Climate Change and Migration: Possible Roles for German Development Cooperation

Discussion paper
Executive Summary

Despite difficulties in drawing causal linkages between climate change and migration, there is growing consensus that climate change is and will continue to be a driver of migration.

Studies have shown that climate-induced migration is most likely to happen nationally and regionally, as opposed to over great, international distances. As climate impacts affect the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest, the lack of social and financial resources for long-distance migration by vulnerable groups will factor into decisions about where migrants go.

Research has also revealed that any approach to managing migration must consider a host of factors, including social, economic, political, environmental and demographic.

In this discussion paper, it is argued that with only the two aforementioned findings from research, German development cooperation can begin pooling experience, as well as designing and implementing activities to build resilience and help to manage involuntary migration. Two pathways for development cooperation are presented:

The first pathway is to implement measures that reduce pressure to migrate.

The second pathway is to support migration as an adaptation measure.

The two pathways are supported with concrete examples and suggestions for future interventions.
When migration is not voluntary

Migration has always been a means of securing or diversifying livelihoods. Whether it’s pastoralists in search of grazing lands for livestock or laborers seeking economic opportunities during the non-productive months of the agricultural calendar, migration is a mechanism for ensuring survival, as well as for identifying opportunities.

When migration is voluntary and anticipated, the movements can be beneficial for migrants, as well as for their countries of origin - where remittances, knowledge transfer and reduced pressure on labor markets have economic and social benefits. Other beneficiaries may be found at migrants’ destinations, for example, as employers gain laborers. However, involuntary and unanticipated movements raise a variety of concerns that range from health and security issues for migrants to social, economic, environmental and cultural impacts associated with forced migration.

In instances of conflict, when populations are forced to cross borders to avoid persecution, migrants may be designated as refugees and be afforded international protection under the 1951 United Nations Convention Related to the Status of Refugees. The so-called Geneva Convention, however, only protects those people designated as refugees, and the term refugee is strictly defined.

Throughout the past decade, the terms environmental refugee and climate refugee have been introduced into the broader discourse about displaced people, as policymakers, environmental and social scientists attempt to gain a better understanding of how climate change and environmental degradation impact human movements. The use of the term refugee in these instances is highly contested, as unlike under the Geneva Convention, a “climate refugee” does not have rights to protection under international law. The circumstance surrounding, for example, the status of populations that become stateless through the loss of their national territory – an oft-cited example is the disappearance of small island states due to sea-level rise – is one instance where refugee status for populations vulnerable to climate change is being debated.

According to the Geneva Convention, a potential refugee must prove that he or she is being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Climate-induced migration is notably missing from the list of criteria for gaining refugee status. Furthermore, not all migrants move internationally, which further confounds the possibility of forced migrants affected by climate change from gaining protection under the Geneva Convention since only those moving across international borders are protected.

One reason that difficulties persist in coming up with an appropriate label or status for forced migrants affected by climate change is that, the causal linkages between climate change and migration are not clearly identifiable. Environmental degradation may mix with unstable social and economic circumstances to create a situation where livelihoods are at risk. An extreme climate event, such as a flood, may create a tipping point, whereby affected populations are forced to migrate either temporarily or permanently to seek economic alternatives. To designate members of the affected populations as refugees under international law is not permitted. Furthermore, given the confluence of factors that have likely contributed to the need to migrate, it would even be difficult to call the migrants climate refugees.

In the case of slow-onset climate change, the linkages to migration are even more difficult to identify, as populations may not move en masse as a result of a catastrophic event but rather relocate gradually in response to, for example, dwindling agricultural outputs and increasing resource scarcity. Here again, a confluence of factors may contribute to the decision to migrate.

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1 UNHCR, Summary of Deliberations on Climate Change and Displacement, April 2011.

2 Tacoli, C., Not only climate change: mobility, vulnerabiliy and socio-economic transformations in environmentally fragile areas of Bolivia, Senegal and Tanzania, February 2011.
Climate Migration and EU Policy: As the European Union overhauls its policy on migration, evidence about where climate-induced migration is likely to occur offers important information for policymakers. Instead of gearing policy towards controlling a mass influx of climate-induced migrants to Europe, EU policy can focus on helping to manage increased mobility in and around climate change hotspots. Some recommendations are provided later.

The contribution of research:

Despite difficulties in drawing causal linkages between climate change and migration, there is growing consensus that climate change is and will continue to be a driver of migration. More research is needed on the links between climate change and migration in order to understand who is being affected, where affected populations are migrating, how long they are staying in the new destinations, if they ultimately return to their places of origin, what they are doing at their new destinations and what challenges exist along migration pathways, including at destination. Such questions also need to be posed in both the context of extreme events, which may result in temporary migration, as well as in the context of slow-onset climate change, which may lead to permanent migration.

