



**MIGRANTS  
RESILIENCE  
COLLABORATIVE**

# Ensuring Safe Migration in Asia Series - Part 2

**Climate Change and Migration  
in Asia**

# Climate Change and Migration in Asia

Human migration as a result of climate change is considered the single greatest impact that could fall upon populations globally. Recent predictions claim the situation of climate has gotten dire, which could lead to 40 million climate migrants in South Asia alone by 2050, almost 2% of the entire regional population. <sup>[1]</sup>

## 1. Understanding Types of Climate Migration <sup>[i]</sup>

Climate-induced migration results from sudden or slow-onset climate changes that disrupt livelihoods. <sup>[2]</sup> Such events since 2020 have led to widespread displacement (Table 1) and migration (Table 2).

It is important to note that sudden and slow-onset climate changes cannot always be differentiated from each other. In some cases, they are interlinked. For instance, a slow rise in sea level might ultimately lead to storms in a location, making it uninhabitable. In some cases, repeated exposure to sudden-onset events along with slow-onset climate change can trigger the cyclical and temporary movement of migration into permanent migration.

Country	No. of disasters	Estimate of people displaced <sup>[ii]</sup>
Bangladesh	14	4.1 million
Cambodia	NA	70,000
India	12	5 million
Indonesia	400	463,000
Nepal	NA	NA
Thailand	NA	61,000

Source: Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020 <sup>[3]</sup>

Table1: Estimated people displaced due to sudden climate events in sample countries

<sup>[i]</sup> We would like to thank Prayank Jain - his report on migration and climate change in India, developed as part of a strategy exercise for Jan Sahas, helped inform us of critical insights to write this chapter.

<sup>[ii]</sup> even though estimates of the people displaced in year 2020 have been released by the same organization, in some cases the numbers are extremely low due to the difficulty in data collection during the pandemic. Hence, statistics from 2019 have been included to get a more representative picture.

Country	Estimated climate migrants <sup>[iii]</sup>
Bangladesh	455,491
Cambodia	NA
India	14 million
Indonesia	NA
Nepal	345,018
Thailand	NA

Source: South Asia Climate Migration Report 2020 <sup>[4]</sup>

Table 2: Estimated climate migrants as a result of slow onset climate change in sample countries

## 2. Understanding Key Drivers of Climate-Induced Migration Patterns in Rural Areas

Climate migration cannot be looked in isolation from migration as a result of economic distress. Experts have argued that migration caused by climate change and economic reasons are often interlinked especially in developing countries where environment dependent agriculture is the main source of livelihood in rural areas. For example, agricultural failure as a result of climate change may push small farmers into financial distress forcing them to migrate. <sup>[5]</sup>

For example, based on evidence from Bangladesh’s northern region, which is highly dependent on agriculture, it used to be prone to heavy floods, riverbank erosion and cold waves. ‘Monga’ or ‘abhab’ <sup>[iv]</sup> is a seasonal event in this region, a near-famine situation between the periods of cultivation and harvest. <sup>[6]</sup> With climate change, the area is experiencing increasingly unpredictable weather conditions leading to increased migration. <sup>[7]</sup>

### SLOW ONSET OF CLIMATE CHANGE LEADS TO MIGRATION



Figure 1: Key drivers of slow onset climate-induced migration

“I come from the northern district of Bangladesh. I used to work as a day labourer in other people’s lands before migration. During the Monga period, it is very difficult in our village to find jobs. Therefore, I decided to migrate to Dhaka during this period to work in the garment industry and earn an additional income.”

- Jyoti, garment worker in RMG sector, Bangladesh

<sup>[iii]</sup> These are estimated figure because it is more difficult to count migration due to slow-onset changes.

<sup>[iv]</sup> The state of not having enough money even for basic needs.

