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Challenging misconceptions on human mobility and climate change

by Ayesha Qaisrani

Debate on the interplay between climate change and mobility has occupied an increasingly prominent place on the international agenda over the past decade – and we now have solid understanding of the climate-mobility linkage. However, a plethora of persisting misconceptions continue to mar a meaningful, solution-oriented conversation on the topic. This commentary addresses some of the more enduring of these misconceptions.

The years leading up to 2023 bear [testament](#) to the fact that the manifestations of climate change are beyond the point of wake-up calls. Recent drought in East Africa, monsoon flooding in Pakistan, wildfires and drought in Europe, and heatwaves and hurricanes in the United States are just the most prominent examples of extreme weather events spurred by climate change. The devastation caused by these events and slow-onset climate impacts in 2022 alone shows that nature is taking its vengeance – and we are too slow to counter.

While [scientific knowledge](#) on the consequences of human activities for the average global temperature continues to advance, depicting strong correlations with high confidence – exactly *how* this change in temperature will affect human societies – cannot be stated with the same level of sophistication. In turn, how human societies will react to the ensuing impacts is even less predictable.

Mobility in the context of climate change

One hotly debated topic is that of mobility in the context of climate change. The discourse has already come a long way and consensus has been achieved with high levels of confidence that there is a clear link between climate change and human mobility. This understanding is reflected in the inclusion of the topic on the agendas of major international forums, but there are still gaps in knowledge and disagreement over the scale, nature, and perceived outcomes of human mobility influenced by climate change.

The jury is also still out on the appropriate terminology for those migrating due to the effects of climate change, with some actors taking issue with the term “climate migrants”. While some [national legal frameworks](#) refer to the terms “eco-migrants” or “environmental

migrants”, so far such terminology does not have any international standing on the basis that the degree to which certain migrations can be attributed to climate change is not measureable. However, there is an increasing consensus on the use of phrases such as “climate-related mobility” or “mobility in the context of climate change”. The lack of an agreed terminology also leads to widespread assumptions on the issue, which may be detrimental to timely and appropriate action.

There are varied estimates on how climate change may impact mobility and migration patterns, with the intensity of the warnings growing stronger by the day. In February 2023, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres made some alarming [remarks at a Secretary Council Debate](#) that the world is set to witness “a mass exodus of entire populations on a biblical scale”, while linking the impacts of climate change to global peace and security. Similarly, a recent book investigating the impact of climate change on human migration predicts a jolting scenario where large swathes of land will become unliveable, [potentially pushing up to 1.5 billion people](#) out of their homes by 2050.

Unpacking the underlying issues

These and similar statements announcing the expected number of climate-related migrants have made headlines in the past few months, with strong voices speaking out in favour of and against these messages. There is thus a need to better unpack the underlying issues. It is easy to react strongly to such headlines if not interpreted with a nuanced understanding of the relationship between climate change and mobility.

While debates on both of these topics are quite politically charged in and of themselves, how the relationship between the two is understood and communicated has even starker political underpinnings. Headlines like those mentioned above, if understood out of context, tend to feed into the anti-migration narrative – even if the intention is to invoke a pro-climate response. They paint a picture of massive groups of people from the Global South suddenly migrating across borders and continents to take refuge in the fortified Global North. Such scenarios further strengthen a few misguided assumptions:

1. Mobility in the context of climate change is bad and needs to be stopped.
2. Climate-related mobility is a security issue.
3. Climate change immediately leads to significant international migration.
4. Migration is easy and cheap (and anyone who is experiencing the impacts of climate change can move).
5. Climate-related mobility is a challenge for future generations.

Each of these five misconceptions are discussed below.

Misconception #1:

Mobility in the context of climate change is bad and needs to be stopped.

As evident from [the latest report](#) by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), there is more confidence now than ever before that climate change does indeed influence mobility and migration patterns. However, the question of whether this impact is positive or negative (and for whom) is not so straightforward.

Not only will the answer depend on the nature of the climate impact, but also that of the agency exercised by those that move and the outcome for migrants and their households. There is convincing evidence on both sides of the argument: Climate change is increasingly leading to involuntary migration and displacement of at-risk populations and, at the same time, for many people, migration is part of climate change adaptation.

