

Climate migrants pushed to the brink

South Asia is unprepared to protect climate migrants, even as it battles the **COVID-19** crisis



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Problem-tree analysis with villagers from Naogaon district, Bangladesh
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

Executive Summary

The world is facing an unprecedented climate emergency. Climate change is impacting the world’s poor adversely, destroying livelihoods and rendering them homeless. People are being displaced and are being forced to move out of their homes. This is the situation when average temperatures have already increased by 1.1°C in 2019, compared to preindustrial levels. Under a business-as-usual scenario, temperatures are expected to continue to increase, crossing the 2°C threshold. The impacts will further exacerbate issues people are facing. This raises the following questions:

- What happens to climate migrants then?**
- What kinds of social protection are they assured of?**
- Do marginalised communities get support in reducing their vulnerability to climate risks?**
- Do climate migrants and those who are displaced get basic services such as education, food, shelter and security at destination sites?**
- Do women, in particular, have access to quality healthcare and sanitation during disasters?**
- Do affected communities get support to recover from climate impacts?**

This policy brief delves into some of these aspects and presents the initial findings of research on climate change-induced migration internally in three countries in South Asia — Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The study was part of the South Asia Migration and Climate (SAMAC) project, funded by the European Union through the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) managed project — Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes Countries — in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, implemented by ActionAid, in collaboration with Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSAs), and its partners.

The study finds that people’s livelihoods in South Asia are being devastated by intense flooding, chronic drought, sea-level rise and changing weather patterns. As local coping mechanisms fail, people are forced to migrate to survive and make an alternative living to feed their families. Governments are unprepared to deal with the issue as they have not yet recognised how climate impacts are affecting internal migration trends. As a result, they have not developed appropriate policies to avert, minimise and address the issue.

People’s voices brought out through participatory research — backed by policy analysis — offer the following demands and recommendations:

Role of National Governments: National governments must recognise the growing problem of climate-induced migration, invest in building resilience and protect migrants through targeted policy interventions at both source and destination sites. To uphold the rights and dignity of affected communities, governments must ensure basic services and social protection to vulnerable communities, particularly to women, whose care work increases due to such migration.

Regional Cooperation: There are more commonalities among the three countries than there are differences. This needs political recognition. Climate-induced migration must be a part of forums like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Budapest Process.* Regional cooperation entails common policies, codes and responses, along with the sharing of information and learning from each other. The rights of people who are forced to migrate across national borders must be legally protected.

International Cooperation: South Asian governments must receive financial and capacity building support. Multilateral institutions, such as Taskforce for Displacement, Global Forum on Migration and

Development, and UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, must rigorously work to protect and strengthen the rights of climate-induced migrants.

Gaps and Research Needs: There are gaps in definitions and conceptual understanding of climate-induced migration. Further research, including academic analysis, is required to establish links between climate change and migration, and its impact on the most vulnerable. There is a strong case to be made for policies on how climate change is affecting the poorest and impacting existing migration trends due to lack of access to natural resources such as land, water and forests.

Role of Other Stakeholders: UN agencies, international organisations, labour unions and civil society organisations have a key role to play in identifying gaps and advocating on all aspects of climate-induced migration, including rights- and gender-based approaches. They must invest in raising awareness and building capacity of government authorities, institutions and other stakeholders. The media also need to be encouraged to report more widely and consistently on the issue of climate migrants.

**The Budapest Process is an interregional dialogue on migration stretching from Europe to the Silk Routes region - also covering Europe's Eastern neighbours, the Western Balkans and Central Asia. It includes over 50 governments and numerous international organizations.*



View of Shaiday IDP camp, Herat province, Afghanistan
PHOTO: TCRO

Context

Climate change is more real than ever. Temperatures and sea levels are rising; cyclones are striking with fiercer intensity; glaciers are melting; and stories of floods and droughts abound. People are ending up more vulnerable than before, and those in South Asia, even more so. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's (IDMC) latest 'Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020' (GRID 2020), there were over 9.5 million newly displaced people in 2019 due to disasters in South Asia, the highest figure since 2012.¹

South Asia remains a disaster hotspot, accounting for 38.3 per cent of the global total number of displacements in 2019.²

The report reveals that most of the disaster displacements in South Asia were due to monsoon rains, floods and tropical storms. Cities in the region are running out of water; people are getting sicker or poorer; they are losing incomes and livelihoods and, in many cases, even their homes. Sometimes, they are left with no choice but to move to survive. Sometimes, they pay with their lives.

