

End of project popular science description

Governing Climate Mobility, October 2024

Introduction

Many observers see the growing impact of climate change as having the potential to send thousands, if not millions, of people on journeys to look for survival or better livelihoods. Given these fears and their impact on global policies and politics, we need a better understanding as to what is going on. Governing Climate Mobility (GCM) took its point of departure in this widespread notion that climate change leads rather directly to migration invoking terms like ‘climate refugees’, ‘climate migrants’ and the like. Combining insights into climate adaptation, governance, and mobility drivers, the project sought to critically engage with this idea and to develop a more fine-grained understanding of the relationship between climate change and mobility.

Migration research has clearly established that many different drivers influence aspirations for and decisions on migration, and therefore the project focused on governance as a central mediating factor between climate change and mobility. In addition, the assumption was that governance can be influenced through policies enabling these to frame how climate change possibly turns into patterns of im/mobility. The project focused on national and local governance issues in Ghana and Ethiopia affecting mobility in situations characterised by slow-onset climate change. Accordingly, research was conducted at local and national levels in each country with inter-country comparative analysis being facilitated through iterative workshops and seminars between the three research institutions involved and other researchers working in the field. The comparative approach enabled analysis of different governance contexts in situations of slow-onset climate change.

Results

The project endeavoured to move the conceptual and theoretical discussion of how governance influences climate mobility forward. By combining relevant literatures and fieldwork observations and data, analysis of political authority has proved beneficial. Defined broadly as including formal and informal institutions at various levels, the nature of political authority, how it is exercised, and the relationship between political authority and populations are of significant importance as to whether and how climate change leads to mobility and migration.

Based on this conceptual and theoretical framework the project has, furthermore, resulted in insights into climate mobility patterns in different localities in Ethiopia and in Ghana. Household surveys, interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions have demonstrated a number of governance-related conclusions. The presence or absence of state-provided services and their degree of coherence influence aspiration and capability to move temporarily or permanently away from areas affected by climate change although mobility is a historical practice in all places. Thus, climate change does not in itself create migration, but may in certain situations stimulate it. Another point is that intensified migration as a consequence of climate change to a large extent will make use of historical practices originating in colonial times and earlier. Slow-onset climate change rarely leads to completely new mobility patterns. Furthermore, the siloed nature of many governance institutions involved in climate adaptation does not enable adequate responses to the concerns of different social groups and can sometimes further stimulate mobility. For instance, small-scale dams may benefit landowners and can therefore enable other household members to migrate for longer periods of time as migration is not something to be avoided for most young people.

A further ambition of the project was to establish strong and sustainable South-South-North research partnerships with capacity to support future research and policy work on climate mobility. While significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the civil war in Ethiopia considerable collaboration

across the three research institutions have enabled significant comparative insights into how political authority frames mobility decisions as well as capacity building through research education of three PhD students and three Master students.

Conclusions

Improved understandings of the relationship between governance and climate-related im/mobility not only counter simplistic representations of climate mobility; they specifically highlight the need to illuminate power and policy dynamics inherent in mobility practices in areas affected by climate change. It is broadly accepted that climate change impacts and response options are differentiated within a population, with many governance dynamics at play, e.g. resource access, decision-making influence, representation, access to finance, etc. Thus, it is important to distinguish between different socio-economic groups and how they are affected by slow-onset climate change.

Moreover, slow-onset climate change is not the sole cause of mobility and migration practices. These typically have a long history, and they are stimulated by diverse drivers of which climate change impacts rarely are the most important. Social networks, on the other hand, often facilitate and direct mobility practices in a particular locality and for specific social groups together with a range of other drivers. This is the reason why 'silo' interventions and technical approaches are ineffective particularly if they are directed at preventing mobility.

Recommendations

The research project's findings strengthen a call to *look to local evidence when addressing global narratives*. All too often policies derive from broadly held ideas which overlook the complex realities on the ground. To this end the value of comparative and longitudinal (panel set) data in monitoring mobilities practiced at sub-national levels cannot be overstated. Similarly, qualitative evidence gathered from *individuals, specific groups, and those acting as agents for those migrating or staying in place* gives depth and expression to the practices found. As it can be unequivocally concluded that slow-onset climate change is not the sole or even main cause of mobility, it can be strongly recommended that policymakers focus on local challenges and *strengthen local livelihood conditions and opportunities so that people have a better basis for deciding whether to move or stay*.