BROOKINGS

Research – Policy – Action

What Research on Climate Change and Human Mobility Can/Should Provide for Practitioners and Policy Makers

Informal Lunch Roundtable on Climate Change and Human Mobility

Wednesday, September 26, 2012, 12.00 – 1.30 pm

The Brookings Institution, Stein Room, 1775 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC

Research predicts that a warming climate will have major effects on human mobility. Some people will migrate, some are likely to be displaced and still others are likely to be relocated by their governments to avoid the effects of climate change. While the Foresight Report on Migration and Global Environmental Change (2011) tried to address many of these questions around human mobility, many gaps in research remain. What kind of research do policy-makers and practitioners need to prepare for the effects of climate change on mobility? How to researchers seek to respond to these needs? As part of the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement's climate change and human mobility roundtable series, this roundtable brought together researchers, policy makers and practitioners who deal with issues of climate change and human mobility to discuss the relationship between research, policy and practice. To get the discussion going we asked experts from different fields to offer brief remarks**.**

Speakers:

Jane McAdam: Designing research relevant for policy and praxis
Professor and Director of the International Refugee and Migration Law Project, Gilbert + Tobin Centre of Public Law, Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales, Australia and Nonresident Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement

Anita Malley: Research as background for humanitarian assistance
Acting Senior Displacement and Protection Policy Advisor, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)

Alice Thomas: The use of research in advocacy
Climate Displacement Program Manager, Refugees International

Part I: Presentations

Jane McAdam began by noting that academic research was often described as being in an ivory tower but that she was trying to develop research that included greater public policy implications. Still, there is a need to distinguish between a public policy and a research agenda.

Her engagement with the issue of climate change and human mobility began when she was interviewed by a radio station on 'environmental refugees'. She quickly clarified that the term was a misnomer, but it led her to start looking at international law issues related to climate change and mobility. A multi-year project looking at international law and international governance frameworks for those who might be displaced across borders culminated with the publication of a book in spring 2012. This was intended in part to help shape the public debate on the relationship between environmental change and the movement of people. Another example of a good policy process that is underpinned by research is the Nansen Initiative.

The question for academics is how to marry research with policy. On the one hand, there is pressure on academics to publish books and scholarly articles in refereed journals; the long timeframe needed for these to be published can limit the relevance of academic research for policies being discussed today. Moreover, in order to reach the policy community, academics need to be able to synthesize complex arguments into short papers with clear policy recommendations. This can be frustrating for academics who feel that nuance is lost when they simplify their arguments. Sometimes too, academics may simply not know the policy implications of their research. Academics may also be reluctant to admit to gray areas of research, especially in politically contentious areas such as refugee law. In many countries, such as Australia, refugee law remains politicized and debates on the subject exist within a highly divisive context. Jane noted that commissioned research, on the other hand, was sometimes problematic as it was often sought to support a particular agenda.

Anita Malley started by explaining the role of USAID's Office of U.S. Disaster Assistance (OFDA). While USAID/OFDA mostly works on providing humanitarian assistance it is also supports disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts. In her area of work – specifically protection of disaster-affected population, there is a strong impetus to do more evaluation in order to see what works and what doesn't work to improve the protection of populations.

In terms of climate change and displacement, USAID is concerned that natural disasters will increasingly cause displacement and is particularly interested to understand the impacts of disasters on vulnerability and on population movement.

Some of the key questions she would pose to researchers are:

- What is the range of needs of people who move and who don't move because of disasters?

- How can we better distinguish who are the most vulnerable people?
- What types of DRR assistance are most effective, especially in regards to human mobility?
- Do considerations of mobility pose new challenges we need to think about in disaster response?

For example, in Haiti, there were reports that hundreds of thousands of people left Port-au-Prince after the earthquake but no information about their needs or about what happened to them in the early days of the earthquake response. And the needs in the capital were just too large to put sufficient resources into researching the conditions of those that left the city. Because there were no mechanisms in place to gauge their vulnerability, USAID had no way of developing appropriate assistance programs.

Alice Thomas explained that Refugees International (RI) is an independent advocacy organization which does not take money from governments or UN agencies and carries out field missions of 3-6 weeks to crisis areas, carrying out qualitative research. The reports of this research are usually 4 pages long in order to be digestible to policy makers and members of congress. Each report includes a set of recommendations. The advantage of this type of research report is that it can be produced quickly – particularly in comparison with academic or peer reviewed research and can encourage action before the more in-depth research papers come out. RI missions to Pakistan, Colombia and the Sahel have analyzed the nature of climate change-induced displacement. There are some important differences between displacement resulting from conflict and from disasters. For example, with the floods in Pakistan, RI found that those displaced returned home relatively quickly after the disaster had abated. However, humanitarian agencies were geared towards building camps rather than assisting people dispersed over a wide geographical area. There is a need to link the humanitarian response phase to longer-term development challenges but there was little inter-agency cooperation on those issues. She noted that even though there are still large gaps in what we know about climate change and displacement, we should not wait to know everything to take needed action.

