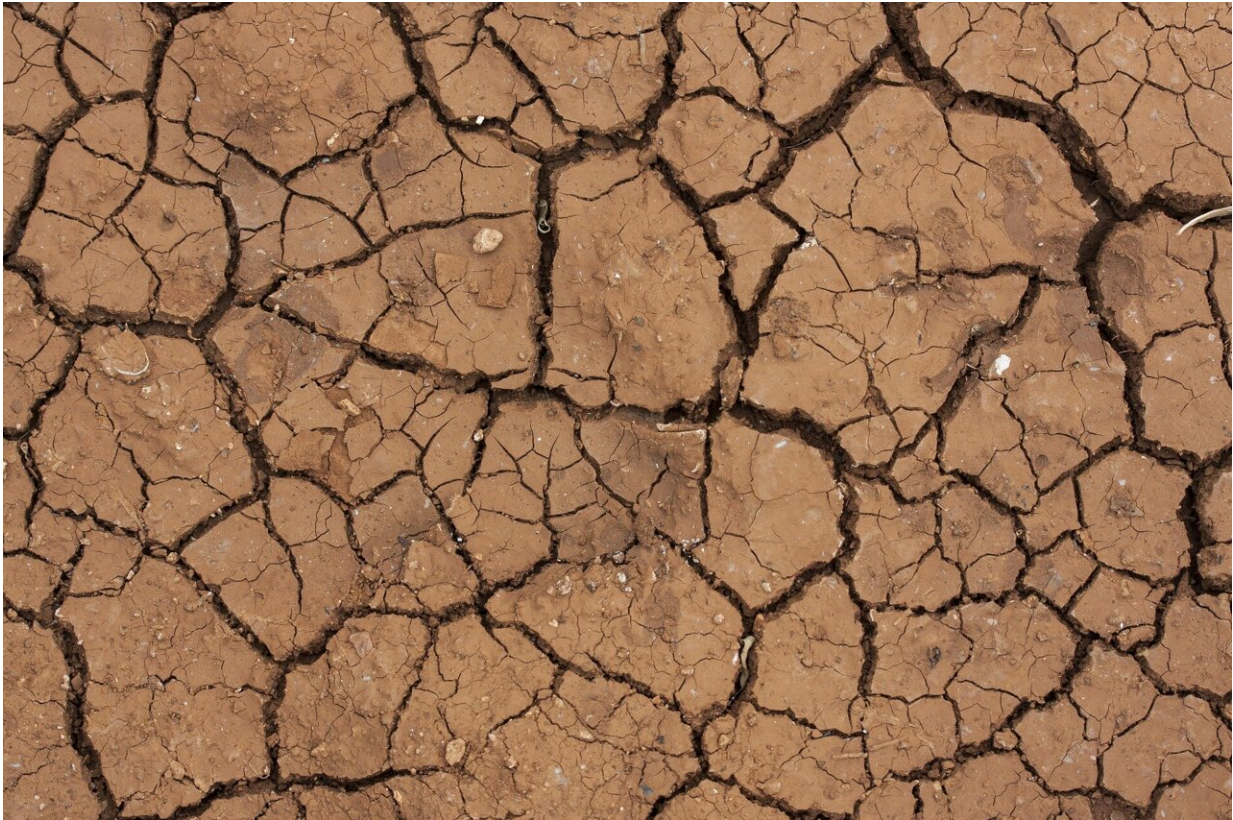


Rethinking boundaries in a warming world

November 22 2023, by Cate Twining-Ward



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These days, migration is always in the news. Around the world, people are displaced by war, political oppression, poverty and violence; every day, families risk their lives in search of better environments.

Weather events alone displace [21.5 million people](#) each year—but recent

projections suggest that [global warming](#) will further prompt mass [migration](#).

In the next few decades, [climate change](#) could push one-third of people from their homes. The [2023 World Bank Development Report](#) stated that climate change will make migration at every scale "increasingly necessary over the next decades for countries of all income levels." And the Institute for Economics and Peace predicts that by 2050 there could be 1.2 billion climate refugees.

The projections are staggering. Yet climate-driven migration is nothing new. For 300,000 years, migration has [aided human evolution](#). Human evolution coincided with significant environmental change, and those most adaptable to changing surroundings survived and reproduced.

Changes in climate can equally threaten non-human animals. From insects to large-order mammals, and everything in between, species after species are under increasing threat because the [rate of environmental change today](#) is unprecedented.

Taking into account humanity's long history of movement, scientists argue that migration is both a [biological and cultural norm](#). Given its inevitability, demonizing migration and migrants could result in further casualties, while delaying much needed action.

For any species, migration is inevitable in times of crisis. But this fact has been misconstrued for decades. Contrary to popular belief, the widespread framing of migration as a threat does not improve our safety—rather, it makes politicians likely to act on policies that will help us adapt to the inevitable.

On nearly every continent, migration shapes foreign policy and defines political campaigns. And, commonly, migration is framed as a crisis,

burden or threat.

But characterizing migration as a threat may result in more harm than good. [New research](#) shows that when framed as a threat, messages about climate-driven migration in five countries—China, Germany, India, UK and the U.S.—resulted in reduced public support for migration policies.

Conversely, when framed as an opportunity, public support for migration-friendly policies increases. Making matters worse, research also shows that framing migrants as the enemy not only breeds intolerance, it also [fosters climate inaction](#).

According to the study, when environmental migrants were framed as victims or as [security threats](#), it intensified the [false belief](#) that migration would lead to resource conflicts; but when migrants were framed as "adaptive agents," people are more inclined to view migration as [an adaptive solution](#) to climate change.

In light of the above, regional actors have been vocal about bringing migration to the global stage. In building momentum ahead of COP28, the Asia Pacific Climate Week, in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, focused on the nexus between climate change and [human mobility](#)—highly topical for the region, given the vulnerability of many islands to the impacts of climate change.

By the end of the century, climate change could amplify the economic damages to Small Island Developing States by 14 times what they are presently. In Geneva, the 2023 International Dialogue on Migration developed a plan to be presented at COP28, for accelerating solutions to climate mobility.

At this year's COP, as stakeholders begin preparing for what is set to be an intense agenda, how migration is approached, and by whom, will set

the global stage for future preparedness and its necessary protocols. Framing migration in a positive way, rife with opportunity, cannot be understated.

"Addressing the human mobility consequences of climate and environmental change must leverage the positive role of migration as an adaptation strategy," says Chris Richer, a climate change specialist for the International Organization for Migration—otherwise, we may all be doomed to failure.

Embracing common ground

Modern humans have a [narrow climate niche](#). This doesn't bode well in a rapidly warming world. Our optimal temperature alcove, between 11 and 15 degrees Centigrade, has allowed humans to flourish for over 6,000 years, in a small subset of Earth's climates. But these temperatures are rising at an [unprecedented rate](#), threatening our livelihoods, homes and survival.

COP28 presents a crucial opportunity for presenting strategies that will help mitigate the associated challenges of forthcoming mass migration. Thematic categories selected for this year's conference include adaptation and resilience, the built environment, desertification, and human rights.

Let us hope our international organizations will act in unison to confront global risks. In the face of [climate](#) gridlock, we are in need of those with the willingness, credibility, and resources to meaningfully act for the common good.

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