



BACKGROUND PAPER

Concepts, Contexts and Categorisations of Climate Mobility

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Climate Mobility and Children: A Virtual Symposium

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing awareness that the adverse impacts of climate change increasingly contribute, directly and indirectly, to different forms of mobility that unfold within countries and across borders. For example, the latest Global Report on Internal Displacement revealed that natural hazards are among the most important drivers of internal displacement: in 2019 alone 24.9 million new displacements were attributed to environmental causes.¹ In years to come, these numbers are likely to increase, particularly in places where rapid population growth and high levels of exposure to climate hazards coincide. With rising global temperatures, the nature and duration of human mobility responses are also likely to change, bearing important implications for policy and governance.²

Climate Mobility and Children: A Virtual Symposium

In order to shine a light on the plight of children on the move and to better understand how children and young people are affected by climate-related migration and displacement, UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration hosted a virtual symposium in November 2020. Over two days, experts, policymakers and young people from around the world met to discuss and debate pertinent questions, unpack key concepts, propose actions and outline an agenda to ensure that children's rights and needs are part of the wider debate on climate change.

While, to date, most studies on climate-related migration have focused on adult populations, emerging evidence indicates that children also become uprooted and displaced due to climate change, or they are left behind when parents are compelled to move in search of livelihoods.³ There is an expanse of research on children and mobility, although not specifically framed as driven by climatic factors. This includes both children's own mobility, as migrants or refugees, and the mobility of parents who leave children behind in their places of origin.⁴ This literature highlights the multiple risks children encounter during their journeys (e.g. violence, trafficking, forced labour, and other forms of exploitation) and the disadvantaged situation children find themselves in (e.g. high rates of school dropout, poor access to health care and other services), particularly when they move through unofficial and unsafe channels or as unaccompanied minors.⁵ These outcomes, in turn, can have lasting implications for children's development and may reinforce and exacerbate their vulnerability and exposure to climate and other types of risks.

This paper unpacks the relationship between climate change and different forms of mobility and highlights the importance of language for shaping discourses about people on the move, and the role of such discourses in driving policy responses. The paper reflects on the implications these may have for securing the rights and protection of adults and children moving in the context of climate change.

THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE AND MOBILITY

People's decision and ability to move away from areas affected by climate change is mediated by existing vulnerabilities, capabilities and motivations, and it is difficult to discern the economic, environmental and other factors that shape those decisions.

Despite a growing body of scientific evidence showing that the relationship between climate change and mobility is complex, environmental determinism, or the belief that people move as a direct consequence of climate change, remains embedded within narratives about human mobility. Terms such as 'climate migrant', 'climate refugee' or 'environmental migrant' are increasingly used in discussions about climate-related mobility. However, the use of this terminology raises a number of potential issues and has attracted criticism over the years. Such terms imply that climate is the main driving force behind people's mobility, making the relationship between the two seem simple and linear. They present a de-politicised picture of the phenomenon and downplay the role of social, political and economic factors and existing vulnerabilities that are present in societies or groups exposed to different manifestations of climate change. A landmark report commissioned by the United Kingdom Government demonstrated that rather than being the only or main driver of population movement, climate change acts as a threat multiplier when it interacts with other intersecting factors that together shape people's decision and ability to move out of harm's way.⁶ The report points out that it is not possible to derive a simple typology or categorisation of people based on assumptions about the main cause of their mobility. Indeed, more recently, research with migrants in Bangladesh, Ghana and India found that those who move rarely identify environmental risk as a primary cause of migration decisions.⁷ Instead, people's decision and ability to move away from areas affected by climate change is mediated by existing vulnerabilities, capabilities and motivations, and it is difficult to discern the economic, environmental and other factors that shape those decisions.

Geographic context and type of climate change manifestation also have important ramifications for people's mobility responses. Sudden-onset climate events and disasters, such as cyclones, storms or flash floods, can quickly displace vast numbers. For example, over two million people were evacuated to shelters as cyclone Amphan approached Bangladesh in 2020. In many cases, such displacement is a short distance and temporary, while in other instances climate-related displacement can become protracted (e.g. many residents of New Orleans did not return following Hurricane Katrina). Displacement can also occur in the context of slow-onset change processes that unfold over extended time scales, such as drought, sea level rise or land erosion, especially in politically fragile contexts.⁸



