

Is climate-driven migration a threat to security?

Panellists and Short Summary

This webinar takes place at a time in which the effects of climate change and variability and environmental degradation on human societies across the globe are becoming increasingly apparent, forcing many to adapt and make use of a variety of coping mechanisms. One of the most important responses which many have undertaken in the face of increasing climatic pressures on multiple dimensions of human security is migration. Human migration is, however, a complex phenomenon often characterised by murky cause-effect relationships, particularly when it comes to the relationship between climate, migration and displacement, and the potential for tension and violence. We focus, therefore, on two key questions:

- **Can climate-induced migration become a threat for national and international security, and if so, how?**
- **Where can CGIAR land, food and water system science have the greatest impact in mitigating potential insecurities associated with climate-induced migration?**

For this webinar, we were joined by our distinguished panel, consisting of:

- **Maureen Achieng**, Chief of Mission to Ethiopia and Representative to the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)
- **Bina Desai**, Head of Programmes at Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
- **Alan de Brauw**, Senior Research Fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- **Alan Nicol**, Director Strategic Program on Water, Growth and Inclusion at the International Water Management Institute (IMWI)

1. Why this webinar?

The need to understand how migration, climate and (in)security interact is becoming increasingly urgent. Climate change will continue to impact human security in the short- to medium-term, with potentially important consequences for human mobility. Over the past decade, for instance, weather-related events displaced 21.5 million people each year, more than twice as many as displacements caused by conflict and violence (UNHCR, 2021). While we must be careful not to over-securitise discourse around migration, ignoring the potential implications of these trends for both human and national security would be equally irresponsible.¹ To give one example, research shows that for every 100,000 people displaced by floods, the probability of conflict incidence rises by approximately 3% (Ghimire, Ferreira and Dorfman, 2015). Given that flooding drove 10 million people globally from their homes in 2019, and 51% of all disaster-induced displacements between 2008 and 2018 were flood-induced, this threat is far from marginal (IDMC, 2019; IDMC, 2020).

Despite the need for a concrete framework through which the relationship between climate, migration and security can be understood and inform policy and governance, a recent macro-analysis determined that there is as of yet no theoretical approach which adequately represents the relationship between ecologically induced migration movements and conflict. In fact, existing theories over-simplify the issues' inherent complexity (Brzoska and Fröhlich, 2016). One of the key barriers lying in the way of a coherent approach is the fact that the nexus is fraught with context-specific thresholds and non-linearities, and that causal mechanisms between climate, migration, and instability are heavily emergent. The development of an overarching theory is hindered by how it is often the interplay of specific local socio-economic, political, institutional, and cultural conditions, circumstances and capacities with higher-level processes that concomitantly have the potential to increase or decrease the risk of conflict associated with climate-related migration. Furthermore, even identifying the if migration is climate-induced can be difficult in practice. People move for complex, multi-dimensional ways. and the slow-onset effects of climate change and variability are often diffuse in nature. They therefore manifest themselves by putting pressure on other dimensions of human security, such as by impacting the viability of livelihoods. This makes the exact role of climate impacts difficult to detect.

In light of both the pressing need to improve our understanding of and respond to the climate-migration-conflict nexus, and CGIAR's desire to better articulate how its

¹ Note the definitional difference between migration and displacement. Migration is often a voluntary undertaking in which the migrant household is more agentic in the decision-making process, weighing up potential benefits of migrating versus the potential costs of in-situ adaptation. Migration is also a multi-causal phenomenon in which climate factors are likely to be one of several factors under consideration. Displacement, on the other hand, is an involuntary process occurring when the climatic conditions of a certain area become uninhabitable, either because of more long-term degradation or sudden bursts of extreme weather.

expertise can contribute to this, this webinar aims to lay the foundations for a knowledge agenda that will help shape the ways CGIAR engages with the issue. By bringing together a range of expert voices, we hope to develop an informed picture of what actions are needed in order to maximise the peace co-benefits from more sustainable management of land, water and food systems.

