Climate-Induced Migration: A Growing Crisis in South Asia

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Background

People have been migrating over the years for various reasons. An essential aspect of human history, there have been several factors responsible for migration that concern socioeconomic, political and environmental aspects. Migration has been influenced by trade, conquests, and resource shortages since the dawn of civilization in places like Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Nile Basin. As individuals relocated to urban areas in search of work and stability during the industrial era, economic and political migration took centre stage as the phenomena developed over time. The world's cultural and demographic landscapes have been significantly shaped by the great migrations of the past, such as the Silk Road trades and the Indo-Aryan movements.

Migration can be divided into voluntary and forced movements, with the latter often driven by factors such as conflict or environmental degradation. Environmental migration occurs when individuals are forced to leave due to natural disasters or long-term climate change impacts. This issue is particularly pressing in South Asia, home to 25% of the world's population. Both sudden-onset events and slow-onset changes are altering South Asia's socio-economic landscape. As Bhatta and Aggarwal (2015) and Bhattacharyya and Werz (2012) highlight, environmental stressors are key determinants of migration patterns, compelling people to relocate in search of stability and security. While some displaced individuals eventually return to their homes, many face long-term resettlement challenges, often categorized as 'distress migrations.' In South Asia, climate change has caused significant internal displacement, with over 40 million people migrating to their countries due to climate-related factors. This represents about 1.8% of the population. Projections indicate that by 2050, more than 62 million people could be displaced if current trends persist.

Consequences of Climate-Induced Migration

Climate-induced migration has consequences which impact both displaced individuals and the receiving areas, source and destination areas driven by both pull and push factors. There is a debate with regard to whether migration is a coping strategy or

a strategy to adapt to the consequences of climate change. Both factors are underplay but depends on the underlying circumstances for migration.

For instance, Bangladesh, with a population of over 174 million, faces internal migration due to climate change. It has affected 50 million people living in the coastal areas as climate-induced displacement is caused by riverbank erosion and rising tides. The mass migration led to overcrowded cities, social conflicts and limited resources. In Nepal, migration caused by climate-related disasters suggested that by 2025, 1.3 million would be displaced. Unemployment and several economic factors have always been the primary causes of migration but at present climate change is now accelerating the pace of migration due to natural disasters. Rural-to-urban migration is particularly prevalent, leading to a loss of human capital in agricultural areas and straining urban infrastructure. In India, floods, cyclones and other weather conditions are leading to climate-induced migration. Between 1990 and 2016, 235 square kilometres of land were lost due to coastal erosion, which forced residents to relocate to safer places. According to a report by ActionAid and the Climate Action Network South Asia, up to 45 million people in India may be displaced by climate emergencies by 2050, which is three times as many people as are already fleeing because of extreme weather events.

In most cases, migrants dislocated are affected negatively by experiences of exploitation and marginalization. Tangible and non-tangible impacts are reported in many cases and non-tangible impacts with regards to the impacts on the social fabric of the community and its long-term implications on societies and its culture are less known and documented besides other factors.

In coal mining regions in India whenever mines close down or are abandoned owing to exhaustion or nonviability, it causes social disruptions and economic crises. Particularly the informal workforce and their families, landless or marginal farmers and induced segments get caught in the cycle of vulnerability in the absence of alternative skills, economic choices and resources to fall back on. Those who used to depend on agricultural land find it difficult to get reasonable returns as the groundwater gets impacted due to excessive mining, particularly due to open cast mining which affects the top soil and the soil fertility. Poor air quality, carbon emissions and coal dust often result in lower crop yield and reduced market response/income. All these factors compel many to migrate to other locations, and towns in search of livelihoods. Moreover, the degree of risks gets compounded when coal-producing geographies like Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh face increasing water risks due to droughts. Building synergies and co-creating holistic solutions is the only answer.

Migration brought on by climate change poses several intricate problems, especially for displaced people. Migrants experience loss of livelihoods, social fragmentation, increased susceptibility to health hazards, economic instability and cultural deterioration.

Adaptation Strategies to Address Climate-Induced Migration

To address these issues, governments must implement comprehensive adaptation programs that promote long-term resilience while also reducing the effects of relocation. By encouraging sustainable lifestyles through skill-building programs, climate-resilient farming methods, and alternate sources of income, migration can be considerably decreased. Communities can adapt to environmental changes and stay in place by diversifying their sources of income and boosting local economies. Furthermore, it is crucial to adopt norms that acknowledge migration brought on by climate change and protect migrants' legal rights. This involves providing channels for social integration, resettlement, and sufficient security. For managing the effects of migration and fostering cross-border resilience, regional collaboration and international assistance in the form of funds, resources, and knowledge exchange are required.

A Call for Action: Directions for the Future

In the end, we conclude that addressing migration requires both short-term and long-term fixes. Comprehensive adaptation techniques are more important than ever as environmental changes continue to affect communities throughout South Asia. From establishing early warning systems and encouraging sustainable livelihoods to guarantee legal protection and necessary services for displaced persons, governments must act pro-actively. Building local communities' resilience, improving infrastructure, and incorporating climate change adaptation into national development plans must be priorities. South Asian nations may lessen the effects of climate displacement and increase their resilience for the future by resolving the underlying causes of migration, such as loss of livelihoods, insufficient resources, and environmental degradation thereby creating opportunities. Effective management of climate-induced migration will depend on international cooperation, pooled resources, and coherent policies. The financial and technical support required to develop adaptive capability will come from stronger regional alliances and help from international organizations. Ultimately, it will take consistent dedication, concerted effort, and an emphasis on long-term solutions to protect the welfare of vulnerable groups, and provide fair access to resources and opportunities thereby advancing sustainable development. ■

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