It is believed migration corridors which have developed over the years by populations migrating to overcome economic distress will be the same corridors used by future climate migrants as well. [8] For example, the area around Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia has one of the highest out-migration rates in the country and people from this area mainly migrate to Phnom Penh or Krong Pailin. It has been observed that the same corridor is being used by climate migrants as well. [9]

Sudden climate events can also increase unsafe migration or displacement pathways especially for women and girls. For example, during Assam floods in India, which have become an annual occurrence, instances of forced child labour and marriage have increased multifold. Similar rise in trafficking after sudden climatic events have been witnessed in other countries of Asia as well. [10]

## Savitri Devi\* - a migrant working as an agricultural labourer in India

*"I used to work as an agricultural labourer in my village, however as a result of severe water shortage in the past few years, I was unable to receive any employment for half the year. While in the past I did find work for a meagre ₹100 to ₹150 per day in nearby villages, even that became difficult as a result of the drought.*

*This forced me to migrate to Solapur district, with a local contractor (thekedar) to work as an agricultural labourer on a sugarcane farm for one season. Prior to migration, I received an advance of Rs.30,000 (for all 4 family members). The thekedar promised that the rest of the wages (₹200-₹250 per day) would be given once the work was complete.*

*Along with my family, I migrated in the hope of earning a better income. However, once we arrived we were faced with terrible working and living conditions, we worked for 16 hours a day in the scorching heat with very few breaks. The owner provided us a small makeshift tin shed as accommodation on the field and gave minimal ration for sustenance. In case any of us fell ill we were given medicine by the farm owner and asked to continue work. If we protested, he verbally and physically abused us, and sometimes beat us up with sugarcane sticks. At the end of the season, we finally thought of collecting our money and going back to our village. However, the owner refused and made us continue working for two more years, without wages.*

*In 2022, we came in contact with the Jan Sahas (JS) field team who found out about our case from other locals. The team was in constant contact with us to help, however, because of local authorities' lack of cooperation, our rescue was delayed. In the meantime, I was worried about my son's health as he wasn't receiving any medical attention after falling sick. When the team finally came to rescue us along with the local police, the owner again refused to let us go. With the local authorities' intervention, we were finally released. We have still not received our wages and have had to take out a loan to buy ration. After this experience, we have no plans to migrate, we would rather prefer to earn the meagre wages available locally to survive."*

*\*This story is anonymous and Savitri Devi is a pseudonym.*

### 3. Climate impacts at destination locations

Climate change impacts are not limited to source or rural areas but are experienced in destination areas as well. Predictions on climate impacts across popular destinations paint an extremely worrisome picture. Such future events could further disrupt migration patterns.

A strong linkage between internal migration and haphazard urbanisation exists, as it leads to stress on the natural resources of cities. [9] Indonesia's Jakarta is a well-known example of the environmental impacts of rapid urbanisation. It has been projected that it is the fastest sinking city globally and is estimated to sink by 2030 completely. To combat this, the Indonesian government has shifted the capital to Nusantara. [10]

As many destination locations face similar threats of climate impacts, those who migrate due to distress caused by the environment are twice as vulnerable. Anecdotal evidence from India found many migrants originally belonging to Sundarbans in West Bengal migrated to

Kerala after the devastation caused by Cyclone Aila (2009) to their livelihood. In 2018, when the Kerala floods occurred, they were faced with the same predicament and were forced to abruptly travel back to their homes without any likelihood of economic opportunities. [11] Even though this was a sudden climate event, with climate change threatening to make many of these destinations completely inhabitable over time, this could severely impact migrants and their families. (Illustration 1)

*"I have a small piece of land in my village in Assam. I decided to migrate because I was under debt and agriculture was no longer productive in my village due to erratic weather conditions. I worked in Kerala for a few months to pay the debt, and then the floods occurred. I lost my job, so I decided to come to Mumbai to work. When I migrate for work, I usually go to Kerala and Mumbai. When it is raining in Kerala, I find work in Mumbai and vice-versa."*

*- Sukwinder, labourer in construction sector, India*

### 4. Recommendations

- **Domestic governments must be at the centre of addressing challenges and formulating policies related to internal migration:** With an increase in migration as a result of climate change and agricultural distress among other factors, the number of internal migrants across countries may continue to increase exponentially. Therefore, the onus of protecting internal migrants must fall on domestic governments.
- **Migration as a result of climate change will be the leading cause of movement in the near future. Therefore it is important that policies specific to climate migration are formulated.**

What can key actors do?

- Domestic governments should capture climate migration and migration corridors formed, especially as a result of slow onset climate change. Welfare schemes and policies must take into consideration climate migrants as a lens in design.
- There must be a strong focus on designing policies addressing climate migration for both source and destination to ensure safe migration.