2. Background

The relationship between climate change, migration, and conflict is a topic where science and development meet contemporary policy challenges of key importance. There is a growing need to map and understand these links in the face of increasing climatic uncertainty and risk. As a science community, we need to help construct and deliver the right kind of evidence to inform policy that tackles climate induced migration and its links to conflict, at the local, national and international levels.

Understanding this evidence, however, first requires dissecting and defining the notion of climate-related migration, with the term encompassing a range of causal mechanisms, processes, and typologies. Firstly, there lies a distinction between voluntary and forced migration, with the former often driven at least in part by relative wage differences, demographics, and access to social networks. Climate change may have some impact on relative wage rates and therefore migration flows, however this impact is likely to be diffuse and very indirect. On the other hand, forced migration or displacement describes a situation where people are forced to leave their homes due to a natural disaster, violence, or other perhaps more slow-onset processes that render their environment uninhabitable. Voluntary migration is also subject to longer-term migration trends, whereas displacement is a more rapid onset phenomenon. Both, however, are significant for the climate security migration nexus. Although evidence suggests those displaced by rapid climate impacts tend not to move very far, failure to provide proper and timely humanitarian relief may put pressure on local resources, another potential source of conflict.

In attempting to unpack the causes behind these potential conflict outcomes, however, we need to avoid being overly deterministic. In many cases, movements are at their core rooted in socio-economic phenomena, with climate-related factors often more likely to play an important multiplier or accelerator role, rather than forming the single most important driver. Recent research in Morocco, for instance, has demonstrated how migration is also closely linked to family structures, youth aspirations, and a host of wider historical factors, *alongside* the impact of successive drought. We also need to remain mindful of the role played by gender- which crosscuts many of these factors, and, more recently, the impact of covid-19- on existing migration patterns. Improving our understanding requires us, then, to be better able to map more clearly the processes behind climate-induced migration and what exactly about today's context is shaping an age-old adaptation and socio-economic development strategy in new ways.

Three factors in particular are specific to the impact of climate change on migration. Firstly, the scale at which climate-related displacement is occurring at alarmingly high rates, with the rate of weather-related displacement steadily increasing. Secondly, the demographic composition of those migrating is not commonly made up of those with the most opportunity or option to decide to move, but those most vulnerable to the impact of extreme events and the erosion of livelihoods. This may result in spiralling vulnerability in the long run. Thirdly, we are increasingly seeing how displacement is occurring in contexts where the triggers for both disasters and conflicts collide. The ways in which climate change impacts converge with pre-existing pressures and stressors contributes to self-sustaining cycles of vulnerability and instability, with climate factors acting as a function of instability particularly in already fragile environments.

Climate-related migration has in the past been the subject of rampant speculation and spurious claims that regard climate shifts as a major driver of mass migration from the global south to the north. Such narratives and assumptions have had the consequence of entrenching climate migration as an inevitably looming security crisis. Despite lacking an empirical basis, this is continually used as justification to keep climate migrants in their area of origin and facilitate in-situ adaptation (adaptation while remaining in place) to the extent that this is possible (Boas et al., 2019). Although the potential for climate change to disrupt livelihoods and threaten lives is real, the vast majority of climate migration occurs within national borders and in fact has always formed a vital adaptation strategy for millions across the globe when faced with an environment that can no longer sustain livelihood needs. Furthermore, it is likely that climate-induced migration will fold into existing migration systems and processes, thereby acting to accelerate already ongoing mobility trends, and not by definition starting new ones (Black et al., 2011). Climate induced migration in and of itself is not inherently more of a threat to security than any other form of uncontrolled migration, and any potential effects on security and stability are likely to be felt at the sub-national and national level.

It is also important to recognise the country and region-specific contexts in which climate-related mobility is most likely to occur. Those on the move are often arguably the most vulnerable and most susceptible to further shocks and insecurities, whether these be directly climate-related or not. For those already fragile states and societies that are particularly vulnerable to persistent climate pressures and that do not possess the legitimacy or capacity to adequately manage state-society or inter-group relations, the risk of emerging grievances spilling over into further conflict and insecurity is a distinct possibility.

