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## Why South Asia Should Embrace Climate Migration

Migration is often framed as a failure of climate adaptation. It's better seen as an effective and sustainable response to climate change.

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When discussing the human security impacts of climate change, climate-induced migration is often viewed as a distant and intangible concern. Despite widespread consensus on “loss and damage” at COP27 in Egypt last November, climate migration in developing countries was barely mentioned. However, the reality is that climate migration is already occurring at an unimaginable scale.

The World Bank estimates that South Asia will face a crisis of 50 million climate refugees each year by 2050, resulting from both short-term natural disasters like floods and cyclones and slow-onset environmental changes such as sea-level rise, soil degradation, and desertification.

Experts suggest that climate migration is a “threat multiplier” that will result in the overcrowding of cities, conflict over land and resources, and regional instability. In other words, climate migration is viewed as a dire negative outcome of climate change, and a crisis that must be managed and minimized. However, this framing does not reflect ground realities, and migration has been a viable adaptive strategy to changing environmental conditions for decades. Nomadic pastoralism in the

Himalayan-Kush region, seasonal fishing in Maldives, and circular rural-urban migration in Bangladesh are just a few examples of migration as climate adaptation in South Asia.

Migration can be an effective and sustainable climate adaptation mechanism in South Asia if supported by the necessary institutional and policy frameworks. In the face of changing environmental and resulting economic and security concerns, governments should not only facilitate safe and orderly migration where local adaptation is no longer feasible, but also incorporate migration as a climate adaptation strategy into their development agendas.

### **Reframing the Discourse**

The idea of climate adaptation is becoming increasingly important as a framework to address climate change, with funding for such programs at more than [\\$2.34 billion](#) annually. Climate adaptation refers to the need for societies and economies to adapt to the consequences of climate change at a structural level. Making coastal cities resilient to flooding, building roads that can withstand higher temperatures, and finding salinity-resistant crops are some examples.

Three decades of literature on climate adaptation has framed migration as a last-resort response to the failure of communities to adapt to climate consequences. Multilateral institutions and development agencies view migration as a [failure](#) of the development agenda rather than a structural condition of a globalized world. In reality, mobility has always been a viable adaptation strategy for people to respond to external market shocks, conflict, and environmental changes.

In South Asia, migration is a vital rural livelihood [strategy](#) for diversifying risk, bringing in additional income, transferring knowledge and technology through remittances, creating social networks across regions, and providing better livelihood opportunities in the face of the slow-onset impacts of climate change. Therefore, a shift in the discourse from “migration as last resort” to “migration as opportunity” could be an effective policy strategy that is more reflective of ground [realities](#).

Recent [research](#) also suggests that while reducing climate migration is necessary, governments should not encourage people to remain in deteriorating environments where their health may be affected by slow-onset climate consequences such as saltwater intrusion in drinking water and the increase of air- and water-borne diseases in warming environments. While inducing people to stay in their homes may serve urban planning and policy interests in the short-term, policymakers should find long-term sustainable solutions when in situ adaptation is no longer feasible, such as facilitating livelihood diversification strategies or planned relocation.

### **Lessons for South Asia**

The World Bank [estimates](#) that 40 percent of India’s rural population will migrate to urban centers to escape climate impacts in the next 13 years. In Bangladesh, [22 percent](#) of households affected by tidal surges have already moved to cities like Dhaka and Chittagong, which are faced with crises of overpopulation. Without the institutional frameworks to facilitate safe and orderly migration, communities impacted by climate change will move to already-overpopulated urban centers with poor basic

services, or remain in hazardous environments for fear of losing social security. While there have been some policy efforts in South Asia, there has to be more planning in the pre-migration stage for effective and humane implementation.

Governments should identify in-migration hotspots, regions that are less susceptible to the impacts of climate change and that have more diverse livelihood opportunities. These regions will include the cooler Southern Indian highlands around Bangalore and Chennai and parts of the Ganga River Basin in western [Bangladesh](#). Particularly, governments should direct resources to secondary cities and peri-urban areas, creating employment opportunities and infrastructure to attract migrants and avoid overcrowding within slums in major cities like Dhaka. The development of climate-resilient secondary cities could also be an opportunity to diversify South Asian economies and bridge the vast rural-urban divide.

Such towns are already being built in parts of South Asia. The town of [Mongla](#) in southwestern Bangladesh, about 50 kilometers inland from the Bay of Bengal, is a prime example and success story of an in-migration hotspot. An important seaport and a special economic zone, Mongla has developed several climate-resilient factories and is now being hailed as a safe haven for climate refugees from the Sundarban villages. There are now plans to build over 20 other satellite towns near economic hubs in Bangladesh, following the Mongla model. Other South Asian countries like India and Pakistan can adopt similar models for the development of secondary, climate-resilient, and migrant-

friendly towns to decongest urban centers and create alternative opportunities.

Simultaneously, governments should identify climate hotspots in South Asia from where out-migration may be high. These may include the deltaic regions of the Sundarbans, coastal towns and cities like Mumbai, the semi-arid plains of Pakistan, the rice-growing areas of northeast Bangladesh, and the northern Indo-Gangetic plains between Delhi and Lahore. Governments and multilateral agencies should provide information and financial literacy programs to communities in affected regions for people to make informed adaptation decisions.

Schemes in out-migration hotspots to build professional skills in sectors beyond agriculture, horticulture, fishery, and animal husbandry will also help people effectively adapt. In this way, adequate preparation and state support will facilitate migration not just to the most convenient locations but to the most environmentally, socially, and economically appropriate ones that will benefit both migrants and host economies.

Seasonal and labor migration has been a common livelihood strategy for people in agro-based economies to find alternative sources of income in urban centers during the dry season. These patterns will be exacerbated by water scarcity and disrupted by changing seasonal patterns due to climate change. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the inadequacies of the informal economy and of service accessibility for migrant workers in India.

An effective climate adaptation strategy could be to streamline and formalize seasonal labor migration for the inclusion of climate migrants

in social protection schemes. This could be done by creating registration and enumeration systems for internal migrants and their informal settlements, making service delivery systems and social welfare schemes [portable](#), and ensuring the availability of temporary employment and housing opportunities in in-migration hotspots.

Financial, technological, and informational remittances bolster local economies, contribute to building climate-resilient homes, and diversify household income in the case of environmental disasters. Internal remittances in India, for instance, come from over 100 million internal migrants each year and add up to an amount eight times larger than the government of India's healthcare and education budgets [combined](#). Governments should streamline the transfer of remittances by creating quicker, low-cost, and more secure channels on the sending end and supporting financial literacy programs on the receiving [end](#), thereby securing migration as a financially secure and sustainable adaptation strategy.

## **Conclusion**

Migration as climate adaptation recognizes that migrants are active social agents responding to changing environmental conditions rather than victims of external structures lacking agency. However, reframing migration as an adaptive mechanism requires a fundamental restructuring of existing urban development and economic frameworks. There is a lack of political will in South Asia to decentralize jobs away from urban centers at the federal level and a plethora of bureaucratic and administrative obstacles to implementation at the local level. Looking ahead, there must also be active coordination between national and

state governments, multilateral institutions, and local NGOs on formulating and implementing a strategy to facilitate migration as climate adaptation, and the integration of migration into all facets of climate policy in South Asia.

## AUTHORS

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