



Photo 1: Farmer trying to live off the drought-prone land on an island in the Jamuna River, Bangladesh. Photo Credit: Linn Borgen Nilsen

Policy Brief

Climate Change Moves People – for Better or Worse

Climate change is a serious challenge for humanity as it puts human development at risk. Already today, many people move in search of safer livelihood options elsewhere. As climate stresses rise, migration is expected to increase further. Countries can minimize the negative effects of climate change by promoting planned and voluntary migration, as it is more likely to be beneficial for individuals and host communities than forced migration. With appropriate framework conditions, migration is an opportunity for development. Hence, development actors should keep this in mind when planning strategies and interventions.

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Climate-Induced Migration is a Reality

Climate change increasingly influences the scale and pattern of human mobility, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Storms, floods and wildfires directly threaten lives, while droughts, irregular rainfall and salinization of arable land put food security at risk and threaten livelihoods. Even with drastic reductions of global emissions and innovative adaptation measures,

some areas of our planet will soon become uninhabitable – or even disappear with rising sea levels. To escape harm, many people are forced to move, and climate-induced migration is expected to increase as climate stresses grow. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) projects that 200 million people will migrate by 2050 due to environmental reasons. Other estimates point to a billion migrants.

Poor communities are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. With little resources to adapt, they are hit hardest by natural disasters and more frequent water and food shortages. The burden of providing for a large number of displaced persons and migrants is therefore likely to be borne by the poorest countries. In this way, climate change increases social and economic inequalities.

However, migration can have positive effects on development. In this policy brief, we argue that facilitating planned and voluntary migration, along with supporting urban host communities, is essential if we wish to maximize the potentially positive effects of climate-induced migration.

The Complex Nexus of Climate Change and Migration

Climate-induced migration can take many forms. Sudden-onset disasters, such as floods or hurricanes, generally lead to temporary mass displacement within a region. Slow-onset disasters, such as sea level rise or desertification, result in a more gradual process of individual migration. Depending on the context, the movements may either be internal or across international borders, permanent, temporary or cyclic.

In many cases, the link between climate change and migration cannot be directly established. For example,

climate change does not cause a single weather event, but the warmer our planet gets, the more likely it is that extreme weather events occur. Thus, attribution of disaster displacement to climate change is tricky. In the context of slow-onset disasters, the link between climate change and migration is even more complex, because decisions to migrate or stay are influenced by multiple factors. What is clear is that climate change amplifies pre-existing socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities and thereby influences migration decisions (see figure 1).

Migration as an Adaptation Strategy

If local measures to cope with climate stresses fail, migration becomes a viable option. If successful, migration can move people out of harm's way and lead to new income opportunities and safer livelihood conditions at the destination. Despite these potentially positive effects, migration is often perceived negatively as a failure to adapt. One aspect that can explain this is that many migrants end up in areas with worse living conditions or move to destinations that are again prone to climate risks. In this case, migration fails to increase resilience or reduce poverty, and is likely to increase the burden for both migrants and host communities. This is especially the case if migration is unplanned. Thus, on the continuum between forced and voluntary migration, the potential benefits for individuals and their communities are higher on the latter end of the continuum.

