

**Policy Review**

**Apathy towards Climate-Induced  
Migrants amid COVID-19**

**Insights from Bangladesh, India & Pakistan**

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## **Abstract**

Climate-induced migration is a well-known phenomenon occurring periodically in response to fast and slow onset events. Climate change projections are a global threat, but damaged is perceived to be higher in ecological and economical fragile countries, which are paying huge cost in the form of unprecedented events leading to internal or cross border migration or displacements. Climate-induced migration is itself a big challenge, but particularly after the coronavirus outbreak, its redressal has become top priority in the regions like South Asia, which is considered to be at higher threat to climate extremes. This policy review specifically focuses on climate-induced migration patterns in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan before the outbreak of COVID-19. It aims to address the climate challenge faced by migrants and the transparent role of existing climate change policies and plans in increasing the resilience against the ongoing climate events and building adaptation for migrants or displaced persons.

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## 1. Introduction

Climate-induced migration is not a new phenomenon. The communities, who are to displace due to extreme climatic events (such as storms, cyclones, floods, earthquakes, rising sea level, glacial lake outbursts, etc.) for their survival within or outside their borders are called climate-induced migrants. Owing to these climatic change events, a huge number of people are forced to migrate or displace each year within the boundaries of climate-hit countries or cross-border (International Organization for Management 2020).

At present, the world is warned of being ready for combating the issue of mass migration induced by climate change amid COVID-19. As the global economy is in the state of recession with disrupted supply chains of prerequisites, i.e. goods and services (International Organization for Migration 2020), migration/displacement in the present scenario will result in a number of challenges for the climate-induced migrants, for instance transportation challenges amid COVID, financial insecurity, etc. The prime climate hotspots in Pakistan are Muzaffargarh in the Punjab province, 14 districts of Balochistan<sup>1</sup>, and Tharparkar and Mithi in Sindh province (Emerson 2010; Bose et al. 2020; United Nation Development Program n.d). In India, the affected regions are: Gujarat, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2019) while in Bangladesh, Titli and Gaja are the worst affected areas (Bose et al. 2020).

Climate-induced migration is a two-way process, which is incomplete without proper involvement of migrants and social and institutional actors. This policy review aims to briefly highlight the climate change impact on Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh before the pandemic. In the light of this discussion, it identifies the existing climate policy challenges and tries to explore how climate-induced migrants are affected amid COVID-19 pandemic and what safety and adaptation measures these states could take to save them from the upheaval and to build resilience and capacity in order to mitigate the severity of climate migration amid pandemic.

## 2. Discussion and Findings

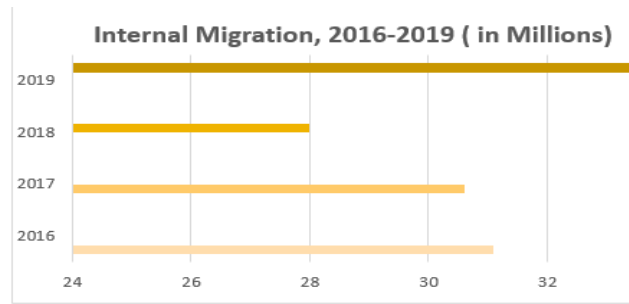
Pre-COVID 19 literature depicts that the global climate is changing at an unprecedented rate, which has surpassed the scientific estimates. Owing to these climatic variations, the global community has already started suffering from climate extremes in the form of natural disasters. The climate change has also forced millions of people to leave their homes and area and migrate (Goodwin and McAdam 2017) internally or cross border depending upon the nature and intensity of the disaster.

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<sup>1</sup> 1) Dera Bugti, 2) Kohlu, 3) Loralai, 4) Zhob, 5) Qilla Saifullah, 6) Pishin, 7) Qilla Abdullah, 8) Noshki, 9) Kharan, 10) Awaran, 11) Mastung, 12) Kalat, 13) Khuzdar and 14) Lasbela.

