

Climate migration and social transformation: The case of West Africa

This policy brief provides an overview of the linkages between climate change, migration and social transformation, using West Africa as a case study. While climate change is already contributing to migration, and is likely to increasingly do so in the future, it is difficult to disentangle these impacts from other economic, social and security drivers of migration.

Against a backdrop of progressively worsening climate change impacts, migration is being more widely recognized as an adaptation strategy. However, the costs and benefits to both source and destination areas will be unevenly distributed. Furthermore, migration will drive processes of social transformation involving long-term shifts on a deep structural level, profoundly affecting individuals, communities and entire countries. These processes will in turn influence climate change vulnerabilities and shape subsequent migration patterns. Researchers and policy makers must take into account the complex and dynamic linkages between these factors when formulating policy responses.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION

Climate change affects nations differently, depending on their adaptive capacities. In West Africa, the climate is changing rapidly, with observed rises in surface temperatures, more extreme heat events, heavier precipitation, and increased coastal flooding (IPCC 2021) already leading to unpredictable rainfall patterns, droughts, floods and coastal erosion. The region is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change impacts because 60% of the population is employed in growing crops and rearing livestock. Against a backdrop of weak governance, insecurity and widespread poverty, the predicted climate change impacts – both gradual and catastrophic – will make adaptation exceptionally challenging.

Migration is a global phenomenon, and West Africa has high mobility even by African standards. The region has a long tradition of migration driven by economic and social factors, often facilitated by

KEY MESSAGES

- Although migration has long been an adaptive strategy in West Africa driven by multiple interrelated factors, climate migration is expected to increase as the impacts of climate change worsen. Climate migration is widely expected to accelerate existing trends, including the movement of people from the dry Sahelian belt to coastal countries and urbanization.
- Migration is increasingly seen as a climate adaptation strategy with benefits as well as challenges including conflict risks, ‘trapped populations’ stranded in marginal areas, and the rapid growth of cities. The benefits and costs of migration will be unevenly distributed at the national, local and household levels.
- Migration leads to profound changes in the socio-cultural dynamics of both the sending and receiving areas, including changes in household composition, gender roles and social support networks. These social transformations are poorly understood and mapped, even though they will significantly influence future migration flows and overall development outcomes.
- Policy makers and researchers should work together to improve data collection and develop social transformation frameworks that can inform policy formulation processes and investment decisions.



Woman watering crops in Ghana, West Africa
(photo: Joe Ronzio / IWMI)

kinship and religious networks as well as by the largely unrestricted movement of citizens within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region of 15 countries. A third of West Africans are estimated to live outside their place of birth. In many rural communities, young adults in particular migrate to other communities within their own country, sometimes on a seasonal basis. Two thirds of migrants from West African countries stay in the region (IOM 2020).

There is increasing movement of population from the Sahelian belt with its dry and deteriorating landscapes to coastal countries where plantations, mining and cities offer better prospects. At times, this mobility is a cause or a consequence of conflict. For example, the migration of Fulani herdsman has led to clashes with sedentary farmers in multiple countries.

LINKS BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION

Linkages between climate change and migration have been discussed in global fora for several decades, and policy and academic interest in the topic is growing. While there is consensus that climate-

induced migration is on the rise both within and across countries (Milán-García et al. 2021), estimates of the numbers of people that will be affected in coming decades vary widely (Rigaud et al. 2018).

Policy stances have been inconsistent. Some have recommended minimizing displacement,¹ while others have welcomed migration as an effective adaptation approach.² The latter view has become increasingly accepted over the past decade (Rigaud et al. 2018).

In West Africa, there is consensus among regional policy makers and researchers that climate change impacts are already driving migration and that this trend will be more pronounced in the years to come (Rigaud et al. 2018; Cattaneo et al. 2019). Climate change is responsible for a broad decline of the rural economy that, combined with a growing urban economy, creates migratory pressures (Dehcheshmeh and Ghaedi 2020).