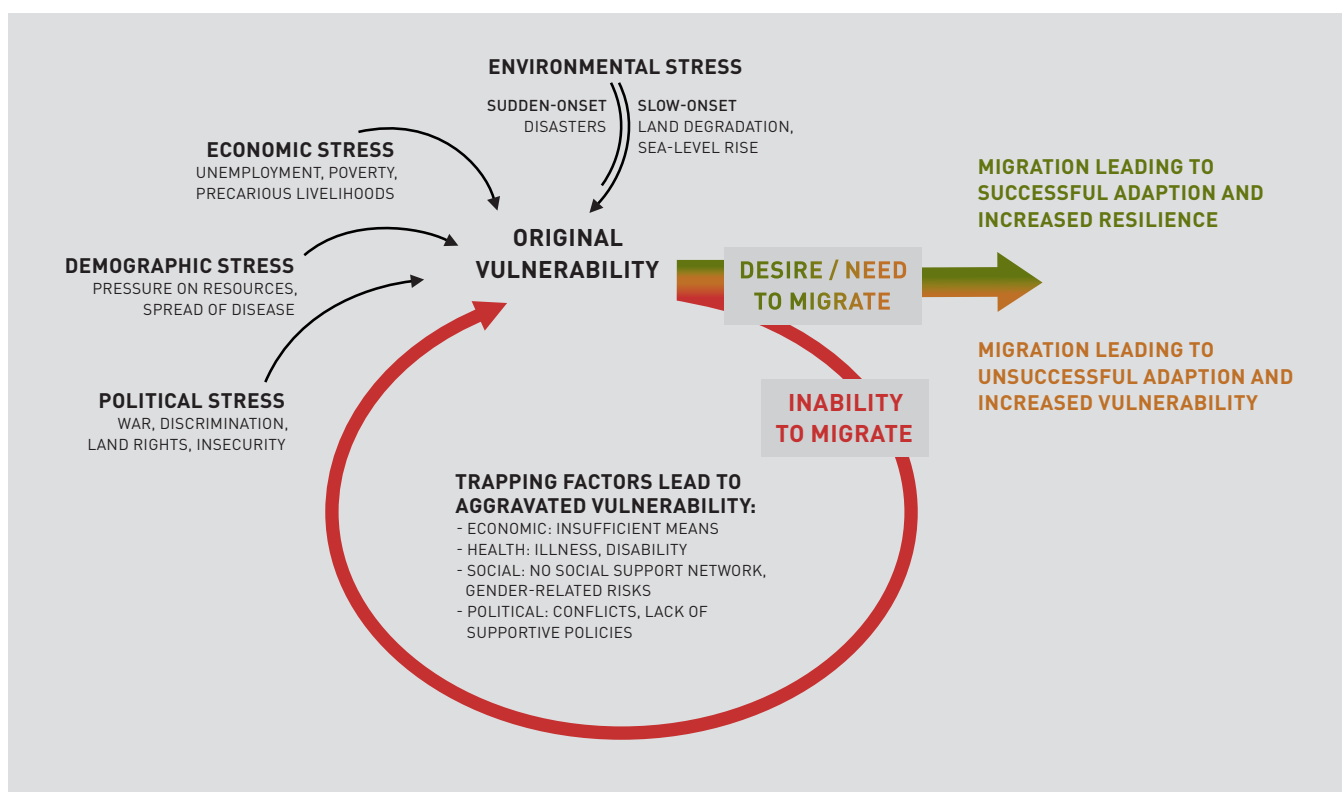


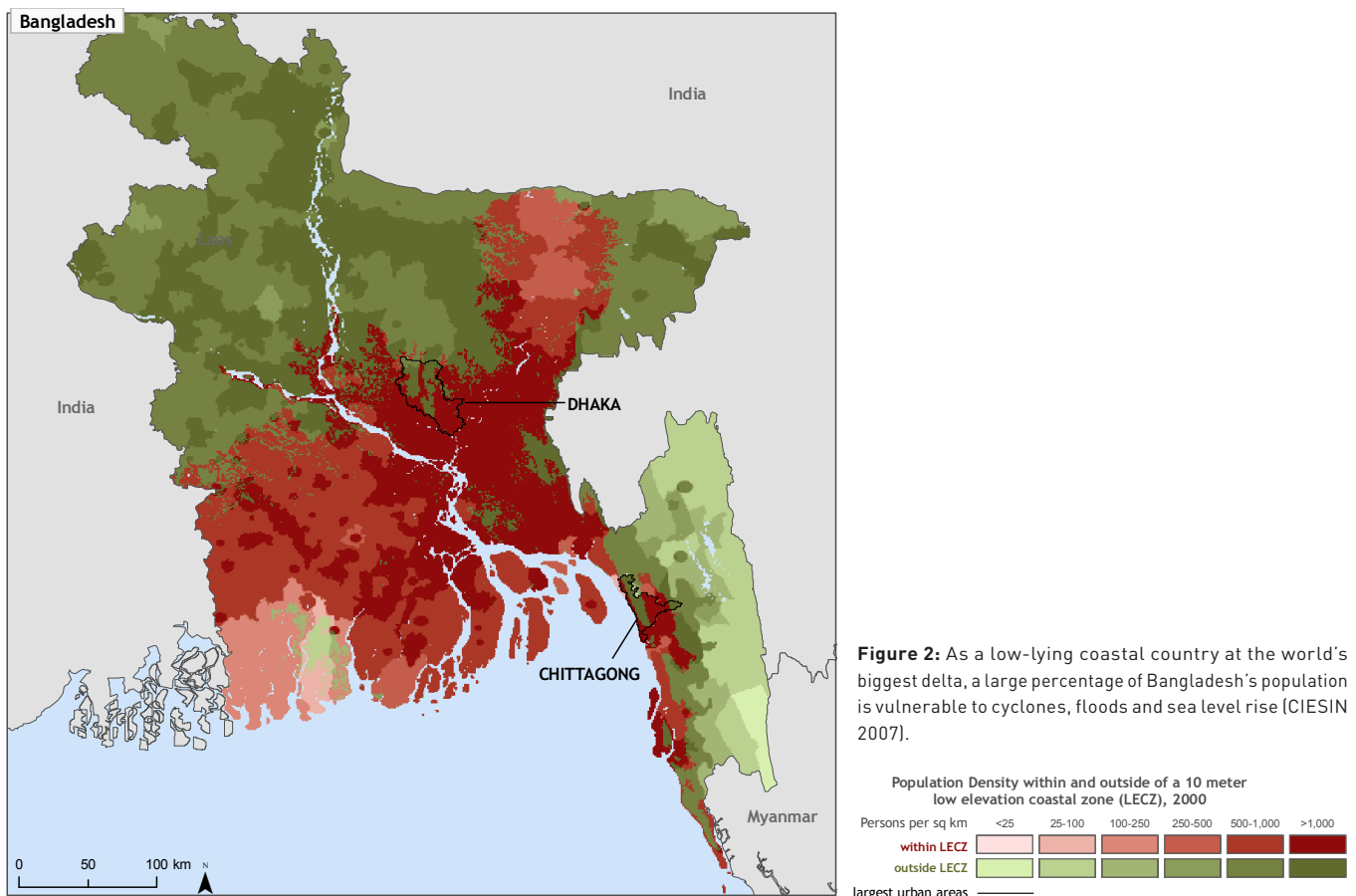
Figure 1: Climate Change and its Impacts on Vulnerability and Migration (based on IOM 2015)

Climate-Induced Migration in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a long history of large migration flows with various, often overlapping drivers, including environmental, socio-economic and political factors. Studies show that climate change is an increasingly important catalyzer for internal migration in the country. Bangladesh is highly exposed to cyclones, floods and droughts. Climate change increases these risks: sudden onset events, such as more frequent and severe floods, storms and landslides, as well as slow-onset events, such as temperature and sea level rise, salinization of farm land and coastal erosion directly threaten people's livelihoods and force them to move. High population density, poverty and significant dependency on natural resources for livelihood generation, make the country particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), about 1.7 million new displacements were recorded in Bangladesh in the first half of 2019. Furthermore, a study by Davis et al. (2018) predicts that almost one million Bangladeshi will have to migrate permanently due to sea-level rise by 2050 and more than two million by 2100, having substantial implications for nutrition, shelter, and employment in destination areas (IPCC 2019).

Bangladesh is also a country with a fast growing economy. As in other countries undergoing a rapid socio-economic transition, this goes hand in hand with accelerated urbanisation. In Bangladesh, many migrants are moving to the large urban areas of Dhaka or Chittagong. According to the World Bank, at least 400,000 persons move to Dhaka every year, making it one of the fastest growing cities in the world. IOM estimates that 70% of Dhaka's slum dwellers moved there fleeing some sort of environmental shock. Unfortunately, the migrants end up facing unsafe living conditions, with limited access to public services or income opportunities – and are often still at risk of climate stresses.