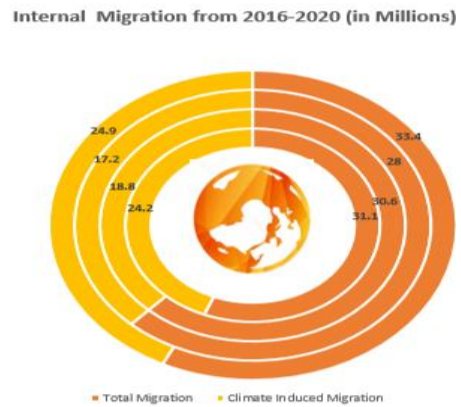
Over the past decades, the internal conflict-induced and climate-induced migrations have increased and it is believed to be a repetitive phenomenon with increasing intensity over time.

The figure shows a cumulative number of both internal migrations but statistics also shows that climate-induced migration holds a giant percentage share (shown in the figure 1). For instance, in the last two years, the number of climate-induced migrants jumped from 16.1 million to 24.9 million, which is quite alarming (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2019 and 2020).



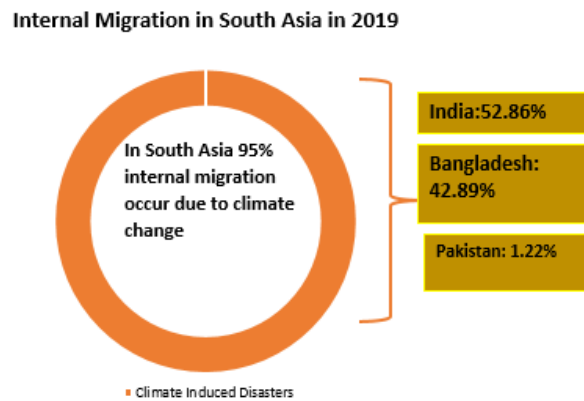
**Figure 1:** Author’s design based on IDMC’s report on ‘internal displacement’ from 2016-2020

According to the ‘Global Report on International Displacement’, in 2019 alone, 24.9 million people out of 33.4 million were internally displaced in response to 1900 natural disasters across 140 countries and probably 95 per cent of disasters occurred in response to extreme climatic events like floods, storms and many others (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2020).



**Fig 2:** Authors’ design based on IDMC’s report on ‘internal displacement’ from 2016-2020

**And when it comes to South Asia,** which is home to one-fourth of the global population and is undergoing swift urbanization, the growing population in the region not only causes to expand cities but is also increasing the risk of their exposure to natural calamities, which incorporates both slow-onset and fast on-set events. Owing to this reason, South Asia have very high rate of climate-induced migrations as shown in Figure 3 and specifically three of South Asian countries, i.e. India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have

