

# Climate migration is a solution, not desperation

- 16:50 03 April 2012 by [Fred Pearce](#)
- For similar stories, visit the [Climate Change](#) Topic Guide

It is a potent image: desperate refugees fleeing environmental apocalypse, crossing boundaries to save their very lives. But this notion is flawed, said geographer David Thomas of the University of Oxford at the [Planet Under Pressure](#) meeting in London last week. Rather than seeing environmental migration as bad, we need to see it as part of the solution to environmental change.

A lot of people are on the move today, and for many a deteriorating environment back home will have played a part in their decision to up sticks. These are the environmental migrants, sometimes grouped under the label "[climate refugees](#)". But mythology is rife.

For one thing, most migrants don't book in for an illegal journey to the rich world: some 80 per cent of migrants move within their own country.

Second, most people are not fleeing. In fact, in extremis, people tend to stay put. Migration, says Thomas, tends to be an act of aspiration, not desperation. And it is rarely the poorest or most environmentally threatened who are on the move.

## Migration costs

Take the African drought of the 1980s. Millions died. The image many of us still have is of people fleeing the advancing desert. That image is wrong, says Thomas, who co-authored [a major study of migration and global environmental change published last year](#).

"In Mali during the 1980s, migration actually decreased," he says. Why? "Migration costs money and because of the drought, people didn't have money."

"The people we should really be thinking about are not the refugees, but those who stay behind, who may wish to migrate but can't," says Thomas. "They are trapped, they are the most vulnerable."

## Rational choice

Not every move is ultimately a smart move, of course. Thomas found that 40 per cent of migrants to Senegal's capital, Dakar, moved into areas of the city that flooded – the neighbourhoods where nobody else wanted to live. Nonetheless, he argues, they were making rational choices about how to better their lives.

"Migration can empower," he said at the meeting. "It's not a last resort. It generally improves the wealth and lifestyles of the people who move." Now that policy-makers accept the world will have to adapt to inevitable effects of climate change, we need to see migration as part of that process, he said.

This is a tricky proposition for westerners who fear hordes of migrants, but climate change is a growing threat and environmental refugees will be a fact of life. Migration, he concluded, is

one of the many ways in which individuals, and the world, must adapt.