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Climate Migration: Why it is a Human Security Issue

By Lorraine Elliott

Synopsis

Migration as a result of climate change needs to be approached as a challenge for human security rather than a threat to state security or regional stability. More attention should be given to adaptation strategies and to understanding migration as a coping mechanism.

Commentary

THE proposition that climate change will or could generate international security concerns has become prominent in public discourse over the last few years. Governments, international organisations and NGOs have increasingly directed their attention to climate change as a likely source of conflict. Climate change is most likely to be presented as a threat multiplier, overstressing societies' adaptive capacities and creating or exacerbating political instability and violence. This is an updated version of predictions from the late 1980s and early 1990s that environmental degradation could contribute to various kinds of instability including civil disruption and perhaps even outright violence.

Climate Change and Conflict

The United Nations has estimated that there could be 'millions' of environmental migrants by 2020. Various think tanks, government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have produced reports that argue that migration can be a major risk factor in the chain of effects that link climate change and violent conflict. The expectation is that climate migration will result in tensions between those displaced within their own country and the communities into which they move, as well as between so-called climate 'refugees' (who cross an international border) and the states that receive them.

Various triggers for conflict have been identified -- competition for scarce resources or economic support (or jobs); increased demands on social infrastructure; and cultural differences based on ethnicity or nationality. All of this is thought more likely in countries or regions that already suffer from other forms of social instability and that possess limited social and economic capacity to adapt.

Climate change-related migration is most likely to be a slow process. The language in the climate security and climate migration literature, on the other hand, conjures up the image of climate change-induced migration that is likely to be out of control and therefore highly threatening. The implication is that countries in the developed 'North' will somehow be threatened directly by the alleged 'influx' of climate refugees (the term itself is nevertheless contentious) or indirectly by instabilities that might arise in regions of strategic interest.

Indeed, some of those reports worry about a likely increase in demands on the military capacity of the richer countries. Yet there is little convincing evidence that climate migration, if and/or when it does occur, will result in social unrest, conflict and regional instability. This is not to deny that migration might be a source of tension. Rather it is to question the inevitability of this relationship in the absence of reliable evidence about causal chains.

Human Insecurity

What is more certain is that both the impacts of climate change that might impel people to move and the consequences of migrating are human security issues and should be addressed as such. In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, it is people and their communities who are most at risk from climate change and from the instability, incapacity, social and economic stress that might occur. A human security model, which takes people (or peoples) as the security referent, questions the 'taken for granted' assumptions and analyses within the policy community about climate change, migration, threat and (in)security.

It suggests that we should think about forced migration from unsustainable or uninhabitable lands as a source of insecurity for those whose lands and homes can no longer sustain them. Migration also generates other human insecurities, including loss of income, loss of social capital, disruption to traditional coping mechanisms and increased vulnerability for already marginalised groups, including the poor, women and children. We should worry about the way that climate-related food insecurity, malnutrition and an increased disease burden destroys lives and livelihoods, and exacerbates poverty and misery for the millions of people who are affected, rather than worrying about this only as a trigger for civil unrest and potential extremism.

Desecuritising Climate Migration

The important human security question, then, is how can we protect and assist people whose lives are disrupted by climate change. Migration is not the only response strategy. People may, for example, choose to stay in their communities and adapt to the impacts of climate change; or they may choose to stay, accept the costs of climate change and do nothing. Even if those who are most vulnerable have no choice but to move, migration does not necessarily have to implicate unrest or violence. Therefore we need to have a better understanding of the complexities of migration as a response or adaptation strategy in the face of the social, economic and environmental consequences of climate change.

We need to know what factors impel migration, as well as the factors that enable individuals and communities to adapt in ways other than moving or migrating. We need to know what kinds of governance and institutional approaches are best suited to anticipating, preventing and, where necessary, managing climate-change induced migration. And we need to think about adaptation as a security strategy that has the potential to save lives, increase individual adaptive capacity, build societal resilience and lessen the chances of conflict.

This move from a politics of security to a politics of adaptation and building resilience can be read as a process of de-securitisation of climate migration in the region. Reading this move instead as human securitisation (or perhaps even counter-securitisation) has the potential to sustain the tactical attractions of the language of security. It also brings urgent attention to the problem and redirects security policy to securing the lives, livelihoods and, wherever possible, the lands and homes of those in the region who are most vulnerable to and most insecure from the threats of climate change.

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