

Building Climate Resilience Through Migration in Thailand

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Thailand is particularly vulnerable to droughts and floods. The country has experienced a number of extreme-weather events in recent years, including severe flooding in 2011 that inundated Bangkok and large tracts of central Thailand for weeks, as well as an extended period of drought in 2015–2016 that was the worst seen in decades.

These types of events affect the country as a whole, but rural, agrarian communities in the poor and dry Northeast region can be considered particularly lacking in resilience to environmental changes. There is little evidence to date that climate or environmental factors clearly and directly prompt migration, however environmental and especially climate risks play important roles in destabilizing rural agricultural livelihoods. These risks, in turn, increase the likelihood for some household members to migrate, as it becomes increasingly difficult for them to earn a living. This is a significant consideration, given that about 30 percent of the Thai workforce is employed in an agricultural sector dominated by small-scale family farms. But instead of merely an escape route, migration can also be a way for households to proactively guard themselves against increasing effects of climate change on local environments and livelihoods.

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Worldwide, migration amid environmental change is today discussed primarily in the context of crises, conflicts, and humanitarian disasters, and is considered to be something negative that should be prevented. The phenomenon is framed as a sign of failed adaptation, with the migrants themselves usually portrayed as passive victims. This narrative is often adopted by the media, politicians, and practitioners who claim as many as 1.5 billion people could be forced to migrate by 2050 due to climate change.

However, the conversation is largely decoupled from state-of-the-art social science findings. There is widespread agreement in academia that these apocalyptic numbers of future “climate refugees” lack sound methodological and empirical basis, and must be regarded as guesstimates at best. There is also a lack of recognition that migration itself, whether internal or international, can be a successful adaptation. Furthermore, migration is a normal part of life for many people, with an estimated 272 million international migrants and more than 760 million internal migrants worldwide as of 2019. Environmental change, therefore, always occurs within a broader context of populations already migrating for one reason or another.

The crucial question, then, is under what circumstances does migration have the potential to generate positive effects for coping with and adapting to environmental change? This article, partly based on a 2019 policy brief for the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, offers perspectives from Thailand. It analyzes interactions between environmental change and migration and offers the notion of “translocal resilience” as a useful framework for evaluating ways that individuals, households, and communities can employ migration to offset some of the hazards of a changing environment.

Success or Failure: The Many Facets of Mobility and Immobility in the Context of Climate Change

While environmental factors certainly influence peoples’ livelihoods and their decisions to migrate, migration in turn also influences how those exposed to climatic and environmental risks are able to cope with and adapt to them.

The case of Pom is illustrative. At age 19, he left his village in Northeast Thailand and moved to Singapore to find work. During 21 years there, he rose from construction worker to foreman, sending the equivalent of 1,500 euros

per month to his family in Thailand. Pom used the money to buy additional land in Thailand and, upon return, also relied on the business acumen he had developed abroad to realize various commercial ventures there, including a pig farm and a karaoke bar.

Pom's decision to migrate turned out to be a profitable one for him and his family, and it cut against the prevailing and longstanding perception of migration amid environmental risk as a last resort for ailing communities.

The Complexity of Migration

Numerous empirical studies show there is no direct, monocausal connection between environmental or climate change and migration. Human mobility is extremely complex. The impact of environmental or climate change on migration is mediated through economic, social, and political processes. Migration should therefore be acknowledged as just one of the manifold livelihoods strategies households adopt to deal with stresses that emerge from environmental change.

Against this background, analysts' interpretation and assessment of mobility amid climate change can vary greatly. On the one hand, migration can be an indicator of a household or community's failure or inability to deal with risks. For example, a drought can lead to the complete collapse of an agricultural system, meaning that tried-and-tested coping strategies such as granaries and adaptation measures such as developing alternative local sources of income have failed. In this case, migration may be the last resort to ensure survival. On the other hand, as in Pom's case, migration can itself be a successful adaptation. In the onset of a drought situation, for instance, some households could send a member to work in the city; the urban worker then sends money back to the household to compensate for crop failures. In this case, migration would be successfully employed to manage a crisis.

It is important to note that not everyone who is affected by events such as droughts has to, wants to, or is able to migrate. Like migration, immobility cuts both ways. On the one hand, immobility can be a sign of great vulnerability and unsuccessful adaptation, such as when a household's in-situ coping mechanisms fail but people lack the necessary skills and resources to move. On the other hand, immobility can also be a sign of resilience, such as for households able to cope with the effects of environmental stresses locally,

with available resources. These households do not need to be mobile in order to ensure their survival.

