

Transforming Challenges Into Part of the Solution: Climate- Change Related Migration

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU)
University of Dhaka

Background

- Migration is the most controversial issue in the global climate change discourse
- During the 1990s and early 2000s, in climate change discourse, migration was presented as a threat.
- These studies perceived climate change as an independent variable driving migration from ecologically vulnerable areas.
- Those who moved were termed as a new group of forced migrants or 'environmental refugees'.

- Although subsequent studies underscored migration as a complex and multi-causal phenomenon, the predominant trend in the discourse remained one of containing refugee flows by way of promoting local level adaptation.
- Under these new circumstances, migration was seen as an adaptation failure.

Central argument

- Challenging the conventional belief that migration from ecologically vulnerable areas denotes failures of local adaptation strategies, this research, based on findings from several ecological hotspots in Bangladesh, demonstrates that livelihood-migration, far from being a failure of the local level adaptation strategies, is actually used by the 'climate victims' as an adaptation tool to combat the climate change stresses better.

- It also argues that facilitating livelihood-migration from climate change prone areas in the government policies, instead of restraining population movements, should ease the stresses on the people and help them adapt with the consequences of climate change.
- It should also help the government attain some of the Sustainable Development Goals better.

Research questions

- How does climate change induce migration in Bangladesh?
- What would be its extent by 2050?
- What types of migration are more sensitive to climate change?
- Are policies and interventions currently in operation equipped enough to deal with the different flows of climate related migration?
- Can migration be used as one of the adaptation tools?

Methodology

- Village level community surveys, in-depth interviews,
- spatial exploration of 2001 and 2011 national population census data,
- Analysis of development and climate change related policies,

- Longitudinal surveys of 1500 migrant and non-migrant households in three climatic stressed areas of Bangladesh: Chapai Nawabganj, Satkhira and Munshiganj, representing respectively droughts, cyclones and saline intrusion, and riverbank erosion and floods.
- Migrants from these three origin areas were traced in three destination areas of Khulna Metropolitan, Dhaka and Keraniganj.



Fig. 1- Map of Bangladesh, showing the study areas

Climate change induced migration

- The research found important links between migration and climatic stresses
- However, climatic stresses may not be the only driving factor
- Differences in age, stages in the migrant's life course, and human capital, including social networks as well as demand-side of the labour market, determine who would migrate and who would not.
- Therefore, facing similar climatic hazards a section of affected people migrate while the others do not.

- Respondents do not always identify identify climatic stresses as their cause for migration. Responses varied significantly on the type of stresses they had faced.
- Respondents from river-bank erosion, flood and cyclone affected areas identified climatic stresses as the primary reason behind their migration decision, whereas respondents from drought affected areas do not identify climate stresses as their reason for migration.
- This leads us to argue that compared to migrants who experienced slow onset events such as droughts, people who experienced sudden onset events such as cyclones and river-bank erosion could associate climatic stresses with their migration decision more.

- From the quantitative analysis, the research found that on an average migrant and non-migrant households relocated their residence 2.61 times
- 75 percent of all households, both migrant and non-migrants, experienced different types of climatic stresses in their dwellings in different periods of their lives.
- 50 percent of them experienced multiple stresses. Flooding, cyclones, riverbank/coastal erosion, salinization, water-logging, drought/ lack of rain, declining land fertility and reduced crop yields are the major stresses that they faced.
- The study captured the livelihood changes of the respondents over the last forty years.

- It was found that villagers in areas affected by increasing climatic stresses and shocks are diversifying their traditional livelihood strategies by migrating.
- Environmental factors, including climatic stresses and shocks, often make such shifts necessary.
- The research found that the families that combined local level livelihoods with livelihood migration of a few household members as one of the tools to make up the traditional livelihood and income losses caused by climatic events, have comparatively gained more.

- A comparison of household financial situations of migrant and non-migrant households of similar socio-economic background shows that before migration 6.1% of the migrants' economic status were "always sufficient", currently it has increased to 10%.
- 5% of the non-migrant belonged to "always sufficient" category but now it has reduced to 2.5%. The number of persons in the category of "just sufficient" has also increased in case of migrant households but it has decreased in case of non-migrants.
- A number of households in occasional and chronic deficit have reduced in case of migrant households; whereas it increased in case of non-migrant households.

- This leads us to argue that migration of household members provided better income and financial situation to migrants compared to non-migrants.
- Another recent study by RMMRU, which covered the same study sites, found that 39% of migrants belonged to below poverty households, whereas 68% of the non-migrant households belonged to that category.
- Such findings indicate that a section of households which were trying to adapt locally may be trapped, due to occasional or chronic poverty.

- Findings of this research necessitate rethinking of policy framework that treats migration as failure failure of adaptation.
- Adaptation programs in Bangladesh should not set goals to prevent migration as it hinders people's choice of mobility.
- While respecting the right of the affected people to stay put in places of origin, policies should also respect the desire of those who would choose to migrate.

- Such conceptualization would throw new challenges.
- In case of internal migration, it will open up new areas of intervention for policymakers that would focus on urban areas
 - planning for urban growth, connectivity between places, addressing protection gaps and mitigating social tensions.
- Similarly, to ensure access to short-term international migration new types of interventions have to be designed at the local level.
- This would require the opening of market-oriented human resource development centers, and establishing migration processing service providers' offices close to climate change affected areas.

Implications for SDGs

- What would be the implications of this new appreciation of values of migration in adapting with climate change, is yet to be seen.
- However, based on the findings of this research it would not be illogical to think that facilitating migration, both internal and short-term international contract migration, might help the government achieve some of the SDGs.

- Ending poverty (by ensuring earning, wages and benefits), promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth (by ensuring full and productive employment and decent work for all, including the climate distressed migrants), making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (by ensuring access to affordable housing, sustainable transportation).

Thank You