The new IPCC report, based on significant evidence gathered over a period of several years, reiterates the vulnerabilities of those forced to relocate due to climate change, but also acknowledges the positive role that migration can play as an adaptation strategy. The premise is that whether mobility is positive or negative depends on the circumstances under which it is undertaken, and the resulting outcomes for the migrants themselves (and their households). People make different journeys and have different lived experiences during and after migration.

Moreover, the interactions between climate change and mobility do not take place in a vacuum. A plethora of socioeconomic and geopolitical factors and policies influence the process and define whether the outcome for the migrant is better or worse than their previous state. Simplistic narratives on climate-related mobility do not help anyone's case by framing migration as a global threat that needs to be controlled – or a panacea for adaptation that needs to be encouraged. Some of the people most vulnerable to the effects of climate change may not even have the capacity to migrate, and climate change may also decrease certain pre-existing mobility patterns, leading to reduced migration from certain areas.

Thus, the simple answer on whether mobility undertaken in response to climate is positive or negative can only be: it depends.

Misconception #2

Climate-related mobility is a security issue.

Depending on the nature of climate impact, some forms of human mobility, for instance disaster-related displacement, may give rise to humanitarian crisis. In the case of more planned migration, where migrants assume some degree of agency, there may be merit in approaching the concept from a socioeconomic perspective.

However, human mobility should not be considered a security issue. Alarmist remarks about the relationship between climate change and migration tend to redefine what and whose stakes are of importance. They redirect the focus and imply that the issue at hand is *controlling migration* rather than tackling climate change. Secondly, they shift the policy focus from places where there is high risk of climate change to those places where policymakers think people might move to. By doing this, the narrative is, consciously or unconsciously, security-coated – precluding discussion of the spectrum of climate-related mobility and its outcomes.

Approaching human mobility in the context of climate change through an economic perspective opens space for more constructive, solution-oriented conversations on the topic. A special panel at [Vienna Migration Conference 2022](#) highlighted the merits of recognising the economic potential that can be leveraged through migration mechanisms constructed around mutually beneficial development objectives. For instance, filling labour demand gaps in certain markets through productive migration partnerships, or devising planned mechanisms for population groups at risk of displacement (e.g. who reside in flood-prone areas) to relocate to intermediate towns or cities.

Such discussions can offer alternative viewpoints – ones that do not feed anti-migration narratives, but rather contribute to finding meaningful solutions, with human rights at their core.

Misconception #3

Climate change immediately leads to significant international migration.

A third assumption that bold headlines tend to feed is that climate change leads to sudden and large-scale movement across international borders, largely undertaken by low-income population groups. However, a [widely cited estimate](#) suggests that, by 2050, climate change could drive about 216 million people to migrate, predominantly within their own countries. Meanwhile, [a regional forecast](#) for climate-related migration in Africa predicts that cross-border mobility will in fact make up but a fraction of total movement. Research shows that people do not just pack up and leave their homes in the millions because of rising

temperatures or sea levels, quickly deciding to set out on the treacherous journey towards a city in Europe, North America, or Australia.

[Involuntary migration](#) is a form of displacement that occurs as a result of sudden, extreme events (such as floods, storms, cyclones, etc.). It is unplanned, usually short-distance, and often temporary – with the aim of the movement being to find safety and security from the particular calamity. Once the disaster has run its course, most migrants displaced in this way return to their home community, and there are only a limited number of cases where climate-related disasters have led to permanent mass migration of the affected population across international borders. [Lack of data](#) in this regard also challenges any supporting figures or models used to claim that climate-related disasters are leading to cross-border displacement.

Another issue at play here is that climate change often does not feature as the [sole factor driving migration](#). Instead, it acts in combination with a range of other factors, making direct attribution of migration to climate change difficult to determine. This is often the case where climate change impacts manifest themselves through decreasing livelihood productivity, living standards, or other indirect pathways.

Slow onset climate impacts, such as rising temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns, and rising sea levels, tend to lead to a more planned decision to migrate, among those with such an option. These movements may be seasonal or permanent, and mostly directed toward towns or cities within the same country. Even in cases where international migration does occur, these movements tend to be more gradual and largely directed towards neighbouring countries within the immediate region.

That said, it is of course useful to be mindful of the increasing risks within current climate hotspots – geographical areas that are more exposed to climate hazards – and plan for situations where domestic capacity to host climate-related or forcibly displaced migrants may be challenged. It is important to have cross-border mechanisms in place that cater to scenarios where climate change may lead to increased international migration.