Part II: Questions and Discussion

Framing the issue of climate change and human mobility

The way issues are framed is important, one participant noted. In particular, are climate change and human mobility questions framed as a humanitarian, development or security issues? If they are seen as humanitarian issues, then it is logical to expect the response to come from humanitarian actors. It seems that the issue of slow-onset disasters is being 'hijacked' by the disaster response community and yet it is likely that the solutions have more to do with development programs than with humanitarian response. Several participants noted the difficulty of determining the extent to which climate change contributes to individual decisions to move. For example, it is likely that climate change is one factor impacting livelihoods and it is the loss of livelihoods, rather than climate change per se which leads people to decide to leave their communities.

One participant questioned whether displacement from natural disasters should be framed in terms of climate change even though it is not possible to attribute any one storm, flood or drought to climate change. For example, some climate activists have used these disasters to raise fears that climate change will result in large numbers of "climate refugees" thereby trying to motivate action to prevent global warming. Academics, on the other hand, have taken a much more cautious approach and, noting the complexity of reasons for migration, have shied away from making generalizations around climate and human mobility. While on the one hand it is good to avoid simplifying the issue and to ensure that discussions around climate and displacement are evidence-based, framing this kind of displacement as climate change-induced is important for instilling a sense of responsibility in the American people regarding their responsibility for the human impacts of climate change. Americans need to recognize the impact their high-carbon lifestyles are having on the poorest people in the world. Not making the link between increased natural disasters and displacement means that the US will continue to view its assistance to people displaced by climate-related events solely as a moral or humanitarian response, rather than seeing themselves as having caused the problem, and perhaps shifting views regarding their responsibility to provide protection to and refuge for people displaced by these events.. Another participant questioned this line of argument, noting that making people feel guilty was usually not a good way of motivating people to do the right thing.

There was a rich discussion about whether the response is – or should be -- different to a disaster which seemed to be related to climate change than one with no apparent relationship. Another participant noted that trying to determine the extent to which climate change is responsible for a particular disaster can be a distraction. For example, people in migration or climate change departments may pass on responsibility, saying 'this isn't our department's responsibility.' And in many countries, public opinion is still questioning whether climate change does in fact, exist.

Target audience and format of research-output

Participants talked about the ways in which research results are presented in terms of the intended audience, noting that short policy briefs were useful for policy-makers who rarely had time (or the inclination) to read long academic studies. And yet sometimes short studies over-simplify complex issues.

One participant talked about her experience with business lobbyists where it was important to tailor the message to the audience, which in her opinion, researchers were not sufficiently doing. The use of appropriate language so people can understand the message is critical. Participants also emphasized the need to use new media, such as video presentations and social media, to reach different target audiences, particularly younger audiences.

There was general agreement that more attention needs to be devoted to disseminating research results, for example by launching studies and reports with public events to engage different audiences and by packaging research results into different formats, aimed at different target audiences.

The merits and shortcomings of academic research

One contribution that academics can make to the policy community is their knowledge of methodology and one role which academics can play is providing this expertise to the policy community. One participant noted the difficulties of carrying out evaluations of disaster response in real time.

Another participant noted the importance of engaging with policy-makers before conducting research to be certain that the right questions were being asked and that the research would be useful.

Another participant asked that we should re-shape the question to be: who are the producers of knowledge? This includes not only academics from well-financed, Northern institutions but also people on the local level who are critical sources of knowledge. Many people in developing countries simply do not have the voice that they deserve. She also noted, that we need to think about which policy-makers we are trying to support. Governments of Western countries aren't the only priorities. Research is useful for people working in a variety of frontline situations.

One participant wondered whether there was still a need for books as a tool for disseminating research results. Another noted that peer-reviewed journals take a long time, particularly in comparison with the increasing use of social media. Another participant agreed that it was important, even vital, to write books as they provided an important level of analysis, but that the challenge for academics was to think about a diversity of audiences. Maybe academics would need the support of professional communicators to get their message to diverse audiences as the British government had for the Foresight report.

Sometimes the link between knowledge about particular needs and response is inadequate. One participant brought up the example of Haiti, where days after the earthquake an outflow of 200,000 people was monitored by the cellphone company, Digicell which found that 80 percent of those who moved away from the capital immediately after the disaster eventually returned to Port-au-Prince. And yet even with this knowledge, US agencies and the Red Cross were unable to provide adequate assistance.

Climate-wise development

One participant made the point that many climate-caused disasters could be predicted to a certain extent and were therefore different challenges than geological hazards such as earthquakes. And yet, she argued, one of the challenges is to bring the work of the climate science community to the attention of policy-makers. Policies can be more preventative and less reactionary if they incorporate the work of climate scientists. For example, important questions include: how to ensure that development programs take climate change into account and how to address the needs of vulnerable populations affected by climate change?