

Climate Change and Migration: Local Realities, Local Solutions

In 2018, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) marked a critical milestone in recognizing the link between climate change and migration, with **commitments to protect those who are compelled to leave due to sudden onset natural disasters or slow onset environmental change**. This explicit acknowledgment created new avenues for actions and policy interventions, but climate change and disasters have gone unabated.

In 2020 alone, disasters such as floods, droughts and storms **internally displaced more than 30 million people around the world**. Yet, this shocking figure, the highest in a decade's time, only tells part of the story of migration in a changing climate. Many people on the move will, in fact, never appear in any official statistics or registry of disaster displaced. They are moving not because of a single, spontaneous event, but because their environment is gradually deteriorating, and with it their livelihoods and ways of life. Depending on how policy rises to meet these challenges, migration to a neighboring community or country can act as a survival mechanism or offer a long-term adaptation strategy.

Migration related to climate change is often framed as a new migration category, as if climate change occurs in a vacuum, outside of local, political and socio-economic contexts. Alarmist, global projections of billions of 'climate refugees' rarely consider what is actually known about the climate-migration nexus. They clash with the decades of qualitative, empirical assessments, which insist that **environmental drivers of migration are intimately intertwined with every other reason for migration**, including local socio-economic conditions and prospects, opportunities for education, or the sanitary situation as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, such projections typically frame climate migration as a future risk, which would only materialise if we fail to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. Not only can such a framing feed into the narratives of a looming global 'migration crisis' and, therefore, fueling restrictive policies and populist discourses in developed countries, but it is also a distraction from the very real policy challenges many regions of the world are facing today. It is our position that **science has the potential to create a better-informed public, to support evidence-based policy, and, therefore, to help people affected by climate change**.

These are some of the reasons why the Hugo Observatory has partnered with more than twenty research organisations across Africa, Asia, and Europe to launch the [HABITABLE project](#),¹ which aims to significantly advance our understanding of the current interlinkages between climate impacts and migration and displacement patterns. It refutes deterministic assumptions and overly simplistic global narratives. Rather, **HABITABLE takes a systemic approach to understanding migration decision-making in a changing climate**. We examine how climate change impacts weigh upon other migration drivers, and how migration, in turn, impacts societies of origin and destination in some of the most vulnerable countries of the world.

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One of the pillars of our work is that context matters: **migration must be understood as it plays out at the local and regional levels**. Over four years (2020-2024), the HABITABLE team does not strive to convey a single, global story of climate and migration for consumption. We want to understand how these dynamics manifest in specific regional trends and challenges while also generating comparable datasets across West, East, and South Africa and Southeast Asia. Such an enhanced understanding and granular data on migration are key to supporting informed policy processes and to help people, and their governments, to better anticipate future evolutions. Therefore, HABITABLE will put forth a range of scenarios that are both quantitative and qualitative, global, regional and local. Most importantly, **these scenarios are forged together with decision makers of all kinds**. In order to tailor solutions to local realities, we co-produce data and aid-to-decision tools with policy makers and civil society actors, diverse populations, and migrants themselves. It is our hope that such engagement will ensure the uptake of research on climate change and migration to inform policy discussions now and to develop instruments for decision-making in the future.

Given that most international migration and impacts of climate change have a regional dimension, this calls for collecting regional knowledge but also for deploying regional solutions. Despite public debates that often focus on the need for a global solution to “solve” migration related to climate change, studies convincingly make the case for **regional solutions and mechanisms that would enable safe, orderly, and regular migration to be deployed as an adaptation strategy to climate change**. The GCM constitutes an important framework for enhanced collaboration in this respect, including at the regional level, however it cannot remain a single isolated instrument. For example, existing bilateral agreements and regional free movement protocols in West Africa (Economic Community of West African States -ECOWAS) and East Africa (Intergovernmental Authority on Development -IGAD) should be engaged in the GCM process. Moreover, the GCM should be implemented in a coherent manner in partnership with other international agreements such as the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

While the explicit acknowledgment of persons displaced by disasters and climate change in the GCM represents a significant breakthrough, it is crucial that traction gained through its adoption is maintained. Effective follow-up and implementation of these commitments will require **long term and sustained efforts by States and for States and their citizens to see themselves and their specific challenges reflected in this process**. Therefore, we look forward to our work on the links between climate change and migration supporting and informing the process of the regional review of the GCM.

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