

COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary



Alan Gamlen, COMPAS Photo Competition 2008

How will climate change impact on migration?



Photo: Allan Findlay

The value of identifying the drivers of migration systems

Several commentators have suggested that climate change will result in very significant migration flows (Myers, 2002; Stern, 2007). This briefing argues that it is unhelpful to estimate the populations of areas vulnerable to climate change as a basis for estimating future environmentally-linked migration. Instead it argues that a suitable starting point is to focus initially on how current migration regimes operate. It examines seven drivers of mobility that need to be understood if the impact of climate change on human mobility is to be discussed in an informed manner. The seven drivers are: immobility, short distance moves predominate, migration as just one mobility response, individual migrants as part of wider households, the poorest are least mobile, international mobility is mainly to neighbouring countries, and social networks shape mobility.

Policy makers should focus on the problem of immobility in the face of increasing environmental hazards

A review of evidence-based research on environmentally-linked migration (by comparison with what is sometimes termed 'the standard' environmental approach) lends no support to suggestions that environmental change is resulting in mass migration from the global south to the global

north. Different types of environmental hazard are shown to stimulate different forms of mobility. The socially most vulnerable groups consistently encounter the greatest difficulties in moving in response to environmental hazards. Rootedness and immobility are dominant features even where adverse environmental circumstances prevail. These points will be illustrated during the briefing in relation to the researcher's analysis of human mobility in African countries currently affected by extreme food insecurity. Rather than being concerned with forced environmental mobility, perhaps a greater concern for policy makers should therefore be the inability of the most vulnerable populations to adapt to climate change in situ. The resistance of wealthier nations to consider migration as an adaptation strategy is unfortunate.

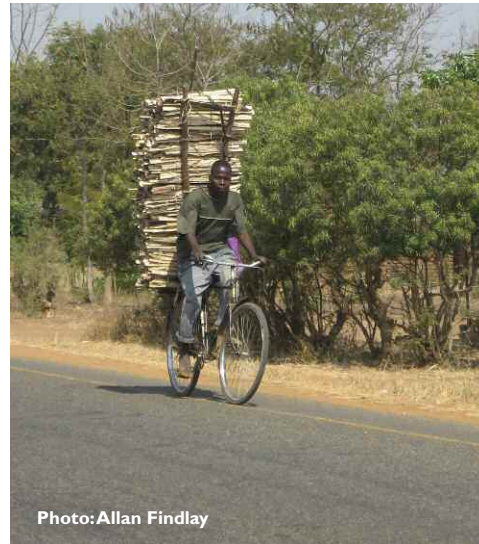


Photo: Allan Findlay

Where movement occurs in relation to environmental change, it is most likely to be short distance, with decisions about destinations being strongly influenced by the social networks of those involved. As a result of existing social and economic systems, the most likely destinations for environmental migrants will be the cities of the global south. The movement will often be by only one



member of a household, in the first instance at least. It is to these cities in the global south that policy makers should direct their attention in relation to the challenges presented by environmental migrants. Moreover, existing migration regimes suggest that livelihood insecurity and other socio-economic factors may encourage an increased flow of people to these destinations in the global south over the next 50 years. It seems probable therefore that migration will move people towards vulnerable environments in the global south rather than towards the wealthier states of the global north over the next few decades.



Photo: Allan Findlay

How will human mobility impact on Europe in an era of environmental change?

In the second part of the briefing, attention turns to Europe in general, and to the UK in particular. In the next few decades it is expected that any significant environmentally-linked migration is likely to be associated with intra-European migration of people moving away from eastern and southern Europe and towards northern Europe. Expert views on why this is the case will be discussed. In addition, the results of a Bayesian forecast of migration will be presented that suggests that the UK is unlikely to be a major destination for environmental migration over the next 50 years.

Finally, the briefing hints at the need to use migration forecasts in a different way from in the past. A wise use of migration forecasts would involve more attention being given to planning for a range of different and uncertain migration futures. A pre-occupation with forecasting a single number of environmental movers has diverted attention from thinking more creatively about uncertainty, and about how to plan for the multiple and complex ways in which environmental migration may impact on destination regions.

Highlights

- Migration theory can advance understanding of the destinations of current environmental mobility.
- There is little evidence to support claims of mass environmental migration to the global north.
- Forced or voluntary immobility in environmentally vulnerable areas may be a serious problem.
- Many environmental moves will be by individuals and not whole households.
- In Europe most environmentally driven mobility will be from within the European Union.
- The pre-occupation with forecasting a ball park number of environmental migrants is a mistake.
- Policy makers should prepare for a range of different and uncertain migration futures.



Photo: Allan Findlay

About the speaker: Allan Findlay is Professor of Population Geography at the University of St Andrews. He co-leads the migration strand of the Economic and Social Research Council's Centre for Population Change. He is founder and co-editor of the journal *Population, Space and Place*.



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