

“Eating the Dry Season”

Labour mobility as a coping strategy for climate change

By Oli Brown

Climate change will become an increasingly important driver of migration in the coming decades. Altered rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and more frequent natural disasters are likely to compromise the “carrying capacity” of large areas of the world, exacerbating existing problems of food and water security in marginal areas. Estimates of the number of people at risk vary considerably; one oft-quoted source suggests that by 2050, as many as 200 million people could be displaced (Myers, 2005). This is a daunting figure; exceeding the current global migrant population of 192 million (IOM, 2007).

Such predictions are inherently speculative. There are so many factors at play (population growth, urbanization and local politics to name just three) that establishing a causative relationship between climate change and

migration is difficult. However it is clear that climate change will lead to large areas becoming less able to sustain peoples’ livelihoods (McLeman and Smit, 2006).

Migration is (and always has been) an important mechanism to deal with climate stress. Pastoralist societies have, of course, habitually migrated from water source to grazing lands in response to drought as well as part of their normal way of life. But it is becoming apparent that migration as a response to environmental change is not limited to nomadic societies. In Western Sudan, for example, studies have shown that one adaptive response to drought is to send an older male family member to Khartoum to find paid work to tide the family over (McLeman and Smit, 2004).

Referred to locally as “eating the dry season,” young adults across drought-stricken Africa are leaving their rural homes during dry periods to search for work in urban centres (Hampshire and Randall, 1999). Temporary labour migration in times of climate stress can top up a family’s income (through remittances from paid work elsewhere) and reduce the draw on local resources (because there are fewer mouths to feed). Similar strategies are being seen in rural populations in South Asia and China to cope with the droughts that climate models predict will become more frequent and severe (Deshingkar and Start, 2003).

But the picture is nuanced. In the West African Sahel, which has suffered a prolonged drought for much of the past three decades, labour migration has become an important part of the annual coping strategy. But *how far* the young men and women travel depends on the success of the harvest. A good harvest might give the family sufficient resources to send a member to



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Europe in search of work. While the potential rewards in terms of remittances are high, the journey is dangerous and the migrant may not be back in time for the next year's planting. But in a drought year, when harvests are poor, the young men and women tend to stay much closer to home. In such years the risk of losing the "migration gamble" is simply too great (McLeman and Smit, 2006).

Until recently, the rich developed countries focused on mitigating climate change by setting emissions targets for the OECD countries and agonizing about how to bring in new members to an emissions capping agreement once the Kyoto protocol expires in 2012. More recently, greater attention has been paid to helping vulnerable countries adapt to the impacts of climate change by altering irrigation techniques, strengthening disaster management plans, developing drought-resistant crops and so on.

This approach to adaptation is fundamentally based on the idea of adapting *in situ*. Migration is seen, somehow, as a failure of adaptation. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, for example, has supported the development of National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) which are supposed to help the least developed countries identify and rank their priorities for adaptation to climate change. However, none of the 14 NAPAs submitted so far mention migration or population relocation as a possible response. Equally, the developed countries are highly resistant to the idea of relaxing their immigration or refugee policies to allow environmental stress as a legitimate reason for migration.

International policy-makers have not, to date, given significant consideration to labour mobility as a possible coping strategy for populations exposed to climate stress. But some analysts are beginning to argue that immigration is both a necessary element of global redistributive justice and an important response to climate change; and that greenhouse gas emitters should take an allocation of climate migrants in proportion to their historical emissions. Andrew

Simms of the new economics foundation argues: "Is it right that while some states are more responsible for creating problems like global climate change, all states should bear equal responsibility to deal with its displaced people?" (Pielke *et al.*, 2007).

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This raises the old debate about the societal costs and benefits of labour mobility. Relaxing immigration rules as part of a concerted policy to "release the population pressure" in areas affected by climate change could accelerate the brain drain of talented individuals from the developing world to the developed—and worsen the "hollowing out" of affected economies, which is itself a driver of migration. On the other hand, shutting borders undermines remittance economies (which can themselves help build resilience to climate change) and denies developing countries the benefits of access to the international labour market (Adger *et al.*, 2002).

The international regulation of labour migration, adaptation to climate change and capacity building in vulnerable countries are inherently intertwined. Migration will be used by some households in vulnerable countries as a means of adapting to climate change and sea level rise. Clearly there has to be a balance of policies that promotes the incentives for workers to stay in their home countries while not closing the door on international labour mobility.

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