The World Meteorological Organization's (WMO's) Statement on the State of Global Climate in 2019 puts things in context. The global mean temperature for 2019 was around 1.1°C higher, relative to the pre-industrial period, and likely the second warmest on record.³ In fact, the past five years — from 2015 to 2019 — have been the five warmest years on record.⁴ Also, the global mean sea level was at its highest in 2019 since the beginning of record keeping in 1993.⁵

The future appears bleak in a business-as-usual scenario. Research suggests that the world is set to cross the 1.5°C and 2°C average temperature thresholds compared to preindustrial times. Climate-related events that already pose risks to society through impacts on health, food, water and human security, will only get worse.

According to the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on 'Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse

Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems', climate change can "amplify environmentally-induced migration both within countries and across borders, reflecting multiple drivers of mobility and available adaptation measures".⁶ The report warns that "extreme weather and climate or slow-onset events may lead to increased displacement, disrupted food chains, threatened livelihoods, and contribute to exacerbated stresses for conflict".⁷ Reports also say people will suffer "stress and mental trauma" from displacement and loss of livelihoods and property.⁸

For South Asia, the situation remains grim. There is a likelihood for a 50 per cent decrease in the area where most favourable and high-yielding wheat is grown, as a result of heat stress in the Indo-Gangetic Plains, according to the fifth assessment report of the IPCC.⁹ Sea-level rise will inundate low-lying areas and affect rice-growing regions.¹⁰ Hunger is on the rise. Over 820 million, or one in every nine people in the world, suffered from hunger in 2018, according to latest WMO global data.¹¹

People will move as a consequence.

Studies estimate that by 2050, environmental migrants may number between 25 million and 1 billion the world over.¹²

In fact, it is already happening as is brought out by the studies conducted in the three SAMAC project countries.



Women's focus group discussion in rural Sindh, Pakistan
PHOTO: SDPI

Climate-induced migration in South Asia

The study on climate-induced migration in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan which account for nearly half of the new displacements in 2019 caused by weather related disasters,¹³ brings out the voices of people unsettled by the climate crisis. The stories are similar – people have suffered disasters, some had to move, either leaving behind families or taking them to unknown, unfriendly territories, searching for security in terms of food, water and shelter, while trying to preserve their dignity and respect to the extent that the situation allowed them. Policy is silent on the issue. There are often attribution issues and climate-induced migrants lack social protection. Below are initial findings carried out in the three countries, bringing to the fore the plight of people.

Afghanistan

In 2018, Afghanistan suffered intense drought followed by the worst flood, the country saw in a decade in March 2019. Both events displaced people from their homes. According to the IDMC report, the flood triggered around 111,000 new displacements and the drought triggered more than 371,000 displacements.¹⁴ Impacts of the drought continued in 2019 as “poor harvests increased food insecurity across the country, leaving many internally displaced persons (IDPs) in dire conditions of poverty and malnutrition”.¹⁵ In fact, Afghanistan had the highest number of people displaced globally as a result of disasters at the end of 2019 with 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled drought and floods in recent years.¹⁶

In the SAMAC study in Afghanistan, researchers from Tadbeer Consulting and Research Organisation (TCRO) visited an IDP camp that houses approximately 30,000 people. Established more than 15 years ago to house people displaced due to conflict, the Shaiday camp in Herat province is now home also to those displaced due to droughts and floods. The visit brought to light stories about the struggle to survive against crippling odds. Consider 50-year-old Ali Mohammad, for instance.

Mohammad, a nomad, used to graze his 100 sheep and return home to his three daughters and son in his village. Gradually though, with increased impacts of drought, the number of sheep started decreasing. By 2018, at the peak of the drought, he was left with only 30.

Unable to find pastures for the remaining sheep, nor being able to feed them, he took the hard decision to sell his sheep.

In 2019, floods in Mohammad’s village claimed his house, and his son and two daughters. Mohammad moved to Shaiday camp with his lone surviving daughter.

Their trauma cannot be described in words. Mohammad now lacks motivation to find regular work. His daughter hardly ever steps out of the tent. They survive on bare minimum support from external agencies, since he is registered as an IDP.

