

## Editorial

This special issue focuses on the intersection of climate change, migration, and social change. It is the cumulative outcome of community research and multi-stakeholder collaborations conducted under the project ‘Successful Intervention Pathways for Migration as Adaptation’ (SUCCESS). I express my sincere gratitude to UK aid from the UK government, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, as part of the Climate Adaptation and Resilience research programme, for their support. I also thank the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), our immediate partner, for lending their expertise and guidance to the implementation of this project in Bhutan. Needless to say, the views expressed in the articles of this special issue do not necessarily reflect those of the UK government, the IDRC, or ICIMOD.

The SUCCESS project, which is being implemented simultaneously in Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, aims to generate new knowledge on the evaluation of adaptations to climate change that involve migration, mobility, and immobility. Through its diverse outcomes, the project offers evidence-based best practices to support successful adaptations for populations that are immobile, or ‘stayers’ (in places of origin) and to promote safe mobility for those who wish to relocate and integrate into new destinations. The findings presented in this journal issue stem from two primary sources: 1) a national conference on ‘Migration, Climate Change, and Social Change’ held on April 10, 2025 at the premises of Royal Thimphu College, and 2) original research conducted by the researchers involved in the Bhutan SUCCESS project.

Together, these efforts, as presented in the 12 articles published here, aim to foster dialogue and connect hitherto separated and self-isolated fields of migration and climate change within the academic and policy contexts of Bhutan.

I express my gratitude to Amina Maharjan, Senior Livelihood and Migration Specialist at ICIMOD, for offering the keynote to the conference. I always wish to thank Dasho Phuntsho Rabten, Eminent Member of Bhutan's National Council, Chandni Singh, Lead, School of Environment and Sustainability, Indian Institute for Human Settlements, and Kurshid Alam, then Deputy Resident Representative of UNDP in Bhutan, for enlightening the presenters and the audience through a lively panel discussion on migration and climate change in Bhutan. I further thank Neil Adger, the overall SUCCESS project lead, Nitya Rao, Tasneem Siddiqui, Prathijna Poonacha Kodira, and Ganesh Gurung for agreeing to chair the conference sessions. At Royal Thimphu College, I would like to particularly acknowledge and thank President Shiva Raj Bhattarai, Kezang Sherab (academic dean), Bikash Chhetri (finance head), Prakash Sharma (finance manager), Latha Chhetri (deputy head), Bhagat Acharja (finance officer), Dawa Drakpa (admin officer), Sonam Tashi (development & external relations), Namgay Tshering and colleagues (IT offices), and Thinley Choden and Choki Wangmo Sherpa (library offices). Neither the national conference nor this special issue would have been possible without their various support.

In Bhutan, it has long been recognised that 'climate change poses a threat to sustainable development and to the pursuit of gross national happiness. Therefore, measures to build resilience and reduce vulnerability are necessary to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and minimize future climate risks' (Climate Change Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2020: 5). Within this gargantuan task for the country to adapt to climate change (to whose effects

Bhutan remains disproportionately vulnerable, despite its carbon negative economic growth – a paradox that also impels urgent questions about climate justice), what could be the potential role of migration? The articles in this special issue employ fresh research and novel data-sets to variously engage this question.

There are broadly two different perspectives that governments may adopt regarding migration and adaptation. In the first perspective, governments may view adaptation to climate change as a way to reduce migration pressures and allow people to remain where they are by modifying agricultural practices, management of pastoral lands, infrastructure development, and other strategies to ensure local development and well-being. In this framing, migration is primarily viewed as a negative outcome, prompting policies designed to avert it.

Conversely, the second perspective, which is the focus of the SUCCESS project and this special issue, views migration not primarily as a problem, but rather as a potential strategy and tool for adapting to climate change. Scholars and practitioners in this field explore how, in climate change contexts, migration might contribute to reducing vulnerability, enhancing resilience, mitigating risks, and advancing sustainable development and well-being. They explore the narratives and policy conditions under which migration might become part of the solution of climate change adaptation both for origin communities and migrants, even if in complex ways.

Currently in Bhutan, the majority of migrants do not explicitly cite climate change as the primary factor influencing their migration decisions. Instead, they cite education, employment, and related aspirations as reasons for their migration. However, as climate change is anticipated to worsen in the coming years, the connection between migration and climate change is expected to

become more pronounced. But even today, migrants readily point to declining agrarian returns, changing precipitation patterns, new crop pests and diseases, and escalating human-wildlife conflicts as constraining livelihoods in origin places, and which are indicative of climate and related ecological crises. Most often, we found that migration decisions are driven by economic aspirations, particularly among the younger population. For this reason, the SUCCESS project conceives of migration as part of the landscape of climate-induced risks, but simultaneously as part of a common movement primarily motivated by economic reasons.

In relation to climate and related environmental change, literature suggests that migration may be the most effective way to allow people to diversify their income and build resilience where environmental change threatens livelihoods. However, migration offers opportunities as well as challenges. It may create new vulnerabilities, especially for already marginalized groups. For instance, ecological and social risks and hazards in destinations may negatively impact the physical and mental health of migrants. Although migration is one means of adapting to climate change, it currently comes with significant personal and societal costs in both origin and destination locations.

The SUCCESS project considers migration as a successful adaptation to climate change if it reduces precarity, enhances adaptive capacity, and increases well-being both for the migrants themselves and for the communities in places of origin. This leads us to ask: what kind of interventions may facilitate inclusive migration as adaptation that meets the goals of human well-being and broader climate-resilient development? This is a crucial question which it is hoped that the evidence and arguments presented in the articles of this special issue will help address. What all contributors seem to broadly agree on is that there is an urgent need for urban policies that reduce climate risks and ensure often marginalised migrant

populations have access to essential services and economic opportunities. At the same time, governmental and non-governmental agencies, including academia, have a key role to play in safeguarding and bolstering rural lives and livelihoods as climate change impacts escalate. This would enable migration to always be a choice, for better opportunities, rather than a necessity, for survival.

Jelle J.P. Wouters  
Project Lead, SUCCESS Bhutan  
Editor-in-Chief, Rig Tshoel