

Climate Change Related Migration in Bangladesh

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Migration in Bangladesh and its sensitivity to climate change and variability

Bangladesh has a long history of migration within the country and beyond. As our earlier Briefing Paper no.1, 'Making migration decisions amid climate change in Bangladesh', described, the link between climate change and migration is often not explicitly recognised by those moving. In part this is due to the complexity and multi-causality of the migration process. Based on the same CDKN-funded research, this paper traces current major migration patterns in the country, identifying their drivers and the sensitivity of these to climate change and variability.

Overall, migration is largely driven by livelihood needs and an aspiration for improving the quality of life. Amid changes in climate and environment, it is likely that more people will migrate for longer periods of time to earn and contribute to better standards of living and resilience at their home and destination.

Foresight Report (2011) conceptualised migration as being driven or determined by the multi-scale and overlapping influences of social, economic, demographic, environmental and political factors [1]. Black et al (2011) argue that assessment of future climate-related migration should start by taking into account existing movements of people in a given region [2]. In the light of all types of migration experience of Bangladesh, this paper tries to identify those flows which are more sensitive to climate change. Historically migration flows from Bangladesh can be categorised under four broad categories; internal, cross-border, short-term contract international and long-term permanent settlement in western countries.

Internal migration

Internal migration streams include flows from rural to rural, rural to peri-urban/urban and to metropolitan cities. Along with change of residence, seasonal circular migration during harvest and sowing seasons is a major form of rural to rural migration. According to Afsar, rural to urban movement is the most prevalent form of migration in Bangladesh, making up two-thirds of total flows [3]. She identified a decline in the farming income of village households from 59 to 44 per cent between 1987 and 2000 as a contributory factor to increased rural-urban migration. Since then the rural economy has changed in some rural areas of Bangladesh impacting migration outcomes. For example, many rural areas of Bangladesh are undergoing a growth in fish and chicken hatcheries, maize and vegetable production with these areas sometimes experiencing an economic rebirth. Increased flow of short-term international contract labour has also resulted in increased income of rural families. This means that recent determinants of rural to urban migration are changing with them being different in some locations from those of the past.

Most internal migration flows are towards cities [4]. Two-thirds of the urban population growth of the twentieth century has been on account of migration. Migrants in urban centres find jobs both in formal and informal sectors. More than 2.8 million people work in the garments sector alone, 80 percent of whom are young women. Brick-kiln, leather processing, jute, rerolling mills and other manufacturing industries also draw internal migrants into the formal sector. The majority of migrants find jobs in the informal economy as casual labourers, street vendors, rickshaw-pullers, domestic workers etc. For example, as early as in 2005, about 500,000 rickshaw pullers were working in Dhaka city [5]. Social networks of migrants based around kinship and neighbourhood ties as well as informal intermediaries support new migration. Therefore, a large segment of economic

determinants of migration for many migrants of climate-affected areas are created by environmental drivers.

Internal displacement

People are forced to move during extreme weather events, disasters and other ecological changes. An estimated 50 million people are exposed or affected by disasters every five years, with the coasts facing a severe cyclone every three years on average, and a quarter of the country getting inundated during the yearly monsoon rains [6]. Displacement after disasters often involves short distances [7], but big numbers of people. For example, the 1998 floods rendered 45 million people homeless. Of the 26 major cyclones from 1970 to 2009, Sidr displaced 650,000 in 2007, Aila 842,000 and Bijli 20,000 in 2009 [8]. People typically find it hard to recover fishing and farming livelihoods after such events.

Apart from the floods that they cause, the Himalayan rivers are also known for the giant loads of silt they wash down to Bangladesh. The dynamic river flow patterns lead to the formation of new stretches of riverbanks and islands called chars and erosion and submergence of existing ones. Hotspots include Sirajganj, Chapai Nawabganj and Munshiganj districts. About 2,000 to 3,000 kilometres of riverbanks face erosion annually, making 4.3 million people who live in the chars vulnerable. Annually this process reshapes about 9,000 hectares (ha) of mainland and 5,000ha of char and renders 60,000 people landless. Two-thirds of the inhabitants of the Jamuna-Brahmaputra floodplain have experienced such displacement at least once, about 17 per cent thrice and 15 per cent 10 times [10]. Erosion does not mean loss of ownership of land. However, due to corruption, locally influential people often grab newly accreted lands resulting in forced migration of rightful owners. One may therefore surmise that in such situations migration often becomes inevitable.

Short-term contractual international migration

Short-term international migration plays a major role in the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. In 2012, migrants remitted US\$14.17 billion, which is 44 percent of the total remittances received by the 48 least developed countries [11]. The volume of remittance was six times higher than the overseas development aid to the country and twelve times more than Foreign Direct Investment [12]. According to Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), from 1976 to 2012, almost 8.3 million Bangladeshis have gone abroad as short-term migrants. Since 2010 around 500,000 to 600,000 people are migrating each year. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Malaysia, Korea and Singapore are some of the major destination countries. However there is no data on returnees. The stock of Bangladeshi migrants is mainly comprised of men. After the lifting of restriction in 2006, female migrants constitute 6-7% of the total flow. Women mostly migrate to Lebanon, Jordan and UAE as domestic and manufacturing workers. The bulk of the Bangladeshi migrants, both men and women, are involved in low and semi-skilled jobs.

BMET data inform us that it is only recently that people of a few climate-stressed areas have started to migrate internationally. Though the causality between climate stress and short-term international migration has not been studied yet, correlation can be seen in the timeframe of climatic stress and beginning of international labour mobility from some of these areas.

