

# POLICY BRIEF

September, 2023

## Understanding Climate-Related Mobility in Contexts of Urbanization

A synthesis of ideas and solutions presented at a UNU-CPR migration policy roundtable

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### Key Recommendations:

- Address climate-related mobility in the local policy context alongside other climate change adaptation responses, as part of a broader developmental process.
- Identify the specific vulnerabilities of climate-related migrants in cities in the context of structural inequalities such as limitations of citizenship, poor living conditions, social exclusion, and poor job security.
- Policy interconnectivity is critical across different levels of mobility and urban governance, especially in relation to labour migration, public health, human rights, and gender equality.
- The nexus between climate-related mobility and urbanization in the Global South needs to be addressed at the United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP).

### Introduction

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), even under an optimistic climate scenario, up to 113 million people are projected to internally migrate by 2050 as the result of slow-onset climate change impacts such as water stress, crop failure, and sea level rise. This figure increases to 216 million people under a pessimistic scenario.<sup>1</sup> Most internal migrants are expected to move to cities because of the perceived employment opportunities that cities offer.

Understanding the relationships between climate-related mobility and urbanization processes in the Global South is a growing priority for academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike. The emergence of the term “climate-related mobility” reflects a new interpretation of climate responses better attuned to structural inequalities, economic precarity, and political events.

Climate-related mobility refers to both the voluntary and involuntary multidirectional movement of people, for reasons related to the consequences of climate change (and addition-

<sup>1</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Climate Change and Future Human Mobility,” *Thematic Brief Issue 1* (2022): 1–4. Accessible at: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1251/files/2022-11/IOM%20Global%20Data%20Institute%20Thematic%20Brief%20%231%20-%20Evidence%20Summary%20on%20Climate%20Change%20and%20the%20Future%20of%20Human%20Mobility.pdf>.

al social, economic, and political factors). Climate-related migrants do not necessarily only refer to people directly affected and subsequently displaced by fast-onset climate change such as hurricanes and floods. They also include people who are affected by slow-onset climate change, such as increasingly frequent drought events, and who go through multiple decision-making processes about whether, when, and where to move, at both the individual and household level.

Additionally, analysing climate-related mobility also allows us to not only focus on the movements of people, but also how these movements are shaped by, and in turn, reinforce or reconfigure existing social relations. It engages in the existing patterns and practices of mobility, and the social, political, and economic structures of society in which those mobilities are embedded.

This policy brief summarizes the key themes and recommendations discussed at a UNU-CPR Migration Policy Roundtable held in New York in March 2023 in partnership with the MIDEQ Hub.<sup>2</sup> The roundtable brought together representatives from the UN system, Member States, international organizations, and civil society to unpack the complexity of the relationships between climate-related mobility and urbanization processes, and to examine the challenges of climate-related mobility in the Global South, particularly for those who move to cities.<sup>3</sup> The roundtable focused on policy and practice efforts aimed at:

- Better understanding the relationships between climate-related mobility and urbanization processes in the Global South;
- Tackling the structural inequalities that undermine adaptation to climate change;
- Exploring opportunities for South-South cooperation to address the consequences of climate change; and
- Addressing the policy implications of climate-related mobility to cities.

## The Importance of Understanding Local Contexts

It was clear from the evidence presented by the speakers that migrating from climate-sensitive areas can be an effective strategy of climate change adaptation. Despite this, migration continues to be understood and represented in overly simplistic terms – either as a successful livelihood diversification

strategy or the outcome of a failure to adapt on the part of those who move.

There is growing evidence that the picture is significantly more complicated. Even when people move for reasons related to climate change, the political and economic structures of society, as well as local social and cultural norms, play an important role in shaping migration decisions and processes. This is often reflected in migration directions and patterns that follow routes established many years prior to the onset of climate change.<sup>4,5</sup>

According to the IOM, the variety of climate change processes and the complex, interrelated factors (social, demographic, economic, environmental, and political), as well as inconsistent data collection, make it difficult to readily quantify the extent to which climate change drives human mobility.<sup>6</sup> There is no deterministic relationship between climate change and human mobility, but rather a multitude of different local factors that continuously influence mobility and the responses of individuals and households. This understanding not only engages with the contextual and lived experiences of climate change, but also reflects economic motivations and local power structures and social inequalities. Such an approach helps us better understand how climate-related mobility can encompass different forms of movement, such as short-term displacement, long-distance migration, or rural-urban movements, and take place within broader local developmental processes.

Different responses to climate change are also shaped by people's capacities, aspirations, and circumstances. Climatic events such as droughts and heatwaves complicate existing local livelihood opportunities that were already challenged by poverty, economic inequality, and population growth. Some people may face social and cultural norms or bureaucratic barriers to moving, while others have no access to financial resources, information, or networks. As a result, different forms of mobility and immobility, while engaging with existing mobility practices, often reproduce existing social relations experienced by migrants, both in their place of origin and destinations.

