



Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change in Sub-Saharan Africa – Trends and Basic Recommendations for Development Cooperation

Summary

This paper provides an overview of what is actually known about the relationship between climate change and human mobility in West, East and Southern Africa – the most affected regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. Although there is a general lack of data on “climate migration”, trends can be deduced from the growing number of case studies and research projects. This paper also formulates some recommendations for German and European development policies for addressing “climate migration” in Africa.

The adverse effects of climate change in the three regions are mainly linked to increasing rainfall variability and a higher frequency or intensity of floods and droughts. These effects are a major challenge for human security. The consequences for human mobility, which range from forced displacement to circular labour migration, are embedded in a complex and very context-specific set of political, social, economic, cultural and ecological factors. Due to generally fragile contexts and armed conflicts, the risk of forced displacement in the context of climate change is probably the highest in the Horn of Africa. In all three regions, many households affected by climate change can be considered “trapped” – mobility is not an option for them at all. If mobility is possible, it often takes the form of individual and circular labour migration. Under favourable circumstance (e.g. in the absence of labour exploitation), money earned by migrants might help their households to compensate or at least mitigate the losses induced by climate change (“migration as adaptation”).

The ideal political response towards human mobility in the context of climate change is to avoid forced displacement, to maximise positive mechanisms of migration and to minimise negative aspects like labour exploitation. This demands a multi-sectoral and multi-level policy approach.

To achieve this, we have formulated the following recommendations:

- Capacity building and bridging gaps between different policy fields. Dialogue processes between the different (policy) fields and communities need to be fostered. As concepts of migration differ significantly between relevant policy fields, a common understanding of the challenges related to human (im-)mobility in the context of climate change has to be created.
- Multi-level governance and local empowerment. Open policy spaces should be established and more resources mobilised to strengthen vulnerable groups and communities, which have so far only played a marginal role in relevant policy processes.
- Collection of data and best practices. The creation of an appropriate database and documentation of best practices regarding the complex problems of local vulnerability and the role of human mobility is absolutely essential for further action. There are severe gaps in this regard.

Introduction

Climate scientists attest that Sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed, and continues to witness, long periods of desiccation and climate variability, namely droughts, floods, erratic rainfalls and storms. Despite the fact that recurring periods of droughts and generally high climate variability have culminated in the continuing adaptation of environmental and social systems, the continent remains highly vulnerable to the consequences of global climatic change (see Figure 1), with potentially dire implications for food security, water availability, health and socio-economic development. These negative impacts of climate change and related shocks are particularly severe in West, East and Southern Africa.

Human mobility, which ranges from forced displacement to circular or permanent forms of (labour) migration, has traditionally been part of the social organisation and experiences of people across Africa. Many Europeans fear that the adverse effects of climate change might create new, probably unprecedented, waves of “climate refugees” seeking their way to Europe. Since most refugees and migrants move within Africa rather than to destinations outside the continent, African governments and societies are also concerned about potentially unmanageable consequences.

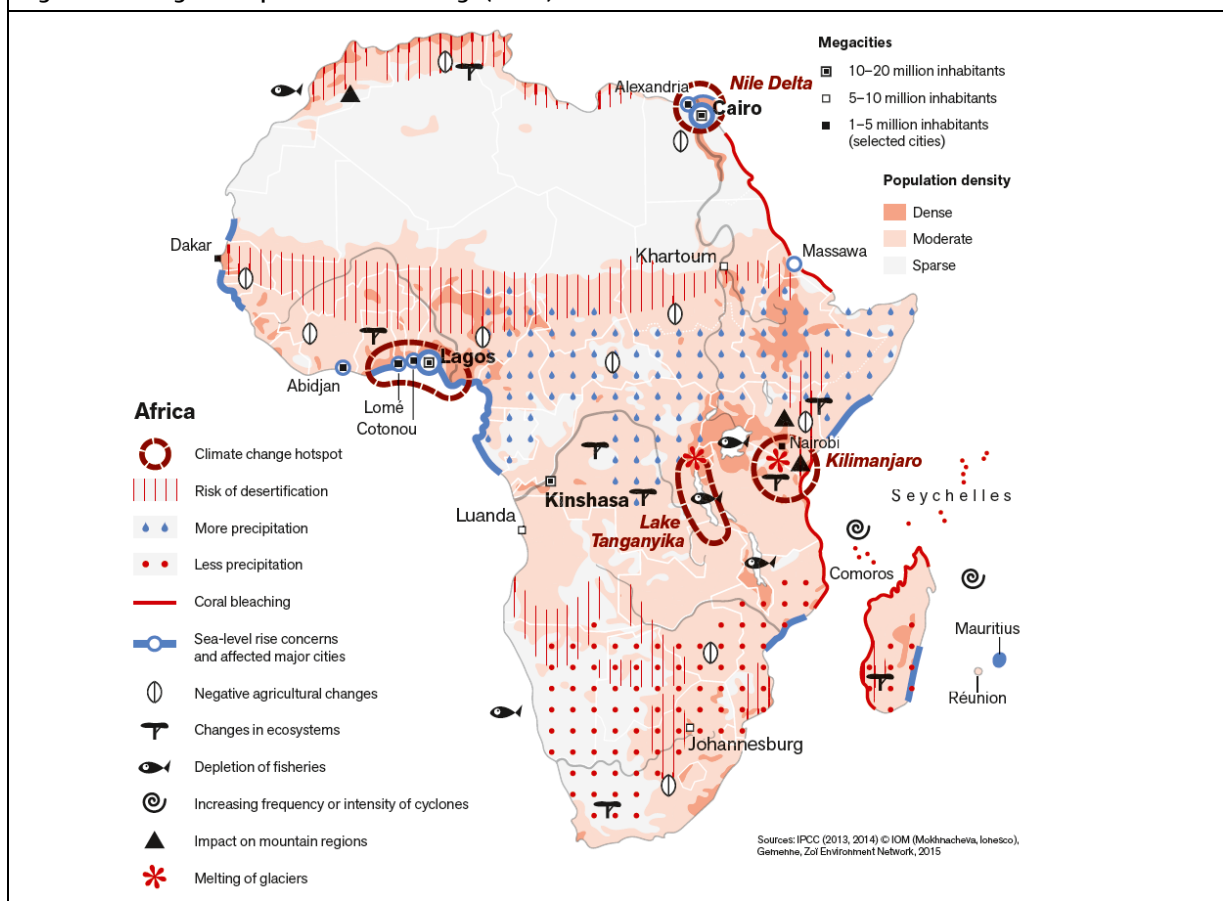
But what do we actually know about the relationship between climate change and human mobility in vulnerable regions in West, East and Southern Africa? What recommendations can be formulated for German and European development policies to address “climate migration” in Africa? This briefing paper provides an overview of insights gained through academic research on the linkages between climate change and human mobility in West, East and Southern Africa, the policy challenges it presents, and policy options for development cooperation.