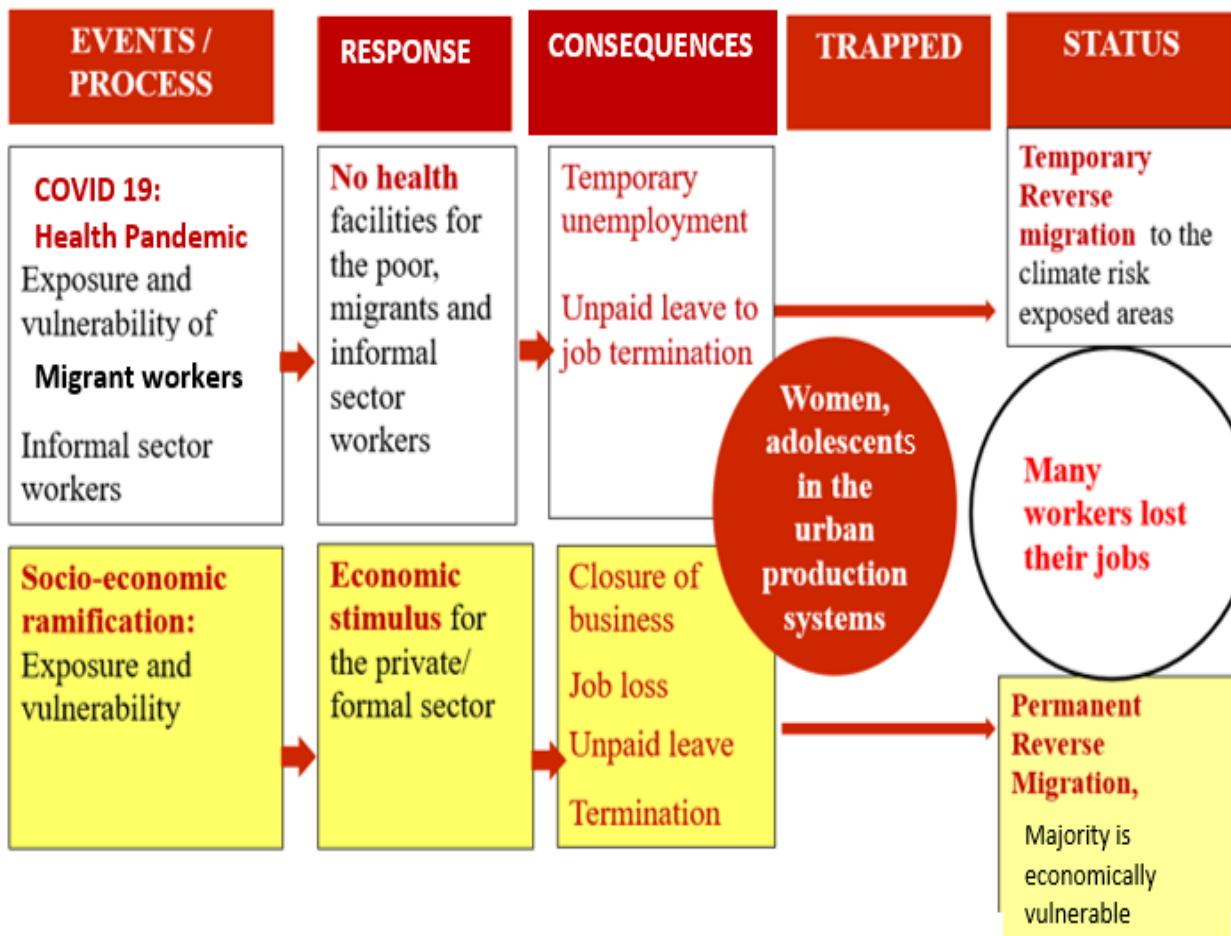


**Figure 3:** Author’s design based on IDMC’s report on ‘internal displacement’ from 2016-2020

experienced high number of climate-induced internal migration in comparison to rest of regional countries.

In 2019 alone, 9.5 million people opted for climate-induced migrations, which is the highest number ever recorded after 2012.

Among these 9.5 million displacements in the region, major internal migrations were observed in India and Bangladesh, as shown in the above figure (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2020). Likewise, half of the regional population is anticipated to extreme climate hotspot by 2050 (Kaur and Kaur 2018). That’s why, the internal migration in response to climate events is very high in the region. For instance, India is home to 800 million economically vulnerable people (Sunani 2014) and in Bangladesh, half a million population internally migrate from rural areas and coastal areas to cities (Islam et al. 2018) every year due to rising sea level and increased river flow (Brown 2008). Hence the global and South Asian statistics reveal that generally, climate migrants prefer to move internally with their available resources.



**Figure 4:** Synergies between climate-induced migrations and COVID-19 pandemic

**Source:** Originally drawn from Md Shamsuddoha with changes

Pakistan, India and Bangladesh have already developed their policies to facilitate climate victims, however, what is important is to figure out that either these policies and plans also support climate-induced migrants or not.

| <b>Table 1: Existing Policies and Plans of Climate Change in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.</b> |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
|  | India  | Pakistan  | Bangladesh   |
| Climate Change Policy  | <b>National Action Plan on Climate change (NAPCC, 2008)</b><br>-Prime focus on adaptation, mitigation and resilience<br>-Addresses Poverty elevation, socio-economic development and environmental balance of migrants (Sunani 2014) | <b>National Climate Change Policy (NCCP, 2012)</b><br>-Acknowledge growing risk of future natural hazards due to climate extremes (Chaudhry 2017)<br>-Recommend policy measures on mitigation, adaptation, technology, capacity building (GoP 2012) | <b>Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP, 2009)</b><br>-Prime focus on medium and long-term climate goals (Alam et al, 2011)<br>- Doesn't advice any plan or action to tackle climate migration (Solutions, 2012) |
| National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA)   | -  | -   | <b>NAPA (2005 and 2009)</b><br>Recognize adaptation needs and focus on water, food, livelihood and energy security (MOEF, 2009)  |
| National Adaptation Plan (NAP)   | -  | -   |  |
| Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC)  | <b>NDC (2016)</b><br>-Adaptive nature, reflexivity (Vij et al, 2017)   | <b>NDC (2016)</b><br>-Institutional flexibility, Adaptive nature, reflexivity (Vij et al, 2017)   | <b>NDC (2016)</b><br>-Adaptive nature, reflexivity (Vij et al, 2017)   |