Some initial research, however, offers important findings that can guide both policymakers and the international community in forming responses and offering assistance:

First: in the last decade, growing interest in the links between climate change and migration has resulted in a flood of reports, each making wildly different predictions about the number of climate-displaced persons that the world can expect until 2050\(^3\). While the predictions have been hotly contested and the methods used called into question, the upshot has been a second wave of research that has looked more closely at climate and migration links.

One important finding is with regard to the type of migration that results from climate change. Studies have shown that climate-induced migration is most likely to happen nationally and regionally, as opposed to over great, international distances\(^4\). As climate change tends to impact the poorest and most vulnerable members of the population, evidence shows that such populations do not have the financial resources or social networks to migrate internationally. The Fore-}

\(^3\) See for example: Myers, Norman (2005) Environmental Refugees, and Emergent Security Issue.


\(^5\) Vgl. Tacoli, C., Not only climate change: mobility, vulnerability and socio-economic transformations in environmentally fragile areas of Bolivia, Senegal and Tanzania, February 2011.
The Contribution of International Development Cooperation:

While research in climate change hotspots and case studies in individual countries offer more specific findings to guide decision-making in specific regions, development cooperation need not wait for a comprehensive body of evidence to begin formulating responses to manage migration pressures in areas vulnerable to climate change. With only the two aforementioned findings from research, the international community can begin pooling experience, as well as designing and implementing activities to build resilience and help to manage involuntary migration. Two pathways for development cooperation emerge:

The first pathway is to implement measures that reduce pressure to migrate.

The second pathway is to support migration as an adaptation measure.

Pathway I
Reducing the impacts of climate change as a means of reducing pressure to migrate:

With regard to the first pathway, significant experience already exists in the field of adaptation. Innovative approaches that address socio-economic factors and that are intended to raise adaptive capacity of both vulnerable populations and ecosystems are being applied all over the world, although not at a scale that is needed.

German Development Cooperation has been implementing adaptation measures in all relevant sectors and in partnership with all levels of government.

For instance, a poverty reduction program in Vietnam, assisting communities in an area prone to extreme climate events and at risk from sea-level rise, engaged in a climate proofing process to mainstream climate considerations into local development planning initiatives. In Bolivia, a rural development program has helped families cope with changing rainfall patterns linked to climate change by implementing water harvesting techniques to stabilize agricultural production in areas dependent on rain-fed irrigation. In the Pacific Islands, land-use planning is being carried out based on available climate information.

The question remains: have such measures eased the drivers of forced migration? Logic tells us that adaptation measures can help to reduce the need to diversify livelihoods through migration since adaptive capacities are strengthened through such processes as innovation, diversification and intensification of resource use in areas vulnerable to climate change. In a similar vein,
The BMZ-financed climate protection programme at GIZ plans to collaborate in 2012 with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) to identify possible linkages between climate change and migration. Based on data collected through household surveys, which inquired about migrant responses to extreme water-related events, the GIZ and ICIMOD will analyze survey responses against a backdrop of climate change information available in the surveyed regions to explore whether climate change factored into migration decisions and whether the decision to migrate was an effective adaptation strategy. Through statistical analysis, the GIZ and ICIMOD hope to improve the empirical base that can help inform development assistance, adaptation decisions and lead to evidence-based policymaking in the affected regions.

In order to show that migration pressure has been eased, monitoring systems would have to be designed to measure rates of migration before and after the adaptation measures were implemented, something that currently does not happen in German Development Cooperation programs, possibly due to a lack of institutional capacity and migration data in partner countries to monitor such movements but also likely due to a program placing greater emphasis on monitoring the overall improvements to peoples’ standards of living.

Despite the challenges of monitoring migration patterns, the information would be useful to have from a development cooperation standpoint. Not only would migration-monitoring shed light on the impacts of adaptation measures, but it would also provide important information about a target group that development cooperation might better serve. By better understanding migration patterns, including where people go and how long they stay, development cooperation can adapt its assistance to help both migrants and local authorities at destinations, including small and medium-sized towns that are often ill-equipped to absorb an influx of migrants.

Four key areas of collaboration for development cooperation exist along the first pathway:

First, development cooperation could collaborate more with research organizations to help close the gap of empirical evidence, which is currently lacking in the discourse about migration and climate change linkages. Through improved information, development cooperation could adapt its own efforts in assisting populations confronting forced migration scenarios.

