THEMATIC BRIEF

DECEMBER 2025

CLARE brief on climate migration



OVERVIEW

Climate change shapes how people respond to risks and adapt, including through decisions about whether to move or stay. Some are displaced suddenly by floods or storms. Others migrate gradually to secure work or diversify their incomes. Many remain in place, finding new ways to cope with increasing risks.

These choices are rarely clear-cut, and climate-related mobility often increases hardship and inequality for marginalised populations. Effective interventions and responses require coordinated action at local, national, and international levels.

Evidence from the CLARE programme shows that migration is predominantly an economic imperative and part of broader adaptation strategies by individuals and regions. When people retain choice, migration can be a proactive way to reduce risk, protect livelihoods, and expand opportunities. When options are limited or support is lacking, mobility can deepen vulnerability.

CLARE research highlights what works to make adaptation more effective. It provides evidence and practical solutions to help governments and partners support people who stay, those who migrate, and, when necessary, those who must relocate.

SUPPORTING ADAPTATION RELATED TO MIGRANT POPULATIONS

Evidence and practical solutions from CLARE research in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan to support adaptation actions for migrant populations, including those who stay, those who migrate, and those for whom relocation is necessary.

CLARE'S APPROACH TO MOBILITY AND ADAPTATION

Human mobility in the context of climate change involves both voluntary and distress movements. Voluntary movement includes choice about timing and choice about destination. But some populations are unable to move even with apparent climate risks, often trapped in increasingly precarious conditions (Black, et al. 2011).

Climate risks also cause distress displacement, where movement happens suddenly with little preparation. Such a diversity of mobility means there are diverse needs and interventions, and little benefit to reductive categories of 'migrant' or 'displaced person'.

Climate change interacts with poverty, inequality, and governance challenges to shape mobility outcomes. It rarely acts as the sole driver of movement, but it often intensifies existing pressures. Understanding who is moving and why therefore requires analysis of both environmental risks and the wider social and economic systems that influence whether people can stay, move safely, or are forced to relocate.

CLARE's work builds evidence about how mobility can strengthen adaptation and on turning this knowledge into practical action (Simpson, et al. 2024).

The research examines relocation, migration, and immobility, highlighting how each affects people's ability to adapt in both rural and urban contexts. It identifies how migrants, those who remain, and those who relocate experience risks and opportunities differently, and how gender and social inequalities shape these outcomes.

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CLARE'S KEY RESEARCH AREAS

CREATING AND ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR MIGRATION AS ADAPTATION

Migration can be a powerful and planned form of climate adaptation when people are supported to move safely, barriers are removed, and rights are protected. In these circumstances migration reduces climate risks, secures incomes and prevents crises. Policy and public debate overlook this potential: while international migration dominates headlines, most movement linked to climate and livelihood pressures involves movement from rural to urban areas within countries (Szaboova, et al. 2023).

Evidence from the **Successful intervention pathways for migration as adaptation (SUCCESS)** and **Climate Change Local Adaptation Pathways (CLAPs)** projects across India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan show that mobility is a demonstration of agency and builds resilience. Yet media analysis of more than 200 news articles in India revealed that climate migrants are often portrayed as passive victims. Nearly half of the coverage does not specify who is moving, and most reporting highlights crisis and loss rather than strategic adaptation. Such narratives undermine policy support for migration as a legitimate response to climate risks (Rajan, et al. 2025).

An evidence-based narrative is essential for enabling more supportive policies. In Nepal, research contributed directly to the National Population Policy 2025 and National Labour Migration Policy 2025 (Ministry of Healthy & Population, 2025).

These policies explicitly recognise the links between climate change and migration and now call for monitoring the drivers of migration and the vulnerabilities of those on the move. They also promote investing in skills and income for climate resilient economic growth and development, that will reshape national adaptation planning.

In Bhutan, SUCCESS is both bridging and bringing into conversation hitherto separate and self-enclosed scholarship and policies on climate change and migration. It promotes integrated knowledge- and policy-making by co-creating and evaluating evidence-based narratives on the relationship between migration and adaptative capacity to climate change in both origin and destination places (Paldon, et. al. 2025).