## Recommendations for Member States:

- There needs to be a change in perception: most climate-related mobility is likely to take place in the Global South and mainly within rather than between countries.

2 The Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub unpacks the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequality in the context of the Global South. More at: [www.mideq.org](http://www.mideq.org).

3 Speakers included: Professor Heaven Crawley (moderator, UNU-CPR and MIDEQ Hub), Jin-ho Chung (UNU-CPR and University of Oxford), Roman Hoffmann (International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis), Sarah Rosengaertner (Global Centre for Climate Mobility) and Dina Ionesco (Climate Vulnerable Forum and Vulnerable Twenty Group). A recording of the event is available at: <https://cpr.unu.edu/events/archive/event/understanding-climate-related-mobility.html>.

4 For more information see: Simeon Ehui and Kanta Kuman Rigand, "Climate migration – deepening our solutions," World Bank Blogs, 22 March 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/climatechange/climate-migration-deepening-our-solutions>.

5 See another example from Ethiopia: Jin-ho Chung, "Climate-Related Migration into Cities: Ethiopian Smallholders Heading to Addis Ababa," UNU-CPR, 3 March 2023, <https://cpr.unu.edu/publications/articles/climate-related-migration-into-cities-why-young-smallholders-in-rural-ethiopia-are-heading-to-addis-ababa.html>.

6 IOM, *People on the Move in a Changing Climate – Linking Policy, Evidence and Action* (Geneva: IOM, 2022). Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/people-move-changing-climate-linking-policy-evidence-and-action>.

- In order to capture the complex relationships between climate change and human mobility, we need to understand how climate change works across the matrix of social, economic, environmental, and political processes in a locality.
- It is important to address climate-related mobility in the local policy context alongside other climate adaptation responses, as part of a broader developmental process.

## The Role of Cities in the Climate Change and Mobility Nexus

The ways in which climate change is affecting human mobility are still contested. Existing research, including the World Bank's Groundswell Report,<sup>7</sup> suggests that most people who move due to environmental changes rarely cross an international border. Rather, they move to cities because of the perceived employment, education, and healthcare opportunities that urban areas offer. Mobility patterns and migrant experiences are, in turn, shaped by the urban environment.

While cities generally provide a wide range of employment opportunities, climate-related migrants often face challenges associated with living in urban areas, including unsanitary living conditions and competitive labour markets for which they may not have qualifications or experience. Focusing on cities and urbanization processes requires us to embed our understanding of climate-related mobility within broader developmental processes and structural inequalities. The limitations of citizenship, living conditions, and job security often generate structural barriers that restrict migrants' mobility in a number of ways:

- There are often bureaucratic barriers for migrants to obtain permanent legal residence in cities. Migrants may not have legal recognition, and this can affect their access to health and education services in cities.
- Migrants tend to live in informal settlements upon their arrival in cities, unless they have existing networks. Living conditions, including hygiene, sanitation, and water availability in these informal settlements are often much worse than migrants' rural homes.
- The informal labour market in cities is competitive because a limited number of jobs are available, particularly for non-skilled manual labourers.

Those responsible for governing cities must address risks associated with climate change. This requires looking for more localized data and projections, and strengthening decision-making power over key policy levers such as land use planning and taxation. Planning ahead and fostering social

inclusion can also help to harness climate-related mobility as an opportunity for urban investment and economic development. This could help to strengthen a city's resilience to climate change, promote sustainable job creation, and improve the overall quality of life for both migrants and existing residents.

### Recommendations for Member States:

- Urban planners must address the risks of increasing numbers of people migrating to cities as a climate mitigation strategy.
- In order to respond effectively to climate-related mobility, policy makers will need a) localized data and projections, b) decision-making power over key policy levers such as land use planning and taxation, c) involvement in policy making at higher levels of governance, and d) direct access to funding and financing.
- It is important to identify the specific vulnerabilities of climate-related migrants in cities within the context of structural inequality, including the limitations of citizenship (related to accessing healthcare, education, and public services), poor living conditions, social exclusion, and poor job security.

## Policy Principles for Addressing Climate-Related Mobility

The roundtable discussion highlighted the importance of viewing climate-related mobility through an urban lens. It also demonstrated why it is important to consider the dynamics of the urban systems that will be affected by both climate-related migration and climate change itself. Climate-related mobility into cities has significant implications for urban development and the realization of urban policy objectives, including the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Pressures on urban infrastructures for housing, employment, water and sanitation, public health, and transportation may be exacerbated, and climate-related migrants could become disproportionately dependent on the informal systems of cities.