Different forms of migration (e.g. circular, seasonal, temporary, as well as longer-term) are also increasingly pursued as a form of adaptation in the context of rural and/or coastal livelihoods, where slow-onset change processes intersect with existing vulnerabilities and shape people's desire or need to migrate.⁹ However, the distinction between voluntary and forced, permanent and temporary, and short- and long-distance migration is not clear-cut. For example, prolonged periods of drought in Syria first instigated rural to urban migration, and only when the revolution erupted in 2011 did many become compelled to flee cities and seek refuge in neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan.¹⁰ Different mobility responses might be necessary or possible when populations are confronted with the same climate change manifestation in different geographic contexts. For example, low-lying areas in coastal Bangladesh and small island States in the Pacific are both affected by sea level rise. While in Bangladesh, people from coastal regions have been adapting to seasonal inundation by migrating to other parts of the country in search of alternative livelihood opportunities, sea level rise could lead to the permanent displacement of inhabitants from Pacific atoll islands which could become uninhabitable in the not-too-distant future.¹¹

While it is not possible to determine and predict the exact number of those who move due to climate change, alarmist projections of extensive population movement have proliferated in public and policy discourse. A widely cited estimate by Myers,¹² for instance, predicts that by 2050 the world could see over 200 million 'environmental refugees' as a result of sea level rise, desertification and other climatic events. A more recent example is the controversial projection in the Institute of Economics and Peace's Ecological Threat Register 2020, which proposed that nearly 1.2 billion people will become displaced due to ecological threats by 2050.¹³ The report attracted criticism from scholars working on the topic who highlighted flaws in the underlying assumptions and methodological approach that led the authors to arrive at this number. Indeed, a closer look at the report reveals that the projection is based on the distribution of ecological threats and climate hazards, rather than on an understanding of why, how and where people move. Climate migration projections have important implications for policy, both in terms of how mobility is governed and for the extent to which those who move in this context are afforded fundamental rights and legal protection. By overestimating the numbers that will move due to climate change, they fuel unhelpful narratives that frame climate-related mobility as a looming crisis that warrants urgent action to counter such movement in order to protect destination countries from its harmful impacts.

Additionally, they do not take into account the nature and destination of migration, whether it is circular, seasonal, temporary or permanent, and whether it takes place within country borders or internationally. Yet these are all important considerations for designing effective policy to govern safe and orderly population movement, address the challenges and harness the opportunities that mobility presents, both in sending and destination areas. Therefore, experts and the academic community have been increasingly calling for the need to confront ‘climate migration myths’ that fuel securitising narratives.¹⁴

CONFRONTING MYTHS ABOUT CLIMATE-RELATED MOBILITY

Based on existing evidence, we highlight three myths or misconceptions regarding the relationship between climate and migration which are particularly relevant for ensuring that adults and children affected by climate change receive the right policy support. These are based on the following three assumptions: (i) climate change necessarily leads to mobility; (ii) mobility is an act of last resort; and (iii) most climate-related mobility takes place at international scale. However, mounting empirical evidence indicates that:

Climate change does not always lead to mobility: While climate change can lead to an increased propensity to move, it can also erode vital capital and resources necessary for migration and leave some of the most vulnerable and poorest groups unable to move in response to climate and environmental risk.¹⁵ For example, the onset of environmental shocks or crises has been shown to coincide with a reduction in population movement, because affected households needed to prioritise meeting basic needs and could not meet the costs of moving. This is also referred to as involuntary immobility, because people who may have the desire or need to move are not able to do so. Black and colleagues¹⁶ highlight the policy challenges of immobility, which concern the human security, health and social protection of those who become trapped in hazardous settings. In addition to environmental factors, social and cultural meanings and values can also influence people’s willingness to move. This is demonstrated by some populations’ lack of willingness to relocate due to a strong sense of attachment or identity with a place, leading them to persist in high-risk geographic settings.¹⁷ The right to remain in vulnerable and hazard-prone locations and non-material dimensions of loss and damage associated with displacement due to climate change pose a further policy challenge, particularly in the context of planned relocation.¹⁸

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Mobility can be a proactive adaptation strategy: Mobility, in particular migration, can be an effective proactive adaptation strategy, not only a reactive coping mechanism, yet migration is often portrayed as a negative outcome or a failure to adapt.¹⁹ This is evident in policy responses that focus on deterring migrants and stopping migration. It is increasingly recognised that migrants are not simply victims of climate change but agents of change, and migration often represents a strategy to minimise risk which can contribute to building long-term resilience. However, the initial endowments of migrant-sending households, in terms of access to capital and existing levels of vulnerability or resilience, shape the extent to which migration can become an effective adaptation strategy in practice.²⁰ Nevertheless, simply linking migration to climate change and referring to those who move as climate migrants, environmental migrants or climate refugees, reinforces the assumption that migration is a last resort action when people fail to adapt locally. This is, however, misleading because migration often complements and even strengthens, rather than replaces, other strategies. The links and feedbacks between sending and receiving areas, particularly through flows of social, financial and in-kind remittances, demonstrate how migration can contribute to building resilience to climate change.²¹

