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12. CLIMATE MIGRATION

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What do you associate with climate migration? Is it the pleasant Mediterranean climate, Californian palm trees or Thai sandy beaches? Or drought, floods and barren farmland instead? The climate is causing more people to move, and unfortunately mostly for the gloomier reasons. It is even thought that in the 21st century, the climate could become, directly or indirectly, the main cause of migration. But who is migrating, from where and how exactly? Is the world ready for climate refugees?

Predictions about the impact of climate change on migration do not bode well. Norman Myers, a professor at Oxford University, has estimated that by 2050 there are likely to be 200 million climate refugees in the world – almost half of the EU population. [200 million](#) people will be forced to leave their homes due to drought, floods, declining soil fertility, pollution or other natural disasters.

Of course, Myers' calculation is not the only one, and estimates from different authors using different methodologies vary widely, from 25 million to a billion climate refugees by 2050. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has even estimated that by 2080, as many as a third of the world's population (3.2 billion people) will suffer from water scarcity, plus hundreds of millions more will be at risk of food insecurity due to climate change. UN-Water has estimated that by 2050, [half](#) of the world's population could suffer from water shortages. In 2020 alone, there were an estimated [30 million](#) more climate refugees in the world.

Climate change as a cause of migration

But let's put the calculations aside for a moment. Let us look at what climate migration is all about, how these 200 million could start moving and what to do about it.

First, there is nothing new in climate migration per se. Floods, volcanic eruptions or desertification have caused people to move throughout human history. In the last 7,000 years, since people have begun building bigger cities, it has happened that clean water has run out or the land has become less fertile in densely populated areas.

The easiest solution has been to move on. Today, however, human settlements are denser and there are no more free patches of fertile land that no one owns yet. And very few countries allow foreigners on their territory just because they no longer have a liveable environment in their home country.

Climate change is still a long-term change and does not appear out of the blue. Although a single flood, hurricane or forest fire can leave thousands homeless at once, its impact on a global scale is still small. In most cases, those fleeing sudden climate disasters also find shelter quite close by and only move tens, not hundreds or thousands, of kilometres, and return home as soon as possible.

Climate change will never create a situation where there are 10, 20 or 200 million people at the border tomorrow and all fleeing at once. Instead, people move gradually and often hope to return one day.

Commuting and breeding against climate migration

Let's look at a family who lives somewhere in Central America and makes a living from farming by growing coffee and sugar cane. In recent years, *El Niños* – a set of weather phenomena that warms the air off the coast of South America and brings rainfall there, but significantly reduces rainfall in Central America – have severely damaged their crops and they can no longer survive on agriculture alone. Therefore, the father decides together with his neighbour to look for the same kind of work up north, where the climatic conditions are better, but the salary is also higher. So, the two leave for climate-change induced reasons, but most family members still stay in their home village. They maintain the farm because it is part of their lifestyle, and in-between seasons, the father can return home to his family. Financial security is ensured by remittances from the father working abroad. As in **Chapter 3, "Why Do People Migrate?"**, it is possible that the migration of one family member will not make others move – maybe some of the children will be sent to study in the city with the additional money made abroad, or maybe the children will decide to go and look for happiness elsewhere, which still means migration. But this is a rather thin though continuous trickle, not a giant tidal wave.

Based on this logic, schemes that enable seasonal labour migration have also been proposed as one of the possible measures to mitigate climate migration. In essence, it will help farming communities survive until plant varieties that are better adapted to the new climatic conditions are developed or other new livelihoods are found in the area.

A new way of urban planning and sustainable migration

However, climate change can have a much gloomier facet and more drastic consequences. Let's take a trip to Bangladesh in South Asia, which is about three times larger than Estonia, but whose population is more than a hundred times bigger than in Estonia. Bangladesh is located by the sea, at the delta of large rivers, which means that the land there is very low-lying. And although there have always been temporary floods in the area, their scale and impact have become more devastating year by year. Already every few years, the whole region suffers from major floods that destroy hundreds of thousands of homes, fields and livestock. Floods make both the soil and the estuaries saline, making it difficult to cultivate the land and obtain clean drinking water. Coastal land is becoming worthless, local jobs are also being lost and coastal families are becoming climate migrants: when there is nowhere to live, the whole family escapes; if there is a place to live, some family members are sent to work in big cities or factories elsewhere. In Bangladesh, however, two scenarios show the importance of urban planning and other development plans in tackling climate migration.

Most of Bangladesh's climate refugees reach the slums of the capital, Dhaka – nearly [800,000](#) people a year. These are spontaneous giant villages that lack a proper electrical system as well as water supply and sanitation, where many become ill from contaminated water and mortality is many times higher than in rural areas. People move into the slums to work in factories in the city or to do housework in local middle-class homes. The city is not at all interested in improving the quality of life in the slums, as this would mean legalising the area and additional costs. Therefore, the situation doesn't improve and only charity organisations keep it from getting even worse.

