

Can we absorb the shock of climate migration?



ZIHAD AZAD
IN 2016, I led my band of misfits, aka Team "Little Wins," to the Shanghai semi-finals of the Hult Prize. For those of you who may not know, the Hult Prize is the world's biggest platform for social startups emerging from universities all across the world. Each year, the organisers issue a big, bold challenge aligned with a large market opportunity meant to inspire and enable the world's brightest minds. They throw down the gauntlet and call into action the university students to solve a specific problem by building a lean startup.

Last year's challenge was predicated on resolving the income issue of people living in "crowded urban spaces." The official challenge document read, "Almost 1.5 billion people live in crowded urban spaces and more people each year are migrating to the cities, displaced by lack of economic opportunities, extreme poverty and climate." Hence, couched in legalese, the Hult prize team was asking the youth of the world to come up with novel economic opportunities for *Climate Refugees*—a term which is yet to be recognised officially. And this was my first brush with the people most susceptible to the perils of climate change.

The geographic location of Bangladesh is a double-edged sword. It makes our soil rich and fertile, but at the same time, makes us vulnerable to the wrath of Mother Nature. Situated in the wide Ganges delta plain with a coastline about 700 kilometres long and with most of the country sitting at less than 12 metres above sea level, Bangladesh is extremely exposed to natural hazards. Floods, tropical cyclones, drought,



According to Oxfam, every day, 4,000 Bangladeshis are moving to cities in search of a safer life, away from the challenges of an increasingly extreme weather.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

and storm surges occur all too frequently. This poses a problem for people whose lives and livelihoods both lie at the mercy of nature's erratic dispositions. After a natural disaster hits, people usually pick up the pieces and continue with their lives. But more often than not, coping mechanisms fail to deliver and migration seems to be the sole alternative. This is where things get a little convoluted.

According to Oxfam, "every day, 4,000 Bangladeshis are moving to cities in search of a safer life, away from the challenges of increasingly extreme weather." Internal mass migration is indeed a pressing problem for Bangladesh. But how much of it is due to climate change is open to debate. For decades, people's livelihoods have been affected by

negative environmental impacts such as deforestation, soil degradation, erosion and salinization, forcing them to flee to cities in search of a new life. From this perspective, one might call them "environmental migrants." Extensive academic research needs to be conducted to establish a causal link before a conclusive use of phrases like "climate migrants" or "climate migration."

But one can argue that a debate over semantics is pointless and serves no purpose. If these people are not climate migrants yet, they (or their children) soon will be. A one-metre rise in sea level—a very likely scenario in this century—would submerge a fifth of the landmass of Bangladesh and render 30 million people homeless. We are heading toward a

precipice at breakneck speed.

However, the portrayal of mass mobility as a singular and unidirectional process is also misleading. People leave for good, they never come back. But the reality suggests otherwise. For example, most survivors of heavy tropical cyclones are only temporarily displaced and they return quickly. Also, often only men move to nearby cities to work, while their families stay back. But it is quite evident that a large chunk of the migrants is permanently displaced by shocks, be it environmental or climatic. And certain initiatives are in place to address their needs.

The Government of Bangladesh has been undertaking an initiative, the Asrayan Project, aimed at rehabilitating homeless and landless

families affected by river erosion. During the first phase of the project, from 1997-2010, a total of 58,703 families were provided with new housing and employment opportunities (Finance Division, 2011). A second phase of the project, Ashrayan II, was launched in July 2010, with the goal of assisting an additional 50,000 home- and landless families. While this project has had largely positive impacts, the differential between the influx of new migrants and the amount rehabilitated remains a significant source of concern.

Also of paramount importance is the tailoring of policies to fit the needs of local people. In case of sea-level rise and salinization, for example, policies should facilitate anticipated migration by promoting resilience and reducing loss and damage as much as possible. In case of those displaced temporarily by extreme events, the government should take steps to ensure that these individuals can return home as soon as possible.

