

Reflecting on the role of local governments, academic and international cooperation for developing actions on climate migration in Latin America

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Abstract

Latin America is among the most vulnerable regions to climate change. Combining all natural disasters, an estimated 8 million people were internally displaced between 2000 and 2015. Most of these displacements frequently happen from rural areas to urban areas. As a result, local level governments should play a decisive role in improving socio-economic conditions of affected people. This study contributes to the deepening of concepts, approaches and discussions on the link between human mobility and climate change; it also calls for more coordination between local governments, academic and international cooperation for developing actions on climate migration.

Keywords: *Climate migration, Multi-level governance, Latin America*

Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are among the most vulnerable regions to climate change. Projected variations in rainfall patterns will bring changes in the water cycle, such as sudden floods, and droughts and the associated risk of forest fires. In addition, rising temperatures are leading to glacial melt in the Andes, leading to shrinking drinking water reserves and causing supply-related tension between inhabitants in the long-term. At the same time, in the Caribbean, the frequency and intensity of hurricanes are increasing at an alarming frequency and causing considerable economic and human losses. For example, Hurricane Maria (2017) caused an estimated \$90 billion in damages and more than 5000 deaths in Puerto Rico alone, making it one of the most dangerous tropical hurricanes in the United States since 1900 (Kishore, et al., 2018). Combining all natural disasters, an estimated 8 million people were internally displaced between 2000 and 2015 (Rodriguez, 2015). Although historically migration has occurred naturally as people left to seek better economic and social opportunities, estimates are revealing that “climate migrants” could number over 17 million in the LAC region by 2050 (Rigaud, et al., 2018). Even this figure is expected to be an underestimate, as no official records - especially of internal movements or displacement - are available. Thus, climate change is emerging as a potent driver of internal and cross-border migration.

Affected people frequently migrate from climate change hotspots, often housing rural populations more vulnerable to impacts, to urban areas. Climate migration, together with other forms of internal movements, are contributing to increasing rates of urban growth in LAC, especially in intermediate

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and small cities. According to the UN-HABITAT (2012), it is estimated that up to 90% of the region's population will be concentrated in urban settlements by 2050.

Despite the importance of climate migration, both temporary and permanent, there is a lack of commitment from the international community to resolve social problems caused by forced migration: a lack of recognition of an international category for climate migrants is obstructing the construction of a proper protection regime that allows migrants to receive necessary assistance, both in origin and destinations places (see Berchin, et al., 2017). In most cases, national migration legislation limits the entry of climate migrants into other countries and even in the case of internal displacement, state policy does not fully recognise their rights as citizens (Oetzel & Ruiz, 2017).

Methodology

This study aims at promoting the discussion between both political and academic communities on climate migration in the LAC region in order to improve the formulation of public policies, particularly at the level of sub-national governments. Moreover, it encourages international cooperation to support the implementation of international programs on the links between migration and climate change, within the scope of international agreements.

The method used is based on data gathering and empirical observations from three sources:

- i) the agenda-setting process in public spheres of the Provincial Government of Pichincha in Ecuador from 2015 and 2017;
- ii) round table and expert discussions in two regional meetings within the framework of the Workgroup "Environmental Migration" of the working group of Deutsche *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ); and
- iii) a literature review from documents and studies from international organisations working on climate migration in the region; many of these documents were published in close cooperation with sub-national governments, academic centers and NGOs.

The collected data was analyzed and presented by the author in three publications and this paper strives to present a summary of the main results. A preliminary characterisation of climate migrants in LAC identifies two main affected groups: the low-income population in the rural Andean region, and the group living in unplanned (informal) urban settlements, or slums.

Results

Drought is considered as one of the mayor climate drivers in the Andean region affecting the livelihoods of local population and influencing internal displacement. The main migration pattern is characterised as slow and gradual, rather than abrupt or defined as mass displacement. This could explain why public authorities and international community still do not consider climate migration as a serious social problem. Moreover, climate migration is still considered as an adaptation strategy and does not sufficiently take into account the human rights aspects of the situation; for example when people are forced to migrate under conditions that put their lives in danger.

