

Disaster-Driven Migration and Conflict and the Role of Government and Third-Party Action

Description of the Project

By 2050, between 200 million and one billion people will be displaced due to environmental changes and natural disasters (Barnett and Webber 2009). Forced displacement can fracture social networks and community structures, interrupt supply chains, overburden infrastructure, and disrupt governance. Coping with new environmental migration, especially migration driven by acute disasters, challenges even the most capable governments and harmonious societies. Existing literature suggests that this forced environmental migration can cause violent conflict as migrants lose livelihoods, move to new areas, or compete over scarce resources.

However, the path through which migration leads to conflict—and the policy responses that either fuel conflict or promote stability—are not well understood. Some countries (e.g., the Philippines after Typhoons Bopha and Haiyan) develop adequate infrastructure and post-disaster policies to mitigate conflict risks from economic disruption and forced migration. Other countries (e.g., Syria after a drought in the 2000s) fail to respond adequately, opening the door for insurgent and terrorist groups to garner support. It is typical for national militaries to respond to disasters, often with assistances from international militaries. Third party support from the United States and other actors (countries, IGOs, and NGOs) influences governments' ability to address displacement and grievances caused by disasters, but responses vary in funding, scope, and success rates.

My research project with Elise Pizzi (Assistant Professor, Political Science) explores the role of government policy and third-party action in environmental migration and disaster response and analyzes of what types of policy responses best reduce the likelihood of post-disaster conflicts. By better understanding post-disaster situations that pose the highest security risks and external assistance that is timely, effective, and well-coordinated with local governments and organizations, US assistance can be targeted more strategically to help disaster affected allies avoid political violence.

Why do we see variation in the effects of environmental shocks and migration on violent conflict? We address this overarching question by exploring four related research questions: (1) how do governments prepare for and respond to natural disasters and weather-related shocks? (2) what effect do these policies have on environmental migration? (3) how do governments' proactive and reactive policies increase or decrease risks for violent and nonviolent conflict? (4) how do third party interventions by the United States or other actors influence the success of post-disaster conflict mitigation? We identify two types of government policy responses to climate events: (1) proactive preparation and (2) reactive response. Prior to experiencing natural disasters, governments can minimize the disruption caused by environmental changes and shocks by planning for disasters, building infrastructure like floodwalls, supporting the movement of homes and businesses to regions that are less vulnerable, and providing agricultural insurance and subsidies. When disaster strikes, governments can respond with many reactive policy options including relocation, restrictions on movement, reconstruction, or regulations on other actors (e.g., NGOs and IGOs). Governments often provide food and shelter, evacuate families, and fund

rebuilding after a shock. However, government responses vary widely, as do the outcomes of their activities. While existing data sources (e.g., UNOCHA reports) and disaster case studies provide information about government and third-party responses to specific natural disasters, this information is incomplete, and we lack an integrated dataset of all policy responses. Our project fills this gap by collecting a new dataset on post-disaster policy responses beginning with the top 25 most disaster affected countries for rapid and slow onset disasters. While our initial project emphasizes reactive policies in the most disaster-prone states, our dataset will be expanded to all disaster affected countries and will include data collection on proactive policies as well (e.g., infrastructure, insurance).

Our project identifies countries most at risk for natural disasters using the EM-DAT International Disasters Dataset. We compiled lists of the 25 most disaster prone (frequency) and affected (people affected) countries for both rapid-onset and slow-onset disasters since 1990. For each country, we generate a list of natural disaster events by date. We use news searching and other historical/internet sources to identify government responses. In addition to coding characteristics of the response policies (e.g., policy type, motivation, timing, scope, scale, and actors), we also record information about US responses to each disaster. We combine this newly collected data with existing information about migration patterns, country characteristics, and political violence to test our theory. Our dataset provides insights about what types of government policy responses and U.S. assistance plans are most effective for maintaining post-disaster peace and reducing insurgents' ability to use environmental shocks for group recruitment.

Role for the Student

With support from the PPC, I will hire Chloe Clemenson as a research assistant to work on this project in the summer of 2021. She will help Elise Pizzi and I collect pilot data for our project on natural disasters, forced migration, and political violence. We are applying for external funding from the Department of Defense Minerva program (June), the US Army (July), and the National Science Foundation (August). Our chances for success will be significantly improved by developing a more detailed coding instrument and demonstrating its feasibility through a pilot study. Chloe will help us do news searching on individual disasters and assist with converting information from UN and other IGO reports into codable data. We will collect data for several highly disaster affected countries including China, India, the Philippines, and Syria.

The summer research assistants for the project will search news stories, government documents, and other sources to identify government policy responses to disasters. We will also collect information on US government and US military responses or support to each disaster. Our goal during this period includes revising our current grant proposal for submission to NSF and other funding agencies and to work on the next research paper from our grant (we published a study in 2020). The students will also have the opportunity to work on research papers with us moving forward. I published papers with multiple undergraduates at the University of Iowa, and I am committed to providing students with valuable research experience. We will also write short pieces conveying the findings of our research in appropriate media outlets (e.g., Washington Post Monkey Cage).