

Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future – Topical Lunch Summary Report

Title: Environmentally-Induced Migration: Drivers, vulnerabilities, and possible solutions

Organizers: Lindy Williams

Attendees: William Block, Mike Hoffmann, Ravi Kanbur, Janice Conrad, David Kay, Mary Jo Dudley, Natalie Mahowald, Shannon Gleeson, Victor Seow, Jack Elliott, Maria Christina Garcia, Charles Geisler, Florio Arguillas, Conrad Jon, Graham Kerslick, David Dietrich, Chris Miller

Summary:

Thursday, April 28th.

A recent AAAS Climate Science Panel has argued that because of climate change, “there is a small, but real chance of abrupt, unpredictable and potentially irreversible changes with highly damaging impacts on people in the United States and around the world.” Widespread displacement is likely to be one outcome of such changes. Although abrupt events pose a considerable risk, slower changes to environmental systems are also expected to spur widespread migration in the years ahead. The topic for discussion on the 28th was how to understand and plan for future internal and international migration that could have at its roots significant environmental drivers.

The objective of this topical lunch was for faculty from across the university who are interested in this topic to join an interdisciplinary conversation. Participants were asked to consider a few questions. First, what are the most consequential environmental causes of substantial human displacement going to be in the coming decades, and where are these likely to occur? How are environmental drivers magnified by institutional ones and vice versa? What are some effective and humane policy responses to environmentally-induced displacement? What are some innovative ways to study this process? What synergies might we develop at Cornell to better understand this issue and contribute to potential solutions?

During a recent trip to the Philippines, my colleagues and I interviewed government officials at the municipal and barangay (smaller neighborhood) levels and conducted a number of group interviews with community members. The venues we visited are facing sea level rise, area flooding, and periodic dramatic weather events. Officials have been focusing largely on risk mitigation and disaster preparation, and trying to stay one step ahead of the problem. Out-migration specifically for environmental reasons does not appear to be widespread in any of the communities we visited, but it has been occurring. In one venue, several dozen low-income families who had been living next to a river had been relocated to a neighboring province and given improved housing (and a variety of employment opportunities that were said to be comparable to what they were leaving behind). Between the time they were relocated (approx. one year ago) and the time we visited the community, however, more than half of the families had returned. In a second community, daily tidal incursions were reported and some houses were being abandoned, generally by people who could afford to move elsewhere. In other cases, people were raising the levels of their flooring on the ground floor (by building layer upon layer) or moving to the second floor periodically to get away from the water.

The lunch discussion focused on what some of the consequences of current adaptive strategies might be (e.g., black mold proliferating under flooring as layers are added), and what some alternative strategies might be (e.g., converting to housing that could rise and fall with the tide, akin to a houseboat). Discussion also addressed government decisions to relocate families and the agency (or lack of agency) of individuals to stay where they are or to comply with relocation decisions. The group considered where the millions of people who may be displaced in the future if/when current conditions continue to worsen will go. One person asked whether the government, known for its long-standing and determined labor exporting policy, might intensify its efforts to move people overseas. There was also some concern that the lack of civil conflict to date may not hold over time, given the array of circumstances facing the people in the coastal communities we visited, and given uncertainty about where displaced people will settle in the future. A number of people expressed interest in continuing this conversation in the months ahead.