“I am grateful for the support I receive, but it is not enough to cover the basic human needs for my daughter and me. We go mostly cold and hungry,” says Mohammad.¹⁷

It is a dire situation. With 80 per cent of the soil in the country degraded due to successive years of drought,¹⁸ and about 85 per cent of the country’s population dependent on agriculture, the accumulative impact of climatic hazards is eroding the productive capability of rural households, forcing them to leave their homes and move out in search of livelihood opportunities elsewhere.¹⁹



Discussions with a women’s group in Herat province, Afghanistan.
PHOTO: TCRO

Studies establish that temperatures are steadily rising. Climate model projections for the country speak about temperatures increasing to 1.4°C to 2°C by 2050 and 2°C to 6.3°C by 2100, depending on different scenarios.²⁰ The consequences of warming will negatively impact Afghanistan’s socio-economic development, increasing poverty and food insecurity,

and leaving more people vulnerable to climatic hazards. Added to that is the long conflict and insecurity, which remain the main causes of migration and displacement in the country.²¹ Due to decades of conflict, and movement as a result, the link between climate factors causing any form of migration has not been explored, even as agriculture outputs declined due to regular and devastating floods and longer periods of drought. A lack of services, markets and social protection has also forced people to move from rural to urban areas, fuelling the rapid expansion of informal settlements in the country's main cities.²² Often, people moving from rural to urban areas are classed as "economic migrants". Such a description forgoes any further analysis as to why people believe their livelihoods are no longer viable in rural areas.

While the country has developed policies to respond to disasters and climate change impacts, the issue of climate-induced migration remains absent for people like Ali Mohammad, who go cold and hungry most of the time.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh had the third highest number of new displacements in 2019, with over four million displaced people recorded.²³ This was the highest figure for the country since 2008, when data first became available. Cyclone Fani triggered the evacuation of 1.7 million people across several coastal districts in May 2019. Combined with those that took place in India, Fani triggered almost 3.5 million displacements, the highest figure for a single event in 2019. Cyclone Bulbul then triggered more than 2.1 million evacuations in November.²⁴

Climate hazards such as floods, riverbank erosion, storm surges and sea-level rise fuel climate-induced displacement and migration trends.²⁵ The pattern appears to resonate with Bangladesh's infamous reputation of being a hotspot for rise in sea levels. The country is the third most at-risk country to sea level rise, with up to 110 million people at risk to it and its associated hazards.²⁶ Studies show that impacts of salinization on agriculture could undermine food security and displace more than 200,000 people annually.²⁷ Permanent inundation could eventually displace more than two million people over time.²⁸ There are, however, opportunities to engage with national policy. The country has a draft strategy

to address disaster displacement, and a National Adaptation Plan is in the works.²⁹ If the country does not recognise the problem of climate migrants and offer them social protection as part of policy, millions of people will continue to remain homeless, grow poorer and lose lives.



Discussing problem-tree analysis with women in Chittagong, Bangladesh. PHOTO: ACTIONAID

The climate-induced migration study carried out by researchers from ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) in Chittagong, Sunamganj, Khulna, Naogaon and Dhaka looked at how people are migrating due to flooding, drought and river bank erosion, and the vulnerabilities they face, once they move to other locations. In Sunamganj, for example, flooding and land erosion due to rising water-levels force people to migrate to nearby towns or cities in search of work. The frequency of migration is increasing over time.

Speaking to a farming community from the village of Miarchar, in Sunamganj revealed that farmers face a number of challenges when half their village gets submerged under floodwaters every year. Their livestock gets washed away and inundated fields become unsuitable for cultivation. Food security is a major issue as people often go without three meals a day. Loss of people's livelihoods forces them to migrate in order to survive and feed their families.

Unfortunately, when people are forced to migrate, dreams are also lost. Consider Maleka, a 16-year-old from Miarchar, who wanted to be a teacher, but ended up as domestic help in Dhaka. Maleka's parents and five other siblings still live in her home village. Maleka followed her elder sister to Dhaka to help their family tide over one crisis after the next. Floods and unusually heavy rainfall have damaged Maleka's house in the village

four times in the past eight years. On one occasion, while trying to fix the house, her father suffered an injury, rendering him immobile. Her mother is afflicted with health issues, which do not permit her to work.

Food shortage, lack of basic needs and sanitation, and diseases stare the family in the face, as do debts. Maleka had to drop out of school and move out to find menial work. "My dream does not matter anymore. God had a different plan perhaps," says the 16-year-old.³⁰

Pakistan

Pakistan, an agrarian economy highly vulnerable to climate change, has experienced several extreme events, some with devastating consequences and large-scale displacement. Between 1995 and 2014, Pakistan has suffered 143 extreme weather events.³¹ The country is listed among the 10 most climate risk-affected countries in the world.³²

Figures from the latest IDMC report estimated 100,000 people were displaced by disaster in 2019. Of these, 23,000 were displaced in July and August due to the monsoon, 10,000 from flooding and riverbank erosion resulting in pre-emptive evacuations and cyclone Kyarr resulted in 1,100 displacements in October.³³ Flash flooding added to these figures. Over 15,000 people were living in displacement across Pakistan as a result of disasters at the end of 2019.³⁴

In 2010, floods in Pakistan affected 20 million people, destroying crop worth USD 1 billion.³⁵ About 14 million people were forced to relocate temporarily, and 200,000 moved to internal displacement camps.³⁶ Some relocated permanently. The floods followed in 2012, 2014 and 2015 and damaged infrastructure, including homes, schools, roads and railway tracks. Agricultural lands, as well as crops, were destroyed.