**Source:** Author's design based on ((Sunani 2014), (Chaudhry, 2017), (GoP 2012), (Alam et al. 2011), (Solutions 2012), (MOEF 2009), (Vij et al. 2017))

The above table clearly shows that despite the paperwork on climate change, climate migrants are not even set as top priority in the policies and plans of chosen countries. There is a need to address migrants' issues under each section of the mentioned plan or policy.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, all the countries imposed a strict lockdown in order to control the intensity of the disease. Though the lockdown brought unwelcoming outcomes for the industries and employees, more severity was observed in the case of climate migrants. As literature supported the fact that most climate migrants are uneducated, unskilled or semi-skilled and have limited resources, so in case of disasters, they migrate to other areas depending upon their social and financial stability and get involved in informal industries in the host areas. However, in the present situation, the shutdown of markets and industries urged these climate migrants to move back to their hometowns as there was no work for them. In India, for instance, it has been reported that a big number of migrant workers moved back to their home towns (Biswas 2020).

#### **Challenges faced by climate-induced migrants in Bangladesh, India & Pakistan**

- Health & isolation challenges in case of COVID-19 especially for pregnant women
- Water availability issues
- Mobility issues, i.e. lack of resources to move, as well as imposition of lockdown which forced them to stay at their original location

The experts consider pandemic as human tragedy quoting various cases where migrant workers from all age groups were forced to return to their origins. The worse thing is that they managed the whole journey by themselves. Migrants travelled back by bicycles, buses or by foot (Biswas 2020).

Likewise, the climate migrants from Bangladesh have also faced the similar situation. It is reported that a big number of climate migrants are currently at home due to shutdown of industry and an estimated one million workers from the garment industry have already lost their jobs (Frayer 2020). It is predicted that this tally may reach to 2.2 million in worse-case scenario.

When it comes to Pakistan, the climate-induced migrants observed the similar situation. Later, the government announced the opening of construction industry (Government announces to open 2020) and also imitated Billion Tree tsunami Project (PTI govt to offer 2020), in order to ensure the employment of the poor and informal workers, including migrants. The government is also trying to provide relief through Benazir Income Support Programme, but it is not sure whether climate induced migrants are the part of this program or not.

The unprecedented climate emergencies are continuously reshaping the world with increasing adversity on the poor by destroying their livelihood and shelters and affecting their basic necessities, i.e. food, water, education, health, security and transportation facilities for children and women, particularly the pregnant ones. The world is facing climate extremes under average temperature of 1.1°C in 2019, which is expected to increase in near future with the expectation to cross the threshold of 2°C (Bose et al. 2020). So, considering present situation of climate change and COVID-19, it is very important for all three governments to address problems of



climate-induced migrants in the context of adaptability, resilience, mitigation, and capacity building. Respective governments and relevant institutions need to build resilience of the vulnerable communities against climate-induced disasters. Through their capacity building their resilience can be built as phenomena of climate change will remain and adaptation strategies will make communities survival easier.

### **3. Conclusion**

Climate-induced migrants already face many socio-economic issues. With the COVID-19 pandemic, they have become more vulnerable. Poor people have issues of transportation, isolation in camps (in case of COVID positive), lack of medicines, unavailability of water and electricity, etc. Special social protection schemes should be launched for vulnerable communities. They should be given awareness and trained how to keep themselves safe from the disease.

### **4. Recommendations**

- More debate leading to some concrete research should be generated on cross border migration in terms of COVID-19 and climate change.
- In the light of the research, issues like resilience building, migration management and migration as adaptation strategy and governance should be addressed under a well-defined strategy.
- The poor vulnerable migrants must be provided with livelihood and other facilities such as education, health, social protection, etc.
- Safe shelters and camps are required for climate-induced migrants in case they are infected with COVID-19.
- Healthcare facilities should be provided to pregnant women and children
- All the governments, particularly in south Asia, need to devise a joint strategy to control emissions especially when more pandemics are predicted to hit the world in future.

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