However, as migration has long been an economic strategy in the region, it is impossible to precisely determine the volume of migration in West Africa that can be attributed to climate change. Environmental factors cannot be easily separated from the social, economic and demographic factors also driving

migration (Abu et al. 2014). The literature on climate-induced migration shows that the relationship between climate change and migration in West Africa is non-linear and may be subject to various tipping points (Wise et al. 2014). The uncertainty of climate projections and paucity of migration data undermines efforts to develop long-term policy responses.

INTERPLAY OF MIGRATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The nexus between climate change and migration poses significant and complex development challenges with demographic, social, cultural, economic, political and security implications (Zickgraf 2021). Migration is a driver of social transformation, generating long-term societal shifts on a deep structural level that impact individuals, communities and entire countries, and affecting subsequent migration flows. Along with movements of people, migration creates a flow of ideas, remittances and social capital, altering social, economic and political structures (De Haas 2010). As these changes occur in parallel and in combination with other societal trends, migration's role sometimes goes unnoticed.

There is evidence that climate-induced migration (like all forms of migration) will lead to significant social, cultural and economic changes in both sending and receiving areas, but this dynamic has not been sufficiently taken into account by researchers and policy makers (Castles 2010; Williamson et al. 2021). For example, the disproportionate migration of men and the resulting increase in female-headed households is likely to change gender norms and gender roles. More broadly, there are likely to be major shifts in demographic structures, social support networks, household livelihood strategies, and local and national economies. Rapid urban growth may leave cities unable to keep up with



Washing clothes in a lake affected by drought, Burkina Faso, West Africa
(photo: Manon Koningstein / IWMI)

¹ Article 50 of the Paris Climate Change Agreement (December 2015) called for the establishment of a mechanism “to develop recommendations for integrated approaches to avert, minimize and address displacement related to the adverse effects of climate change”. More recently, the UNFCCC in its Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage established a Task Force on Displacement, which released a 2018 report calling for the minimization of displacement.

² The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) acknowledged that migration can be an effective adaptation strategy to environmental and climate change (IPCC 2014). The UNFCCC COP 16 in 2010 also recognized migration as an adaptation to climate change and called for further action on migration, displacements and planned relocation. Within the Sustainable Development Goals, migration is recognized as a “multidimensional reality” that is of “major relevance for the development of countries of origin, transit and destination” (2030 Agenda, Article 29; UN 2015).

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS IN WEST AFRICA

Most West African countries have policy frameworks addressing migration and climate change:

- National Action Plans to Combat Desertification (NAP/CCD)
- Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)
- National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs).

Relevant regional dialogue initiatives include:

- Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA)
- Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process)
- ECOWAS programme for the sustainable management of pastoral resources and observation of transhumance.

burgeoning demand for basic services, let alone new livelihood opportunities, but recent arrivals may nonetheless be able to access better education and healthcare. Others may end up in more precarious situations than before, leaving behind ‘trapped populations’ stranded in marginal rural areas. The benefits and disadvantages of migration will not be equally distributed within countries, localities or even households.

Social transformation dynamics – whether positive or negative – will in turn influence climate change vulnerabilities and shape subsequent migration patterns. Thus, migration policy should avoid taking the status quo for granted. Instead, researchers and decision makers must consider the continuous complex interplay of multiple interdependent variables at the national, local and household level.

FUTURE AGENDA

The links between climate change, migration and social transformation are not sufficiently documented or mapped, which is crucial to develop an adequate framework for policy, research and investment. Current policy frameworks on climate migration often lack an in-depth social transformation analysis of sending and receiving areas. This means there is inadequate understanding of how shifting socio-cultural dynamics are influencing migratory decisions and processes, and vice versa. Researchers need to collect better data on migratory flows and use interdisciplinary approaches to explore how agriculture, urbanization, gender and conflict shape – and are shaped by – climate migration.

Policy makers should collaborate closely with researchers to develop integrated, cross-sectoral approaches to design policies and interventions that better leverage the opportunities (as well as the challenges) of climate-induced migration in the context of overall development strategies.

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