

Changing climate, changing policies?

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It remains doubtful whether national and international policymakers are yet willing or able to act to prevent or mitigate the displacement impacts of climate change.

There is of course no shortage of political or media interest in the nexus between climate change and migration. Yet there seems to be a dearth of analysis on how exactly climate change will lead to displacement and on what should be done to minimise adverse impacts. This has resulted in limited commitment to action.

Identifying the contexts in which climate change is or will be the determining factor in causing displacement (as opposed to one of many factors that may motivate people to move) will be crucial. Until we are clearer about this many policymakers will argue that, despite the importance of the issues, there is insufficient evidence upon which to act. This is not helped by the fact that most researchers working in this area are not yet confident enough about how the causality works to be prepared to recommend policy action.

Unfortunately, the relationship between climate change and migration, each a massive subject on its own terms, seems to be rather marginal to those who focus primarily on one of the issues. Sharing methodologies and findings across these communities more effectively will be a key step not only in advancing knowledge but

also in generating policy solutions. Such cross-pollination will help resolve some of the key questions about what action is needed.

Even when it is clear how and where climate change will lead to displacement – and concerted research efforts currently underway should yield a reasonable picture soon – the difficulty of getting policymakers to act should not be underestimated.

The very task of identifying responsibility will be a huge challenge. The politics of climate change are plagued by collective action problems. International climate negotiations are regularly undermined by the fact that climate change is a global phenomenon that knows no boundaries, while some of the most important actors (sovereign nation states) are inherently bounded. Add to this the challenges of responding to international migration, another area where global consensus seems far off, and achieving multilateral action to prevent or respond to climate change-induced displacement seems incredibly difficult.

Any international action in this area will need to manoeuvre around several potentially thorny policy

issues. For example, policymakers will need to decide whether they want to use legal interventions or new operational mechanisms, or both. And should policymakers prioritise agreeing universal principles around protection or proceed on a more ad hoc basis?

In the absence of good quality research and strong political leadership, we may actually see the worst of all possible outcomes: sensationalist headlines that exaggerate the scale of what might happen, reactionary policies to prevent the entry of environmental ‘refugees’ and very little genuine protection for those who might be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, often through little fault of their own.

Researchers hold some of the responsibility for avoiding this by providing better analysis of exactly how the relationship works but the onus is equally on national and international policymakers to show leadership and respond appropriately to the challenges ahead.

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“My personal experience is that most people have not yet integrated the issue of climate change into their everyday life. They still feel there was just a bit “too much rain” during the rainy season or “too little” in the dry months. It is not easy to realise that these are the first signs of a permanent change.”

Dr Sutardi, Ministry of Public Works and Executive Secretary of Indonesia Water Partnership

From *Adapting to Climate Change: Practical Perspectives*, GTZ, 2008. Online at www.gtz.de/en/dokumente/en-climate-adaptation.pdf