POLICY BRIEF

By Lorraine Elliott

Climate Change, Migration and Human Security in Southeast Asia

Migration and displacement are among the range of pressures on people and their communities likely to arise from the economic, social and environmental consequences of climate change. Despite fragmented data, the climate security literature has focused on the potential for climate change-induced migration to trigger social tensions and conflict within states and across borders. A human security approach seeks to ensure that people are placed at the centre of concerns about mobility and migration in response to climate change. This requires more than identifying those who are vulnerable to migration pressures. It necessitates an understanding of how mobility choices are made and how vulnerabilities can be managed in ways that are participatory and responsive to local needs and circumstances.

Introduction

The 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggests that in some parts of the world, climate change-related disruptions of human populations are likely both within states and across national borders, with sudden sharp spikes in rural to urban migration in some countries, and the exacerbation of shortfalls in food production, rural poverty and urban unrest in others.[1] In the face of UN estimates that there could be 'millions' of environmental migrants by the year 2020,[2] the consequences of climate change-induced migration pressures have come to feature prominently as a possible trigger for instability, conflict and violence, building on a much longer tradition of debates about the links between environmental change and security.

This policy brief provides a brief overview of the arguments surrounding climate change-induced migration as a risk factor for insecurity, identifies key concerns within Southeast Asia and offers some thoughts on a broad framework for policy responses that rely on a human security approach to this problem. In particular, it focuses on the importance of adaptation strategies and the need to understand the complexities of migration as a coping strategy.

Securitising Climate Change-induced Migration

While 'causal chains … have so far rarely been substantiated with reliable evidence',[3] much of the climate security literature assumes that climate change-induced migration is highly probable, that the numbers involved will be in the millions, and that this will almost certainly result in, or at the very least be implicated in, social conflict and instability. Hypotheses about the relationship between climate, migration and conflict are usually presented in terms of anticipated competition for scarce resources or economic benefits (such as jobs); increased demands on social infrastructure; and cultural differences based on ethnicity or nationality. The expectation in much of this literature is that climate change-induced migration will result in tensions – between those displaced within their own country and the communities into which they move; and between so-called climate 'refugees' (who cross an international border) and receiving states.

Climate change-induced migration – internal and cross-border – is assumed to be more likely to result in social unrest, conflict and instability if it occurs in countries or regions that face other forms of social instability (or have a recent history of such instability), that possess limited social and economic capacity to adapt, and from a human security perspective, where migrants have inadequate 'social support mechanisms or [in]sufficient resources to assimilate or establish stable communities'.[4]

The term 'climate refugees' has become shorthand for those who have moved, or who are identified as likely to have to move, as a consequence of the impacts of climate change. It is, however, a controversial piece of terminology. The usual objection is that it runs the risk of undermining the legal meaning of 'refugee' in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. The term preferred by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is 'environmentally induced migrants', defined as 'persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad'.[5] The term 'climate refugees' also invokes (whether consciously or not) a disquiet similar to that engendered by descriptions that are applied to others who seek refuge – illegal

aliens, non-citizens, queue-jumpers. The inference is that those who are forced to be mobile in response to climate change are somehow illegitimate and a source of threat.

While climate change-related people movements are more likely to be 'slow-induced migration',[6] the language of the climate security literature conjures up an image of processes that are likely to be out of control and therefore highly threatening. The US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), for example, worries about 'massive migrations – potentially involving hundreds of millions of people … dramatic movements of people … perhaps billions of people … a significant portion of humanity on the move'.[7] Uncontrolled migration, in their view, is likely to 'overwhelm the traditional instruments of national security (the military in particular) and other elements of state power and authority'.[8] In their report on climate change and international security, the High Representative and the European Commission talk of a 'vicious circle of degradation, migration and conflicts'.[9] Many of the reports also anticipate increased demands on the military capacity of the richer countries. The Oxford Research Group, even while expressing concern over knee-jerk responses that would be unsuccessful in the long run, raises the likelihood that 'the protection of national and maritime borders and the detention of illegal immigrants is likely to become an increasing priority' for agencies such as police, customs and (where relevant) coastguard operations.[10] Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper suggests that if international cooperation on climate mitigation and economic assistance strategies were insufficient to avert climate change-related stresses and strains in the region, including 'potentially destabilising mass migration flows', then the government 'would possibly have to use the ADF [Australian Defence Force] as an instrument to deal with any threats inimical to [its] interests'.[11]