Second, targeted approaches to adaptation are also needed that can reduce climate change impacts and increase climate change resilience. Areas with a high potential for out migration due to climate change have already to a certain extent been mapped. Development cooperation could focus adaptation efforts in such hotspots as a means of building resilience and thereby helping to reduce pressure for mass, uncontrolled movements. While it is not recommended to try and stop migration from vulnerable areas, as this may ultimately lead to increased impoverishment,
Disaster Risk Management at the Community Level: the Philippines. The Bicol Region of the Philippines suffers from a high incidence of poverty and four of its six provinces are classified as highly vulnerable to climate and weather-related risks. A typhoon in 2006 caused widespread destruction and casualties from landslides and mudflows and ultimately affected over 2 million people, with over 100,000 people seeking shelter in evacuation centers. IOM worked with local authorities to not only address urgent needs for food and shelter in the wake of the disaster but continued its collaboration to ensure that long-term disaster-risk reduction efforts would be incorporated into disaster risk management activities. Health clinics and community centers were built, as well as more shelters so that schools, where displaced people were living, could return to the task of educating children. Legal clinics were established to protect beneficiaries’ rights and to strengthen rule of law in affected communities. Other interventions included trainings and event preparation activities, as well as food security and livelihood enhancement measures. (IOM, 2010)

Scaling up climate proofing efforts: The Tra Vinh province is located in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam and is vulnerable to extreme climatic events, such as storms and droughts, as well as slow-onset events, such as sea-level rise. In addition, poverty is widespread. With climate change threatening development objectives, the GIZ launched a pilot program to climate proof communal development planning. A systematic development tool to inform decision-making was developed and adapted for the province. Local universities and selected municipalities engaged in efforts to map climate change threats and impacts. Development planners and local experts were trained in climate-proofing processes. GIZ also provided technical support for implementing the climate-proofed development plans in participating municipalities. The results have been that climate proofing is safeguarding success in poverty reduction. Communities understand the causes and impacts of climate change, and take climate risks into account in development and investment planning. The experience at the community level is now recognized in provincial planning processes and the province has adopted the approach to be used in all local development planning. (GIZ 2010).

The flipside to targeting climate change hotspots as potential points of origin of migrants is to target migrant destinations, which is also discussed as part of the second pathway.

Third, scaling up existing adaptation innovations and measures is needed. Lots of good practices exist, and these need to be deployed and implemented on a much wider scale.

Finally, the fourth area for action is to maintain a strong focus on protecting the climate in order to manage the drivers of climate change. Low-emission development that results in reductions of greenhouse gas emissions and the protection of ecosystem services are vital to limiting or slowing climate change and its negative impacts. Development Cooperation already has significant experience in supporting developing country partners at all levels of government and across sectors with limiting or slowing greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation. These activities also need to be expanded and scaled up, while placing greater emphasis on monitoring mitigation results.

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Temporary and circular migration as an adaptation strategy: A confluence of environmental and social factors, including climatic changes affecting rainfall patterns, has resulted in Colombia having the second highest rate of internally displaced persons after the Sudan. In recognition of the potential for migration to spur development and serve as an adaptation strategy, the Colombian government established the Temporary and Circular Labour Migration (TCLM) program with Spain to allow families affected by natural disasters to work temporarily in Spain while affected regions recuperate. The program also leverages public and private co-funding to support migrants and their families in order to maximize the impacts of remittances, including training family members to be agents of development and use remittances to build more resilient communities. IOM is working to expand the TCLM program in order to ensure that more migrants can participate and that returning migrants can maximize the use of acquired skills through access to affordable credit and other services. (IOM 2010.)

Pathway II
Planning for and supporting migration as an adaptation measure:

The second pathway where development cooperation can play a role is to support migration as an adaptation strategy. While German development cooperation does not have concrete experience in relocating displaced persons, there are two specific areas where development cooperation can make a contribution. The first is to help manage migration, and the second is to improve conditions at destination.

Managing migration may encompass a variety of concrete activities, including addressing protection gaps of populations vulnerable to climate change. The proactive approach that many small-island states are taking to seek assurance that their populations will be protected in the event that low-lying islands become uninhabitable is a prime example of managing migration. While not officially conceived of as a climate change response measure, the agreement between New Zealand and Tuvalu to allow 75 people per year over the next 30 years to move to New Zealand as part of a labor agreement is an example of how some island states are working to resettle vulnerable populations.