The suffering is relentless. People lived in makeshift arrangements for months, and parents fed children flood water, with sugar for taste. Diseases followed. Some women miscarried, with no access to medical care. Some were raped.³⁷

The study, carried out by researchers from Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), in Muzaffargarh in Punjab and Mithi Tharparkar in Sindh, found that

migration was common among landless farm labour in rural areas, particularly during floods or droughts. A discussion with a women's group in Muzaffargarh revealed that they would have coped better with early flood warnings. They learnt about a flood at night with no time to prepare, and struggled to get to roads due to floodwaters. Houses, fields and schools were destroyed, drinking water was polluted, and people struggled to shift the disabled and elderly to safer areas.³⁸ In rural Tharparkar, women are the key workforce involved in farming and livestock management, but are among the most socially and economically deprived groups as they work without financial benefit. This is done in addition to performing household chores and fetching water from long distances, adding to their unpaid care work.³⁹

During droughts, too, people do not fare better. In arid areas of Sindh province, droughts are common. However, never-ending droughts are not. People now report of frequent and prolonged droughts, causing loss of livelihoods and agricultural productivity, leaving them with little option but to lock up their houses and move to look for work. This includes elderly women, who end up working in brick kilns to support families. Sometimes, ill-health comes in the way of earning money. When they return home, they may find their houses destroyed, and have to rebuild.⁴⁰

Studies establish that heatwaves, even though they spur migration, attract relatively less relief compared to floods.⁴¹ The understanding of interactions between climate change and migration as well as the contribution of migration as a response strategy remains a big gap in the literature on climate-induced migration in Pakistan. This gap must be addressed to better respond to the plight of people, who may be simply branded as "economic migrants".



Talking to a villager in rural Muzaffargarh, Punjab, Pakistan. PHOTO: SDPI

COVID-19, a wake-up call for governments to protect migrants

The Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has exposed governments worldwide, with fragile preparedness in protecting the poor and marginalised. COVID-19 has resulted in an unprecedented situation – industrialised countries are buckling down under pressure; poorer countries, with limited resources and flailing health systems, cannot protect their migrant population.



Social distancing in a crowded area of Delhi, India.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

In Bangladesh, the Coronavirus crisis hit garment workers hard. A significant number of the garment workers have had to leave their homes due to erosion, sea level rise and repeated cyclone strikes, which have made farming difficult, and move to Dhaka.⁴² Given the COVID-19 crisis, confusion over whether transportation services would be closed led to panic among the workers and they started leaving en masse. Some factories shutdown without notice, and workers who could not leave the city were left without wages.⁴³ As production slows, they will face the difficult decision of returning to their families in the delta, or finding other ways to survive in the city.⁴⁴

In Nepal, labour migration to India was hit by India's lockdown, especially in urban centres. Nearly 500 Nepalese migrant workers ended up stuck at the Indian border without food or shelter. The COVID-19 crisis left wage labourers without a job. Many struggled to return home, and some had to walk long distances.⁴⁵

In India, following the announcement of lockdown to contain COVID-19, migrants found themselves on the streets, deciding to walk back home because road and rail networks were closed. The distance — sometimes hundreds of kilometres — was no deterrent. The migrants wanted to return home because they did not have secure employment, housing or even food. Many returned to the rural areas they left because of climate impacts.⁴⁶ Some reportedly lost their lives out of exhaustion.⁴⁷

These migrants are generally termed as labour or “economic migrants”. There is a story behind each migrant’s move to the city, and a study is required to find out the environmental factors that may have also driven them to migrate.

And yet a disaster strikes in the city and the migrants are left homeless again. These migrants are not covered under any social protection scheme. It takes media attention and migrants to die for governments to take notice and realise that they did not think through how a lockdown would impact a certain population that helps build and run a city. The importance of bringing migrants into the fold of existing social protection schemes cannot be stressed enough. Some say India has not seen such a huge exodus since Partition in 1947.⁴⁸

India’s Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has issued an advisory on the migrants’ psychosocial issues, where it underlines how to take care of them. “Migrants are less familiar in their new environment in which they temporarily live. They are prone to various social, psychological and emotional trauma in such situations, emanating from fear of neglect by the local community and concerns about wellbeing and safety of their families waiting in their native places. Migrants are forced to leave their native places in search of better opportunities and earnings, sometime leaving behind their families. In many instances, the families in native places depend partially or entirely on the money sent by the migrant earning members of the family...” the advisory reads.⁴⁹