The main category of migrants from rural to urban areas are youth and economically active people, leading to reduced adaptive local capacities in the poor areas they leave behind. It was found that, initially, this demographic may decide to move temporarily to an area with greater employment or livelihood prospects, with the help of good personal contacts. Migration can become permanent when income generation improves. Additionally, a lack of property rights over land in the areas of origin reinforces the decision of climate migrants to stay indefinitely at the destination.

While climate change is affecting the livelihoods of the rural population in the Andean region by reducing the quality and quantity of natural resources, the urban population living in informal settlements faces high ecological risk due to urbanisation in vulnerable slums areas. In intermediate and small cities the increase of population density turns this group to the most vulnerable especially against landslides and floods. Informal settlements usually house poor people coming from rural areas who probably once again suffer climate change impacts. For the group living in slums there is less information and research regarding to the social and economic structure, or gender roles in case of migration.

For both groups of migrants, sub-national governments have been assuming high responsibility to guarantee human security and to grant basic socio economic conditions and public services. Local administrations often fulfil their public functions without any technical and financial support, and it is frequently beyond their capacity to address environmental and social problems in an integral way. For example, limitations exist in urban planning where standards relating to the prevention of new settlements in areas with steep slopes, little vegetation cover or edge of rivers are not upheld.

Conclusions

Due to the social and environmental complexity of climate migration, the challenges to overcome this topic require a holistic approach and call for developing a series of transdisciplinary actions and strategies involving several stakeholder groups such as local governments, academic and international cooperation.

This research focuses on ‘internally displaced’ climate migrants, thus sub-national governments but especially “city governments” need to play a decisive role for improving social integrations of newly arrived urban inhabitants (Ruiz & Carvajal, 2015). . In LAC, the focus of action should be put on intermediate cities that currently play an important role as connection nodes between urban and rural areas. Steps should be taken to facilitate new residents’ access to social services and infrastructure and to improve urban management of climate change and natural disaster risks. It is therefore crucial to support local capacity building, both to prevent and respond to climate risks and to guarantee human rights of affected persons. All these actions also contribute to the implementation of relevant international agreements that increasingly call for reinforcing tasks and responsibilities of local authorities, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. At this level, further topics to promote include: incorporating the migration dimension into climate change adaptation plans and programs, but also into urban planning. Additionally, for cross-border migration the public policies should be based on agreements of integration and on domestic constitutions aligning existing norms with new migration directives.

International cooperation agencies and international bodies could contribute not just as technical advisers or providers of financial resources, but also to encourage the exchange of South-South experiences, for instance with Africa and Asia where significant progress to better understand the topic has already been made. Here main topics for exchange could be the following: regional agreements of rights protection within the framework of the Nansen Initiative; adaptation strategies both in place of origin and in places of destination; and the promotion of research studies making visible the fact and reality of migration in climate change hotspots.

Furthermore, this study calls on international bodies not to underestimate the problem of climate migrants in LAC, even if climate conditions currently are not identified as extreme in many regions; however territory could be affected either as places of origin or destinations of climate migrants (Ruiz & Carvajal, 2015). Lastly the role of academic centers should concentrate on closing the gap in empirical evidence and data on climate migration. In the short-term research and studies should respond to the following questions: What are the socioeconomic characteristics of the group of climate migrants?; What is the social structure of the group of trapped population?; What are the main drivers for climate migration?; What are the gender roles both in the migration group as well as in the trapped population? And for whom and under what kind of conditions could climate migration be considered a successful process?.

All these aspects could contribute to eliminate negative prejudices on climate migration as a global crisis, but in addition, they could help the main stakeholders to design and elaborate tailor-made policy instruments both at local and international level.

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