAPAs) are, to date, the principal mechanisms through which low-income developing countries identify adaptation needs and programmes.

Adaptation strategies related to migration fall into two major categories. First, and more commonly, governments view adaptation as a way to reduce migration pressures through risk-reduction measures that allow people to remain where they are, such as: modifying agricultural practices, management of pastoral lands, infrastructure such as dykes and coastal barriers, fishing patterns and other strategies to reduce pressures on fragile eco-systems. Bangladesh, for example, in its NAPA seeks to combat salinisation, to slow the “social consequences of mass-scale migration to cities.” Other approaches focus on early warning and emergency preparedness to reduce displacement from natural disasters associated with climate change.

Second, migration is seen as an adaptation strategy in and of itself. Some countries view migration as a way to reduce population pressures in places with fragile eco-systems; others recognise that resettlement of some populations may be inevitable, but should be accomplished with proper planning. In still other cases, migrants already living outside of vulnerable areas are seen as potential resources to help communities adapt and respond to climate change. Just as migrants are contributing to the development of their countries of origin, adaptation strategies envision that the Diaspora may have the technical knowledge and financial resources to help communities cope with the effects of climate change.

International migration policies

Immigration laws in most destination countries are not conducive to receiving environmental migrants, unless they enter through existing admission categories.⁷ Typically, destination countries admit persons to fill job openings or to reunify with family members. Employment-based admissions are usually based on labour market needs in the receiving country, not the situation in the sending country. Family admissions are usually restricted to persons with immediate relatives (spouses, children, parents, etc.) in the destination country.

Humanitarian admissions are generally limited to refugees and asylum seekers; that is, those who fit the definition in the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees:

persons with a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Most environmental migrants will be unlikely to meet these legal definitions.

Some countries have established special policies that permit individuals whose countries have experienced natural disasters or other severe upheavals to remain, at least temporarily, without fear of deportation. The United States, for example, enacted legislation in 1990 to provide temporary protected status to persons “in the United States who are temporarily unable to safely return to their home country because of on-going armed conflict, an environmental disaster, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions.” However this status only applies to persons already in the U.S.; it was not designed as a response to an unfolding crisis in which people seek admission from outside the country.

Sweden and Finland include environmental migrants within their immigration policies. Sweden includes within its asylum system persons who do not qualify for refugee status, but have a need for protection, including from an “environmental disaster.”⁸ Decisions are made on an individual basis, and may sometimes include permanent solutions. Similarly, in the Finnish Aliens Act, “aliens residing in the country are issued with a residence permit on the basis of a need for protection if...they cannot return because of an armed conflict or environmental disaster.”⁹

A number of countries offer exceptions for persons whose countries of origin have experienced significant disruption because of natural disasters, such as occurred following the 2004 tsunami. Several governments announced similar plans after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. However, no international law compels, or even encourages, other governments to adopt similar policies.

Similarly, no legislation or policies address the migration of persons from slow-onset climate changes that may, in the future, destroy habitats or livelihoods.¹⁰ For the most part, movements from gradual-onset climate change and other environmental factors that limit economic opportunities are treated in the same manner as economically motivated migration, usually resulting in mandatory return or deportation.

The paucity of immigration policies appropriate for environmentally induced migration has particular relevance for three groups of adolescents and youth: irregular migrants, trafficked adolescents and youth, and those in situations of protracted displacement.

Irregular youth migration: Climate change exacerbates the conditions that already cause many children and youth to migrate without official authorisation. These problems will no doubt increase in scope and difficulty, given the lack of policies addressing the complex links between environmental change and migration.

Trafficked adolescents and youth: Among the many climate-related displacement scenarios are emergency movements from frequent and intense acute natural hazards and conflict related to competition for scarce resources. Each scenario heightens vulnerability to trafficking for adolescents and youth, particularly when these events strip away economic opportunities and trigger breakdowns of law and order. While all affected persons are vulnerable to trafficking when they lose their means of livelihood and community protection, those who have already been displaced by conflict or natural hazards are particularly at risk. Displacement strips away economic opportunities, terminates dependable employment and educational opportunities, induces extreme forms of isolation and poverty, and destroys social structures. Many displaced persons struggle to survive with inadequate shelter, little or no access to food, basic healthcare, hygiene or protection. These conditions leave young people disoriented and less able to resist exploitation as they desperately search for a means of survival.

