The concept of crisis migration

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Crisis migration needs to be understood in terms of 'tipping points', which are triggered not just by events but also by underlying structural processes. It is important for policymakers for there to be an adequate theory behind the concept of 'crisis migration' so that responses are appropriate, timely and thoughtful.

Protection and assistance issues may be as acute in the aftermath of a natural disaster as in conflict; those displaced may suffer from the same lack of access to basic rights and resources, and experience psychological distress. Until recently, however, the international community's focus has been on protecting those displaced by conflict, despite the growing (and larger) number of people being displaced by natural hazards. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has stated that "while the nature of forced displacement is rapidly evolving, the responses available to the international community have not kept pace"[1] and, according to the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator, more frequent and severe disasters may be "the new normal".[2]

Yet, while we might instinctively think that 'crisis migration' entails movement in response to an objectively perceptible hazard, such as a flood or earthquake, it is the underlying social dimension which will transform it from a merely hazardous encounter into a situation of stress that tests the resilience of both individuals and communities, and may lead to movement. What constitutes a 'crisis' and spurs migration will depend upon the resources and capacity of those who move, as well as upon the ability of the state into or within which they move to respond to their plight. Migration is a normal, rational response to natural disasters and the more gradual impacts of environmental change. This is not to say that it should always be assumed to be voluntary but rather that it should not automatically be treated as abnormal.

Because natural disasters and other hazards are commonplace in some environments, they will not manifest as 'crises' unless certain variables are present. A sudden event may, however, interact with pre-existing stressors such as poverty, overcrowding, environmental fragility, development practices and weak political institutions. Thus, what may be weathered by one community or individual may constitute a crisis for another.

'Crisis migration' is therefore best understood as a response to a complex combination of social, political, economic and environmental factors, which may be triggered by an extreme event but not caused by it. Particular events or processes should be recognised as just one aspect of the process of a crisis, which is rooted in systemic inequities or vulnerabilities that render particular groups more vulnerable to displacement. When conceptualised in this way, 'crisis migration' implies acute pressure on the person or group that moves, rather than necessarily indicating the presence of an extreme or sudden event.

A helpful way to understand this is in terms of tipping points. When does the cumulative impact of stressors – whether socio-economic, environmental, political or psychological – tip someone over the edge? When is moving away preferable to staying put? Irrespective of whether a crisis is triggered by acute or chronic conditions, there will be tipping points involved, and these will vary from individual to individual.

Policy implications

Such an understanding has far-reaching policy ramifications because when a 'crisis' is understood as something more than a single, sudden event, we can start to contemplate interventions over longer timeframes, different combinations of institutional actors, new partnerships, and more sustainable funding

models. Definitions matter even more if they determine access to legal entitlements or humanitarian assistance.

It is not just within academic circles that the ideas of 'crisis' and 'migration' are being considered together. States chose

Somali refugees

'managing migration in crisis situations' as the theme of the 2012 International Dialogue on Migration organised by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Given the potential policy and legal ramifications of deliberations in such contexts, it is critically important that they are conceptually clear.

The IOM discussions suggested that policymakers intuitively understand the concept of 'crisis' as a pivotal moment or turning point – an emergency situation. But the problem with conceptualising 'crisis migration' as an individual's or community's response to an external event is that it can obscure pre-existing fragilities, placing the focus on a physical occurrence rather than a holistic appraisal of socio-economic circumstances. A related concern is that improved development practices (poverty reduction schemes and so on), which already have strong institutional frameworks, may be overlooked in favour of emergency responses which are typically reactive and ad hoc, addressing symptoms but not causes.[3]

Furthermore, it is essential that policymakers appreciate the way in which mobility has (or has not) featured historically within particular communities. Otherwise, interventions may be misplaced. For example, in the Pacific islands, mobility is a core part of historical and present experience, and movement therefore needs to be understood as an adaptive strategy that is part of a historical continuum.

If meaningful change is to be effected, it will be necessary to transcend conventional policy

silos and instead promote coordination within and between governments, international and local agencies, and NGOs. A more holistic approach across different sectors is needed, with improved links between the humanitarian and development communities.

The nature and timing of policy interventions will play a major role in shaping outcomes to 'crisis migration'. They will also help to determine whether such migration can function as a form of adaptation, or will instead signal a failure to adapt.[4] Migration as adaptation posits movement as a productive force to be harnessed and developed, rather than as an overwhelming humanitarian calamity to be solved.

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1. Statement by António Guterres at the Intergovernmental Meeting at Ministerial Level to Mark the 60th Anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th Anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, December 2011 www.unhcr.org/4ecd0cde9.html.

2. Opening Remarks by John Holmes at DIHAD 2008 Conference, April 2008 www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/YSAR-7DHL88?OpenDocument.

3. Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture' in Susanna M Hoffmann and Anthony Oliver-Smith (eds), *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 2002, 32.

4. Koko Warner, 'Assessing Institutional and Governance Needs Related to Environmental Change and Human Migration', Study Team on Climate-Induced Migration, German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2010.