

DECEMBER 2010

OVERVIEW

IIED Human Settlements Group

Project name:

Migration and climate change: learning from experiences in Bolivia, Senegal and Tanzania

Project leader:

Cecilia Tacoli

Time frame:

November 2009 – October 2010

Cost:

Approximately £80,000

Objective:

To explore how a different approach to migration – one that supports and accommodates mobility – can reduce poverty and help people adapt to slow-onset climate change.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Drawing on case studies in Bolivia, Senegal and Tanzania, this project explored how environmental change at the local level interacts with socioeconomic, cultural and political factors to shape migration patterns – and how these in turn affect the livelihoods and resilience of individuals, households and communities in areas experiencing the impacts of climate change. The findings help refine understanding of the links between climate change and migration and show that, although it is unlikely that climate change will trigger large flows of international migrants, increased mobility is an important element of adaptation that should be supported. Strengthening local governance systems is an essential part of this.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Migration and mobility are key elements of the livelihoods of people living in environmentally fragile areas. The impacts of climate change, as well as socioeconomic transformations, make them increasingly important. But policymakers' perceptions of migration are overwhelmingly negative, in part because of the misperception that

Moving to adapt to climate change

Migration and mobility can help communities find new income sources and become more resilient to climate change.

By 2050, climate change is expected to push hundreds of millions of people – up to 1 billion, by some estimates – to leave their homes seeking better land, jobs and other resources. The figures are intimidating – but they don't offer the specifics needed to prepare for the transformation. Uncertainties about local impacts of climate change, as well as thin data on migration today, make it difficult or impossible to precisely predict future mobility patterns. But we can better understand how environmental change in fragile areas affects people's livelihoods and influences migration – and how governments and civil society can take these links into account. In 2009, IIED, in partnership with three local NGOs – Mainumby, IED Afrique and Tamasha – began case studies looking at these questions in Bolivia, Senegal and Tanzania.

Migration myths

It was important to counter the common view of migrants as an undifferentiated torrent of refugees. In reality, different groups will move towards different destinations – from local to international – for various lengths of time. Another misperception increasingly held by governments is that migration fuels urban poverty and needs to be controlled. The proportion of low- and middle-income nations with policies to curtail migration into towns and cities rose from 51 per cent in 1996 to 73 per cent in 2005. Such policies may

backfire and further marginalise the poorest groups and those most vulnerable to change.

But a more positive picture is steadily emerging from research on migration, including IIED's work over the past 15 years. There is very little evidence that migration exacerbates poverty. Instead, it is best viewed as one strategy people use to find new work and diversify their income sources – a tool for adapting to change. With this case study project, we filled in much-needed information on how this can work for communities under pressure from climate change.

Researchers worked with local grassroots organisations and arranged group discussions with residents of nine settlements in the three countries. These settlements were either home areas or destinations of migrants, and ranged from large villages to growing towns and a major city, Dar es Salaam. Some had suffered droughts, livestock diseases, soil degradation and other climate-related troubles. One Bolivian site had been a haven for migrants in a resettlement programme, and a settlement in Senegal felt heavy effects from human intervention to stem floods in the neighbouring city of Saint Louis. Researchers explored people's perceptions of local environmental change and wider socioeconomic transformations, and how these have combined to affect local livelihoods in the past three decades.

migrants predominantly move from rural to urban areas and increase urban poverty and pressure on services and infrastructure. Understanding the ways in which migration supports livelihoods in different contexts, and the diversity of migration flows — in terms of who moves, where and for how long — is essential to change these perceptions and to develop national and local policies that accommodate rather than penalise migrants.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- Migration is best viewed as an adaptive response to socioeconomic, cultural, political and environmental change. It's important that people not only can move, but can diversify income sources and reduce dependence on natural resources by moving.
- Even under gradual climate change, precipitating events — such as unusually harsh droughts — force radical changes in livelihoods. What makes these events catastrophic is largely socioeconomic shifts that have narrowed the range of activities and income streams people can rely on.
- Migration is not a single phenomenon. Different types of flows — including seasonal, temporary and international migration — affect each other, and their complex links with the physical and socioeconomic environment vary between places. Strong local governance is therefore essential to address migration's impacts.

PARTNERS' VIEW

In our point of view, the project was very interesting. It gave us the opportunity to investigate the place of migration among several adaptation strategies to climate change. Based on four case studies [in Senegal], we have highlighted critical issues about the links between migration and adaptation to climate change. It's a great step for moving ahead further research.

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IIED HUMAN SETTLEMENTS GROUP

The Human Settlements Group works to reduce poverty and improve health and housing conditions in the urban centres of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It seeks to combine this with promoting good governance and more ecologically sustainable patterns of urban development and rural–urban linkages.



Photo: Ray Wittin/The World Bank

On the move: seasonal migrants help fill labour gaps on family farms.

Where environment meets economy

The trends the researchers uncovered showed several different modes of migration, shaped largely by non-environmental factors. Seasonal migrants move when they can't find other work during the agricultural slack season, but still rely on farming much of the year. They often shuttle between rural areas, especially to places where out-migration has led to a shortage of labour on family farms. They also bring remittances — money sent by those who have left — for hiring seasonal wage workers. Temporary migration is more likely to take rural people to urban centres and, increasingly, smaller towns, where they rely on social networks and send remittances back. This movement is stimulated by international migration, which does not involve those squeezed hardest by environmental crises but creates demand for workers in construction, trade and domestic service, as emigrants tend to invest in growing small-to-medium towns rather than in large cities.

This highlights migration's positive effects. At all case study sites, the people identified as most vulnerable were those with no migrant relatives to back them up. Seasonal and temporary migration often helped residents stay in their home areas by broadening their income sources. And the most dynamic communities had both in-migration and out-migration, as funds sent home by migrants paid wage labourers arriving from afar. Migration did not mean a community was drained and became poorer — quite the opposite, in many cases.

How does environmental change enter this picture? All our study areas were

going through long-term, gradual shifts such as desertification and soil degradation. Nevertheless, locals at most sites singled out a precipitating event — a tipping point when they had to radically change their livelihoods to survive. Importantly, socioeconomic constraints determined which events tipped the balance. In Norte Potosí, Bolivia, for example, a severe drought in the 1980s coincided with closure of mines that had provided income in off-seasons and lean years, forcing people to migrate. On the other hand, if migration feeds urban centres where governments lack technical capacity and financial resources, it can worsen environmental problems and make poor people poorer — vicious cycles we need to avoid.

Policymakers must recognise these socioeconomic factors as they work to support adaptation to climate change. Predictions of mass migration based on climatic threats may not only miss the real dynamics, but lead to resettlement programmes that don't protect the rights of people facing the worst impacts. Another clear lesson: national and international players should not overlook local governance. The links between mobility and environmental and socioeconomic change are locally specific, and it is local actors who are on the front line to ensure that migration is part of the solution rather than an additional problem.

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