For those who migrate across borders, national and international protocols should be in place to address the issue of migration with the aim to increase the ability of communities and ecosystems to absorb shocks. Misguided policy implementation can have severe consequences. An aid project which did not take account of Bangladesh's massive monsoon rainfall built dykes and created Dutch-style polders. During the fall season, it flooded and then waterlogged the land in the polders. The land was rendered unworkable as a result, forcing thousands to move in recent years. So, in the context of addressing climate change impacts, the prescience and levelheadedness of policymakers cannot be overstated.

Climate refugees still have no legal standing under international law. No binding global agreements contain provisions for them, despite the first

assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1990 suggesting that "the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration." In such trying times, we get to see Scott Pruitt, a notorious climate change denier, to be appointed as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency of the United States. The Trump administration's crusade against climate science may shift the epicentre of the fight against climate change to China, a fight in which Bangladesh is one of the essential battlefronts. We need sufficient funding and technology to rebuild our infrastructure, reduce loss and damage and create a more resilient Bangladesh. But we also need to mainstream migration strategies into national development plans and policies. We do not have the capacity to accomplish all these on our own. We need help from the developed countries of the world.

Meanwhile, aid agencies and the media can help Bangladesh by telling the stories of Bangladeshi people whose lives have been turned upside down by extreme environmental events. Perhaps, making broad generalisations to conflate "climate refugees" with "environmental migrants" is a pardonable sin for the greater good. By the time academicians agree on the right label for these people by establishing causality beyond all reasonable doubts, the transition from environmental to climatic migration may already have happened. It is never too early to take a proactive approach to addressing climate change, or for that matter, climate change-induced migration. But it will be too late to pump the brakes after the proverbial bus has run off the cliff.

Zihad Azad is a student of EEE department in BUET. He directed the short film "The Outlanders" based on climate refugees that won an honourable mention in the International Mobile Film Festival 2015 held in Paris.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Europe's crisis starts at home



MARK LEONARD
DEEP divisions within Europe are increasingly threatening the values upon which the European project of "ever closer union" is based. In 2015, during the refugee crisis, many commentators saw a divide between

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) and Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán's vision of ethnic purity: a Western Europe of bridges versus an Eastern Europe of walls.

But another threat to European unity comes from within individual countries. In Germany, talks to form a centre-left, centre-right coalition have broken down. In the Netherlands, it took Prime Minister Mark Rutte 208 days to form a new government after elections in March. In the United Kingdom, the political establishment is in disarray over Brexit. And in Poland, white nationalists and neo-Nazis recently staged a massive march through the streets of Warsaw.

Which gulfs are wider—those between member states or those within them? The answer to that question matters a great deal. If Europe's biggest problem is that it is divided along national borders, then liberal-leaning countries like France and Germany could try to change the balance of power within increasingly illiberal countries.

Every EU country agreed to a set of liberal-democratic standards (part of the so-called Copenhagen Criteria) when it joined the club. But, over time, the governments of Hungary and Poland have decided that they no longer want to abide by the rules. One solution could be to create a smaller club

with better benefits. Countries that wish to join this privileged inner circle would have to agree to a new—or rather, the original—set of rules; and countries that break the rules would be left out. There would finally be a cost to breaching EU standards.

But this solution could work only if the biggest problem is the divide between member states. As for the divisions within member states, consider Germany. After the federal election in September, Merkel embarked on a fascinating experiment, in which she tried to unite her centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its more nativist sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP), and the left-wing Greens.

Merkel is a talented negotiator, and far better suited to write about "the art of the deal" than others we won't bother mentioning. But it remains to be seen if she can heal the divisions in her own country.

While the Greens would like to uphold the *Willkommenskultur*, the CSU's position on migration is closer to that of the Visegrád Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). In fact, at the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, the CSU hosted Orbán at one of its party conferences.

Moreover, while the Greens are European federalists who support greater economic solidarity with Greece and Italy, the FDP channels the fiscal discipline of the Finns, the Dutch, and German Swabians. They are staunchly opposed to deeper European economic integration.

Many hoped that Merkel would succeed in forging a "Jamaica" coalition (named after the colours of that country's flag). But, in the end, the experiment failed. The FDP abandoned the talks out of frustration that, as its leader Christian Lindner put it, "The four discussion partners have no common vision

for modernisation of the country or common basis of trust."

