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Climate Change and Migration

We pursue justice in the face of climate and environmental change.

PERCC Insights Brief, #2

The climate crisis intensifies an important demographic trend, rural to urban migration, with an increasing number of people leaving rural regions to improve their economic prospects and boost family income. This trend has accelerated as more people migrate since they join and expand the social networks that support additional migration.

With both slow-onset stressors like droughts and rapid-onset shocks like tropical cyclones, migration patterns have changed. People in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving areas, in both rural and urban regions, have had to adapt to how climate change has altered economic, sociocultural, and political prospects.

As rural-urban migration is increasing, by and large, research to inform climate adaptation strategies on many scales can help governments make informed social policy decisions that take into account changing demographics, human rights considerations, and political pressures.



Climate and Migration Intersections

In the early 2000s, migration patterns showed pronounced gender disparities. In the cities of many low- and middle-income countries, more adolescent girls (ages 15–19) than boys were migrants. As they migrated for different reasons, they experienced different outcomes.

In Pakistan, for example, boys migrated from rural areas to cities for education, employment, or to join a family member. In contrast, more than 40 percent of females aged 15–19¹ migrated just for marriage. For those girls that migrated for work, their jobs left them isolated (40 percent of migrant girls in Ethiopia reported not having friends) and vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

Our research also found that the rural-urban migration trend² was more pronounced in less “urbanized” countries like India of the 1990s than with more “urbanized”

countries like Mexico and the United States (U.S.) in the following decade.

Today, with 1.8 billion people between the ages of 9 and 24, and 90 percent of them in cities in low- and middle-income countries, the impetus is on governments to ensure that this generation can reach its economic earnings potential. The alternative means increasing rates of poverty, which carry a wide array of social pressures. Migration, and mobility more broadly, is an important outlet to ease the burden in these countries, especially when climate stressors hit the country hard—as seen after the massive flooding that Pakistan experienced in 2022.

Our researchers saw this when looking at migration patterns in Egypt³ after its revolution during the 2011 Arab Spring. The Arab Spring itself had roots in climate change as the food insecurity crisis that brought it on was triggered, in part, by an extended drought.⁴

In looking at demographic patterns after the Egyptian revolution, we saw that a more economically mobile part of the younger generation—and men more often than women—was more likely to emigrate. Dissatisfaction with the political results of the revolution coupled with a lack of economic opportunities led them to seek better livelihoods elsewhere. Those who lived in more polluted areas³ were also more likely to migrate in search of healthier places to live.

With climate change intensifying, vulnerable regions in countries like Pakistan are seeing a wider variety of migration patterns. Increasingly, migration itself can be seen as an adaption strategy,⁵ with low-skilled labor moving from agricultural regions in Pakistan to higher-income, oil-producing countries. Remittances—when migrants send some or most of their earnings back home to family—then help to ease the climate-driven crush in rural communities.

When migrants leave one location for another without sending remittances back, however, the location they leave can suffer economic losses. When migration comes after a climate-related disaster, the economic losses that migrants take with them from a disaster-affected area can compound the economic losses from the disaster itself (e.g., housing loss and damage). Research in the U.S.⁶ has worked on quantifying the size of this dual economic loss. Looking at the global picture of the increasing frequency of climate change events, and the migrations that they compel, gives pause.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In times of crisis, especially the economic challenges that climate change provides, many politicians reflexively increase barriers for migration and embrace an “us versus them” political mindset. Instead, migration should be more readily embraced. Politicians and their governments should respect the rights of those migrating, in accordance with United Nations conventions on human rights, since the economic benefits of migration have the potential to lift all boats.

Special attention, however, needs to be focused on gender equality. Young women need and deserve the same opportunities afforded to men of their age, and government policies addressing migration should use this opportunity to advance gender equality.

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