

Research Proposal

Title: Climate Refugees: Health and Livelihood in the Bay of Bengal- India and Bangladesh

Summery

Scholars working on Indian Ocean region migration studies have engaged at great length with the remittance economy, indentured labour regimes, transoceanic mobility and debates on cosmopolitanism (Ensang Ho 2012, Amrith 2013, Green 2014). Our research focuses on a less studied subject – the internal climate refugee crisis and its ‘nexus’ with livelihood stresses, that have been accentuated by climate change, affecting community resilience, health and well-being (Vinke et al., 2020). While there is an increasing body of research focused on climate change-related migration, there is not yet adequate research on how environmental refugees overcome their ‘vulnerability’ and enhance their individual and collective agency to successfully deal with climate, health and livelihood challenges in their ‘new’ socio-economic and political settings (Black et al. 2011, Hunter and Norton 2015, Mcleemann 2017). Therefore, we have proposed a collaborative research project to study how climate refugees in selected coastal communities across the Sundarbans delta use and enhance their individual and collective agency to devise new survival strategies in the context of endangered livelihoods.

Proposal

Displacement related to climate change is complex—and as climate change presents a super wicked problem, so too do the dynamics of related human mobility. Problematizing the phenomena requires us to distinguish between causes and correlations, and to engage with interactions between climate change and mobility on the one hand, as well as their nexus with violence, and (under)development, on the other. Unpacking this nexus also requires us to pay particular attention to temporal dimensions of both movement and climate change impacts. More specially, making sense of climate change-related human mobility requires us to distinguish the effects of slow on-set climate change impacts from those of rapid on-set disasters, as both act as drivers of temporary, seasonal, long-term, permanent and/or protracted displacement. From a protection standpoint, taken together, the above intersections pose acute and timely questions for the livelihoods and human rights of impacted individuals and communities. They also beg consideration within the development sector around resiliency-building approaches to climate change, such as adaptation and mitigation efforts that may divert persons from being forced to move.

We will use collaborative, multi-sited ethnography, focus group interviews and other action research methods, such as photo voice and digital diaries to capture the voice of the community and our interlocutors, who will become our prime sources of knowledge in case study sites (Carlson et al., 2006, Zacarias 2019). The goal of our transregional project is to build a collaborative, transdisciplinary and ethical research platform involving not only regional academic institutions and scholarly networks but also government, policy and civil society actors. The project will chart pathways to capacity building at the local level so that

a multidisciplinary and trans-regional project can be sustained in the coming years. These contributions will lay the groundwork for a broader discussion of the role of the social sciences and medical humanities in filling research gaps and strengthening regional capacities to respond to the grand challenges of climate change and environmental refugee issues. Given that climate change will have different impact on men and women, it is equally significant to capture gendered narratives from the study sites and support decision makers by critically examining adaptation frameworks that are not gender sensitive (Maluka 2013; Evertsen and Geest 2020).

The ways in which our research will add to the prevailing narrative of environmental refugees in the region are as follows: i) through the idea of refugee agency, expressed through their everyday struggle to access new livelihood opportunities, access healthcare facilities and maintain well-being; ii) by looking at the idea of ‘encompassment’ (Thomas 2000, Makwa 2015), where people reimagine their lost landscape in the new environment through storytelling, amnesia, songs and memories of migration; iii) by developing a transboundary comparison between Indian and Bangladesh environmental refugee migrant experiences with South Asian experiences while, at the same time, collectively examining the experience of refugees across the four case study countries. This research offers the opportunity for transregional work through case studies.

In recent debates on climate change and migration, the focus on the figure of ‘environmental refugees’ has given ground to a broader conception of the ‘climate–migration’ nexus. In particular, the idea that migration can represent a legitimate adaptation strategy has emerged strongly (Black et al., 2011, Foresight report 2011). This appears to be a positive development. However, political and normative implications of this evolution are still understudied. Our focus in the project, therefore, will be to draw on the intersectionality of migrant’s choices, livelihood stresses, gender preferences, kinship networks, and the health and well-being of communities. All these aspects play a role in the push and pull factors of migration and present a complicated story that goes beyond the linear narrative of climate- or nature-induced migration (Shah and Lerche, 2020).

