

Unpacking the Concept of Climate Migration

By Dr Sripallavi Nadimpalli.

Human mobility in the context of environmental impacts has been gaining increasing attention. Our blog series 'Under the Weather, On the Move' seeks to demystify climate migration by exploring some of its key aspects, intersectional variations, and policy angles.

In this first article, we discuss how climate migration can be broadly defined.

When migration is triggered by changes in climate to which people are unable to adapt, it can be considered as a risk-coping or adaptation strategy. While the impact of climate change on human mobility is complex, it is not always direct. Often, environmental factors are interwoven with other contextual demographic, social, political, and cultural factors, resulting in multiple risks. Thus, climate change impacts often worsen existing vulnerabilities and risks, triggering migration for some, while others may choose to stay despite the risks. Still some others, despite the intent to migrate, may lack the ability or resources to move. When people do move — either by force or by choice — they may not always move as a household. Also, these movements are typically short distance and within the borders of a country.

Given this complexity, how do we begin to understand climate migration? One way could be to unpack the conditions amidst which climate migration happens.

Nature of climatic events and diverse responses

Climatic events can be broadly categorised as 'sudden-onset' or 'slow-onset' processes. Sudden climatic events like hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and landslides usually allow very little preparation time and may cause sudden mass human displacements. On the other hand, slow-onset processes like desertification, extreme temperatures, droughts, land degradation, and sea-level rise allow some reaction time. In these cases, people adopt multiple risk-management strategies based on their perception of risks, and their ability to cope with them and participate in making decisions. Sudden displacements, due to their high visibility, tend to get more attention. However, it is crucial to pay equal heed to slow-onset processes and the coping strategies they elicit over time.

Depending on the nature of the climatic event and the time available to adapt, the responses vary. Further, for different individuals and groups, this ability to cope (or **adaptive capacity**) varies with their physical and social capabilities, personal attributes, asset bases, and agency in decision-making, in addition to factors like access to knowledge, institutional support, and technology. Thus, for understanding climate migration, it is critical to consider *who responds and in what ways* (to multiple risks), taking into account the nature of the dynamic relationship between risks and responses of different individuals.

Multiple migratory and non-migratory outcomes are possible

Climate change impacts vary across India, owing to its diverse geography. Interestingly, even for the same climatic event, people can experience different vulnerabilities and respond differently. The contextual conditions, the people involved, their varying adaptive capacities, and their prior experiences together shape unique adaptation strategies and migratory outcomes.

For example, a recent [study](#) in the Gandak river basin of Bihar reported that while the slow onset of riverine floods impacted overall farming, the magnitude of impact was quite varied across the basin

as well as across different social segments of the population. A combination of caste-based discrimination and the anticipated risk of losing land titles in the aftermath of flooding prompted some marginalised families to stay behind despite the recurring floods. Similarly, women-headed households or households with more women/girls experienced challenges linked to socio-cultural conditions that imposed a lower social status on them and restricted their movement.

Studies in India have also shown that migration typically occurs as a last resort when all other attempts to cope with climate risks locally have either failed or fallen short. Within the migrating household, the socio-cultural expectations pressurise men to migrate for additional income (to offset financial shortages or debts incurred while coping with recurring climatic events), while women, children, the elderly, and the differently abled are expected to stay behind. The choice of destination as well as the duration of migration is linked to their adaptive capacities.

For example, those with established social networks and adequate resources may be able to readily obtain work outside home and stay away for longer durations. In the case of land-owning farmer households, the preference is either to stay back and try coping or migrate for shorter periods of time with the intent of going back (temporary migration). But this is not a surety as circumstances do not always allow reverse migration or return to home. When the island of Lohachara in West Bengal got totally submerged in the 1990s due to sea-level rise and coastal erosion, the inhabitants had to migrate for good.

Climate migration is highly context-specific

Context perhaps plays the most significant role in the climate migration phenomena, as multiple drivers come together in complex ways to shape risks and vulnerabilities experienced, leading to multiple adaptation strategies and outcomes. It is also important to note that migration is just one of the many adaptation strategies undertaken by a household, where not all members migrate, making both mobility and immobility outcomes possible.

Our recent report on [climate migration](#) that reviewed well-documented case studies in India to understand the diversities of responses and outcomes underscores the overarching role of context in climate migration.

We also find that when migration occurs, it establishes a two-way link between origin and destination(s), where risks are transferred or spread across places. Though migratory decisions are aimed at reducing risks at origin, these risks do not cease entirely with migration, and new risks can also emerge at the destination. Further, the risks experienced, as well as the adaptation strategies employed, are likely to evolve over time with changing circumstances across multiple locations. Also, migration is usually not the first response to risk, and decisions to migrate or to stay are diverse and layered.

Thus, climate migration is complex and can have numerous contextually determined outcomes. How different individuals or groups experience multiple risks and respond to them is also not uniform, as it is largely determined by their adaptive capacities, which vary considerably.

Our next article will elaborate on these differential experiences and introduce the notion of intersectionality, delving into how an intersectional lens can help understand climate migration holistically.

The author works in the area of climate adaptation and risk analysis at the CSTEP.