Most climate-related mobility takes place within country borders: It is often assumed that climate change will result in the increased movement of people to international destinations, particularly to European and North American countries. These concerns were elevated in political circles following the 2015 'migration crisis', which prompted several European countries to take drastic measures in an effort to secure their borders. However, empirical evidence indicates that, in fact, most climate-related mobility takes place at the country or regional level.²² The 2017 UN Report on International Migration²³ showed that over half of all international migrants moved to countries within the same world region as their country of origin. The landmark Groundswell report stressed that in the absence of concerted action to curb climate change, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America could witness as many as 140 million people moving within national borders.²⁴ Importantly, internal migration often involves movements from rural areas towards densely populated urban centres which has implications for the well-being and human security of those who move.²⁵ This is evident from migrants' stories about their lives in cities, which indicate that through moving they often replace one set of vulnerabilities with a different set as they try to make ends meet.²⁶ This indicates that policy attention needs to also focus on the outcomes and circumstances of migrants in their destinations.



CRISIS NARRATIVES REINFORCE VULNERABILITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Concepts that designate people as climate migrants or refugees are now embedded within the language and narratives that are used to communicate and discuss these issues in different public and policy forums. They have contributed to the emergence of so-called ‘crisis narratives’ which portrayed climate-related mobility as a threat and climate migrants as encroachers on foreign land. Crisis narratives, in turn, hold important implications for policy and the legal protection of those who migrate or become displaced due to climate change impacts.

While it is important to ensure that safe and orderly channels are available for those who need to move, designations such as ‘climate refugee’ or ‘environmental refugee’ may create ambiguity that stands in the way of this. These terms are absent from international law and are not covered under the 1951 Refugee Convention. People displaced by climate or environmental causes are currently not recognised as refugees. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees feared that the use of these terms could have repercussions for the protection of refugees fleeing conflict, violence and threat of persecution.²⁷ However, recent developments such as the landmark ruling by the UN Human Rights Committee and a ruling by the French court, both of which were made on climate and environmental grounds, present a promising development in debates about the right to protection from the negative impacts of climate change.

The language and terms employed to discuss climate-related mobility shape how policymakers and the public view those who move due to climate change.

The language and terms employed to discuss climate-related mobility shape how policymakers and the public view those who move due to climate change. For example, the climate migration crisis narrative can contribute to the securitisation of borders, which sometimes involves imposing physical barriers on movement. Examples of this include the barrier between India and Bangladesh, the erection of a fence on Hungary's borders with Serbia and Croatia during the 2015 European migration crisis, and the proposed wall between the United States and Mexico. Exclusionary policies also extend to children on the move, evidenced by their poor treatment and detention by governments.²⁸ Exclusionary measures are also implemented in the context of internal mobility where, for example, rural to urban migrants are denied full citizenship rights in cities.²⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of many migrants who could not access vital services and social protection in cities as a result. Additionally, language also shapes public attitudes towards migrants and refugees at their destination where they often struggle to gain acceptance and integrate into the new setting. For example, host communities tend to regard refugees as more deserving than migrants, as they associate the former with persecution and a lack of choice, whereas they view the latter as a voluntary action.³⁰

Urban residents in Kenya and Vietnam, for example, did not consider those who move due to climate impacts more deserving than economic migrants.³¹ Migrants and displaced persons often face stigma, discrimination and limited access to services in destinations, which affect multiple dimensions of their well-being, potentially exacerbate their vulnerability, and consequently represent a gap in social protection. Children are particularly susceptible to falling through the cracks. While children's education and welfare are among the key motivational forces behind parents' decision to move, many drop out of school and are caught up in often exploitative working conditions.³² This can have grave consequences for children's development and future resilience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While mobility is often regarded as a last resort reactive response, given the right circumstances it can also represent a proactive adaptation strategy that contributes to building long-term resilience.

In summary, the relationship between climate change and migration is complex. Climate change interacts with existing social and economic vulnerability, as well as with political and demographic processes, and shapes peoples' need and ability to move. While mobility is often regarded as a last resort reactive response, given the right circumstances it can also represent a proactive adaptation strategy that contributes to building long-term resilience. However, most research on climate-related mobility to date has primarily been with adults and little is known about children's experiences. More research will be needed to develop a better understanding of where, how and why children move in this context and to identify their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

The language and concepts used to discuss the relationship between climate change and mobility have important ramifications for the protection of people on the move, including children. Using inappropriate language can be harmful when it comes to securing the rights and protection of those who move due to climate change. Therefore, anyone communicating these issues, whether academics, the media or policy stakeholders, should be clear and transparent in their intended message and meaning, rather than using shorthands such as 'climate migrants' or 'climate refugees'.

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