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Climate Change, Mobility and Human Rights: 'Slow onset' environmental change and displacement in the Mekong Region

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Policy Pointers

In the Mekong Region, the impacts of slow onset climate change are being experienced on-the-ground in urban and rural communities, and migration is one response

Recognition on the complex relationship between human mobility and slow onset climate change is growing among policy makers, researchers, and civil society

Foregrounding a human rights-based approach will help clarify the entitlements of rights-holders and the duties of states in this context

Transdisciplinary research and policy dialogue is needed to better understand the challenges faced and potential solutions



(Credit: Getty images)

This policy brief examines the connections between climate change, peoples' mobility and human rights in the Mekong Region. A particular focus is on the slow-onset environmental change dimensions of climate change, such as sea level rise and changing seasonal weather patterns, that are shaping peoples' mobility in less recognized ways. Slow onset processes introduce significant complexity, given that any decision to migrate intersects with pre-existing conditions and other ongoing economic and social development trends. The seeming lack of consensus on how to define and understand this form of 'environmental migration' has implications for law and policy, as well as responses on-the-ground. However, a human rights-based approach is emerging that connects together climate change, mobility and human rights.

Introduction

The connection between climate change and peoples' mobility is increasingly recognized in academic and policy circles, and popular media. Most visible are the impacts of disasterous events such as flooding on forced displacement, but slow onset environmental changes such as sea level rise and changing seasonal weather patterns are nowadays also crucial in shaping human mobility (or 'environmental migration'/ 'climate mobility') in various ways. In slow onset processes, the changing climate intersects with other ongoing economic and social development activities and their associated environmental impacts which influence situations of vulnerability, for example the construction of large hydropower dams. As a result, there is significant debate on how to understand the relationship between pre-existing conditions, slow onset climate change and human mobility. This includes their intersection with the politics of existing situations of vulnerability, such as access, control and use of resources, and the situations that migrants face at origin, in transit and at destination.

Climate change poses threats to human rights, including the right to life, the right to health, the right to shelter, and the right to food, and many others amplifying the impacts of structural inequalities and injustices. There is a growing recognition within human rights literature, international and national law, and among practitioners, of the connection between environmental change including climate change, mobility and human rights. These studies are now establishing a framework for determining the duties of states, and the entitlements of rights-holders. Governments in the Mekong Region are increasingly making commitments and policies on climate change mitigation and adaptation, yet human mobility due to 'slow onset' climate change seems to be less acknowledged and addressed.

Vulnerability, mobility and climate change

There is a long history of mobility in the Mekong Region, and a wide range of ways in which 'natural' and 'human produced' environmental change has influence it. There are many types of human mobility, which can reduce or increase vulnerability, or substitute one form of vulnerability with another. These include: local, cross-border and transnational migration; short-term, long-term, seasonal or permanent migration; and 'multi-local livelihood strategies' in which some family members migrate and some remain at the place of origin. Mobility can be a vulnerability reduction strategy, for example spreading risk across multiple locations, or being able to move away if a natural disaster occurs. However, it can also be a forced movement for example due to sea level rise, or somewhere in between.

Overall, peoples vulnerability to the various impacts of climate change reflect a larger story of socio-economic and political inequality. Hazards such as flooding and drought disproportionately affect marginalized groups with less political power. The effects of climate change can be mitigated or exacerbated by institutionalized disaster response strategies (or the lack thereof), as well as shaped by long-term development planning policies. Risk reduction for some can entail risk redistribution to other groups, and future research should expand on how that is related to slow onset climate change.



(Credit: Carl Middleton)

Categorizing 'climate mobility'

There remains an unclear categorization of who is an environmental migrant – and in particular a 'climate migrant' – especially in the context of national laws and regional policies in the Mekong Region. Terminology and categorization matter in terms of protecting human rights and reducing situations of vulnerability via recognition in national legislation, and in regional and global agreements, including access to any adaptation funds or 'damage and loss' funds. While people affected by disasters such as earthquakes, floods and droughts are generally recognized under national disaster preparedness laws, those experiencing slow onset environmental change are less recognized. Some aspects of the climate change – human mobility nexus still need more attention, such as displacement due to large hydropower dams that are being proposed as mitigation solutions for climate change.

Beyond siloed approaches to mobility and climate change

The general approach towards slow onset environmental change, mobility and human rights in the Mekong Region remains siloed in policy and to-a-significant degree among researchers and practitioners. Fragmentation of governance and action between actors creates limited understandings of how long existing connections between different factors contributing to vulnerability could be addressed. This creates a central question of how to generate and draw on empirical evidence to influence policies that promote and protect human rights. There also needs to be gender-sensitive policies and greater reflection on how policies can be inclusive of groups who may be more likely to be in situations of vulnerability, including ethnic minorities.

A rights-based approach to reduce climate vulnerability

The extent to which migration is effective as a response to climate change depends in part on whether there is a corresponding increase in mechanisms that will protect migrants' rights. Revising existing laws to better protect climate migrants seems a more promising approach than creating entirely new legal instruments. At the same time, it is important to draw out the climate dimension to migration to ensure recognition and accountability on the contributing causes, rather than simplifying the incentive of migration to be economic.

