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Environment, Climate Change and Migration

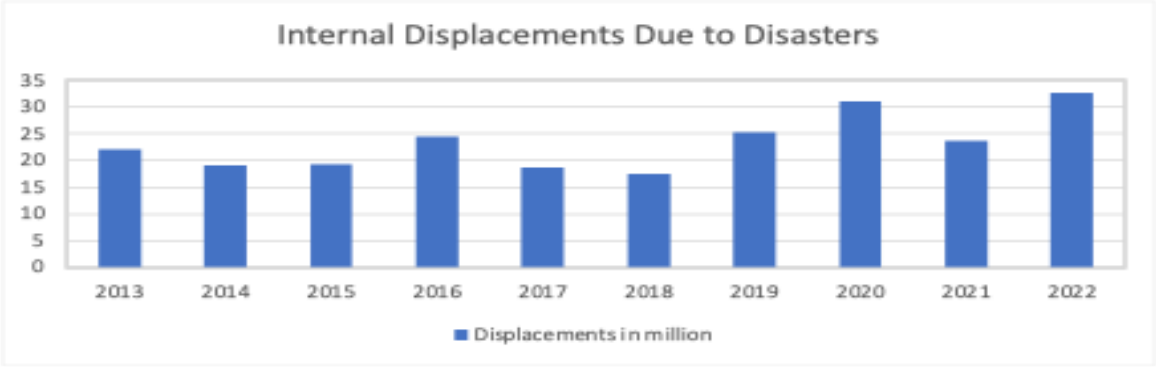
Is climate change potentially affecting the patterns of migration across the globe? In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that over the period of years climate change would speed up the pace and outcomes of migration around the world. After more than two decades, in 2016, United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants declared climate change as one of the key drivers of migration across the globe. However, the relationship between extreme climatic events and migration patterns is very complicated. Debates about the impacts of climate change on migration revolve around many interrelated concepts such as frequency of the climate related events, intensity of the events viz slow-onset or fast-onset, direct and indirect effects of such events, migration outcomes such as voluntary or involuntary, short term and long term migrations, short distance and long distance and local or international. It has been pointed out by many scholars that in order to understand the relationship between climate change and migration, it is necessary to understand the impact of climate-related events such as disasters on the other drivers of migration, e.g. political and economic instability, existing inequalities, mechanism of social protection.

Due to its complexity and multifaceted nature, there is no universally accepted definition of migration driven by environmental factors. In 2007, the International Organization for Migration provided the following broad working definition for environmental migration:

"Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad"[i].

The number of people migrating due to environment and climate change is expected to rise substantially in the coming years. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report (2024), extreme weather is considered to be the top risk for human beings in 2024[ii]. The World Bank estimates that climate change will create up to 86 million additional migrants in sub-Saharan Africa, 40 million in South Asia and 17 million in Latin America, as agricultural conditions and water availability deteriorate across these regions; leading to a total of 143 million climate migrants by 2050 [iii].

The recent Global Report on Internal Displacement, produced by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2023), provides statistics regarding internal displacement of people due to various factors across the world [iv]. The Report indicates that out of total 60.9 million people who were internally displaced in 2022, 53% of them were displaced due to disasters. This is a 45 per cent increase in the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to disasters compared to 2021. The Report further shows that by the end of December 2022, at least 8.7 million people in 88 countries and territories were living in internal displacement as a result of disasters that happened not only in 2022 but also in previous years.



Source: IDMC 2023

Situation in Pakistan

Pakistan is one of the worst-affected countries due to climate change driving millions of people to leave their homelands and migrate to safer places. According to the Global Climate Risk Index (2021), Pakistan is ranked as the eighth most vulnerable country to long-term climate risk in the world .The data of IDMC (2023) reveal that in 2022 Pakistan had the highest number of internal displacements in the world due to disasters as 8.2 million people were displaced in the country during the year—constituting 25 per cent of internal displacements due to disasters globally in the year 2022 and the world's largest displacement in a decade.

Pakistan is facing perilous consequences of climate change. Annual loss suffered by different sectors such as agriculture, livestock, forestry and water availability amounts to billions of USD per annum. Extreme effects of climate change in Pakistan coupled with its specific circumstances such as youth bulge, rampant and unplanned urbanization, political instability, social polarization, skewed development priorities, socio-economic melt down and political neglect may represent the following scenarios of migration patterns.

a) Climate-induced shocks may force the people to long distance domestic migration, especially from rural to urban areas.

b) Rural-urban migration will be high in the areas proportion to severity of low-onset of climate related events such as droughts, land erosion and degradation and temperature variations.

c) The extreme weather patterns are likely to affect the patterns of seasonal labour migration as well.

d) As the long-distance migration involves considerable financial resources, skills and information, international migration will take place dominantly from urban households as they have sufficient resources.

However, the migration outcomes are not a linear process. Climate-related events coupled with concurrent and pre-existing socio-economic and cultural factors affect the extent to which migration occurs. It also depends upon the vulnerability and adaptation capacity of the households, their desired destinations and expectations and capability of the households. Moreover, earlier research in Pakistan shows that migration driven by climate change is a gendered phenomenon as it disproportionately affects women and girls particularly in terms of health, education, participation in socioeconomic activities, and gender-based violence[v].

Despite its extreme vulnerability to climate change and disasters leading to mass displacements of people, still this particular aspect of migration is a little studied issue in Pakistan. With struggling economy and meager resources, recovery or resettlement of millions of displaced persons remains a daunting task. There have been reports of exploitation and trafficking of the vulnerable people who have been displaced due to natural disasters[vi]. There is a need to collect and compile data to better understand the nexus between climate change and migration in Pakistan to develop some inclusive policy interventions to address this particular form of migration and related issues that largely remain invisible in the existing policy discourse on climate change and associated risks.

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[i] https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/about_iom/en/council/94/MC_INF_288.pdf

[ii] https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/in-full/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=ppc&utm_campaign=globalrisks&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAq4KuBhA6EiwArMAw1J8JnbarCZ3jzGWBzKblWDXhmupGyMfB3J-p92gyYL-f0-M44rajoxoCX2YQAvD_BwE

[iii] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/2be91c76-d023-5809-9c94-d41b71c25635

[iv] https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental_migration_and_statistics

[v] https://sdpi.org/assets/lib/uploads/uploads/2021/07/Climate-Induced-Migration-Among-Women.pdf

[vi] http://www.humanrights.asia/news/forwarded-news/AHRC-FAT-043-2010/

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