Although trafficking during conflict related to competition for scarce resources takes many forms, the trafficking of children, adolescents and youth into armed groups and the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation are two of the most common. Climate change may well increase the number and frequency of crisis events, leading to a need for more effective policies and programmes to address trafficking in these contexts. Current strategies focus on the 4Ps.¹¹ These approaches need to pay special attention to the trafficking of adolescents and youth in the context of climate change, including those on the move to seek economic opportunities in anticipation of, or response to, environmental impacts, or, even more urgently, those displaced by climate-related natural disasters and conflict.

Adolescents, youth and protracted displacement: Young people displaced by climate change for extended periods face further challenges. Experiences in refugee and displaced persons camps – where stays average 17 years – are indicative. Many refugees are born in and experience their entire childhood or adolescence as displaced persons, with limited access to education, training or employment opportunities. Those displaced across international borders will lack work authorisation; if they find work, it is often in the informal economy or under exploitative conditions, with no legal recourse or protections. Since education at the primary and secondary levels may not be available to them, especially if they lack legal status, these youths’ prospects for economic advancement are bleak. In camp settings, their physical mobility is often restricted as well. International aid organisations, rather than parents, are seen as the principal providers of food, shelter, clothing and other items. One article describes ‘angry young men’ with no male role models to provide guidance on how to follow productive paths. Not surprisingly, young people may resort to alcohol, drugs and violence.

REPATRIATION, INTEGRATION, RESETTLEMENT

Traditionally, there are three solutions available for refugees and internationally displaced persons: repatriation to countries of origin, integration into countries of refuge and resettlement to third countries. Repatriation generally requires a change in the conditions that caused the displacement; in the case of climate change-induced displacement, this may be impossible due to extensive destruction of habitat. Integration in countries of asylum often proves difficult for refugee adolescents and youth and other displaced populations. Many climate-displaced will have gone to under-developed neighbouring countries that may suffer the same impacts of climate change as their country of origin. Moreover, fearing that integration of the displaced will reduce international assistance and lead to competition between the displaced and locals for jobs, neighbouring countries may be unwilling to permit settlement outside of established camps. Destination countries may continue to restrict access to employment and local services with the expectation that the international community should support the displaced.

However, local integration can benefit both the displaced and host communities. The Hon. Lawrence K. Masha, MP Minister for Home Affairs, The United Republic of Tanzania, described the thinking behind his country's offer of citizenship to Burundian refugees:

With refugees, partnerships can entail taking a community-based approach; with host governments it can encompass joint problem analysis and the implementation of programmes that benefit both refugees and host populations; with development actors it requires persistence and advocacy to ensure refugees and refugee-hosting areas are both taken into account on development agendas; and with the international community (governmental and non-governmental) it involves joining forces to ensure that responsibilities and burdens are shared.”¹²

Adolescents and youth are both the principal beneficiaries and principal contributors to such a win-win situation, as they are the breadwinners of the future.

Third-country resettlement is the other option available to resolve protracted displacements, and may well be the option of choice for those who face relocation from countries inundated by rising sea levels. However, the limited number of slots currently available for resettlement of refugees raises questions about whether such relocation will be forthcoming in large enough numbers. In 2011 alone UNHCR estimates that 172,300 persons needed resettlement. Although some 25 countries participate in the resettlement programme, only 80,000 resettlement slots are available worldwide.

CONCLUSION

Research on the interconnections between climate change, international migration and youth is in its infancy. Few empirical studies have identified the precise impacts of climate change on youth and still fewer have made linkages to the literature on migration and youth. Given the complex range of factors that influence migration, and the recognition that environmental factors are seldom determinative in migration, filling this information gap is essential. Policymakers seldom want to hear that more research is needed on an emergent issue, but it would be foolhardy to lead with anything else in the case of climate change, migration and youth.