Even without a Jamaica coalition, Germany still has a stable liberal majority in the Bundestag. The same cannot be said for the rest of the EU, where almost every other member state is now a "50-50 society": half cosmopolitan, half communitarian. In these countries, the government at any given time represents whichever side won the latest round in an ongoing culture war.

In the UK, for example, 52 percent of voters opted to leave the EU. The country is now hurtling toward an isolated state of provincialism and xenophobia, but its leaders keep telling the public that Britain will be better off on its own. For those who believe it,

the fact that the UK will lose a say in EU decisions affecting its economic environment doesn't seem to matter.

France, on the other hand, has an energetic new pro-European president, Emmanuel Macron, who is committed to preparing his country for the years ahead. And yet France is not much more cosmopolitan than Britain. In the first round of the presidential election this spring, the nativist campaigns of Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan collectively won 46 percent of the vote—almost as much as the UK's "Leave" campaign.

Clearly, the EU is both a society of states and of citizens. That means intra-national divides are as important as the diplomatic

spats between countries.

Earlier this year, a Brookings Institution report tried to determine if Europe is an "optimal political area," a concept borrowed from economist Robert Mundell's theory of "optimal currency areas." The report concluded that cultural and institutional differences between EU countries have not changed much over the past three decades of European integration. But it also found that the divisions between countries are far smaller than the differences within countries. Or in other words, on the issue of freedom of movement, there is greater polarisation between London and the British Midlands than between the UK and Poland.

Creating a flexible or multi-tiered Europe could solve some short-term problems, by bringing together coalitions of the willing to address specific issues. But it could also introduce new dangers. After all, most European countries, regardless of what tier they are on, will still be 50-50 societies that could opt in or out of deeper integration with a single election or referendum. In the future, one cannot rule out the possibility that Le Pen will be elected president of France, or that the anti-EU Five Star Movement will come to power in Italy. By the same token, the more moderate Civic Platform might return to power in Poland.

Confronting the intra-societal challenge to the European project will not be easy. It is a deep, generational problem that goes to the heart of national identity, history, and geography. No quick institutional fix can solve a problem like that.

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A WORD

A DAY

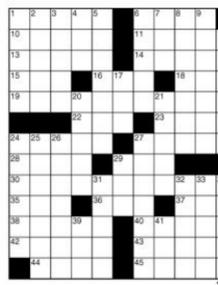


PASTICHE
NOUN

A work of visual art, literature, or music that imitates the style or character of the work of one or more other artists

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Brooch part
 - 6 Aspiration
 - 10 Bit of gossip
 - 11 Clumsy
 - 13 Bring together
 - 14 Sacred scroll
 - 15 Periodical, for short
 - 16 Sleuth Spade
 - 18 Color
 - 19 They're stepped on to stop
 - 22 Count start
 - 23 Fencing sword
 - 24 Isolated
 - 27 Survives
 - 28 Spice from nutmeg
 - 29 - Aviv
 - 30 Shore walls
 - 35 Parking place
 - 36 Silent assent
 - 37 Chinese zodiac animal
 - 38 Wed in secret
 - 40 Honshu city
 - 42 Zellweger of "Chicago"
 - 43 Laser printer part
 - 44 Bears' lairs
 - 45 Nourishes
 - DOWN**
 - 1 Cookie bit
 - 2 Moon-based
 - 3 Female friend, to Fernando
 - 4 Toper
 - 29 - Aviv
 - 5 Gift
 - 6 Blackjack call
 - 7 Music's Yoko
 - 8 Maybe
 - 9 Shoulder ornament
 - 12 Doctoral papers
 - 17 Gorilla, for one
 - 20 Asian peninsula
 - 21 Gave out hands
 - 24 Writer Eric
 - 25 Out, in a way
 - 26 Solvent ingredient
 - 27 Start
 - 29 Binary base
 - 31 Leg joints
 - 32 Make blank
 - 33 Did yard work
 - 34 Flag features
 - 39 Signing need
 - 41 Take to court



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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D	E	E	R	D	O	D	D		

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

