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TRANSFORMING MIGRATION

From threat to tool of adaptation



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Perhaps the most controversial issue in the global climate change literature is migration. During the 1990s and early 2000s, in climate change discourse, migration was presented as a threat. These studies perceived climate change as an independent variable driving migration from ecologically vulnerable areas. Those who moved were termed as a new group of forced migrants or environmental refugees. Subsequent studies underscored that migration is a complex and multi-causal phenomenon. Along with the influence of climate change, migratory behaviour is also shaped by other macro issues such as social, political, economic and demographic influences. Micro-level realities like household characteristics and meso-level facilitating or intervening factors play a role in inducing or restricting migration of individuals, households, or communities.

Two strands of debate currently dominate the migration and climate change discourse. The first one is environmental determinism versus multi-causality. The other strand is migration as one of the adaptation tools versus migration as failure of local level adaptation. This article identifies different migration experiences of people from climate hotspots of Bangladesh and shows that people are autonomously using livelihood migration as one of the adaptation tools; but lack of understanding and coordination among government agencies and action plans work as hindrances in the process of an integrative approach that accommodate local level adaptation programmes with livelihood migration and resettlement

of the displaced.

Considering the climatic characteristics of Bangladesh and the trend of exacerbation of climate related hazards in coming years, studies inform that the volume of certain types of population movements are likely to increase in Bangladesh. It is important to note that all types of population movements are not equally sensitive to climate change. The result of sensitivity tests conducted by RMMRU-Sussex Centre for Migration Research (2014) shows that both internal displacement and internal livelihood rural to urban migration are highly sensitive to climate change, whereas cross border population movement and short term international contract migration had mixed sensitivity to climate change and long term permanent migration to the west had extreme low sensitivity.

On climate hazard related displacement some estimates have already begun to surface. Global estimate of Brown (2008) suggests that by 2050 one in every 45 people of the world will be displaced by climate change, and in case of Bangladesh one in every seven people will be displaced. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that more than 4.7 million people were displaced due to disasters in Bangladesh from 2008 to 2014. A UNDP (2013) study, identified that population growth in environmentally fragile areas, especially in the coastal regions, experienced low population growth over the last two decades compared to the national average. Again, a RMMRU-SCMR study (2014), based on historical analysis of upazila level census data of 2001, and 2001 predictions of global climate

models and World Bank studies of 2010 and 2011, estimates that as many as 16 to 26 million Bangladeshis will migrate from places of origin due to floods, storm surges, riverbank erosion and sea level rise in the period 2011 to 2050. Of this 2 to 5 million will migrate due to riverbank erosion, 3 to 6 million due to inland flooding, 5 to 7 million due to coastal storm surges and 6 to 8 million due to sea level rise.

Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP II) of the Government of Bangladesh con-

ducted a nationally representative baseline survey in 2014 to assess the magnitude and patterns of climate induced displacement in Bangladesh. It looked into four types of environmental hazards. These are floods, riverbank erosion, salinity and water logging. It found that 12 percent of the population was permanently displaced due to climate change, 46 percent of the population experienced temporary displacement, while another 29 percent swung between temporary and permanent displacement. Only 13 percent of the

households in those districts had never experienced any form of displacement. In other words, more than 85 percent of the survey population in environmentally fragile areas had experienced some form of displacement.

AbRAR and Azad (2004) showed that those who are displaced initially try to resettle themselves in nearby areas and if they fail, only then they migrate to nearby districts or gradually to megacities like Dhaka and Chittagong.

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