

Climate change, migration
and vulnerability to trafficking

28th September 2021 Online event

Event report

Climate change, migration and vulnerability to trafficking

Workshop report

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About the event

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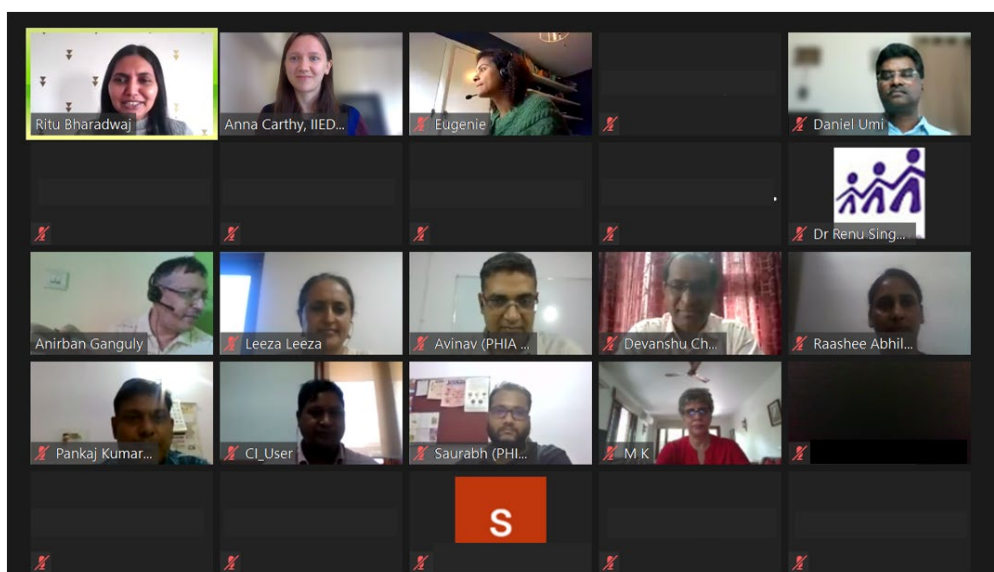
Climate change, migration & vulnerability to trafficking

28th September workshop report

On the 28th September 2021, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) convened a range of key stakeholders and experts in the fields of climate change, migration, and trafficking. The workshop was intended to explore the nexus between climate change, migration and trafficking, by facilitating discussion and exchange on a range of topics. It was conducted as part of a research project which will examine whether there is a causal link between climate change, migration, and trafficking. This is a new area of research which will analyse these three elements in two case-study locations in India.

Although there is a growing literature on the factors that shape vulnerability to human trafficking, such as poverty and lack of economic opportunity, the evidence on root cause of these factors, particularly in context of climate change, is not well documented. Also, the understanding of the relationship between climate change and vulnerability to trafficking has been marginal - a significant gap exists in (i) our understanding of the underlying drivers that push the disadvantaged communities into situations where vulnerability to trafficking amplifies; (ii) factors that increase the pull towards risky migration pathways that lead to exploitative work situations; and (iii) gaps in the existing social protection mechanism that fail to provide the safety net during climate crisis that can help them avoid dangerous coping strategies and expose them to trafficking. A better understanding of climate change related insecurity as evidence of vulnerability to trafficking can provide insights into ways in which existing social protection schemes can be strengthened to support anti-trafficking efforts.

IIED is undertaking a research in partnership with grassroots level organizations to address this gap and generate evidence on the relationship between climate-change, migration and vulnerability to trafficking. The study will examine whether and to what extent climate change impacts and climate-related migration or displacement expose women and girls, men and boys to risks of human trafficking, forced labour, bonded labour, debt bondage and forced or early marriage - in two case study locations. These case study locations will represent two different types of climate vulnerability, viz, slow onset events like drought and rapid onset events like floods and cyclones.



As part of this project, we organized a workshop on 28 September 2021 with organisations and experts working on the issues of climate change, migration and trafficking with the view to get their inputs, advice and learnings to co-develop the conceptual framework for this research.

The workshop explored the following thematic areas:

Session 1. The drivers of trafficking

Context

The drivers of vulnerability to modern slavery are complex, cross-cutting and impacted by multidimensional layers of risks, which encompass social, economic, political, cultural, and institutional factors. At an individual or household level the root causes of vulnerability stem from exclusion, marginalisation, poverty, unemployment, lack of education, low skill level, lack of access to resources and basic services, lack of alternatives and low socioeconomic status. It is worth noting that these factors are interlinked and quite often it is social inequality and the resulting power imbalances that create vulnerability to slavery. At community level, the drivers of risk include weak institutions and decision-making bodies with lack of resources and democratic processes, access to poor infrastructure and basic services such as schools, health facilities, economic and political instability.