Cross-border migration

Bangladesh and India share 4,096 km of land border. Cross-border mobility predates these countries' existence as nation states. It is understood that people from both sides move across the border due to historical links and social network of kinship, marriage, religious affinity and also for livelihood opportunities. Migration of landed aristocracy from different parts of East Bengal to Calcutta, movement of plantation workers from Uttar Pradesh to Sylhet, "unskilled workers" from Orissa and South India to the urban municipalities of East Bengal, agricultural workers from greater Mymensingh and

Sylhet to Assam and railway workers from Maharashtra and Bihar to different parts of East Bengal, are some major internal movements that took place during the British period. The partition of British India in 1947 was accompanied by large-scale movement of Hindus and Sikhs to India and Muslims to the newly created East and West Pakistan. The formal and informal flows of migration between Bangladesh and India continued after 1971. Settlement migration of a section of Hindu community and migration of relatively poor and less educated Muslims from bordering areas for livelihood are the two important streams. Migration from India to Bangladesh takes place through marriage and



At Nandinar Char in Sariakandi, Bogra district, Anna (26) cooks food on a banana stem raft in front of her flooded house. (Photo from IOM, 2010 by Abir Abdullah)

during agricultural seasons; relatively recently professionals are obtaining skilled jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors. There is very little research on population movements between India and Bangladesh. The formal record of remittance transfer does not show India as one of the remittance sending countries. Climate stresses may induce migration from the bordering areas through previously existing networks of migration. Swain (1996) has drawn correlation between the construction of Farakka Barrage and migration from surrounding areas [13]. In recent years, different securitisation measures along the border taken by India have made irregular migration particularly of Muslims from Bangladesh difficult.

Nonetheless, members of the Hindu community may choose to migrate to West Bengal if livelihood and integration opportunities there turn out to be better than migration to urban areas of Bangladesh.

Migration from Bangladesh to the developed countries of the West was intimately connected to British colonialism. People from Sylhet, Noakhali and Chittagong found jobs in British merchant ships. Some jumped ship in various ports including London, Liverpool and Bristol. In the 1950s to meet the demand for its growing textile industry, the UK opened its immigration door. A large number of people from the Sylhet region migrated to the UK through the social network of early settlers. Now people of Bangladeshi origin can be found in many developed countries. An estimate based on information provided by the Bangladesh missions inform that in 2004 there were 1.5 million people living in the developed countries [14]. Drivers of permanent migration are diverse; however, recent environmental events do not have much role in that.

If supported properly, migration can form a beneficial adaption strategy. In the scenario of a changing climate, poor people who move in search of jobs to new places often risk low wages, insecure working environments and inadequate housing, services and infrastructure. The economic contribution of temporary migrant workforce is often not adequately acknowledged. While such systemic inadequacies make their livelihoods insecure, the migrants could also face exploitative practices at work, at their living environment and while accessing services. Government policies should be directed to addressing these challenges, taking into account the vulnerabilities, strengths and above all, the rights of the migrants, as well as considering the vulnerabilities of those left behind, unable or unwilling to move.

The climate factor

The above discussion on migration flows within and from Bangladesh show that, not all types of migrations are equally sensitive to climate change. Migration for permanent settlement is weakly sensitive to climate change. Short-term contract migration mostly takes place from certain pockets of Bangladesh that are less sensitive to climate change. In recent times however informal recruiters have begun recruiting from a few of climate vulnerable areas. The cost of such migration deters the poorer people of climate change affected areas to take advantage of international migration. Some bordering areas of Bangladesh could be sensitive to cross-border population movement. However, securitisation of population movements between India and Bangladesh has reduced the scope of such movement to a great extent. Displacement and short-term internal migration are the most sensitive flows to climate change and variability. Amid unpredictable but definite changes in climate and environment, it is likely that more people will migrate for longer periods to earn and contribute to better standards of living and resilience at their home and destination.



Umbrellas are a hot sale during the rainy season in Dhaka, and many migrant men work as street vendors. Photo: Steve Evans

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Climate-related migration in Bangladesh project

'Climate related migration in Bangladesh' is a project of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex and the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, University of Dhaka, funded by the CDKN. It aims to understand, plan for and respond to climate-induced migration. It seeks to reduce people's vulnerability and build resilience. The project will produce qualitative and quantitative evidence on climate change and migration in Bangladesh, identify policy gaps and make recommendations to minimise the costs and risks associated with such migration and maximise its contribution as an adaptive measure. The Government of Bangladesh is a key stakeholder in it. This briefing was written by Maxmillan Martin and Dominic Kniveton at the Department of Geography, University of Sussex and Tasneem Siddiqui and Mohammad Towheedul Islam of RMMRU. For more information please contact: d.r.kniveton@sussex.ac.uk and info@rmmru.org.

Sussex Centre for Migration Research

School of Global Studies

University of Sussex

Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ T +44 (0)1273 873394

F +44 (0)1273 620662

E migration@sussex.ac.uk

W www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/

Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit

Sattar Bhaban (4th Floor) 3/3- E, Bijoy Nagar

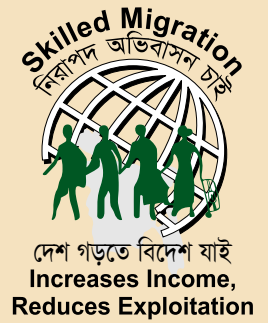
Dhaka-1000

T +880 2 9360338, F +880 2 8362441

E info@rmmru.org

W www.rmmru.org

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Programme Officer, AMR Project, RMMRU

Address: RMMRU, Sattar Bhaban (4th Floor)

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