These explanations show that neither mobility nor immobility in the context of climate change can per se be interpreted as success or failure. Instead of framing migration as either a failure or success, it makes more sense to consider the degree of freedom that individuals and households have in their decision whether or not to migrate, in order to improve their livelihood situation or cope with or adapt to environmental change.

Conceptualizing the Contribution of Migration: From Migration as Adaptation to “Translocal Resilience”

The positive view of migration as a potentially successful way to deal with stress situations amid climate change has been increasingly recognized in academic and political debate, although this perspective receded somewhat following Europe’s migration and refugee crisis of 2015–2016. To describe migration’s potential in this context, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) uses the phrase „migration as adaptation.“ Analysis revolves primarily around the role of remittances, in the form of financial remittances as well as the transfer of knowledge and ideas, and is centered on managing, facilitating, and regulating migration in the context of risks. This discussion makes an important contribution to balancing the widespread but one-sided, negative view of migration in the context of climate change.

The notion of “translocal resilience” offers a conceptual framework that does more justice to the complexity of the nexus of migration and climate change. It observes that, regardless of expected climatic change, migration is a global social phenomenon and will continue to be an important driver and aspect of global change. Migration, in other words, is not something extraordinary that only occurs in crisis situations, but is already an integral part of the livelihoods of many people and households worldwide. A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the environment and migration therefore requires a consideration of mobility, especially in the context of vulnerable livelihood systems. People’s everyday vulnerability—not only that brought about by extreme situations or in response to extraordinary events—is of central importance.

Moreover, migration is not a process that begins with one's departure from her or her region of origin and ends with arrival somewhere else. Migration connects people, changes places, enables the permanent exchange of knowledge and resources, and thus creates a networked translocal social space. It intensifies the relationships between different places, in turn strengthening the ability of individuals and households to deal with climate-related risks and maintain or increase their wellbeing.

Translocal resilience can therefore be defined as the ability of individuals, households, and communities to uphold connections and navigate across distances in order to increase their ability to withstand shocks and hazards associated with climate and environmental change. A better understanding and, possibly, strengthening of this concept thus requires a focus on the interactions of the individuals, conditions, and connections that link migrants in places of destinations and households at places of origin, including social and economic elements. Considering the structures of these constellations and the agencies of individuals involved helps to reveal and understand conditions of translocal resilience.

Strengthening Resilience Through Translocal Relations: Practical Examples From Thailand

Resilience therefore depends on the constellation of characteristics of migrants at places of destination and households at places of origin, their multilevel embedding in social, economic, and other structures at the respective places, and the strength and dynamics of the relations and interactions between them. Examples from the authors' field research in Thailand illustrate qualities of translocal resilience, showing under which conditions migration can contribute to enhanced resilience against environmental risks.

As noted earlier, the authors could not find cases in Northeast Thailand in which migration could be directly attributed to climate factors. Yet the destabilization of agricultural livelihoods because of changing climate increases the likelihood of migration by some family members. Thus, regardless of the immediate drivers, rural migration—both to other parts of Thailand and internationally—and the ensuing connections between migrants and their origin households can help the households enhance resilience against current and future environmental risks.

Characteristics of migrants and their origin households, their embedding in community and larger structures, and their relations and interactions with each other can lead to dramatically different outcomes. However, the authors have noted some general patterns, among them that the socio-economic status of the household at the place of origin is highly influential. It affects whether there are the resources for migration, either internationally or internally; the migrant's education and skills; and the household's dependence on regular remittances, which affects what demands the migrants perceive.

Precarity of migrants' place-of-origin household are thus often mirrored in working and living conditions at destination. Lamai, a 42-year-old female internal migrant who worked in a garment factory in Bangkok, came from a highly indebted, poor farming household that lacked income sources and depended on her remittances. Lamai also had to repay an informal, high-interest loan in the city that she took to pay down her family's debts. She could not afford to take risks to improve her and her family's situation and did not see any option other than continuing to make ends meet for both her urban and rural family. These kinds of situations tend to lead to stagnation and a "coping trap", instead of adaptations and improved livelihoods.

Inversely, the case of Phichit, a 40-year-old man who worked at a Bangkok factory, shows how better resource endowment paves the way for more positive development. Phichit came from a better-off rural farming household and finished secondary school before moving to Bangkok. As his household of origin did not need remittances, he could save enough to afford a bachelor's degree, which in turn enabled him to obtain a better paid and permanent position at the factory. He invested in his parents' farm, building ponds and acquiring livestock, and during visits helped villagers write funding proposals and development activities.