Priority messages co-identified by participants

The pathways to trafficking are varied. There are both push and pull factors, as well as facilitating factors, that create the environment where people migrate and become vulnerable to trafficking. The major pull factor is demand for labour in cities and towns, while social networks were also evoked as a pull factor. A key push factor that featured in discussions – aside from climate change – was conflict. Violence, religious and political conflicts are considered important in forcing people into precarious situations, a factor which was deemed understudied. Other push factors include a lack of livelihood opportunities and large scale industrialisation of land. Finally, the presence of facilitating factors, such as trafficking intermediaries or online platforms, are also important to take into account. As intermediaries between workers and employers, recruitment / placement agencies play a role in creating pathways for unsafe migration and trafficking. In addition, the use (and abuse) of social media and online platforms is a new trend in trafficking, and online trafficking is on the rise.

“it is holistic... it is not just one or two factors that cause people to be vulnerable to trafficking”

Who is most vulnerable? Several groups were considered to be highly vulnerable to unsafe migration and trafficking, notably children, women, women-headed households, and tribal people. Women and children are particularly at risk because they are not included in online registration of labourers and are thus rendered ‘invisible’. Risks are high for those women who migrate from their homes, especially if their destination is a camp setting, but also for those who are left at home while male family members migrate, because women-headed households face higher risk of trafficking. However, beyond simply naming vulnerable groups, it is crucial to dig into what is meant by the term ‘disadvantaged’. Who is disadvantaged historically and how are we defining that? It is important to go beyond simply socio-economic information and understand the root causes of vulnerability and marginalisation, including their historical and political context. To do so, research into this issue must be participatory and inclusive and avoid being extractive.

“look at context of historical marginalization of these community pockets”

A spectrum of exploitative work exists. There are conditions that keep people in a perpetual cycle of poverty and, while not called ‘trafficking’, cannot be considered safe. One example is women from Jharkhand working in the garment factories in Tamil Nadu, where they received low wages, are not paid on time, and face poor work conditions and long hours. The range of exploitative working circumstances is often not acknowledged. However, it is important to not look solely at the extreme manifestations, but at the entire spectrum that keeps people in this loop. In addition, it is important to look at trafficking in both source and destination locations. There may be specific stressors in each area that create conditions for trafficking. For example, different areas may face different types of climate risk: a rural inland area might be drought-prone, causing people to migrate to a coastal city, which may be exposed to flooding, storm surges or cyclones. These different risks may both act as stressors to the risk of trafficking.

“between safe planned migration and trafficking there is a whole spectrum of exploitative work conditions”

Session 2. Is climate change a stress multiplier to drivers of trafficking?

Context

Climate change acts as a stress multiplier to factors driving trafficking. While several socioeconomic, political, cultural and institutional vulnerabilities act as drivers to modern slavery, they are increasingly being considered to be worsened by climate change impacts and environmental degradation. The FAO released a report in March 2021 demonstrating that the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather disasters such as floods, droughts and megafires due to climate change is resulting in devastating effect on food security and livelihoods of those already living in poverty and marginalisation. These situations create circumstances where the vulnerable communities are preyed, forced or coerced into slavery and slavery type practices. For example, damages to the agricultural sector caused by natural hazards and climate change (loss of crops, livestock and fisheries) can erode the livelihoods of already socioeconomically vulnerable communities’ forcing them towards risky coping strategies in absence of other safety nets making them more susceptible to becoming victim of slavery.

Priority messages co-identified by participants

A clear connection exists between climate change, migration and human trafficking. This intersection is generally accepted among practitioners based on their experiences on the ground and this is thus emerging as a new area of research study. Climate change and climate hazards are triggering risky migration patterns, for example flooding of the Ganga River creates displacement from Bihar during monsoons. Distress migration often also results from loss of rainfall or loss of crops. For example, dependence on a single crop means that any change in the rainy season can cause significant out migration, particularly from communities of Santhals and/or Bhuniyas. These circumstances increase the risk of trafficking. Migration is increasingly occurring from tribal areas and among young people. It is important to also account for the aspiration aspects of migration among young people and the factors pushing them to leave home.

“experiences from the ground clearly indicate a deep connection between climate impacts and distress migration”

Both slow and rapid onset-events cause risky migration.

