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Livelihoods in Migration Contexts
and the Growing Challenge of Climate Change

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This paper focuses on migration and livelihoods, but recognizes that climate change is an amplifier for the first and creates the need for adaptation to the second. Therefore a better understanding is needed of how these three elements—migration, livelihoods and climate change—fit together. The purpose of this document is to provide a short, practical guide to move forward thinking on livelihoods programming in migration contexts (including climate migration) and to support the communities of practice that work on these issues by making them aware of evidence and resources that already exist.

How this work began…

Inspired by a lively webinar discussion in July 2021, an implementer Learning Group was organized to provide space to discuss the challenges of working on livelihoods programming in migration contexts. The United States Agency for International Development Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), through the Strengthening Capacity in Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Environment (SCALE) award, supported the webinar and Learning Group. It quickly became clear that livelihoods practitioners often have limited familiarity with the migration resources already available—possibly because migration is frequently framed as a failure of development (e.g., many livelihoods programs are designed to prevent migration, rather than viewing migration as one of many ways to contribute to household income). At the same time, climate change is forcing implementers to think differently about 'traditional' livelihoods programming, and also increasing the need for migration (which some consider to be forced migration).

What are the issues?

Migration is a politically sensitive subject in many countries, which can drive donor priorities and subsequently implementer activities. As a result, livelihoods programming often side-steps issues of migration or focuses on keeping populations in place (as the least politically sensitive approach). Busy with this type of livelihoods work, implementers rarely move beyond their programmatic scope to explore how migration fits into household livelihood income streams in the contexts where they are working. This means that the positive role migration can play in livelihoods, climate adaptation, and development generally is overlooked.

The World Bank notes that "migration is not a substitute for development, but it can be leveraged for development." Estimates indicate that there are 281 million migrants worldwide (including economic and voluntary migration as well as refugees and other types of forced migration) but contrary to popular belief, the share of emigrants from low-income countries going to other low-income countries is larger than the share going to high-income countries. This means that many countries where international NGOs operate livelihoods programs are both sending and receiving migrants. For example, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya are estimated to host the highest number of migrants in the region (1.5m, 1.1m, and 1.0m respectively), yet they are also estimated to have diaspora populations of 1.5m, 2.5m, and 3m respectively.

Despite the impacts of COVID, projections point to a significant increase in migration driven by demographics, income gaps, increasing conflict, and climate change. The 'youth bulge' in countries like Nigeria, Uganda, and India—alongside an income differential of 54:1 between high-income and low-income countries—will continue to drive people's desire to migrate. (See this recent resource for more data and statistics on migration.) Post-COVID labor shortages in many high-income countries point to the potential benefits of increased cross-border labor mobility for both sending and receiving countries, although protectionist policies are more common in countries with weaker economies.

DEFINITIONS

Migrant
Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is. (IOM 2019).

Forcibly Displaced
Refugees and Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often considered to be forcibly displaced. A distinguishing feature of forced displacement is that individuals may not have sufficient time and choice to determine when and how to leave and where to go. In addition, climate change may be considered a factor in forcing displacement.
(World Bank, 2019)

In addition, according to USAID's Climate Strategy 2022-2030, weather-related disasters displace around 30 million people annually, and modeling suggests that the interaction of climate impacts with other pressures will lead to hundreds of millions of new migrants by 2050. However, most climate-related migration occurs within national borders (to urban destinations and may be either a seasonal or permanent movement). Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Sudan are among the top five countries expected to face climate migration issues.

How do we re-frame the pros and cons of migration?

Seen through the lenses of climate change and resilience, donors and livelihoods practitioners have an opportunity to reframe migration as a choice and an opportunity—one that has both benefits and risks to be proactively managed. While the benefits or drawbacks will be specific to country context and individuals, the design of livelihoods programs can be guided by the issues raised in the table below.

Benefits for countries sending and receiving migrants	Benefits for migrants	Downside for migrants
Strengthening legal channels can decrease the appeal of illegal channels	Safer, more reliable travel; potentially less expensive than informal channels	Increased administrative burden; may need specific skills to be eligible; potential xenophobia in receiving countries
Providing alternatives to the 'all or nothing' choice faced by illegal migrants makes it more likely that migration will be temporary or circular	Can likely return to visit friends and family as desired without jeopardizing migration status	Permanent settlement may not be a legal option
Migration can be used to meet labor market gaps in receiving countries, if appropriate training/support is provided (e.g., shortage of healthcare workers)	Increased likelihood of being hired after training if training is aligned with identified market needs	Job opportunities may not be found in all sectors where migrants would prefer to work
Increase in training programs may contribute to a 'brain gain' in sending countries as not all potential migrants will leave, and many will return after gaining on-the-job experience	Increased income; more diverse/prestigious work experience	Psychological stress of being far from friends and family
Remittances support economic growth in sending countries, especially those that have a more efficient financial sector	Remittances provide more direct and immediate financial support to households than aid programs	Cost of remittance transfers are still high; pressure to send money home may lead to poor living conditions in host countries
Increased tax base for receiving countries when migrants are legal and paying taxes	Likely to gain increased access to public services	Taxes slightly lower migrants' disposable income
Supporting affordable childcare (in all countries) contributes to increased female labor-force participation, contributes to other development goals	High demand for affordable childcare is an employment opportunity for lower skilled migrants, and is likely to continue to be a need in high-income countries	May not bring any additional 'status' to migrants upon returning home; lower-paid work