Social and Financial Remittances Combined

The density and quality of migrants' social relations depend on a range of factors, including generational and filial structures, gender relations, and the embedding and positionality at their places of destination. For Thai laborers migrating to Singapore, for example, exclusionary and segregationist policies at destination can contribute to them retaining a strong orientation towards families and rural origin villages in Thailand.

Translocal interactions between migrants and their households of origin are epitomized in different types of remittances. In addition to financial transfers that can help sustain household income and buffer against losses, migrants may transmit social remittances in the form of ideas, skills, innovations, and changed perceptions of risks and opportunities, which play an important role in households' resilience. Studying the experiences of these Thai migrants in Singapore, Simon Alexander Peth and Patrick Sakdapolrak show that a combination of financial and social remittances leads to transformation and changed practices, while financial remittances alone tend to maintain the status quo, and social remittances such as new ideas can often get "lost" without sufficient material support.

Pom, mentioned earlier in the article, represents one example of the successful strengthening of social resilience through a combination of financial and social remittances. The income and skills that he acquired through migration enabled him and his family to diversify their income base, making them less vulnerable to environmental and climatic risks.

However, in many cases migrants' working conditions are so different from their places of origin that their skills, knowledge, and ideas cannot easily be transferred. This was the case with Thong, a 29-year-old return migrant from Northeast Thailand who worked in industrialized farming in Israel for five years. The drip irrigation scheme he operated in Israel depended on sophisticated computer technology; even with all the necessary technical skills to set up such a system in Thailand, he simply could not afford the technology and hardware.

Implications for Policy

This analysis shows that migration can and does contribute to increased resilience that can be beneficial in the event that migrants' households are exposed to greater climate risks. The extent to which that is the case depends on a number of conditions and factors both at places of origin and destination, most of which offer entry points for policy action beyond traditional migration management. Among these factors are the socioeconomic situations of households of origin and migrants' ability to send financial remittances and gain knowledge, skills, and ideas to better cope with or adapt to risk. As one example of possible policy moves, rural and agricultural development

organizations could offer investment training to households with migrants, remotely involve absentee migrants in local activities and community development strategies, or view return migrants as potential agents of change and offer appropriate financial or organizational support.

Whether migrants can send both financial and social remittances to a significant extent also depends on a range of policy areas. Migration policy certainly plays a role here, especially for international migration, as legal barriers drive the financial and organizational costs that can be decisive for an individual's ability to afford to migrate. But other policy fields are also highly relevant, shaping for example migrants' working conditions, payment and social insurance schemes, health care, housing conditions, and education for them and their children. It is important to also acknowledge the special vulnerabilities of migrants on their journey and often also in their destinations.

The debate on environmental migration should be re-centered from its current focus on national security and instead prioritize human security. It should aim to strengthen the capacity of those who are vulnerable to adapt and increase their freedom to decide whether to move or to stay. However, this seems difficult at present, given the polarization around migration in many places around the world. On the one hand, the environment-migration nexus has become a topic of concern in recent years and was mentioned in the United Nations-backed Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. On the other hand, the policy debate in a number of countries has been increasingly dominated by nationalistic sentiments. Together with COVID-19-related mobility restrictions, it remains an open question whether wealthy countries such as the United States or those in Europe would welcome immigrants to enhance resilience against climate risks.

In this light, a translocal resilience perspective could contribute to a more nuanced view of the nexus of environmental change and migration. Through the multiple entry points for policy that translocal resilience opens up, it broadens the options for policymakers to concretely support migration as a strategy of adaptation.

Migration not as Failure to Adapt, but Part of Adaptation

Climate change already is increasingly threatening human security, especially among vulnerable populations in the global South. Mobility patterns are being influenced and changed. However, the relationship between environmental change and migration is more complex and multilayered than simple representations suggest. Migration in this context should not be seen only as the result of a household's failure to adapt, but can also be part and parcel of the process of successful adaptation.

Apart from simply better managing migration and instead of deterring it, as many countries have prioritized, there is room to improve migrants' situations and instead of deterring it, as many countries have prioritized, there is room to improve migrants' situations and enhance their ability to contribute to climate resilience for themselves and their families. Doing so means going beyond managing migration to better managing translocality.

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