

Environmental changes in developing countries: from moving to trapped populations

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Over the last decades, environmental changes driven and/or compounded by population pressures and climate change have dramatically impacted human mobility, including population displacements or migration, especially in developing countries. Slow onset degradation processes (aridification, desertification, wind and water erosion, deforestation, shoreline erosion, etc.) and sudden disasters (extreme climate events such as floods, droughts, storms, heat waves, etc.) have intensified since the 1950s in terms of frequency, intensity and duration, as well as in their socio-economic consequences. In the absence of an international objective to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, global warming and its wide range of negative impacts are not likely to be contained in the future.

This paper demonstrates how a system can see its resilience capacity shrink as a result of increasing external pressures, to which current adaptation strategies cannot respond in a proper and timely manner.

In order to illustrate this decreasing resilience capacity, recent case studies in West Africa showing how and why people decide to move as a response to these environmental stresses are presented. In many cases, it appears that migration often results in further vulnerability and precarity of the people who moved, especially in the absence of adequate resettlement planning organized by the authorities. Rural-to-urban migration often leads to inappropriate resettlement in 'vacant areas' at risk of flooding, landslide, gully erosion, coastal erosion, etc. In these cases, poor people become poorer and progressively lose their capacity to move – and so to adapt again – thus becoming 'trapped'.

Since more and more people are likely to migrate in West Africa because of climate change in the coming decades, we call for the urgent development and implementation of national and international strategies that facilitate sustainable resettlement in cases of environmental migration.

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