KEY MESSAGES

- Adolescents and youth tend to be among the most mobile populations. They are often risk-takers who are resilient in the face of change. To the extent that climate change impedes economic opportunities and exacerbates un- and under-employment among adolescents and youth, migration is likely to be a key adaptation strategy.
- Proactive approaches are needed. Support for disaster risk reduction and conflict-mediation strategies, while strengthening capacities for humanitarian response, can also help prevent climate-driven migration. Governments that fail to take action now to reduce risks to youth from acute crises will be called upon to help later, when the problem will be much more difficult to address. Special attention should be paid to the negative impacts of protracted displacement on youth.
- Current laws, policies and institutional arrangements are inadequate to deal with complex human mobility. Guiding principles are needed today to shape thinking about how to manage potential larger-scale relocation in the future. It is particularly important to strengthen systems for disaster response in challenging political and security environments. Youth will be disproportionately affected as potential victims and perpetrators of violence.
- Protection for people displaced by climate change consequences remains a huge gap. Migration laws in most countries are not conducive to receiving, providing protection, or realizing human rights for environmental migrants. Most environmental migrants will be unlikely to meet legal definitions or other conditions for employment-based admissions, family admissions or humanitarian admissions to destination countries. However, several countries have established policies to include some environmental migrants in immigration policies, labour admissions or temporary protection.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Help youth migrate in safety and dignity. When migration is the best, or only, adaptation strategy, effective policy responses can help to ensure that movements are orderly and safe. Policies should seek to avert situations where youth are forced to move (distress migration) or to move during emergencies. Special attention should be paid to providing alternatives to irregular migration and, when the impacts of climate change preclude return to countries of origin, the focus should be on permanent admissions.

- Provide protection. A concerted international effort is needed to identify a framework of principles and measures for access to safe haven and protection of rights of persons displaced by climate change/environmental degradation.
- Involve the Diaspora in designing and funding adaptation strategies that enable youth to cope more effectively with climate change. Just as the important role of Diasporas in promoting development has only recently been recognised, their role in adaptation deserves greater attention.
- Participatory policy planning. Involve affected communities in policy planning and implementation of human mobility solutions. Recognise that youth can be effective partners in addressing climate change-induced migration, and ensure their involvement in consultations about their future. In some cases this may mean site identification for relocation projects, in others it may mean development of alternative livelihoods or agricultural practices to ease migration pressures.

NOTES

¹ Foresight Project (2011), p. 44. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/foresight/docs/migration/11-1116-migration-and-global-environmental-change.pdf>

² *Ibid*, p. 45.

³ UNFPA (2009), *State of the World's Population: At the Frontier: Young People and Climate Change*, New York.

⁴ Jean Louis Rallu (2008), "Population, Migration and Development in Asia, With Special Emphasis on the South Pacific: The Impact of Migration on Population and The MDGs," UN Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, Thailand, 20-21 September 2008.

⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007), "Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability." IPCC Fourth Assessment Report: Working Group II Report. Geneva: IPCC, Appendix 1, "Glossary" p. 869.

⁶ UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2009). "Terminology on disaster risk reduction".

⁷ M. Leighton (2010), "Climate change and migration: key issues for legal protection of migrants and displaced persons", Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States; P. Martin (2010), "Climate change, agricultural development and migration," Background Papers of the Study Team on Climate Change and Migration, Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States; J. McAdam (2011), "Climate change, displacement and the role of international law and policy." Paper prepared for the International Dialogue on Migration, 29–30 March 2011.

⁸ Aliens Act (2005:716), Issued: 29 September 2005, with amendments: up to and including Swedish Code of Statutes 2009:16; Chapter 4. Refugees and persons otherwise in need of protection.

⁹ V. Kolmannskog (2009), "Climate change-related displacement and the European response," Paper presented at the Society for International Development (SID), Vijverberg Session on Climate Change and Migration, The Hague, January 2009.

¹⁰ New Zealand's Pacific Access Category (PAC) is sometimes described as climate change and migration legislation. Under PAC, 75 people from Tuvalu, 75 from Kiribati, and 250 from Tonga (islands subject to rising sea levels) may immigrate to New Zealand each year. However, the programme is based on employment, not environmental, factors. The immigrants must be between 18-45 years old, have English skills and an offer of employment in New Zealand, meet minimum income requirements, undergo a health check and have no history of illegal entrance. The programme is not intended to provide access to those who may be most vulnerable to climate change-induced displacement—such as the elderly or the infirm.

¹¹ The 4 Ps are: prevention of trafficking; protection of trafficked persons; prosecution and effective penalties for those who traffic; and partnerships among the public and private institutions that hold potential for curbing trafficking activities, reducing vulnerability to trafficking and protecting those who have been trafficked.

¹² "Burden Sharing And Protracted Situations," Presentation By Hon. Lawrence K. Masha, Mp Minister For Home Affairs, The United Republic Of Tanzania, during The African Union Special Summit On Refugees, Returnees And Internally Displaced Persons, Kampala, Uganda, 22/10/2009.