

Science for Environment Policy

Human migration as a result of climate change: how should governments respond?

Human migration as a result of climate change is now a reality. People across Africa, Asia and Latin America are moving in response to unpredictable rainfall patterns. The governments of Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea and small island states, such as the Solomon Islands, have already had to resettle people because of rising seas. A recent policy brief, published by the Institute for Environment and Human Security of the United Nations University, examines this issue and makes recommendations for policy.

The authors explored different facets of human movements as a result of [climate change](#). They discuss the importance of recognising that these movements can be internal within a country or international; voluntary or forced; and either temporary or permanent. They can be the result of displacement, migration or planned relocation. Importantly, the needs of affected people can vary across all of these categories.

Such movements occur in response to several different impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels, desertification or permafrost melt may render some areas uninhabitable. Increased frequency of storms, floods, cyclones and heat-waves may force people to relocate, sometimes in the long term. Changes to regional weather systems may reduce access to essential resources such as water, as well as affecting livelihoods, especially fishing and farming. Finally, these impacts, either in isolation or combined, may result in conflict, again displacing people.

Research as part of the EU-funded EACH-FOR¹ project examined 22 case studies in six regions of the world to demonstrate that rapidly changing environmental conditions are now driving changes to migration patterns. Another project, focusing on refugees from Ethiopia and Uganda found that worsening weather patterns caused resource scarcity, exacerbating pre-existing conflicts. In addition, these conflicts severely affected the refugees' abilities to deal with climate-related stresses.

[Research in Africa, Asia and Latin America](#)² revealed that seasonal, temporary and even permanent migration is already being used to manage risks associated with rainfall variability and food insecurity, which are both worsening under climate change. Most migration is within national borders, the researchers found, and the majority of migrants are men, although the number of women is rising.

The policy brief emphasises the need to distinguish between resilient and vulnerable groups of people, both of which might migrate in response to climate change. Resilient people (those which tend to have more assets, education and access to adaptation strategies) use voluntary migration as a way of enhancing their resilience. This might involve a move to a non-agricultural job in the city, for example. Conversely, vulnerable people have fewer assets and may be forced to move for survival, in search of food, or work to buy food.

Continued on next page.



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Changing Climate, Moving People: Framing Migration, Displacement and Planned Relocation. Policy Brief No. 8. Bonn: United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS).

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1.Environmental Changes and Forced Migration Scenarios (EACH-FOR) was supported by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme. See: <http://www.ccema-portal.org/article/read/each-for-project-publications> .
2.Warner, K., *et al.* (2012). Where the Rain Falls: Climate Change, Food and Livelihood Security, and Migration. *Global Policy Report of the Where the Rain Falls Project*. Bonn: UNU and CARE. Available from www.wheretherainfalls.org.

The brief's authors recommend that, where possible, policy should support a transition toward livelihoods that are not climate dependent. Particular focus should be given to those that are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. For example, these individuals should be prioritised by national schemes for improved education or vocational training. Indeed, it is vital that states do not wait until migration has begun before making provisions for access to housing, land and property for people displaced by climate change. If conditions worsen to the point where the state must intervene to relocate populations, extreme care must be taken to reduce the negative effects of such a move. The brief highlights some key recommendations.

First, they assert, any forced relocation — where realistic options to choose from are no longer available — must be an absolute last resort. Second, planning is essential and any scheme should be part of a new sustainable development programme rather than a temporary measure. Third, it is vital that people to be moved are consulted on how the process could be best designed to work for them. Finally, the process does not end once people have moved. In their new homes they should be supported to restore and improve their livelihoods and incomes.

Policy should be designed to foster understanding and co-operation on this subject between neighbouring countries. While there is as yet no recognition that climate-displaced people be given refugee status, the human rights of climate-displaced people must be recognised. The brief concludes that more information on the complex impacts of migration and displacement is vital to create effective policy agreements for the future.

