

Susanne Melde

MA

Human Rights, University of Sussex



Evidence for Policy: Human Mobility as Adaptation to Climate and Environmental Change

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Since 2010, human mobility made its way into the global climate change negotiations. In 2015, the Paris Agreement recognized migrants in its preamble and the challenges of displacement. The Protection Agenda of the Nansen Initiative on cross-border displacement as well as the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction recognized displacement and planned relocation as key issues at the policy level. Many countries already aim to address displacement risks and consequences in their policies and programmes. Yet few consider benefits of mobility for adapting to environmental and climate change.

This article is based on cutting-edge primary research in six countries (Dominican Republic, Haiti, Kenya, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea and Viet Nam). This first ever comparative approach allows to draw out how different forms of human mobility can support or undermine adaptation efforts to hazards. Findings include that across countries people use migration to adapt to future hazards and consider the impact of migration to be positive. Disaster risk reduction and resilience programmes need to be strengthened "to prevent, minimize and address displacement" as called for in the decision on loss and damage in Paris in 2015, whereas planned relocation programmes need to be informed by existing insights to decrease the creation of new vulnerabilities and harm in the new location.

Background: The migration – environment nexus

The links between migration on the one hand and the environment and climate change on the other hand are twofold. Disasters and slow processes of environmental degradation exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change occur on a daily basis around the world. Both fast on-set events - floods, tropical storms and earthquakes to name a few - as well as gradual changes such as sea-level rise, desertification and salinization can lead to people migrating as a response. Climate change is likely to exacerbate these environmental events and processes and thus indirectly influences migration. At the same time migration can affect the environment in places of origin and destination of migrants, as well as along transit routes.

Migration linked to the environment is a multi-causal phenomenon. Many factors influence the decision to migrate, and can be of political, demographic (very young populations with little employment opportunities for instance), socio-economic (the costs of migration, such as buying a bus or plane ticket) and/or environmental nature (being exposed to disasters, land degradation, water security among others). Thus persons moving in the context of a changing environment and climate may have different reasons and mo-

tivations to move or to stay (Foresight, 2011). Different persons will thus develop different strategies to adapt to these changes in the environment.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has advocated for including migration in environmental and climate change policies and vice versa for many years (IOM, 2014). Since 2010, human mobility made its way into the global climate change negotiations. This is illustrated by references to migrants' rights in the preamble and displacement of persons in the context of climate change in the body of the Paris Agreement in 2015.¹ In 2015, the Protection Agenda of the Nansen Initiative on cross-border displacement² as well as the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction recognized displacement and planned relocation as key issues at the policy level. Many countries at the national level already aim to address displacement risks and consequences in their policies and programmes. Yet few consider potential benefits of mobility for adapting to environmental and climate change. Often migration is still considered a failure to adapt, without considering that people move often in any case, whether linked to the environment or not.

The innovative MECLEP research project: Mobility as adaptation

The first ever comparative approach in the EU-funded "Migration, environment and climate change: Evidence for policy" (MECLEP)³ project allows to draw out how different forms of human mobility can support or undermine adaptation efforts to hazards. The types of migration studied include migration, be it for work, pursuing education and reuniting with family members; displacement related to disasters; and planned relocation, being the movement of an entire community as a last resort in the face of irreversible environmental degradation. The cutting-edge primary research focused on six countries: the Dominican Republic and Haiti in the Caribbean, Kenya and Mauritius in Africa, and Papua New Guinea and Viet Nam in the Asia/Pacific region.

Findings include that across the countries studied people already actively use migration to adapt to future hazards and consider the impact of migration to be positive. Remittances, the money migrants send to family members and friends, are used for basic needs such as food and are thus important to reduce poverty. Migrants also learnt new skills while away that they used and passed on to origin and destination communities (Melde et al., Forthcoming). Migration can thus help to increase resilience to disasters and environmental degradation

and should not be viewed as only entailing negative effects.

Displacement in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010 and floods in Les Gonaives in 2008 increased the vulnerability of the affected populations even further (Milan et al., 2016). In order to avoid, reduce and address displacement as called for in Decision 21 of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on Loss and Damage,⁴ disaster risk reduction and resilience programmes need to be strengthened. When people are better prepared and warned early about impending disasters, they may be better able to protect themselves and their belongings from damage through storms and other events. Those that do not have the means to move, so called "trapped populations" (Foresight, 2011: 25), need particular attention. They are most vulnerable and have least means to protect themselves from damage (Melde & Laczko, forthcoming).

When staying is no longer an option and communities have to be relocated, the political will to plan, finance and conduct locally-driven solutions has been found to be key (see Connell & Lutkehaus, 2016 for a case in Papua New Guinea). In addition, it is important to ensure that viable job opportunities are taken into consideration and planned for (Melde, forthcoming; Melde et al., forthcoming). Otherwise persons from affected communities may have to move back to the original place that is threatened by environmental degradation and may become even more vulnerable. Vocational training activities in new professions have been found to be a good practice for ensuring future employment in the new sites in relocation cases studied in Can Tho, Viet Nam (Entzinger & Scholten, 2015; 2016).

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Notes

- 1 See <http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/human-mobility-cop21>.
- 2 See http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/default/files/policy/PDD/EN_Protection_Agenda_Volume_I_-low_res.pdf and http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/default/files/policy/PDD/EN_Protection_Agenda_Volume_II_-low_res.pdf.
- 3 See <http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/migration-environment-and-climate-change-evidence-policy-meclep>.
- 4 See <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/10a01.pdf>, Paragraph 49.

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Yhteydenotot:
Arkistonhoitaja Jarno Heinilä
jarno.heinila@utu.fi
+358 (0)2 28 404 40