

Towards a better Climate Migration Policy Landscape in India

By Dr Sripallavi Nadimpalli.

The [first two](#) articles of our '**Under the Weather, On the Move**' blog series talked about the various considerations in conceptualising climate migration, and why migration is usually not the first adaptation strategy when facing a combination of climatic and non-climatic risks. We also discussed that when migration occurs, the outcomes are highly context specific and incredibly diverse for different individuals.

In this final article of the series, we focus on the challenges in understanding these pluralities of climate migration, and the implications they have for policy formulation. India's socio-cultural diversity and variable vulnerability to climate change make the challenges even more daunting, especially in terms of tackling the issue at a macro level.

The average annual temperatures in India are projected to rise by 1.1°C–4.1°C by the end of the century, which is likely to increase the frequency and/or intensity of flash floods, heatwaves, and droughts. Sea-level rise has already increased the risk of coastal floods and tropical storms. Climatic change consequences vary spatially and further intersect with poor land management practices and rapid urbanisation, causing human displacements.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre says that since 2018, at least 2.5 million people have been internally displaced (within India) every year, primarily due to natural disasters. Depending on the nature of climatic variations, intensity and recurrence of hazards, and other contextual conditions, multiple adaptation strategies and mobility outcomes are possible. Also, unforeseen circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic can trigger mass displacements. The lockdowns of 2020 left migrant workers in cities without jobs, food, or shelter overnight, prompting forced return migrations.

The overlap challenge: Climate migrants, climate refugees, and other migrants

In India, most internal movements (i.e. within a country) are intra-state and caused by depleting farming productivity and natural resources that impact rural livelihoods. While the reasons that trigger migration cannot be generalised, it is also difficult to directly link migration to environmental factors, making it hard to clearly identify climate-induced migration. Similarly, '*climate refugees*' — a category often appearing in international discourses and referring typically to people who have migrated across international borders with low possibility of returning to the origin — can form a part of climate migrants.

These overlapping categories of migrants and their varying experiences make policy formulation extremely challenging. While India receives refugees from its neighbouring nations, there are no clear laws that define refugees displaced by climate impacts or how they can be rehabilitated or protected. In Assam, for example, there is a long history of immigration from Bangladesh, but when flooding occurs, despite the government's active efforts to provide disaster relief, non-citizens are left out of the allocated benefits, even though they are victims of disasters. Their human rights are violated and they are likely to experience severe discrimination in the absence of dedicated policies for climate refugees.

In general, all migrants are perceived as 'problematic outsiders' in everyday discourses, and are usually considered a threat to local jobs and resources in the city. Where they are socio-culturally different from the majority, they can become marginalised, and may have limited voting rights and poor political representation, particularly if they lack the necessary documentation. Migrants'

discrimination is multi-tiered, which can be further affected by their position within the social hierarchy. For instance, if they belong to lower castes, are poor, or are generally not a desirable demographic at the destination, their marginalisation can worsen.

Existing policies and data woes

At the national level, there are no policies that holistically understand climate migration and perceive the nuanced experiences of different migration trajectories within this broader category. However, there are some policies and schemes on disaster relief and management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, infrastructure development, and livelihood security and housing in rural areas that indirectly address some facets of climate migration.

In 2008, the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) was launched by the government as a climate change mitigation and adaptation initiative. Based on the distinct vulnerabilities experienced in their regions, the states have formulated the State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC). However, these do not directly address climate migration.

In India, internal migration is largely viewed as a livelihood-related phenomenon, and there is limited data to capture the nuances. The numbers on the total internal migrants, displaced populations, and climate refugees are either unavailable or debatable, and the availability of gender-disaggregated data is also insufficient. Without adequate information to comprehensively gauge the impact of migration at multiple locations (including origin and destination) and their interconnectedness, policy approaches may remain skewed.

Need for a holistic, inclusive, and contextually relevant approach

India's vast diversity makes the inherently layered phenomenon of climate migration even more complex. Clearly then, a one-size-fits-all solution cannot work. For developing policies that are adequately inclusive and locally relevant (with different strategies for origin and destination), mapping the phenomena holistically within its context and with due cognisance to intersectional variations is crucial. Also, more micro-level studies are needed to help bring out the nuances and regional differences for formulating policies that capture the vast geographical variations of climate change impacts and attend to at least some of the challenges they pose.

In our recent report on [climate migration](#), we have attempted to address these challenges, by developing a framework that could potentially enable a holistic mapping of the climate migration phenomenon with an intersectional lens. It emphasises the interlinkages among diverse and multi-locational adaptation strategies at a household level, by acknowledging the differential impacts on different individuals. The framework aims to allow researchers and policy makers to identify specific entry points for interventions that are tailored to the context.

However, inaccessibility to or unavailability of current and relevant data can be a major roadblock for applying this framework, especially at a regional scale, as well as for supporting policy formulation in the climate migration space. Bridging the data gap is thus critical for devising and implementing policies that adequately address the unique challenges of climate migrants.

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