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Crisis or adaptation? Migration and climate change in a context of high mobility

Cecilia Tacoli, IIED

Abstract

The impact of climate change on migration is attracting growing interest, as well as heated debate. Predicting the impact of climate change on population distribution and movement is fraught with difficulties. It is likely that both extreme weather events (storms, floods, heat waves) and changes in mean temperatures, precipitation and sea-levels will in many cases contribute to increasing levels of mobility. However, it seems unlikely that the alarmist predictions of hundreds of millions of environmental refugees will translate into reality. What is more likely is that the current trends of high mobility, linked to income diversification, will continue and intensify. Past experiences suggest that short-distance and short-term movements will probably increase, with the very poor and vulnerable in many cases unable to move.

Underlying these trends is the growing need for the diversification of income sources and the spatially unequal distribution of economic opportunities. The centrality of both these issues to adaptation initiatives cannot be over-emphasised. What is also necessary is a radical change in perceptions of migration. Most migration management policies try to influence the volume, direction and types of population movement. However, policies might more usefully aim to accommodate changes in migration patterns that result from environmental degradation, economic growth or crisis, and other wider transformations. This is an essential element of adaptation to climate change and other development goals.