There are several examples of rapid-onset climate hazards plunging people without safety nets into poverty, causing migration, and increasing the risk of trafficking. In Assam, people are displaced by floods every year. On the east coast, the frequent cyclone events are increasingly severe, which contributes to the significant migration observed from eastern India. Slow-onset events are also associated with increased trafficking. Changes in climate variability and increasing prevalence of drought conditions has displaced entire villages. In some circumstances, farmers are forced to become agricultural labourers and borrow money to survive. In this way, debt is a push factor into trafficking under conditions of slow onset climate hazards. Communities with high dependence on forest resources are also at risk of unsafe migration and trafficking as climate change is predicted to increasingly impact forests and the non-timber forest produce which many livelihoods rely on.

“We have seen buses are coming to the Northeast and taking people for the work... This increases on occurrence of climate change extreme events as these incidents make people more vulnerable”

Pre-existing vulnerability remains vital. Climate change acts as a stress multiplier to many other factors that lead to unsafe migration and trafficking. It compounds existing challenges and issues. For this reason, it doesn't manifest equally for different groups. Climate impacts affect people differently based on their pre-existing vulnerability. For example, Bhuniya people with small landholdings and dependency on natural resources are more at risk when climate risks hit. Climatic shifts can create deep distress within such communities and lead to debt bondage and migration. In communities more generally, those without access to resources are those first and worst affected when climate hazards strike. Social inequity is thus very important to consider, particularly based on gender, class and caste.

“When these climate hazards happen it adds to the vulnerability – they are already vulnerable but it makes them more vulnerable”

Session 3. The gaps in existing response mechanisms to trafficking

Context

The biggest shortcoming of anti-trafficking initiatives is a lack of effort to address the root cause of this issue. While there is a recognition that factors such as poverty, uneven development and gender inequality shape vulnerability to human trafficking – effective social protection mechanisms that can help in addressing these issues particularly in the face of climate or environmental crisis is less than adequate. When access and protection are not available, especially for women and girls – they get exposed to exploitation and trafficking. Social protection systems, access to basic public services and sustainable infrastructure are key to addressing trafficking. There is a need to consider vulnerability to trafficking in the framing of social protection initiatives and climate risk management framework, where the priority to prevention of trafficking should be recognised and addressed – so that the vulnerable communities have sufficient coping capacity in the face of climate and other crisis viz. to appropriate shelter, food grain, decent work/ jobs/ livelihood opportunity, skills, health care, justice system etc., because the lack of or inadequacy of these expose them to exploitation.

Priority messages co-identified by participants

Ensuring inclusive and broad access to social protection and safety nets is crucial. Mechanisms do already exist that aim to decrease communities' vulnerability to climate change and its consequences. It is important to understand what has and hasn't worked in the operation of such schemes and to assess the potential of programmes like MGNREGS and Food for Work to reduce distress migration during or after climate-related extreme events. One key factor in the success of such programmes is who they are available and accessible to, and whether socially and economically disadvantaged groups are included. Context-specific power dynamics determine who has access to safety nets, and this is often skewed towards certain social groups. Marginalised groups' access to certain resources can be minimal due to imbalanced social structures.

“Access to public services and social protection programmes across different social communities... is another important factor”

Creating safe migration opportunities is a priority. Migration can be viewed as both a risk and an opportunity, depending on the circumstances. Migration is not necessarily a negative outcome, or something to be prevented entirely. It can provide benefits both for those who migrate and families who remain at home, to come out of poverty and to recover from periods of stress. However, protections for those who migrate and measures to promote safe migration pathways are important to prevent risky practices resulting in trafficking. Measures to facilitate safer migration include introducing portable social protection entitlements. Another example is provided by the governments of Telangana and Odisha, who collaborated together to ensure migrants travel safely in particular corridors and to reduce the vulnerability of migrant workers. Finally, how the Global Compact on Migration is operationalised and delivered on is also useful to consider.

“We need to promote safe and regular migration”

Political momentum and action can play a catalysing role. COVID-19 has brought the issue of migration to the forefront as it raised serious challenges for migrant workers in India. This might therefore be a politically salient moment to incite action on the issue. There is currently some momentum, including a draft bill on anti-human trafficking and a national investigation agency is soon to investigate trafficking issues. While individual states have tried to support migrants during the pandemic, there remains no national policy on migration. There is lack of coordination between these levels and labour laws have become diluted. Labour trafficking and exploitation is still a major issue, especially for informal workers' groups. Policies at different levels, from district to national, are therefore important. Meanwhile, in the absence of national laws or policies on the issue, civil society has played a strong role in preventing risky distress migration and supporting migrant workers. For example, civil society organisations have supported the government of Orissa to develop an action plan on distress migration in eleven districts and a programme to support parents' education in villages where distress migration is occurring.

“Thanks to Covid - it brought the migrants issue to the forefront, every government is talking about it.”

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Event
Materials

Climate change

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