

The socio-economic impacts of migration influenced by climate change

It is widely recognised that the drivers of migration are many; that they encompass economic, environmental, demographic and social factors; and that the impacts of climate variability and change are likely to alter migration pressures and flows into the future. Briefing paper no. 3 in this series, Future Migration in the Context of Climate Change, highlighted that over the next 40 years approximately 9.7 million people in Bangladesh are estimated to migrate in the long term from locations that are currently experiencing the impacts of climate stresses such as inland flooding, storm surges and riverbank erosion, although movements of less than a million of these additional migrants can be attributed to the added impact of climate change; with the remaining being due to the current context of climate-related stresses, economic needs and population growth. Shorter term and circular migration is expected to be even larger than these figures. This briefing paper explores the socio economic impacts of increased migration occurring in the context of climate variability and change.



Sewing is a skill that helps many migrant women get jobs in cities. Training is key to facilitate migration. Photo: Amir Jina

Recent academic studies have highlighted how migration can contribute to development goals, though the benefits of migration may vary across communities. However, when migrant networks are established in destination countries, the cost of migration falls, enabling those who are less well-off to migrate as well [1]. This trend applies to migration influenced by climate change as well. Thus remittances from migration may have a positive role in preparing households against natural disasters and in coping with loss after the event. In addition, migration in response to the heightened livelihood stresses and shocks related to the impacts of climate variability and change clearly does also in some instances remove the affected people from hazard-

ous locations, which is a direct form of 'adaptation'. In this briefing we summarise what are considered the benefits and costs of migration at local to national scales, before exploring the adaptive potential of migration and providing some policy suggestions related to maximising this potential.

Migration and development

Migration as an adaptation strategy

For those viewing migration optimistically, the impacts of remittances from both international and internal migration have traditionally been seen as leading to resource availability and improved income distribution in origin areas [2]. However, for those with a more pessimistic view of migration's development potential, out-migration from a region is seen as perpetuating a state of economic dependency and undermining prospects for development [3]. Alternative readings of migration have noted that while in the short term the negative costs of migration might dominate, ultimately in the long-term migration stimulates development (named the 'time perspective') [4]. Others have argued for the importance of the structural context in a country in determining whether the benefits of migration are positive or negative for development goals [5].

In this conception, migration is noted to be more likely to be beneficial if governments and institutions create "attractive investment environments and trust in political and legal institutions in the origin countries [and regions]" and through reducing barriers to migration of the relatively poor and lower skilled through giving access to residency rights, education and employment [5]. Under the right conditions migration can contribute both to economic growth and social development. For Bangladesh, financial remittances have been shown to play a significant role in the promotion of national economic growth [6, 7]. Remittances of internal migrants reach more households; however, international migration on short-term contracts has a greater potential to reduce poverty as wage differential is much higher in foreign destinations compared with cities within Bangladesh [7].

While migration has also been shown to stimulate a number of broad changes within familial and social relationships in sending locations, with out-migration promoting the upward and outward mobility of women, changing generational dynamics, the nature of mobilisation in local politics and sources of local political power [4]. Yet as suggested earlier, migration is not without its costs. For example, many migrants to Dhaka find themselves in poor housing prone to environmental hazards, with little access to health services and education and open to exploitation in terms of employment.

Adaptation is an adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities [8]. Migration is one among a wide spectrum of responses to changes in the environment that complement one another. "Within debates about adaptation to climate change, there has been an emerging trend to position migration as an adaptation strategy to environmental shocks and stresses. Migration may lead to reduction in vulnerability, through enhancement of livelihoods, reduce pressure on resources in origin communities, represent an income source that is not disrupted by environmental hazards, help people to better withstand the impacts of environmental stressors, and allow for better access to information and social networks" [9].

Of late there has been an increasing recognition of migration as an effective adaptation strategy that offsets the impacts of environmental shocks and stresses [10]. Starting or changing migration patterns could be an effective way to deal with disaster risk as well [11]. It could mean moving out of risk exposure, surviving seasons of hazard risk or lean productivity, earning extra income for disaster recovery, or improving and diversifying livelihoods when faced with processes such as soil degradation and erratic rainfall. Meanwhile remittances from migrants could boost adaptive capacity in their points of origin.

Migration could offset the vulnerability of households by improving access to resources, livelihood strategies, social networks, and accessibility. Overall it becomes an adaptive strategy in different and synergic ways. Adaptation can be a slow adjustment to livelihood patterns at community, household or individual levels. It could involve step-by-step improvements in existing systems, involving better resource management, income diversification, disaster preparedness measures or development programmes. Migration of a few members of the family could be part of adaptation. In areas that face climatic stress and shocks, people sustain their livelihoods by combining benefits from both rural and urban areas. The family takes the benefit of government programmes in health, education and nutrition and through migration earn better in cities.

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A community health worker conducting a survey in an informal settlement in Dhaka. If migration is to be facilitated or encouraged, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive policy to protect the rights of the internal migrants. It includes easy access to healthcare and education. Photo: DFID — UK Department for International Development

Policy implications

Policies can increase the development outcomes of migration, whereas a lack of policy or a set of restrictive policies can be counterproductive. According to the recent Foresight report on Migration and Global Environmental Change [12], a proactive policy towards migration influenced by environmental change should not be based on a presumption that people should stay where they are, especially if that involves staying in increasingly vulnerable locations.

However, if migration is to be facilitated or encouraged, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive policy to protect the rights of internal migrants, covering wages, working hours, and prevention of child labour practices, as well as safety, health and environmental improvements in the workplace.

This is especially important in the garment, brick kiln and construction sectors, where many internal migrants congregate. Policies could also encourage providing training and imparting skills for urban jobs.

Such interventions could focus on locations where the livelihood pressures of climate variability and change are the strongest, so ensuring that the best possible benefits of migration for the poorest of the community are realised. Furthermore, investment opportunities (for remittances) could be encouraged in places that are resilient to climate impacts in the most exposed locations. Better housing opportunities in reduced hazard prone areas in destination areas might also be prioritised as well as policies aimed at allowing access to education and healthcare for migrating populations.

In view of changing migration patterns and the contribution of migration to climate change adaptation, policies should make the process smoother and safer. There should be policy efforts to and make the migrants' destinations safer and friendly.

We propose that with better scientific understanding of the changing migration patterns and careful planning, governments and humanitarian actors could make migration safer and more remunerative as an effective adaptation strategy in the face of climate change.

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About the climate migration project

The field research for this policy brief was conducted in Chapai Nawabganj, Munshiganj and Satkhira districts of Bangladesh. It is part of the Climate change-related migration in Bangladesh project of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex and Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, University of Dhaka. The CDKN-funded project aims to understand, plan for and respond to climate-induced migration. It seeks ways to reduce vulnerability and build resilience of the Bangladeshi people to withstand the impact of climate change.

The project will produce qualitative and quantitative evidence on climate change and migration in Bangladesh, identify policy needs and make appropriate policy recommendations that will minimise the costs and risks and maximise the contribution of migration in response to climate change. The Government of Bangladesh is a key stakeholder in the project. This paper was written by Dominic Kniveton, Richard Black, and Maxmillan Martin at the Department of Geography, University of Sussex and Tasneem Siddiqui and Mohammad Towheedul Islam of RMMRU. For more information please contact: d.r.kniveton@sussex.ac.uk and info@rmmru.org.

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