Impact of (increasing) rainfall variability, drought and floods on human mobility

Although the data situation on human mobility in many areas is still rather poor, there is a growing body of case studies on the impacts of global warming on human mobility. Based on this literature, a number of observations for West, East and Southern Africa can be made.

All three regions are experiencing considerable changes in their climatic and environmental conditions, with adverse impacts on their societies. Climate scientists have identified an increase in rainfall variability (in particular in the arid and semi-arid areas of the greater Sahel), defined by the degree to which rainfall amounts vary across an area or through time.

Figure 1: The regional impacts of climate change (Africa)



Map extracted from Ionesco, D., Mokhnacheva, D., & Gemenne, F. (2017) *The Atlas of Environmental Migration*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 63. © IOM (Mokhnacheva, Ionesco), Gemenne, Zoi Environment Network, 2015. Sources: IPCC, 2013, 2014.

The increasingly unpredictable start of the rainy season, the early cessation of rainfall, prolonged intra-seasonal dry spells, and the increasingly heavy rainfall events are all relevant to rain-fed farming systems. In Southern Africa, annual mean rainfall is expected to decrease, while at the same time an increase in more erratic rainfall in all three regions is projected. These developing agro-climatic dynamics are persistently posing threats to food and livelihood security, as crop failure and declining yields affect staple foods such as maize, millet and sorghum. As the reliance on rain-fed agriculture is generally high in all regions, smallholder farmers are being forced to diversify their income. Studies report an intensification of circular and seasonal migration as an important coping or adaptation strategy.

The observed and projected increase in intense rainfall is accompanied by flash floods, riverine floods and floods caused by cyclone activity in coastal areas. In the East African highlands, flash floods repeatedly destroy settlements and agricultural areas, often displacing farmers (temporarily but also permanently). In the East African lowlands, large-scale riverine floods in semi-arid and arid lands mainly affect and displace pastoralists who practise flood-recession agriculture, but also repeatedly threaten urban dwellers (e.g. in Addis Ababa). In Southern Africa, larger land areas in extensive river basins and low-elevation coastal zones (in particular in South-East Africa and Madagascar) are hit by floods over and over again, leading to temporary but also permanent migration. Flood events related to sea-level rise also increasingly affect coastal communities and major cities such as Lagos, Accra and Mombasa all around the African coastline. Combined with urban mismanagement, this also increases migration within coastal regions.

In East Africa, in particular, studies reveal that drought cycles have become shorter, more frequent and intense due to global climate change and environmental degradation. But in all regions, displacement or temporary relocation due to droughts pastoralists and semi-pastoralists are the foremost affected. Displaced pastoralists may be forced to become sedentary, settling along rivers to water their cattle, which in turn increases their vulnerability to floods. Or they may migrate to cities. As a consequence of more intense periods of droughts (in particular in Southern Africa), people leave drought-affected areas and migrate permanently. But in the context of both floods and droughts, circular labour mobility (both rural–urban and rural–rural) is a common reaction in all three regions (see below).