So where are we headed?

USAID's new Climate Strategy envisages working with partners to address climate-related migration to both limit displacement and to support safer and more productive migration. This positive framing (and that of the chart above) is important because research shows that anti-immigration rhetoric in press reports has increased over the last two decades. This undermines the economic contribution made by migrants and can skew the design of livelihoods activities—for example when a program design that views migration as a positive livelihood option or coping choice is seen as 'too political.'

Alongside negative press, the focus of donor agencies has in the past been largely negative regarding migration. An analysis of 134 USAID Requests for Applications, Requests for Information, and European Commission Action Documents from 2014 to 2020 revealed a bias towards static development strategies and limited appreciation for investment in migration. In the few solicitations for migration programming, donors sought to manage, contain, or prevent labor mobility rather than viewing it as an appropriate livelihood strategy; one that is not always illegal (legality is context dependent).

The Global Compact on Migration now provides a framework for bringing together refugee protections and good practice in addressing migration and displacement. The objectives in the Compact are aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and recognize the multi-dimensional nature of migration. The 23 objectives outlined in the Compact provide an excellent starting point for staff to reflect on how their livelihoods work can contribute to higher-level migration objectives.

What migration resources are useful to livelihoods practitioners?

There is already a wealth of resources available to donors and implementers that can help them design livelihoods programming that looks more meaningfully at migration issues. However, experience from the Learning Group showed that many implementers are not aware of migration-focused resources. This list provides a starting point for discovering the datasets and resources that may be useful in program design.

The United Nation's Network on Migration has a wide range of resources including a Repository of Practices and a Knowledge Platform. This is a good starting point for livelihoods and markets practitioners to find a broad range of resources, e-learning, and events relevant to specific topics of interest.

Mapping private sector engagement along the migration cycle can help implementers of livelihoods and markets work to understand how the private sector can support the various stages of migration. This resource from ECDPM (the Centre for Africa-Europe relations) includes clear graphics and reflections that can help a team to more accurately map the markets that migrants engage with.

The Global Repository of Good Practices from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre provides a platform to share policies and programmatic approaches that support better solutions for displaced people worldwide. The initial focus of the repository is examples relating to displacement linked with climate change.

For data on different aspects of migration and remittances, the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) is a global hub of knowledge and policy expertise on migration and development issues, where one can find data and analytics, research for solutions, migration diagnostics, technical assistance and more. And for those specifically focused on youth there are specific pages dedicated to Children and Youth.

Forced Migration Review (available in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic) and Migration and Development Brief provide a wealth of perspectives on migration issues as authors from around the world analyze the causes and impacts of displacement; debate policies and programmes; share research findings; reflect the lived experience of displacement; and present recommendations for policy and action on migration issues.

A recent case study on applying a Market Systems Resilience (MSR) lens to labor migration is the Market Systems Resilience Assessment: Nepal (Trend 3). The case looks at how Nepal can unlock its resource potential and manage risks to become more competitive, inclusive, and resilient.

The Displacement Tracking Matrix from the International Organization for Migration tracks and monitors displacement and population mobility in 73 countries. It is designed to support decision-makers and responders to better understand population flows and emerging needs.

In addition, there are a wide variety of systems tools being used by livelihoods and markets practitioners, which are available at BEAM Exchange and Marketlinks. These tools lend themselves to migration-focused systems approaches, and livelihoods practitioners should feel comfortable using them to understand systemic issues that affect the opportunities and barriers for migrants.

Five recommendations for improving livelihoods programming in migration contexts

Building on the resources noted above, here are four steps that livelihoods implementers and donors can take when designing programs to better address the intersection of livelihoods, migration, and climate change.

1. **Understand the incentives on all sides.** This will help implementers, governments, and host communities to identify shared goals, which can then be addressed using collective impact and systems approaches.