Rather than presenting possible climate-related mobility scenarios as apocalyptic, and manoeuvring them as a source of fear-mongering, they should be used to find solutions on human security, not national security.

Misconception #4

Migration is easy and cheap.

A fourth conjecture appearing in such headline statements is that anyone experiencing severe climate threats can and will migrate. However, the reality of the situation is that at-risk populations experience different constraints, and may even be trapped in extremely vulnerable situations, meaning it is not financially or physically viable for them to migrate. Others still may simply prefer to stay put through difficult times.

Migration is a costly endeavour. It requires resources to travel to and settle in another place, find work, etc. In many cases, it places additional financial pressure on households before easing them. Indeed, this is the economic calculation that lies at the heart of the [vast majority of migration decisions](#).

For this reason, when exploring the linkages between climate change and mobility, one of the focuses should be on who is vulnerable to climate impacts but ultimately *unable* to migrate. Therefore, whilst the available evidence has led to a consensus that climate change impacts influence mobility patterns, this influence does not only mean an increase in the scale of migration.

There is limited, if any, effort to understand whether climate change alters existing mobility patterns, and where and under which circumstances migration is decreasing, or trapping people in difficult situations.

Misconception #5

Climate-related mobility is a challenge for future generations.

Concluding this list of five common misconceptions, it is important to highlight that many discussions on climate-related mobility tend to portray the phenomenon as largely set to occur in the future, indirectly placing the onus of taking responsive action on future generations. Using estimated projections for 2050 and later often has the effect of taking the focus away from the present to a vaguer, even distant future.

However, in many climate hotspots, climate change is *already* shaping mobility patterns in different forms. Yet, policy planning on the topic is still in its infancy, being politicised and tugged at both ends by humanitarian and security-oriented narratives. Recognising that the scale of climate-related mobility is expected to increase in the future, the time to devise

actionable strategies and do the groundwork is now – if we are to keep it from becoming a looming crisis.

Efforts to make cities inclusive and welcoming, and support for the development of new and inclusive intermediate cities, especially within those countries already experiencing high rates of urbanisation, should be prioritised. This will require further empowering cities and recognising the important role played by urban governance structures in this process.

A more constructive mobility-climate change response

The crux is that discussion on climate change and human mobility should always be nuanced and contextualised. It should carefully detangle the complexity of the interactions between climate change and mobility, and understand the web of intricacies that influence the phenomenon or the outcomes associated with them. Sensational headlines, without context, do a distinct disservice if they invoke a different policy agenda. Such statements also usually lead to policy action that is rooted in security concerns, with the objective of keeping people in their place, rather than enacting comprehensive response to decrease the vulnerability of at-risk populations to climate change.

Mobility in the context of climate change does not have to be a crisis. It requires progressive thinking, with out-of-the-box solutions to effectively manage risks, reduce human rights violations, and keep it from becoming a humanitarian emergency. Displacement can be minimised by planning anticipatory relocation from climate hotspots that are highly vulnerable to extreme events. At the same time, if managed well, and in time, there is tremendous potential in leveraging changes in mobility patterns for mutually beneficial outcomes. For instance, some countries such as Bangladesh are discussing the development of [climate-friendly intermediate cities](#) offering alternative destination choices to those migrating due to climate-related factors from rural areas to urban areas, and relieving pressures from major cities. Similarly, countries facing workforce shortages can design legal migration pathways, coupled with targeted investment in relevant skill development, for employing labour from climate-vulnerable countries to fulfil their labour demand.

Of course such [recommendations](#) are easier said than done, but there is little evidence that they should be perceived as being impossible to implement. Alongside various governmental and non-governmental actors, ICMPD is working through multilateral policy dialogues and capacity development programmes to devise operational solutions in Latin America, Africa, and the Silk Routes Region. For instance, in [the Gran Chaco](#) region of South America and in Africa ICMPD is supporting enhanced regional cooperation between central and local

governments, while in the [Silk Routes Region](#), ICMPD has promoted gender-sensitive policy options for anticipating and managing climate-related mobility. ICMPD's experiences across these regions have reiterated that operational solutions should be based on partnership, responsibility sharing, and creating more pathways for safe, regular, and legal migration – rather than closing off borders and adopting approaches that make people stay put. It is time to look beyond the humanitarian consequences and anticipate the long-term impacts of climate-related mobility on societies and communities.

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