While environmental changes in and by themselves are important, both the process of human mobility in the context of climate change and the potential consequences are highly embedded and dependent on a complex set of political, social, economic, cultural and ecological factors. This is why, for example, the risk of forced displacement in the context of climate change is most pronounced in the Horn of Africa – with its generally fragile contexts and prolonged armed conflicts. And in such fragile contexts as the greater Lake Chad region, drought-induced water scarcity and associated

mobility leads to a higher probability of conflicts between farmers and pastoralists over scarce resources. In all three regions, many households affected by climate change are so poor that they do not have the necessary resources to move at all (so-called “trapped populations”).

There is, however, also the potential for “migration as adaptation” to climate change. In many cases, individual household members migrate for a period of time to earn money to remit in order to mitigate hardships faced by their families back home. But this is not an easy solution, as problems such as labour exploitation, lack of jobs, and harsh living and working conditions often undermine this positive potential of migration.

“Climate migration” in the policy sphere

Since climate change interacts with a myriad of other drivers, and both causes and effects of mobility operate at different levels, multi-sectoral and multi-level policy responses are necessary. However, what we observe is a general lack of interaction between climate and migration policy actors and institutions at all levels. Moreover, there is an underlying attitude that, as a rule, migration is regarded as something that is supposed to be prevented:

The treatment of the topic by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its members is telling in this regard. Although migration officially entered the realm of the international climate negotiations in 2010, and a Task Force on Displacement was established in 2015, the suggested long-term and shorter-term measures centre on preventing mobility by mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and providing alternatives to migration through adaptation measures for vulnerable groups. This is also common in other international policy sectors, processes or platforms relevant to “climate migration”, such as rural development. (Paragraph 14(f) of the Cancun Adaptation Framework (2010) invites the UNFCCC parties to “enhance understanding, coordination and cooperation with regard to climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation, where appropriate, at the national, regional and international levels”.)

Although since at least the 2000s the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR have been trying to raise awareness of “climate migration”, international migration policy institutions and actors have been reluctant to discuss concrete policy options. But the “Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” (adopted in late 2018) might not only harmonise the, so far, rather complex and fragmented architecture of global migration governance. It could also be the starting point for a more active approach to the climate–mobility nexus, as it calls, amongst other things, for strengthening “joint analysis and sharing of information to better map, understand, predict and address migration movements” in the context of environmental degradation and climate change.

The same can be stated for regional and national levels in Africa, for which integration of migration and climate policies

remains a remote target. For example, an analysis of national climate policies in Africa shows that migration is either not mentioned at all or is mentioned as something that ought to be prevented. This said, there are also some positive approaches in this regard: The Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA), a regional consultative process supported by IOM has established a Thematic Working Group (TWG) on “climate change, land degradation, desertification, environment and migration”. Another example is the not yet implemented National Migration Policy in Ghana, which regards migration in the context of environmental and climatic change as a strategic area for inter-sectoral/inter-ministerial collaboration.

A major obstacle is a lack of integration and poor capacities at the local level in the African context (and beyond). Despite their important role in, and increasing awareness of the importance of, migration governance, municipalities and cities in Africa (and beyond) are facing huge challenges. Moreover, vulnerable migrant groups – and population groups in general – often live in socially and economically marginal situations, with limited possibilities for political participation. Their voices are largely unheard.

Policy recommendations

Climate change poses a fundamental risk for human security and well-being on the African continent for years and decades to come. Nonetheless, human mobility in the context of climate change should not only be considered through the lens of risk. From forced displacement to circular labour migration, it may even constitute an important adaptation mechanism in itself, with outcomes highly context-specific.

Accordingly, the ideal political response towards human mobility in the context of climate change should be on governing human mobility in a way that makes it possible to avoid forced displacement, to maximise positive mechanisms

of migration (financial or other remittances), and to minimise negative aspects such as labour exploitation or human trafficking. But “climate migration” in Africa is a political challenge that cuts across different (policy) fields (climate change, migration, development cooperation, urban planning, humanitarian aid, rural development etc.) that include varied notions of human mobility. German and European development cooperation can support coming closer to this political ideal by:

Bridging gaps between different policy fields: A more intensive dialogue process between the different (policy) fields, communities and experts in relevant fora, processes and organisations needs to be fostered, with the goal of actively addressing migration, instead of (as a rule) trying to prevent it. A further prerequisite is the creation of a common understanding of the challenges related to human mobility and immobility in the context of climate change.

Multi-level governance and local empowerment: While basic (governance) frameworks for human mobility in the context of climate change are about to be created at the global level (i.e. the UNFCCC process and the Global Compact on Migration), there are few such efforts at regional, national and, in particular, communal levels. Open policy spaces should be supported and more resources should be mobilised in order to further empower and better integrate these levels. A more comprehensive integration of vulnerable, and at the same time politically and socially marginalised, groups is also highly important in this context.

Collection of data and best practices: A solid and disaggregated data foundation is absolutely essential to address climate-change-related human mobility. In addition, there needs to be a systematic documentation of best practices regarding the complex problems of local vulnerability and the role of human mobility in such contexts.

References

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