This does not, however, permit us to make deterministic causal assumptions regarding the relationship between climate migration and conflict, and we should remain wary of over-

securitised narratives and framings of migration. When examining the potential for climate-related movements to result in conflict, we need to recognise the importance of auxiliary conditions and circumstances, and that when climate-induced migration does emerge as a function of insecurity, it does not do so inevitably. In many contexts, migration represents a valid and well-established adaptation strategy in the face of climate pressures, and can help build household capacity and improve resilience. A causal sequence between climate, migration, and conflict is more likely to emerge if unregulated migration occurs in the context of pre-existing structural factors relating to governance, power, access to resources, and identity.

CGIAR Focus Climate Security has identified four major pathways representing common event sequences and causal mechanisms which may, given the right mix of contextual factors and conditions, link climate variability, migration, and violent conflict. They are grounded in the logic that livelihood insecurity and subsequent migration are a climate fragility risk that may- if poorly managed or regulated- lead to local and regional instability (A New Climate for Peace, 2015). These pathway representations are therefore not designed to be overly deterministic or teleological, but simply account for a number of potential pathways through which the complex interplay of climate impacts, structural factors, and political and socio-economic contexts may result in said risk playing out in reality.

1. In the **climate-induced disaster and forced migration pathway**, a sudden migration flow is catalysed by a rapid-onset environmental catastrophe (such as a hurricane, tsunami, or other extreme weather event), which can lead to conflict in areas of destination
2. The **resource scarcity pathway** involves competition over dwindling resources both in areas of destination, where newly arrived migrants may clash with host communities or face sustained marginalisation, and in areas of origin among 'trapped' populations unable to migrate outwards
3. The **resource abundance pathway** maps the potential for climate variability to improve environmental conditions in certain areas, leading to in-migration and clashes between for instance informal land users and agri-businesses, as well as amongst each other

3. What can we do?

As governance appears to be the main variable to worsen or improve the potential for climate change to lead to conflict, improving the capacity of governance bodies at all levels so they can better manage human mobility in integrated and sustainable ways is a key part of responding to this challenge. Regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and most recently the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have,

therefore, been working to deconstruct problematic narratives of human mobility by instead framing migration as an adaptation strategy undertaken by individuals in the face of increasing climate stresses and steadily eroding livelihoods. There have been regional and continental efforts to view migration through a developmental lens and move the continent towards greater integration, with a strong emphasis on cross-border resource sharing.

Two particularly important examples of such efforts are the Free Movement Protocol and the Africa Continental Free Trade Area, both of which serve to facilitate greater cross-country integration and provide those who need to move for survival with the opportunity to do so safely and securely. The Free Movement Protocol (2018), for instance, contains a number of provisions relevant to climate security, such as those that commit to simplifying cross-border employment processes; the portability of social security benefits; the facilitation of remittances across borders; and those that encourage states to develop mobility protocols for specific groups, including pastoralists. Although the agreement does not directly mention climate, it does help re-frame migration through the lens of development as well as help remove barriers to one of the most central adaptation strategies open to individuals, households, and communities in the face of climate stress.

However, guarding against climate-security-migration risks also requires more proactive policy and governance responses. More dynamic efforts are needed to build upon existing early warning systems and construct policy frameworks capable of providing appropriate incentives for communities to move away voluntarily and safely from areas known to be particularly vulnerable and susceptible to extreme weather events. Developing these policy frameworks will be crucial to avoid unregulated and sudden displacement in the face of sudden climate shocks and mitigate the potentially destabilising effects of this movement. Secondly, alongside these frameworks, countries vulnerable to climate impacts should develop robust systems to respond to such sudden crises as and when they occur, with a dedicated governmental entity working to prepare for and learn from climate shocks. Such systems could be informed by large-scale public insurance programs, tailored to local contexts to help build resilience from the local through to the national scale. CGIAR possesses the capacity to contribute to such initiatives and responses.

Evidence 4 Peace: CGIAR could, firstly, leverage its expertise to help fill the remaining data and evidence gaps when it comes to monitoring the relationship between the intensity and shape of migration flows and climate impacts. There exist three main challenges around the production, collection, and usage of data and evidence:

- 1) A lack of volume and coverage of data that includes not just migratory flows emerging because of disaster-induced displacement, but also those related to slow-onset degradation, and the processes by which this displacement occurs.