But advisories are not enough. While in the given situation, tackling COVID-19 assumes priority for governments, it would be a missed opportunity if they do not relate the migrant crisis to the increasingly growing impacts of climate change that countries are facing and how they are impacting lives, especially those of the poor. In 2016, a report — Climate Change Knows no Borders published by ActionAid, CANSA and Bread for the World — highlighted that climate change is already having devastating impacts on communities, livelihoods and food security across South Asia.⁵⁰ Its consequences are so severe that it is increasingly contributing to migration, and this incidence is likely to escalate much more in the years to come as climate change impacts become more serious.

Targeted policies towards migrants are the need of the hour. With COVID-19, human life is on the edge, even as huge efforts are being made to save the lives of people. Support to help developing countries cope with COVID-19 must also strengthen resilience to climate change. It means supporting farmers and rural women, making food systems more resilient, reviving local economies and investing in public services, such as health and education, so that countries have a better chance of surviving this crisis and future threats.

The world cannot afford to go back to business as usual.

Conclusion

Migration is happening, and climate change plays a role. For people who cannot cope with the impacts of climate change, there is no choice but to move away from their homes, and sometimes even cross borders. This is the situation across three countries in the region. Such migrants are often generically termed “economic migrants”, since it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between migration and climate change.

Data is often limited, and it is not always possible to attribute an extreme rainfall event or a drought to climate change. Therefore, it is difficult to establish people being displaced due to such events as “climate migrants”. This points to the need for more robust research rather than being in denial that climate-induced migration occurs.

The experiences of people also highlight there are more similarities among the countries than there are differences, however, regional set-ups such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

(SAARC) are mired in either mistrust or political controversies. Sometimes, both. However, a crisis turned into an opportunity when COVID-19 brought the SAARC countries together after a hiatus. Leaving political disagreements aside, SAARC leaders met virtually to discuss the COVID-19 situation and how to tackle the crisis. India proposed an emergency fund, and countries committed and contributed to it.⁵¹ The countries need to come together for yet another looming crisis – climate change. Not as mere tokenism, but to take real action to build resilience, prevent displacement and protect the rights of climate migrants.

While each country individually is taking climate action seriously, has domestic climate plans and set climate targets under the Paris Agreement (the global framework under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), they do not collaborate to resolve the issue of climate-induced migration, which is the need of the hour. The countries must cooperate and come up with common policies, codes and responses, share information and learn from each other’s experiences.



A family in Shaiday IDP camp, Herat, Afghanistan
PHOTO: TCRO

Recommendations

Based on the findings of studies carried out in three countries, these are the recommendations:

- 1. Role of National Governments:** National governments must recognise the growing problem of climate-induced migration, invest in building resilience and protect migrants through targeted policy interventions at both source and destination sites. To uphold the rights and dignity of affected communities, governments must ensure basic services and social protection to vulnerable communities, particularly to women, whose unpaid care work increases due to such migration.
- 2. Regional Cooperation:** There are more commonalities among the three countries than there are differences. This needs political recognition. Climate-induced migration must be a part of forums like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Budapest Process. Regional cooperation entails common policies, codes and responses, along with the sharing of information and learning from each other. The rights of people who are forced to migrate across national borders must be legally protected.
- 3. International Cooperation:** South Asian governments must receive financial and capacity building support. Multilateral institutions, such as Taskforce for Displacement, Global Forum on Migration and Development, and UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, must rigorously work to protect and strengthen the rights of climate-induced migrants.
- 4. Gaps and Research Needs:** There are gaps in definitions and conceptual understanding of climate-induced migration. Further research, including academic analysis, is required to establish links between climate change and migration, and its impact on the most vulnerable. There is a strong case to be made for policies on how climate change is affecting the poorest and impacting existing migration trends due to lack of access to natural resources such as land, water and forests.
- 5. Role of Other Stakeholders:** UN agencies, international organisations, labour unions and civil society organisations have a key role to play in identifying gaps and advocating on all aspects of climate-induced migration, including rights- and gender-based approaches. They must invest in raising awareness and building capacity of government authorities, institutions and other stakeholders. The media also need to be encouraged to report more widely and consistently on the issue of climate migrants.

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Cover photo: Children in Shaiday IDP camp, Herat province, Afghanistan. Credit: TCRO

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Climate Action Network – South Asia (CANSAs) is a coalition of over 150 organisations spread across all South Asian countries. We promote equity and sustainable development through effective climate change policies and their implementation in South Asia and at the global level.

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