

Mixed motivations and complex causality in the Mekong

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Many climate change-affected communities have already been using migration as a means to adapt to and withstand the challenges to their livelihoods and security. Strengthening of existing protections for all migrants is clearly advantageous in the context of climate change.

In the Greater Mekong Subregion¹ there is a strong correlation between people's perception of negative environmental changes and decisions about migration. However, it is also clear that other factors are equally if not more important in decisions about migration, and that economic and environmental factors are inextricably linked.

In Ma Gyi Chay Htaut Village in Myanmar's central dry zone, conditions are arid all year round, with limited rainfall. Residents report experiencing lower average rainfall and more extreme warm weather. Research partners ECODEV and the Foundation for Education and Development found that

environmental changes are affecting lives, in particular in relation to increasing debt and decreasing income, increasing food insecurity, negative health impacts, and decreasing quality and quantity of crops.

Low income means that it is difficult for residents to accrue savings which could act as a buffer during periods of climatic variability, water stress and environmental change. Currently out-migration – mostly to nearby towns, with smaller numbers migrating further afield – is occurring primarily as a result of a lack of jobs, environmental changes and health hazards. A majority of people cited environmental changes

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as among the primary considerations in why they would migrate from the village, with equal numbers citing lack of jobs, and many others citing low earnings.

A big gap between rich and poor was noted, reflecting the complexity of causal factors of migration and the central role of economic factors in migration decisions. Widespread poverty was limiting people's responses in relation to negative environmental changes and the most vulnerable people in the communities were often unable even to access migration as a coping strategy.

The community referred to several key needs if they are to be able to cope with the environmental changes and related impacts. The highest number of respondents stated that they need a wider variety of employment opportunities in the village that are not so heavily tied to natural resources and agriculture. Following this, people desire improved access to credit and government assistance to allow them to survive in their place of origin. Access to information is also an important factor, with some respondents expressing a desire for more information about migration in order to manage the associated risks.

In Vietnam's Mekong Delta, research partner the Center for Research and Consultancy for Development found that environmental changes were having negative effects on the health of local people, the water quality and the soil quality. A majority of respondents said that environmental changes were causing a decrease in the quality of life, a decrease in incomes and livelihoods, less employment, increasing debt and less economic development.

One resident, a 55 year-old woman working as a daily wage labourer, reflected:

"The livelihood of local people living along the channel depends much on the quality and quantity of flood water but, unfortunately, the flood in recent years hasn't been as good as expected, resulting in little silt, which is needed to have a good crop. And

the heat seems so terrible that nobody can do their field work in the late morning and early afternoon. We have to reverse our daily routines, meaning that we stay at home during the daytime and go to the rice field to work at night-time ... working shifts are messed up and we must adjust our bio-rhythm. In recent years ... weather conditions are much more irregular and disordered."

The most pressing community needs for coping with environmental changes, as expressed by residents, are access to information regarding environmental issues so that they can better understand the expected environmental changes and make more informed decisions, and availability of different jobs and skills training in the home community.

The Climate Change Coordination Office in Cantho City is undertaking studies investigating the threshold below which people can no longer tolerate their local conditions and must move to ensure their quality of life. It aims to use its research as a basis for a socio-economic development plan for the region so that people in Cantho are not forced to move away.

It is vitally important that policy responses to climate change-affected communities do not automatically assume that permanent migration is an appropriate or desirable adaptive strategy. Within the Greater Mekong Subregion, much stronger genuine cooperation on the trans-border issues of climate change and migration is crucial.

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This article is based on research conducted by the MMN and the Asian Migrant Centre. The original research report is available at: www.mekongmigration.org/CC-M%20Report%20Final.pdf

1. Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (specifically Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.