In Odisha, India, CLAPS worked with non-governmental organisation Gram Vikas to establish a registry of interstate migrant workers at the village level. Maintained monthly by trained community members, or Pravasi Mitras ('migrant friends'), the registry has improved disaster preparedness by helping officials trace migrants during emergencies, enabled targeted enrolment in social protection schemes, and strengthened access to welfare services.

Remittances can act as an income stream and a foundation for resilience. In Bangladesh's coastal communities, early findings from SUCCESS fieldwork suggest that migrants' earnings are used to rebuild homes after cyclones. In India's Karnataka and Odisha states, remittances support house construction, small businesses, and crop diversification, creating more secure and diversified local economies that withstand climate shocks.

Interventions like these which enable migration grounded in local realities can strengthen protections for both migrants and those who remain, while making mobility a realistic climate adaptation strategy. Coordinated action across climate, labour, social protection, and development sectors can therefore promote migration as a proactive adaptation strategy.

SUPPORTING ADAPTATION IN PLACE

CLARE research demonstrates how adaptation in place can reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience. For example, improved forecasting systems, stronger local governance, and co-developed strategies have helped communities anticipate risks and adapt in place. Futures thinking and systems mapping in South Asia carried out by CLARE projects are equipping policymakers with foresight tools to better plan for uncertain climate futures.

Migration is seldom a simple choice between leaving or staying. In many areas of rural economies, it is single men who initially migrate. Supporting adaptation in place is therefore as important as enabling mobility. It allows families to protect their livelihoods, cultural identities, and agency while keeping future mobility options open (Cundill, et al. 2021).

Strengthened local communities play a vital role in making climate adaptation in place effective and sustainable. In the Odisha coastal village of Ramyapatna, CLAPs shows fishing families chose to remain despite cyclone and erosion risks, lobbying successfully for seawall construction, showing how staying populations develop sophisticated resistance strategies (Hemant Kumar, et al. 2024).

Research in Odisha and Karnataka shows stayers are predominantly women, elderly, and children who maintain cultural practices and local knowledge systems while adapting to climate impacts through crop diversification and water conservation.

In Nepal, four municipalities integrated migration-responsive adaptation actions into their 2025/26 development plans with support from SUCCESS. This was the first time such budgeting had occurred and demonstrates how governance systems can support those who stay within their communities while linking adaptation to mobility.

Practical solutions show how adaptation in place can be strengthened. In Karnataka, the CLAPs project co-developed a regional heat advisory for outdoor workers, including migrants, written in both English and Kannada. Unlike broad national warnings, this version provided clear, targeted guidance for farmers, day labourers, health workers, and employers, and was formally shared with district and local authorities.

Migration and staying in place are not separate but complementary strategies. To strengthen resilience, policies must invest equally in people who remain, ensuring they have the resources, protection, and voice needed to adapt in place while staying connected to broader mobility systems.

MAKING DESTINATIONS SAFE FOR MIGRANTS

Migration does not end with departure. For adaptation to succeed, urban destinations must become inclusive spaces that reduce precarity and strengthen resilience. Too often, cities treat migrants as temporary populations, leaving them excluded from climate planning, services, and social protection. Yet most migrants are long-term contributors to urban economies and communities. Supporting them is therefore central to effective adaptation (Siddiqui, et al. 2021).

CLARE research highlights practical ways to make destinations safer. In Bengaluru, CLAPs revealed that existing climate action plans failed to account for the city's large migrant workforce despite evidence that migrants are among the most exposed to heat stress, flooding, and poor housing. Surveys and stakeholder consultations showed that migrants were excluded from adaptation planning because they were seen as temporary residents without entitlements.

In response, the project is co-developing a Migrant-Inclusive Climate Action Plan with city authorities. Therefore, the policy explicitly integrates migrant needs, making it an innovation that bridges climate resilience planning with migration governance.

Research in Kerala, India showed that migrant workers faced major barriers in accessing healthcare, including language, cost, and clinic hours that clashed with long shifts. In response, CLAPs partnered with the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development to pilot mobile health clinics adapted to migrant schedules, now serving more than 6,000 workers across the coastal state of Kerala.

This innovation demonstrates how evidence-based design can overcome systemic barriers and provide a scalable model for migrant-inclusive health services (Jose, 2025). The clinics are scheduled around working hours, provide multilingual services, and bring healthcare directly to worksites, removing barriers such as distance and language.