Climate Change-induced Migration in Southeast Asia

Given Southeast Asia's high degree of vulnerability to climate change, the issue of climate change-induced migration is an important environmental, social and political challenge for the region's peoples and governments. The question is whether this is also a security issue and, if so, for whom? A report prepared for the US National Intelligence Council (which comes with the disclaimer that it does not represent US government views) anticipates both internal and cross-border migrations that could well have 'destabilizing impacts'.[12] It foresees 'large-scale migration from rural and coastal areas into cities' (identifying Vietnam as the country most in

need of resettlement planning on this count) and suggests that this form of internal displacement will 'increase friction between diverse social groups already under stress from climate change'.[13] It also anticipates that 'climate change may drive cross border movements of Vietnamese and Indonesians to Malaysia, Cambodians and Laotians to Thailand, Burmese to Thailand and Malaysia, and Filipinos throughout the region'.[14]

However, confident predictions about the likely extent of climate change-induced migration in Southeast Asia and elsewhere often derive from rather simplistic methodologies that rely on extrapolation from historical events or on assumptions about what Clark refers to as 'single agent causality'.[15] The Asian Development Bank (ADB) draft report on climate change and migration in Asia and the Pacific recognises that 'it is difficult to make reliable predictions of the number of climate-induced migrants'.[16] Convincing evidence that climate change-induced migration, if or when it does occur, will result in social unrest, conflict and regional instability is similarly sparse.

What is more certain is that for people and communities in Southeast Asia, both the circumstances related to climate change that might impel people to move, and the consequences of that migration, are human security issues and should be addressed as such. In a report prepared for CARE International, Koko Warner and colleagues argue that 'climate-related displacement and migration should be treated, first and foremost, as a "human security" issue' and caution against 'sensationalist warnings' about the extent of displacement and its likely impacts.[17] 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. From a human security perspective, forced migration is a potential source of insecurity for those whose lands and ecosystems can no longer sustain them. This approach challenges the representation of 'climate refugees' or 'climate migrants' as a potential source of pressure on, or threat to, states.

Migration is not the only response strategy to climate change: people may, for example, choose to stay in their communities and seek to adapt to the impacts of climate change, or they may choose to stay, accept the costs of climate change and do nothing.[18] But where it does occur, particularly for those who are already vulnerable, migration can generate 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. A human security model demands that we worry about the way that climate change-related food insecurity, malnutrition and an increased disease burden can exacerbate poverty and misery for those who are affected, rather than focusing on climate change-induced migration only as a trigger for civil unrest and potential extremism.

A human security approach acknowledges that in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, it is people and their communities who are most at risk from climate change, and from the social and economic stress, instability and incapacity that might occur. It therefore emphasises 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. Within the security literature, this move from a politics of security to a politics of adaptation and building resilience would be read as a *de-securitisation* of climate change-induced migration. Reading this shift as '*human* securitisation' (or perhaps even 'counter-securitisation') instead has the potential not only to sustain the 'tactical attractions' of the language of security and the urgent attention that a security discourse brings to a problem, but also to redirect security policy to securing the lives, livelihoods and, wherever possible, the lands and homes of those in Southeast Asia who are most vulnerable to, and most insecure from, the threats of climate change.

Policy Implications

Policy responses need therefore to be grounded in a clear understanding of the complexities of migration as a strategy for adapting to the social, economic and environmental pressures of climate change. As the ADB has argued, 'solid analysis and greater knowledge development and sharing on climate-induced migration are essential to inform policy makers of the issues at stake'.[19] Those responses need to recognise the factors that impel migration (including how climate change interacts with existing migration pressures) and the factors that enable individuals and communities to adapt in ways other than moving or migrating. A recent study demonstrates that 'climate change is only one factor among several others in explaining migration dynamics'.[20] Nor is it inevitable that climate change migration will be a destabilising factor. As the non-governmental organisation International Alert points out, it is not 'the process, but the context and the political response … that shapes the risks of violent conflict'.[21] Policy responses will therefore be enhanced if they consider the human security dimensions of the issue:

- **Equity**. Policy responses should be sensitive to equity concerns and the social dimensions of vulnerability in identifying those who are most likely to be subject to mobility pressures, both within states and across borders. Those equity issues will range across a number of possible areas of disproportionate impact and demand but are likely to focus particularly on gender difference, on the complex migration geography of urban and rural communities and on the impact of poverty in the nature and timing of mobility choices.