   Household migration aspirations, decisions, and actions are shaped by:
   - Perceptions of local livelihoods and employment options and how well these currently meet household needs; and similarly, perceptions about the desirability of migration as an alternative or supplemental livelihood strategy
   - Information that households and individuals have regarding the specific migration opportunities available to them
   - Actual costs of migration (in both financial and human security terms) and the ability and willingness of households or individuals to pay these costs
   - Timing of migration opportunities, as compared to household needs or aspirations, and whether the migration is understood to be permanent or temporary

   Local governments may experience conflicting agendas. They may:
   - Need support in providing the infrastructure and services to manage migrant inflows
   - Face capacity constraints within their own staff
   - Be hearing positive or negative feedback from the business community regarding labor market needs in country
   - Need to respond to political pressures regarding xenophobia in the country

   Providing examples of how other governments have handled similar issues (examples from Jordan and Uganda) may be useful in identifying the role local officials can play in shared agendas, and where there are gaps.

   Implementing organizations and donors should actively and intentionally increase coordination between organizations working on migration issues and those working on livelihoods and markets. In conflict contexts, draw from existing learning on the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus to build shared understanding around incentives.

2. **Use existing migration data sources to deepen contextual understanding and invest in robust research to fill context data gaps.** Experience from the Learning Group showed that livelihoods practitioners were largely unaware of the wealth of resources available on migration, and how it could be used to support livelihoods programming. There is a large body of data that can underpin learning and program design, as well as supporting the development of shared agendas.

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Two specific opportunities for implementers and donors are worth pointing out:

- **Remittances**—Increase the contextual understanding of remittances for the populations they are working with and seek opportunities to leverage remittances to increase adaptation, resilience, and economic growth.
- **Forecasting data**—Look at how existing climate forecasting and migration forecasting tools can better help governments and implementers plan ahead for migration support. For very localized forecasts, implementers may consider developing their own forecast in collaboration with local communities and governments.

3. Support appropriate capacity building and training in fields that are in demand.

There are two main groups that are likely to need support with capacity building or training:

- **Local government staff** may be overwhelmed by incoming migrants and may benefit from support in addressing specific needs identified in shared agendas. This is particularly true in urban settings where local authorities may struggle to integrate climate and migration dimensions; but it is through this kind of local-level work that migrant-inclusive societies are most likely to be built.
- **Potential migrants and recent migrants** are likely to need skills that are aligned with specific gaps in receiving country labor markets (e.g., health care, child care), or skills related to resilience in receiving countries (such as language training, understanding of rights, context knowledge). In many cases, migrants also need help with managing their expectations, both prior to departure and after arrival.

4. Advocate for and test migration solutions that have the potential to be win-win.

This might include:

- **Work with governments to identify labor market gaps or business opportunities that could be filled with skills provided by migrants.** This might be similar to the work done in Jordan or programs in Turkey. This type of program may reduce the need for ongoing aid and also can contribute to increasing social cohesion between host and migrant communities.
- **Develop or strengthen programs that support legal migration**, potentially with obligations of return and contribution to local capacity building. For example, these could be work/study abroad programs that allow migrants to fill temporary labor gaps in receiving countries, returning to their home country after a set period of time with skills that are also needed in the sending country.
- **Link households receiving remittances with financial literacy and business skills training**, to allow them to invest incoming remittances in ways that promote resilience and economic growth. Existing tools such as this guide on remittances and diaspora investments could support implementers with this kind of activity.
- **Increase the information available** to potentially migrating households, through outreach activities, for example information on legal channels of migration so that people understand the risks and opportunities for migration generally and can make informed choices.
- **Build** locally led climate adaptation **into program design**, so that local communities feel better prepared to manage the challenges they are likely to face in the future.

5. Work to change the negative public perception in host countries with campaigns that inform the public of positive benefits of migrants and encourage appropriate policy changes. In high-income countries where implementers may have headquarter operations, this work may focus on advocacy or targeted marketing. In implementation countries, a good starting point is repackaging and sharing data from large-scale studies with different audiences.

Studies such as this one on Dadaab Refugee camp, which looked at the socio-economic benefits of the camp, are useful to donors and implementers for planning, but information on the positive economic impact of refugees on the local economy should also be shared in clear easy-to-understand messages with government and local communities. Similarly, in-depth studies done by the international community on climate change and potential adaptations, if shared appropriately, can contribute to local community understanding of whether migration is the right choice for their households.

It is clear that more robust approaches to livelihoods programming in migration contexts are needed. It is also clear that the pressure of climate change and continued conflict is likely to increase the usefulness of these 'new' approaches and that systems approaches have a role to play in addressing these challenges. The goal for donors, implementers, and local governments should be to support opportunities for safe, legal migration that provides win-win economic benefits for sending and receiving countries as well as for migrants and the households they support.