However, managed migration does not necessarily have to result in permanent resettlement. One example of migrants moving temporarily through a managed migration program is described below:

The second area of intervention for development cooperation along the second pathway is through the improvement of conditions at destination. Cities in low-income countries are faced with a “double-jeopardy” future due to deficiencies of existing infrastructure and services, which will further deteriorate in the face of rural-to-urban migration and environmental threats. New urban migrants will be particularly vulnerable. Development Cooperation can, for instance, provide technical and advisory services to local governments, including climate proofing planning processes and advising on urban planning to address the influx of migrants to urban areas. The Foresight Report on Migration and Global Environmental Change urges immediate action to bolster urban infrastructure to make it more “sustainable, flexible, and inclusive” before the situation becomes irreversible.

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11 ibid.
Emphasis on Urbanization Policy: The Foresight Report on Migration and Global Environmental Change presents evidence that policy makers should focus efforts on improving the urban environment and increasing urban resilience. Not only are migrants particularly vulnerable, as they tend to live in densely-settled areas prone to environmental hazards, but policies designed to prevent rural-to-urban migration tend to be unsuccessful and even increase vulnerabilities. Particular focus needs to be placed in African countries, which until now have had relatively low urbanization rates (and therefore little experience of dealing with dramatic urbanization) and severely underdeveloped urban infrastructure.

Urban migrants as the engine of the economy: Dhaka has an annual growth rate of 4% and now is home to 13 million people, with many migrants from environmentally-vulnerable regions of Bangladesh ending up in its urban slums. While there is a tendency to characterize slum dwellers as problems, such a categorization dismisses the fact that 70% of the urban workforce in Bangladesh is in the informal sector – for example, working as domestic laborers or micro-entrepreneurs – making the economy of Bangladesh highly dependent upon the work of the poor. Evidence points to positive connections between the migration trends to urban areas and its effect on poverty reduction and economic development (Afsar 2005). As income from agriculture declines in rural areas and income from remittances, trade and services increases, development cooperation can support migrants at destination as part of their livelihood diversification strategies. (IOM 2010)

Another example of how development cooperation might improve conditions at destination for migrants would be through the establishment of service centers, where new-arrivals gain access to important information about their new place of residence. Evidence from Bangladesh supports the argument that more effort needs to be placed in integrating migrants rather than seeking ways to evict them, as migration to cities is contributing to diversifying rural incomes and livelihoods (IOM 2010).

Finally, development cooperation can work at migrant destinations to manage social tensions and conflicts that may result from an influx of new people into already precarious situations. Evidence points to a potential for increased conflict when large numbers of people arrive to a single destination over a short time period\(^\text{12}\). In the absence of strong political leadership, such situations may lead to social tensions, which development cooperation can help mediate through support measures to local governments. The Foresight report also points out that conflicts may not be limited to migrant destinations, arguing that vulnerable populations are more susceptible to conflict as their vulnerability impedes them from moving in a safe way to a new place. Such populations become “trapped”, potentially resulting in humanitarian emergencies. In such instances, work on closing protection gaps for vulnerable populations both at points of origin and destination should underscore efforts to manage conflict.

Finally, at a national level, development cooperation can make a contribution by helping to mainstream climate change considerations into migration strategies, and vice versa.

If migration is recognized as a legitimate means of adapting to climate change; is proactively and in participation with destination and receiving communities managed; and if it follows the requirements of the individual, it can be an essential way of achieving resilience to climate change. Specifically, migration may result in remittances, strong social networks, diversified incomes and developed livelihoods.

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Climate policy, therefore, needs to ‘factor in’ migration: there will be different numbers of people in different locations over the next 50 years, and climate policy needs to take into account the demographic and spatial dimensions of human settlement and movement. For example, cities need to be planned for how big they will be in 50 years time, not just how big they are now. Similarly rural development policy should not focus efforts on keeping people where they are: people will go to cities for many reasons, and the key is to ensure urban-rural linkages are built and movements are managed.

In conclusion, the article sets forth two possible pathways for development assistance to work at the nexus of climate change and migration. The first pathway focuses on ways to reduce the drivers and impacts of climate change through targeted and scaled-up resilience-building measures, as well as continued efforts to reduce emissions and ecosystem degradation. Research can also contribute along this first pathway to bolstering the empirical evidence base that could inform adaptation decisions and ease pressure to migrate.

However, it is also important to recognize that migration itself may be an effective adaptation strategy. The second pathway for development cooperation, therefore, lays out two areas of intervention that would support migration as an adaptation strategy. Managed migration and improving the conditions for migrants at their destinations are two areas where development cooperation can play an active and influential