- 2) A lack of robust data gathered weeks, months and even years *after* an event to examine how individuals, households and communities cope and develop. Understanding of the impacts of climate-related displacement is currently hampered as there is no way to create a long-term picture of how migrants are affected. This has relevance for urban planning and governance, but also for the security domain.
- 3) A lack of coherence between data providers and collectors with regards to concepts and categories. Every actor uses their own categorisations, questions, data storage procedures, making it difficult to connect different data sets, even within one specific location.

CGIAR research could contribute in particular to the shortcomings identified in the need to understand better the processes by which climate-induced migration occurs, particularly in the context of slow-onset climatic processes. It is likely that the relationship between climate and migration is characterised by the presence of a series of locally defined thresholds, with in-situ adaptation for example becoming unfeasible- and migration more likely- after a certain tipping point in climatic conditions (be this in temperature, precipitation or other variables) is reached. These thresholds are determined by the interaction of household or community characteristics and capacities, local socio-economic, political and institutional conditions, and the local manifestations of both global climatic and socio-economic processes. Untangling the web of variables and conditions that make up these thresholds through the development of localised evidence bases could play a critical role in mapping out the ways climate can impact or generate migration. Furthermore, research could improve understanding of the impact climate-related migration is likely to have across multiple locations. Migration, whilst often framed as uni-directional, should really be seen as establishing a (trans-local) relationship and process of exchange between two different localities, with migrant workers for instance generating remittances in destination areas for the purposes of improving household resilience in areas of origin. More robust and localised evidence can be developed to help understand climate-related migration as a dynamic process impacting and operating across multiple spaces, including the potential scope for increasing the risk of tensions and conflict.

Programming 4 Peace: CGIAR science and research also has the potential to inform climate and security-sensitive tools and innovations that help build resilience to both the effects of climate change and variability and potential attendant climate security risks. CGIAR scientists can take it upon themselves to do more research into developing climate-resilient agricultural systems in a variety of agro-ecologies, for instance by creating and implementing effective resilience-building programming. This includes weather-index based insurance, localised early warning systems, food- and cash-transfer programmes, and climate-smart village approaches, that help build adaptive capacity to climate shocks and

therefore reduce the risk of involuntary displacement. Further improving evaluative strategies can also help ensure this research and programming remain effective, accountable, and responsive to changing, climatic, socio-economic, political, and institutional conditions. Such innovations may help reduce the prevalence of involuntary displacement and thereby reduce the risk of insecurity.

Policy 4 Peace: working in already fragile or conflict-prone contexts is however also a challenge for CGIAR, given how agricultural production requires both time and investment that may not be available in such environments. As such, research could focus on developing context-appropriate early warning systems and increasingly responsive risk monitoring signs. Such systems, particularly when developed with migration in mind, could be integrated with and inform proactive migration policy regimes by identifying both areas that are likely to be subject to the impacts of climate and areas that are likely to experience areas of out- and in-migration. The evidence generated by these early warning technologies could serve to inform responsive and pro-active migration policy regimes by underpinning, for instance, preparatory capacity building and allowing for the appropriate allocation of resources so as to ensure (local) governments are able to perform stabilising functions and reduce the risk of insecurity following in-migration.

In developing these tools, however, CGIAR needs to remain aware of how people are already adapting to climate change. We need to go beyond merely looking at the challenges and also examine and document what efforts are already underway. Adaptation strategies at the community or regional level should be considered not only in the ways in which the impact of climate change on human mobility is modelled, but should also be incorporated into policy framings that prioritise early intervention and adaptation. CGIAR has and should continue to design early warning systems and adaptation programming in a participatory manner, incorporating local knowledge systems wherever possible in stages of the project life cycle. CGIAR is therefore well-positioned to help implement and operationalise existing movement protocols by providing the tools and capacities necessary to develop informed and coherent cross-sectoral responses to migration.

Resources

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