

LABOUR MIGRATION AS CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

Well managed, regular labour migration offers a positive opportunity for migrants and communities to increase their adaptive capacity to adverse climate change impacts while also providing an alternative, appealing, and frequently underrepresented narrative for the broader connection between human mobility and climate change. The [Working Group II Report](#) of the Sixth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change acknowledges that labour migration could contribute to climate-resilient development.

To leverage labour migration as a climate change adaptation strategy and to address the accompanying challenges, IOM aims to support all involved stakeholders through a holistic rights-based and gender-sensitive approach and strives to maximize the benefits of existing and new regular labour migration pathways that include migrants occupied in low, medium and high-skilled professions, as well as short- and long-term labour migration, and considers the needs of migrants and communities.

LEVERAGING LABOUR MIGRATION AS ADAPTATION

Labour migration offers several opportunities through which it can act as a climate change adaptation strategy. Decent work can directly reduce the vulnerability – for example through financial stability – while also stimulating development for the migrant workers and their community of origin. Skills and knowledge transfer, along with new networks, can further boost the adaptive capacity of the migrant-sending communities by increasing their competitiveness in labour markets and applying lessons learnt on climate resilient practices. In this context, governments can develop regular labour migration pathways that include measures to maximize the climate adaptation potential for all relevant stakeholders. Through private financial flows, such as remittances, labour migration can contribute to geographical and sectoral diversification of the livelihood portfolio. Indirectly, migrant workers and their communities can invest their savings into local sustainable practices that reduce their vulnerability.

Diasporas form another entry point to promote labour migration as a climate change adaptation strategy. Diaspora communities contribute to the development and climate resilience of communities in the heritage country through their [economic](#), [human](#), [social](#) and [cultural](#) capital.

At the same time, the private sector plays a critical role in respecting the rights of migrant workers, connecting to innovation and the facilitating a transition to a sustainable economy which makes them ideally situated to promote and engage in the development, recognition and transfer of green skills and knowledge. The industries which are impacted the most by a green transition – such as the services industry and agriculture sectors – are among those with the highest concentration of migrant workers.



A worker in the construction sector following displacement after repeated droughts made the agro-pastoral way of living impossible © IOM/Alexander Bee

INCREASED VULNERABILITY OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN THAILAND ON SMALL-SCALE SUGARCANE FARMS

In Southeast Asia, people whose livelihoods may be affected by climate change impacts are increasingly turning to established cross-border labour migration corridors to increase their income, especially when climate change impacts such as droughts and floods adversely affect agricultural livelihoods. In Thailand, many workers from designated border areas in Cambodia and Myanmar use Thailand's Border Employment Regulation or cross the border irregularly, in order to work on small-scale sugarcane plantations in designated Thai provinces. The challenges and limitations to access the scheme means that many migrant workers lack permits and cross borders irregularly. In a study commissioned by IOM, migrant workers working irregularly on smallholder sugarcane plantations have reported exploitative and abusive working conditions, as well as substandard accommodation and physical isolation, which increases their exposure to

adverse climate change impacts such as rains, floods and heatwaves. These natural hazards not only put migrant workers at a direct risk and deteriorate their living conditions further, but also impact their income when working is no longer possible because of the paid by piece principle instead of a fixed income.



Migrant worker on an agricultural farm in Thailand © IOM/Javier Vidal

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRANTS DURING LABOUR MIGRATION

Utilizing labour migration as a climate change adaptation strategy also comes with several risks if it is not managed properly. In these cases, the vulnerability of migrant workers can increase. An increased risk of exploitation across climate-affected migration corridors can be observed as migrant workers might be compelled to work in abusive conditions which increases their exposure to adverse climate impacts and diminish the positive effects of labour migration. Migrant workers, especially those with low-income or low-skill levels, may live in informal settlements that have limited public services and amenities or that are located in hazard prone areas. Furthermore, the social costs of migrants and their families, such as social isolation and discrimination, are more easily overlooked and underscore that human rights should be central in any regular labour migration pathway.

EXAMPLE OF OPPORTUNITY: AUSTRALIA-TUVALU FALEPILI UNION

The Governments of Australia and Tuvalu recently signed [a treaty](#) that includes a regular labour migration pathway component. Yearly 280 people are allowed to migrate from Tuvalu to Australia to boost remittances, along with providing opportunities for skills and knowledge transfer, contributing directly to building climate resilience for the Pacific island country.

Promoting migration through regular channels can not only maximize the potential of utilizing labour migration as an adaptation strategy, but also manage the risks associated to migration, as many migrants who participate outside the legal pathways are more vulnerable to exploitative working conditions. Ensuring ethical recruitment practices, strong regulatory protection of labour migrants and the integration of migrant workers in the labour market and society reduce the possibility for exploitation. Principles such as IOM's [Migrant Worker Guidelines for Employers](#), IOM's [IRIS Standard](#) and the [General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment](#) can be implemented to promote ethical practices among employers and recruiters. In addition, raising the awareness of decision-makers and planners in the destination communities to consider migrants in adaptation planning, as well as including representatives of migrant workers in adaptation planning and monitoring are critical. Using these principles, IOM aims to develop and sustain regular labour migration pathways in collaboration with governments, the private sector and other relevant actors, that maximize the adaptation potential of labour migration for migrant workers and their community of origin, while acknowledging that the families of migrants, especially the women and youth, should be considered in adaptation planning by the decision-makers and planners in the origin communities.