A rights-based approach would focus on strengthening agency and creating stronger protections that prevent cyclical vulnerability. As international and regional frameworks develop in response to climate change, states should revise their own national policies and laws to reflect them. Furthermore, other challenges connected to migration in the context of climate change that could be addressed through policy should be considered including: access to social or financial assistance; access, use or ownership of land; and addressing indebtedness. To revise laws, there must be clear assessment about what human rights are relevant, if and how they are being violated, and the exact part of the law that needs to be revised to protect, respect and remedy violations. There needs to be evidence collected to inform reforms, including on-the-ground community experience.



(Credit: Allyson Joyce)



(Credit: Getty images)

Transdisciplinary knowledge at the nexus of mobility and climate change

It is difficult to define 'slow onset' environmental change, especially considering the disconnect between situational/ local and scientific perceptions of climate change and its impacts. Local accounts often associate individual events with climate change, such as a crop failure or drought, but it is more difficult to articulate long-term change including anticipating the future. Scientific accounts on the other hand address longer-term trends retrospectively and for future scenarios, but often reflect less locally specific circumstances and the qualitative experience of affected people. In development policy and planning, scientific knowledge is often privileged even when public participation is invited, including for climate change adaptation. There should also be a greater balancing of scientific and local knowledge regarding how climate resiliency is understood and acted upon.

An important challenge to be met is to produce 'actionable knowledge' at the nexus of mobility and climate change. There are many different types of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, local knowledge, practical knowledge,

and political knowledge. There are also many different means of producing knowledge, for example scientific expert-led (top-down) studies, 'community led' (bottom-up) studies, and civil society or think tank research. Transdisciplinary approaches, sometimes termed 'co-produced knowledge' may be the most promising approach to producing 'actionable knowledge'.

Research could include the organization of local-led meetings, discussion on the types of support needed directly from the local people, and representatives from the group can present results in a session with other local villages. Practices like Thai Baan research could be implemented to encourage local people to identify issues and perform data collection. Outside researchers then can become a facilitator to the local people who perform the research. This could create discussions that produce better data collection and create mechanisms of accountability to the local people. These types of research practice can build a more robust understanding of local power relations that shape how policies are implemented moving forward.

Reliable documentation and archives could help communities better prepare for the future, and information sharing between disciplines and perspectives could produce more cohesive long-term solutions against slow onset climate change. Technology can also be used to facilitate networking opportunities, disseminate information, and engage in cross-border information sharing. Multiple forms of knowledge dissemination could also be used including non-written formats such as films, posters or art, and collaborating with the media.

Conclusion

There has been growing attention to the connections between environmental change and mobility among academics and practitioners that is increasingly connecting these governance regimes, especially at the global level and most visibly for rapid onset disasters. Relatedly, there are a growing number of academic and practitioner frameworks intended to understand the decisions to migrate under conditions of climate change. There is also a growing recognition, especially at the global level, of the need to recognize the climate change-mobility nexus, for example in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. However, at the national level, including in Southeast Asia, government agencies and the laws that mandate them that are responsible for environmental management and migration are largely siloed.

Building recognition on the relationships between slow onset climate change and mobility matters for a number of reasons, including: It is an important aspect of protecting human rights in the range of vulnerable situations generated due to climate change; It is necessary for defining duties of government agencies, including the allocation and availability of resources for protection and support, and strengthen national laws; it matters for the use of assessment tools that inform policies and project planning, such as risk impact assessments; and it matters within academic studies and conceptualizations, as these influence prevailing discourses on what it means to be an environmental or climate migrant. As global adaptation funds become available, and also as financing is provided to further climate mitigation projects, recognition of the wide range of connections between mobility, climate change, and situations of vulnerability will be an important dimension of climate justice.

Some research-focused recommendations are:

- Review existing legislation on disaster preparedness and response and other relevant fields (social welfare, health, housing rights...) to identify gaps and suggest strategies to strengthen protection of people displaced by slow onset climate change and other trends in climate mobility, including addressing institutional siloed approaches to this complex policy issue
- Undertake research to contextualize the increasingly consolidated human rights approach on slow onset climate change and mobility to the Mekong Region specific political and legal context, and support policy dialogues on this topic
- Establish a research network formed of scholars, civil society, think tank, community leaders and others to build a bottom-up knowledge base of community level challenges on slow onset climate change and mobility and formulate policy recommendations
- Promote transdisciplinary (co-produced) approaches to knowledge production on the nexus of mobility and slow onset climate change to produce 'actionable knowledge' involving multiple actors (community; researchers; civil society; state) who are willing to work together in inclusive and bottom-up ways

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See the details and recording of the workshop here: <https://www.csds-chula.org/activityandevents/2023/1/13/event-resources-climate-change-mobility-and-human-rights-24-november-2022>"

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the co-organizers and participants of the public seminar.

Knowledge Products

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