- **Community.** Policy responses need to take into account community experience. This version of a livelihoods model should consider (among other things) existing migration strategies including those that are often temporary and seasonal, or rely on short-distance rather than cross-border movements. It calls for a 'realistic analysis of [people's] livelihood strategies [to] provide an adequate understanding of how they live' at the local, household and individual level,[22] and how they are therefore likely to respond to climate change-induced migration pressures.

- **Resettlement.** Policy responses will have to ensure that resettlement planning is based on governance arrangements that are transparent and accountable. This is not just a question of institutional design, or the policies and strategies adopted or implemented under the auspices of regional organisations. It requires that 'resettlement strategies … protect people's lives and livelihoods'[23] and support community-based responses.

Notes

[1] Cruz, Rex Victor, Hideo Harasawa, Murari Lal et al., 2007, 'Asia', in Martin L. Parry, Osvaldo F. Canziani, Jean P. Palutikof et al. (eds), *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 488.

[2] 'Statement at the Thematic Debate on Climate Change and the Most Vulnerable Countries', 2008, Presented by the President of the *62nd Session of the UN General Assembly*, UN Headquarters, New York, 8 July. http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/statements/ccvulc080708.shtml

[3] Nordås, Ragnhild and Nils Petter Gleditsch, 2007, 'Climate Change and Conflict', *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 6, p. 627.

4 Preston, Benjamin L., Ramasamy Suppiah, Ian Macadam et al., 2006, *Climate Change in the Asia/ Pacific Region: A Consultancy Report Prepared for the Climate Change and Development Roundtable*, Canberra: Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), p. 49.

5 International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2007, *Discussion Note: Migration and the Environment*, MC/INF/288, 94th Session (1 November), pp. 1–2.

6 Gemenne, François, 2006, 'Climate Change and Forced Displacements: Towards a Global Environmental Responsibility?', *47th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA)*, San Diego, 22–25 March, p. 3.

7 Campbell, Kurt M., Jay Gulledge, J.R. McNeill et al. (eds), 2007, *The Age of Consequences: The Foreign Policy and National Security Implications of Global Climate Change*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, p. 8.

8 Ibid., p. 10.

9 High Representative and European Commission (HREC), 2008, *Climate Change and International Security*, Paper to the European Council, S113/08, March, p. 4.

10 Abbott, Chris, 2008, *An Uncertain Future: Law Enforcement, National Security and Climate Change*, Briefing Paper, London: Oxford Research Group, p. 9.

11 Australian Government, 2009, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, pp. 30 and 40

12 CENTRA Technology, Inc., and Scitor Corporation, 2010, *Southeast Asia: The Impact of Climate Change to 2030: Geopolitical Implications*, CR 2010-02, Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, p. 27.

13 Ibid., p. 4.

14 Ibid., p. 4.

15 Clark, William A.V., 2007, *Environmentally Induced Migration and Conflict*, Berlin: German Advisory Council on Global Change (WGBU), p. 15.

16 Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2011, *Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific, Draft edition*, Manila, p. 28.

17 Warner, Koko, Charles Ehrhart, Alex de Sherbinin et al., 2009, *In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement*, Geneva: CARE International et al., p. v.

18 See, for example, Reuveny (2007) for an examination of the conditions under which people may or may not migrate in response to climate change. Reuveny, Rafael, 2007, 'Climate Change Induced-Migration and Violent Conflict', *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 6, pp. 656–73.

19 See Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2011, 'Climate-induced Migration: Mitigating Risks, Creating Opportunities'. http://www.adb.org/ SocialDevelopment/climate-migration/default.asp

20 Piguet, Étienne, Antoine Pécoud and Paul de Guchteneire, 2011, 'Migration and Climate Change: An Overview', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 12–13.

21 Smith, Dan and J. Vivekananda, 2007, *A Climate of Conflict: The Links Between Climate Change, Peace and War*, London: International Alert, p. 16.

22 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), n.d., *Food Security and Livelihoods*, Thematic Brief, Rome, p. 1.

23 Martin, Susan F., 2010, *Climate Change, Migration and Adaptation*, Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, p. 1.

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