At the state and national levels, SUCCESS has contributed to heat advisories with migrant-specific guidance and to disaster preparedness protocols in Kerala that recognise migrants as part of at-risk populations.

In Bhutan's Pasakha Industrial Estate, it documented how factory workers, mostly internal migrants, were living in makeshift housing highly exposed to floods and pollution. The absence of sufficient sanitation facilities and regular water shortages particularly adversely impact migrant women. SUCCESS research and engagement has rendered the labour migrants, and their gendered vulnerabilities and needs, visible to the municipality, and as a first step to mitigate their current precarity a disaster evacuation plan is being co-designed for them.

In Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, a survey of 600 migrant households showed that municipalities are already providing key services such as subsidised health and education, often unintentionally. With planning, these efforts could be scaled up into deliberate migration-responsive governance.

These findings demonstrate that safe destinations are as important as safe journeys. Cities that integrate migrants into climate planning, social protection, and urban services not only reduce vulnerability but also strengthen their own resilience. Policymakers must move beyond treating migrants as temporary and instead embed their needs in the long-term future of urban development.

MAKING RELOCATION WORK

For some communities, adapting in place or through migration is no longer feasible or sufficient. Rising seas, repeated flooding, and loss of land mean that relocation is the most viable option. Planned relocation can reduce risk, but only when it is rights-based, participatory, and focused on livelihoods and community priorities (Bower, et al. 2025).

CLARE research shows both the potential and the pitfalls of relocation. Across coastal regions of Bangladesh and India, SUCCESS and CLAPs found improved housing security and better access to schools and services. Yet residents also reported serious challenges, including loss of livelihoods, weak infrastructure, and a lack of maintenance in shared spaces. Many indicating that they would have preferred to rebuild in place, reflecting the strength of place attachment and the importance of cultural continuity.

Community resistance in Ramyapatna, Odisha, highlights this clearly. Fishing households chose not to move into a new relocation site because it was too far from the coast and did not account for the daily coastal access needed to sustain their livelihoods. The settlement remains largely unoccupied, showing how relocation that ignores occupational needs will not succeed.

Comparative evidence from Bangladesh underscores that relocation outcomes depend on how communities are involved. For example, in Khulna's Ashrayan sites, residents valued improved housing but faced ongoing livelihood insecurity and waste management failures. Women emphasised deficits in infrastructure, privacy, and drainage, while men prioritised livelihood opportunities. These insights point to the need for gender-sensitive relocation design.

SUCCESS has also engaged directly in policy processes. In Bangladesh, research findings shared through dialogue, have helped to secure political support from the senior interim administration for continuing the Ashrayan II relocation programme during a government transition. This shows how sustained evidence-based engagement can influence national relocation policy for safe and durable solutions to climate displacement.

The lesson is clear: planned relocation is sometimes unavoidable, but success depends on more than moving people to new houses. Durable solutions require community participation, protection of rights, and continuity of livelihoods, alongside attention to gendered needs. When implemented fairly and effectively, relocation reduces risk while preserving dignity, agency, and long-term resilience.

CLARE'S CONTIRBUTION TO EFFECITVE ADAPTATION FOR MIGRANT POPULATIONS

CLARE research shows that effective climate adaptation must recognise migration, staying, and relocation as interconnected strategies. Communities adapt in different ways: some members move, others remain, and in some cases relocation becomes unavoidable. Supporting each pathway is essential to building resilience.

Evidence from CLARE demonstrates that mobility is not automatically good or bad for adaptation. Outcomes depend on the conditions under which people move. When mobility is supported, it reduces risk, secures livelihoods, and strengthens agency. When it is not, it increases precarity and inequality. CLARE research highlights three clear priorities for policy:

- enable migration as a proactive strategy
- invest in those who remain
- and ensure relocation is participatory, rights-based, and focused on livelihoods.

CLARE also delivers practical solutions. Its work supports inclusive urban planning, strengthens social protection and livelihoods, informs anticipatory responses, and promotes gender-sensitive approaches that reflect the priorities of different groups. By engaging directly with governments and communities, CLARE research bridges the gap between short-term crisis response and long-term resilience planning.

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Front: Munnekollal, India.
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