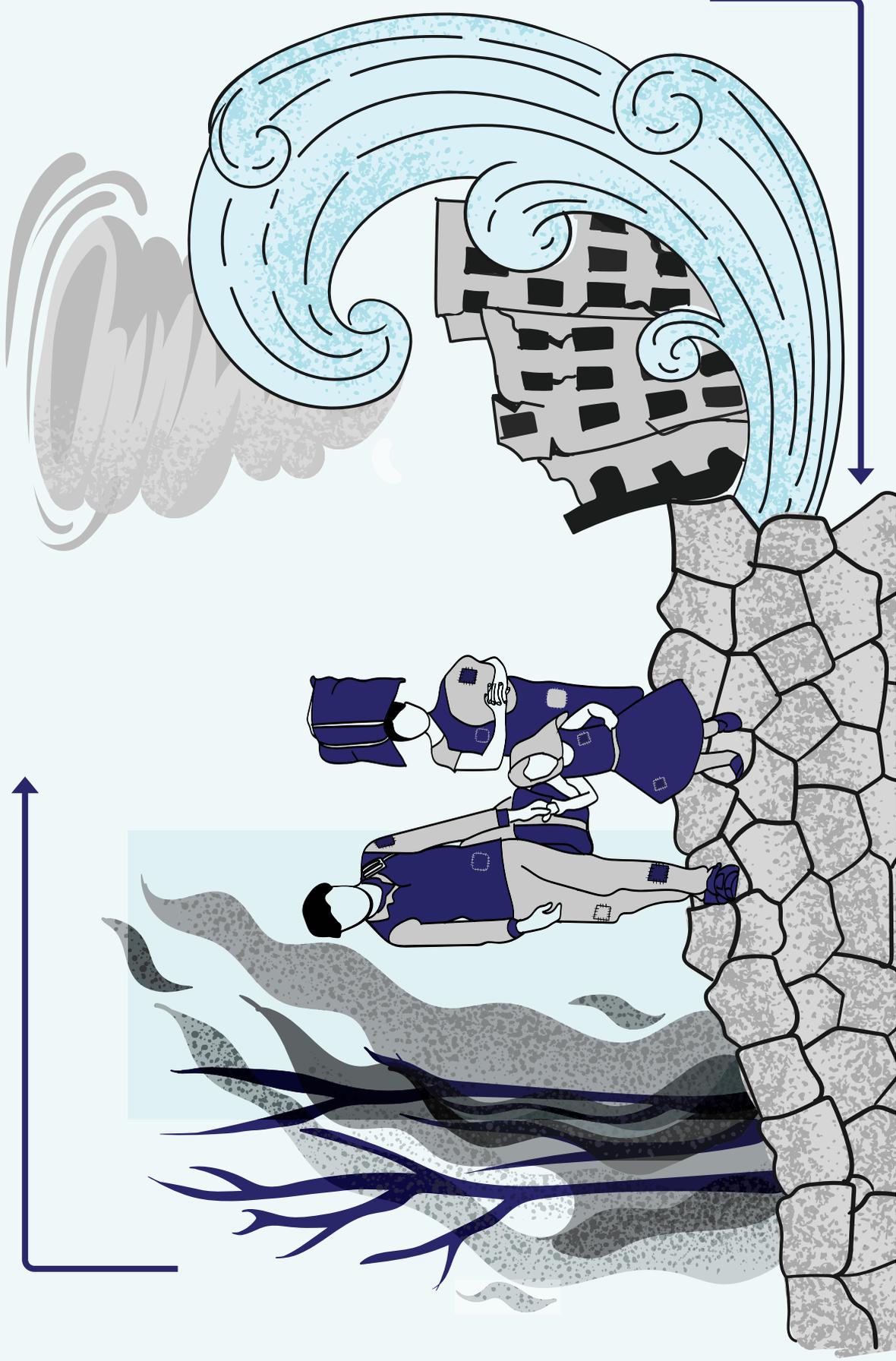


Illustration 1: Threats of climate impacts, like source locations are faced at destination locations too. Those who migrate due to distress caused by the environment can face similar impacts at destination making them twice as vulnerable.

## End Notes

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