Speakers emphasized the importance of understanding that mobility governance takes place across different levels of governance, even though many international policy initiatives for climate- and environment-related mobility over the past 20 years have tended to focus on the regional level (examples include the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)<sup>8</sup> and Regional Dialogue to Address Human Mobility and Climate Change Adaptation in the Eastern Caribbean<sup>9</sup>).

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank, *Acting on Internal Climate Migration: Part II* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2021). Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/2c9150df-52c3-58ed-9075-d78ea56c3267>.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Executive Secretary, IGAD Secretariat, and Republic of Djibouti, *Protocol on Free Movement in the IGAD Region* (Khartoum: IGAD, 2020). Available at: <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1411/files/event/file/Final%20IGAD%20PROTOCOL%20ENDORSED%20BY%20IGAD%20Ambassadors%20and%20Ministers%20of%20Interior%20and%20Labour%20Khartoum%2026%20Feb%202020.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> More information at: IOM, "Regional Dialogue to Address Human Mobility and Climate Change Adaptation in the Eastern Caribbean," last accessed on 22 August 2023, <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/regional-dialogue-address-human-mobility-and-climate-change-adaptation-eastern-caribbean>.

Given that most services and policy innovations for climate-related migrants happen at the national level, increasing policy interconnectivity across different levels of governance in both mobility and urban contexts is critical. Four critical cross-cutting issues were highlighted by the speakers in this regard: a) labour and seasonal migration, b) COVID-19 and public health, c) human rights, and d) gender and social inequality.

The critical status of these issues is supported by existing research. According to ODI, for example, improving human mobility helps provide the labour flexibility required in cities to address climate change and other environmental crises. Dynamic labour markets, allowing the geographical mobility of workers, are crucial to supply labour when and where it is most needed. However, this requires policy collaborations across different levels of governance to recognize and improve labour mobility, supporting climate-compatible development in both places of origin and destinations through circular mobility initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

It is also important to organize at the international level in order to address climate-related mobility and harness its benefits. Relevant climate-related mobility and urban issues such as public transport infrastructure need to be addressed at the United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP), with financial support for the Global South to support adaptation as well as mitigation.<sup>11</sup>

### Recommendations for Member States:

- Policy interconnectivity across different levels of mobility and urban governance is important, in particular for the following cross-cutting issues: a) labour migration, b) public health, c) human rights, and d) gender inequality.
- The nexus between climate-related mobility and urbanization needs to be addressed at the United Nations Climate Change COP for the Global South.

### Conclusions

Climate-related mobility reflects the weak position of climate-related migrants embedded between rural and urban spaces and their associated vulnerabilities. Their mobility only partly functions to spread risk and reflects existing social, economic, political, and structural inequalities alongside the impacts associated with climate change. Moreover, climate-related mobility is often historically integrated into the livelihood systems and is part of the seasonal movement cycle.

Climate-related migrants need long-term policy support that addresses structural inequalities in contexts where potential climate migrants live. The informality and temporality of climate-related mobility also needs to be addressed in the urban policy context. Policy interconnectivity across different levels of governance is essential, as is international support for the Global South. Finally, other urban planning policies, such as urban housing, must also be taken into consideration when preparing climate-mitigation policies.

<sup>10</sup> For more information, listen to the ODI event: ODI, “Migration for climate action: how labour mobility can help the green transition,” 12 May 2022, <https://odi.org/en/events/migration-for-climate-action/>; Case studies are available at: Ipek Gençsü and Nathaniel Mason, “Migration for climate action: how labour mobility can help the green transition,” ODI, 11 May 2022, <https://odi.org/en/insights/migration-for-climate-action-how-labour-mobility-can-help-the-green-transition/>.

<sup>11</sup> More information at: Global Centre for Climate Mobility, “The Climate Mobility Pavilion @ COP27,” last accessed on 22 August 2023, <https://climatemobility.org/cop27/>.

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**About the UNU-CPR Migration Policy Roundtable Series:** The UNU-CPR Migration Policy Roundtable Series brings together UN agencies, Member States, international and civil society organizations and academics to explore the evidence in relation to key policy issues relating to equitable development and migration. The events are held in a hybrid format, alternating between New York and Geneva.

**Acknowledgments:** The UNU-CPR Migration Policy Roundtable Series is supported by the Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub. Funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) (Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1), the MIDEQ Hub unpacks the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between migration and inequality in the context of the Global South by decentering the production of knowl-

edge about migration and its consequences away from the Global North towards those countries where most migration takes place. For more information visit [www.mideq.org](http://www.mideq.org).

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**ISBN:** 978-92-808-6607-0 © United Nations University 2023.

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**Citation:** Jin-ho Chung, “Understanding Climate-Related Mobility in Contexts of Urbanization,” *UNU-CPR Policy Brief* (New York: United Nations University, 2023).