

# Maximising migration's potential as a climate change response



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by Samuel Huckstep and Michael Clemens

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Climate change will have major ramifications for migration at every level, and is already impacting movement. Some policy responses are much more promising than others.

Last week the Center for Global Development published a [comprehensive overview of the climate-migration nexus](#). It covers the current system of international movement and its prospects; the role of regional free movement; the interaction between climate, migration, and urbanisation; the effect of remittances on climate resilience; and options for new approaches to climate change and migration—and more.

The climate-migration nexus is complex. Migration in response to climate change will be mostly domestic, but also international. Climate shocks are not the most important factors affecting movement: networks, education, resources, and other considerations all shape migration decisions. But complexity does not justify inaction. A lot can be done.

First, we must recognise that the humanitarian system of refugee and asylum law cannot accommodate most climate migrants, nor are there substantial prospects for a new “climate visa”. International mobility in response to climate change will be regulated mostly through labour-based visas and through bilateral or regional free-movement accords. But these are outdated and must be redesigned around their 21st century role: not merely as instruments of industrial and trade policy, but as vital instruments of foreign policy and security policy, and central to climate policy. Some governments have begun to do this, offering models for others.

Second, because so many households invest in migration as a strategy for resilience, we should seek to maximise migration's potential for adaptation. We can do this at multiple levels. We can help people affected by climate change to move more easily across borders, especially at the regional level. This is especially helpful

to people in borderland areas, and there are several regional free movement initiatives which already look promising. We can also help people to move internally, providing them with information, training, travel support, and other assistance. And we can reconsider our international labour migration approach, bending labour migration pathways towards climate-vulnerable populations who would most benefit from access to new opportunities.

Third, many people will not be able to move. Repeated and worsened climate shocks will gradually or suddenly erode the resources of many populations, leaving them “trapped” where they are. These populations will often be far more vulnerable than the “climate migrants” of news reports, but will often need support in relocating if they are to avoid serious harms. Relocation programs will also be necessary for less vulnerable populations; policymakers need to start having these conversations, and recognise that they will be challengingly political.

Fourth, migration is not a silver bullet despite its high potential. Migration can be maladaptive, increasing vulnerability. This does not have to be the case, and policymakers and other actors can troubleshoot potential hazards at different levels. In cities, for example, increased vulnerability in informal settlements can be avoided through climate-conscious zoning and upgrading.

The report makes policy suggestions in a large number of areas. Among many proposals, we suggest that:

- Regional free movement should be facilitated, allowing access to adaptive labour migration and, if necessary, permanent movement away from decreasingly inhabitable areas;
- Labour migration should be reconsidered as a valuable tool for climate adaptation, and we should make the institutional reforms necessary to enable this;
- Adaptive internal migration should be supported, by subsidising rural-urban transport, providing targeted training, and allowing portable skill recognition;
- The hazards of internal migration should be troubleshoot, including climate-conscious urbanisation, planned relocation preparations, and expanded social protection access for migrants;
- A greater understanding of the impact of climate change on displaced populations is needed, and approaches to refugee/IDP care need to incorporate climate factors;
- Diaspora engagement for climate adaptation should be stepped up, and efforts to guide remittances towards adaptation projects should be increased.

The climate-migration nexus is enormous and highly complex. Each locality and group will have its own context-specific issues and opportunities. Nonetheless, there are considerable overlaps, and many of the same challenges will arise in most

situations. We hope that this broad overview will be useful in helping different actors to anticipate and respond to these challenges, and to notice and take advantage of the opportunities migration can provide.

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### **Disclosures:**

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### **Author/s:**

#### **Samuel Huckstep**

Sam Huckstep is a research assistant in the Migration, Displacement and Humanitarian Policy program at the Centre for Global Development.

#### **Michael Clemens**

Michael Clemens is a Professor of Economics at George Mason University, and a distinguished non-resident fellow at the Center for Global Development.

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