Rapid and unplanned urbanization presents enormous challenges, not only for Bangladesh but also for many other low- and middle-income countries. Against this background, it is easy to forget that cities are catalysts for development in all countries of the world. Cities stimulate innovation and development in science, technology and industry. They can provide a wide spectrum of jobs and education opportunities, as well as better access to health and social services. This, however, requires efforts in urban planning and governance.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The case of Bangladesh illustrates how original vulnerabilities are worsened by climate change and that unplanned or forced migration is less likely to be successful. Countries can turn this around by giving more support to planned, voluntary migration, allowing it to become a dignified choice rather than a desperate last resort. This is particularly important in countries where a large part of the population is vulnerable to climate change. Anticipating the scale and changing patterns of human movements and their implications for development, policy makers have to provide solutions that make migration a sustainable adaptation choice. The following recommendations propose options that policy makers and development actors should consider if they want to secure the resilience of origin and host communities.

1) Promote Climate-Induced Migration on the Agenda of Global Politics

On the international level, migration has to be recognized as a possible adaptation strategy in the context of climate change. This recognition is necessary to promote legal, safe and planned migration. Switzerland should continue to promote the topic of climate-induced migration in all its forms on the international political agenda and strive to achieve a common understanding of the benefits of voluntary migration. For instance, the collaborative efforts of Switzerland to achieve international initiatives and agreements that recognize the interlinkages of climate change and migration should be intensified, such as the Nansen Initiative and the Global Compact for Migration.

2) Mainstream Climate-Induced Migration into Policy Making and Promote Policy Coherence

On a national level, climate-induced migration should be recognized as a reality and mainstreamed into policy making. Instead of allowing for push factors such as natural catastrophes to force migration, governments can incentivize gradual and planned migration into areas that feature low climate risks, for example through the promotion of economic activities. The areas that people move to should be safe and climate-resilient. Therefore, policies concerning housing, health, education and employment – among others – should consider migrants to foster inclusion. For a more sustainable and comprehensive response to climate-induced migration, governments and development actors should strive to achieve policy coherence in the cross-cutting topics of climate change and migration.

3) Focus on Interventions in Urban Areas and Informal Settlements

On a local level, interventions at migration destinations, especially in urban areas, are crucial. To ensure proper livelihood security for migrants, interventions should focus on urban resilience and disaster risk management, including risk reduction through sound urban planning and disaster preparedness. An additional focus should be put on the provision of services to vulnerable populations in informal urban settlements. Interventions in the area of affordable, decentralized water and sanitation services should be established and the efforts in education and skills development for improved livelihood security should continue.

Not everybody affected by climate change is willing or able to migrate. Insufficient means, illness or disabilities, missing social networks or gender-related risks as well as conflicts or the lack of supportive policies may hinder the use of migration as an adaptation strategy. To account for those who are unable or unwilling to migrate, local adaptation measures to climate stresses need to be stepped up in areas where sustainable livelihoods are viable in the long-term.



Photo 2: Aerial view of a flooded Dhaka, Bangladesh.
Photo Credit: Linn Borgen Nilsen

Conclusion

For people faced with the devastating effects of climate change, migration should be a choice rather than a desperate necessity. Policy makers should facilitate framework conditions that allow for more voluntary forms of migration to be successful and to become an appropriate adaptation strategy. Policies should encourage economic opportunities in areas with low climate risks and promote inclusive, climate-resilient cities. In this way, climate-induced migration can be a chance for development.

However, adaptation has limits. Achieving the above-mentioned policies will get harder and harder with increasing climate stresses. As emissions rise, climate change continues at an unprecedented pace and the adverse effects become more severe and complex on a local level. Therefore, it is also of vital importance to invest major efforts in mitigation. Acting upon climate change is not a 'no-regret' but rather a 'no-choice' strategy.

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