But there is another, more controlled way to deal with climate migration. In Bangladesh, the port city of [Mongla](#) is already being deliberately developed as a potential destination for climate migration. And what is being built there? Of course, shore fortifications to protect the city from floods, but they

are also planning infrastructure and housing, as well as factories to have jobs, and the tourism industry and the port area are also being developed. Everything is planned so that the city can expand in the future. Of course, the coastal areas of Bangladesh will not be completely wiped out. The breeding of salt-tolerant rice varieties is progressing and some fields flooded by the sea have been turned into shrimp farms.

Thus, a significant part of the problems of climate migration can be solved by careful planning, either in the surrounding areas or by reorganising life on site. In the field of insurance, ideas are also being developed to provide so-called climate change [insurance](#) for whole countries or certain regions. Regular insurance payments would ensure sufficient funds for adapting to climate change.

The uneven price of climate change

As seen in previous examples, climate change mostly affects developing countries, whose environmental footprint is often not comparable to that of developed countries. For example, [carbon emissions](#) in Latin America are many times lower than in the United States, but the effects of climate change are felt there more directly. At the same time, the consequences of climate change are not only tropical storms but also conflicts, the escalation of which is quite clearly correlated with the [occurrence of natural disasters](#).

We see a similar picture in the Sahel region of Africa, where the climate and conflicts have already forced [3.8 million](#) people to flee their homes and made 24 million dependent on foreign aid. For example, Lake Chad, on the border of Chad, Niger and Nigeria and once the largest lake in the world, has lost almost 90% of its area in just over 50 years. The resulting water shortage threatens both people's livelihoods and increases the level of conflict in the region. A similar fate befell Syria in the Middle East – the civil war that caused a large wave of emigration is widely associated with an exceptional drought from 2006 to 2011.

The African examples also show that circular migration from an already unstable region may not be the answer. You may have heard of Boko Haram, a terrorist group operating in northern Nigeria and the immediate region, which abducts women and children from villages. This has become particularly easy as a result of the climate crisis, as men have gone abroad to look for work to support their families at home.

In many African countries, awareness of about climate change is even less developed than in Europe, which means that there are no local mechanisms to protect oneself in times of crisis. If Estonia is hit by a significant decrease in agricultural yields due to unfavourable weather conditions, food will be imported from further away, which will probably mean an increase in food prices, but a drought will probably not cause mass casualties. Unfortunately, such solutions can't be implemented so easily in areas where there are no supermarkets, and above all people's survival depends on what can be grown locally.

Therefore, the depth of the climate crisis and the pressure of climate migration depend largely on the international community and international development cooperation. Developing countries alone may not be able to develop more climate-resilient crops or sufficiently effective crisis management measures. Several international organisations (such as the [Red Cross](#), but also in the [UN Security Council](#)) have concluded that, in addition to military assistance already provided in some vulnerable

areas, support for tackling climate change must also be arranged. For instance, peacekeepers have been fighting terrorism in Mali, but the cattle farmers there would also need protection against local bandits who have taken control of water sources.

Ironically, of course, climate change will not affect all regions in the same negative way. In some regions, such as [Canada](#) and [Russia](#), climate change may not only have a negative effect but also increase agricultural fertility. So, while climate change is threatening some regions with hunger, other hitherto sparsely populated areas have become more fertile than before. Thus, some international labour migration may even be necessary for destination countries. For example, the [UN Global Compact for Migration](#) calls on countries to establish channels for legal migration (e.g., seasonal or long-term migration schemes, resettlement of crisis victims) to prevent irregular and uncontrolled migration and to ensure that people can move between their jobs and families and thus avoid even greater international migration. On the other hand, more intensive agriculture in these areas may not be sustainable, as it leaves its mark on the environment.

But what to do in situations where climate change has essentially destroyed the land and nothing grows anymore? To this end, the United Nations has already begun to develop a strategy for the planned relocation of communities. In essence, this means, for example, evacuating an entire village at once and moving the same community to another location. This may sound rather dystopian, given what we have touched upon in **Chapter 11, "Integration and Adaptation"**, for example. The whole community at once? So how does it integrate into the rest of the society? The idea of the programme is to minimise the problems associated with migrants feeling like they're lacking roots. Not everyone adapts well to change, and forced leave can create a sense of giving up. Moving communities as a whole will create the necessary safety net that is initially needed to get on one's feet. But, of course, even with such a solution, you have to think two steps ahead to what will become of these communities in 10 years or within a generation, and how to ensure social integration. These migrants will probably not have the opportunity to return.

Discussion points

- As mentioned in the chapter, the effects of climate change on developed and developing countries are often relatively different. Discuss how climate migration could affect developed and developing countries.
- The chapter introduced various solutions to prevent climate-induced migration crises. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different options from the perspective of potential migrants, countries of origin and destination countries.

Further reading

Website of Climate Refugees, an advocacy organisation dedicated to climate refugees with a variety of thematic and up-to-date reading and listening topics: <https://climate-refugees.org>

IOM Climate Migration Report: https://www.ipcc.ch/apps/njlite/srex/njlite_download.php?id=5866

Activities and challenges of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in managing climate migration: <https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>



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