

South Asia's climate migration is a ticking bomb

Despite the alarming magnitude of climate displacement in the region, responses from governments and international agencies have been inadequate

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'Changes in agricultural patterns and water availability force people to migrate to urban areas'

June 5 marked the 50th anniversary of World Environment Day which was started by the United Nations in June 1972 at the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. Even after 50 years, 40% of the world's population — 3.5 billion people — live in areas that are particularly susceptible to the effects of [climate change](#), including water scarcity, drought, heat stress, sea level rise, and extreme events such as floods and tropical cyclones. The World Development Report on Migrants, Refugees, and Societies states, "As the world struggles to cope with global economic imbalances, diverging demographic trends, and climate change, migration will become a necessity in the decades to come for countries at all levels of income".

Area of climate displacement hotspots

South Asia houses the world's most impacted climate displacement hotspots, including the Hindu Kush-Himalaya region, coastal areas, island nations, and deltaic and semi-arid regions. Land regions which are prone to high environmental vulnerability include Bangladesh, India,

Pakistan, and Sri Lanka affected by sea level rise and coastal floods. While Bhutan, Afghanistan and Nepal are affected by glacial melt and temperature rise, small island nations such as the Maldives face the threat of submersion.

The situation is exacerbated by high population density, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure. By 2050, nearly 216 million South Asians could be displaced due to climatic reasons. In 2020, cyclone Amphan alone displaced five million people across South Asia. In 2015, Nepal's Gorkha earthquake displaced 2.6 million people, and left over 6,00,000 homeless. Over 7.9 million people were displaced by the floods in Pakistan, in 2022.

Costs of displacements

By 2050, globally there could be 1.2 billion climate refugees. In South Asia, there have been over nine million internal displacements in 2020, making it the region having the highest number of new displacements due to climate change. Climate displacement results in job losses, food insecurity, and an overall overcrowding of resources, creating further migration and incurring other social and economic costs.

Poor economic capabilities reduce the adaptive capacity of communities to climate change events and promote migration. Internally displaced people migrate for better livelihood opportunities, and safety. The economic costs associated with climate migration in South Asia include loss of skilled labour, and reduced productivity in agriculture, fisheries, and forestry. Displacement can also lead to social costs such as the breakdown of social networks and communities, mental health issues, social unrest, and conflict.

Changes in agricultural patterns and water availability force people to migrate to urban areas. Such rural-urban migration overburdens cities that already operate at capacity. Climate migration creates a multiplier effect on pre-existing threats such as overcrowding, and conflicts over resources sharing. The correlation between climate vulnerability and violence is notable. In 2020, 95% of conflict-related displacements were reported in climate vulnerable countries.

Supporting the climate refugees

Because of disasters ranging from floods to desertification, South Asia would have an estimated 50 million climate refugees by 2050. The importance of improving resistance and resilience by introducing sustainable solutions such as adopting salinity-resistant crops, making coastal areas resistant, and strengthening infrastructure will be deterministic. Such structure gaps need to be corrected to ensure that communities are not forced to migrate. The underlying economic reasons of poverty and poor infrastructure play a crucial role in the efficacy of a climate adaptation method.

Weak policy responses

Despite the alarming magnitude of climate displacement in the region, responses from governments and international agencies have been inadequate. Most countries in South Asia lack comprehensive policies to address climate displacement, and international aid has been insufficient to meet the needs of affected communities. Missed targets of climate funding also

hold back developing nations from financing their climate goals and building resilience. Building climate-resilient infrastructure and improving disaster preparedness are essential to support adaptation and mitigation measures.

Governments and international agencies must recognise the severity of climate displacement in South Asia and mitigate its effects. Further, governments in the region must develop targeted policies that address the specific needs of climate-displaced communities. Apart from developing resilience, policies should focus on providing alternative livelihood opportunities and social protection programmes to help affected communities cope with the impacts of climate change.

Implications for COP

Although the “loss and damage” framework developed at COP27, is aimed at supporting most impacted countries which is viewed as an integral part of climate justice, concerns remain on whether wealthy countries would be willing to pay any “liabilities” or “reparations”. The amount of funding required, and the designation of funders are questions still unanswered. European countries worry that they may have to bear a large responsibility as oil and gas suppliers such as Saudi Arabia, or a large economy such as China may take refuge under the UN definition of “developing country”.

While human mobility could not find its place on the COP agenda, the final COP27 text identified “displacement”, “relocation”, and “migration” as some of the concern areas that would be addressed by the loss and damage financing. The UNHCR raised the question of refugees and displaced people at the COP27; even after five decades of World Environment Day, climate migrants are yet to find their voice in the global platform.