Significance of the research

The significance of our research lies in addressing three fundamental issues. First, we aim to explore marginalised topics within migration research – internal migration and well-being issues – that have not received much attention and focus in recent times (Thumbé 2018). Second, we propose to document the life narratives of our interlocutors, who are invisible in official records, from an (emic) perspective: by developing comparative perspectives on migrants’ everyday experiences, giving agency to their voice-perceptions and narratives employing innovating methodology like ‘photo voice’, ‘digital diary’ and ‘collaborative’ action research. Third, we aim to examine the problem holistically, integrating ‘bottom-up’ participatory and ‘top-down’ policy perspectives by engaging with migrants’ perceptions as well as the vision of ‘policymakers’ and the ‘epistemic community’ working on climate change mitigation. Our investigation, therefore, focuses on a niche area of migration flow that looks at environmental refugees who

are internally displaced because of extreme weather and other stresses on livelihood that force them to migrate.

A review of the most relevant literature and how our research intersects with these studies

Our research will endeavour to contextualise migration studies in South Asia by putting forward the lived experiences of environmental refugees in four littoral Indian Ocean countries. By using the ‘aspirations-capabilities’ framework developed by Sen (1999) and Carling (2002), we will capture migrants’ agency and explore the intersectionality between gender, class, caste and ethnicity as important social and cultural variables that influence people’s capacity to migrate and adapt in different environments (Hess 2021). This can significantly influence policy and praxis of responding to the grand challenges posed by climate change and migration, which are often presented as a resilience strategy for disaster-affected communities. Instead, our research aims to tap into the moral universe of migrants who live ‘hyper precarious’ lives and are trying to build a sustainable living by exercising their ‘agency’ and ‘capabilities’ in destination sites (Maharjan et al., 2020).

The Bay of Bengal delta in India and Bangladesh, which also included small islands in the Sundarban Delta, have experienced several annual floods and super cyclones in the past decade; these have forced people to move out permanently, or what we know as forced displacement and short-term seasonal migration. People were forced to seek occupation outside their villages, often against their will, as shown by a recent survey by Mallick et al. (2017) in Bangladeshi villages. Saha (2017) reported that in Southwest Bangladesh, food insecurity led to out-migration from villages and favourable income outside the village created a sense of migrants’ ability to adapt to the disaster. He refers to migration as a key adaptive response to environmental events, as evidenced by the improved economic condition of a substantial number of migrated households. Similar outcomes have been reported by a study conducted by Subhani and Ahmed (2019) in Bangladesh. They used a mixed methods approach to examine the recovery from the 2009 Aila cyclone for households who migrated out of their villages and who did not. While a counter discourse has been produced by scholars like Mallick (2010), who argue that the role of climate change in population displacement is not a linear relationship of cause and effect, of environmental ‘push’ and economic ‘pull’, Brown (2008) stated that migration, even forced migration, is not usually just a product of an environmental ‘push’ from a climate process, like sea level rise. A socio-economic study on migrant communities following the Aila and Sidr cyclones has shown how migrants faced downward social mobility once they moved to urban spaces for work, caused by what the author refers to as ‘climate-induced unsuccessful migration’ (Sams, 2019:147) or maladaptation, while Barenzen et al. (2019:1) postulated that climate migration is, in its first instance, economically induced, with environmental stress contributing as a secondary factor. However, the central problem of such historical–structural views is that they leave hardly any room for human agency and transregional/ transboundary understanding of the issue, which we intend to explore through our research.

Budget

Honorarium for two researchers	INR 2000x 9months x2 =36000
Fieldwork travel in India and Bangladesh Sundarbans	INR 25000
Food and lodging	INR 30000
A project workshop	INR 9000
Total	INR 100000

Activities (Months June 2022 to March 2023)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.1 Organise workshops with local stakeholders to discuss project goals									
1.2 Rapport building activities with interlocuters									
4.1 Primary data collection through photo voice, Key Informant Interview, Focus Group Discussion, telephone interview.									
5.1. Primary data analysis and interpretation									
6.2 Preparation of the final project report									

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