



# Social Capital and Environmental Migration: Insights from the Brazilian Amazon and Implications for Climate Change

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Climate change, natural disasters, and flooding caused by dam construction are displacing tens of millions of people globally. These environmental changes threaten the ability of households, and sometimes entire communities, to maintain livelihoods. Migration is a key response to such threats. An estimated 143 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America could be forced to migrate due to climate change by 2050 (Rigaud et al. 2018). To develop effective policies it is critical to better understand how environmental migrants make decisions about where to go and why, and to determine what factors influence post-migration well-being.

Using longitudinal semi-structured interview data to examine the role of social capital in dam-induced migration Randell (2019) studied a population of rural farmers in the Brazilian Amazon who were displaced by construction of the Belo Monte Dam, the fourth largest dam in the world in energy generating capacity. Households were compensated with cash or credit payments for their lost land and assets, and were then responsible for finding and purchasing new property on their own. Land was abundant in the region but varied greatly in quality and price. Unlike a more organized program in which households are collectively resettled in a new community, this compensation-based program allowed the author to examine how each household made decisions about where to go, and to explore how they utilized social capital along the way

Pre-migration semi-structured interviews with cacao farmers, cattle ranchers, and sharecroppers who were displaced by the dam were conducted in 2012. In 2014, follow-up interviews were conducted with the same households after migration. Like Elliott, Haney, and Sams-Abiodun (2010), this research considered both the temporal and spatial aspects of social capital.

Many of the displaced households had lived in the origin community for decades, migrating from other parts of Brazil during the 1970's and 1980's. As such, people had formed close bonds to others within the community while also maintaining ties to family and friends elsewhere in the region and in more distant parts of Brazil. These bonds, both near and far, proved critical throughout the migration process.

The majority of households used ties to family and close friends in the origin and/or destination to help them locate and purchase new property. Sharecroppers joined their compensation payments together so that they could afford properties too costly for one person, relatives and friends accompanied each other on trips to search for properties, and those who already migrated

Social and familial connections are at the heart of the choice of destination for environmentally displaced migrants. At the same time, environmental displacement weakens and disrupts long-standing and painstakingly constructed social ties in the place of origin.

informed new migrants of available land to buy. Indeed, with the help of social capital, the majority of households were able to remain within the region, migrating to places where other displaced households had recently moved or to locations where family and friends were already living. Maintaining ties in their new communities was a priority for many households, as having family and friends nearby provided social, financial, and emotional support during the process of rebuilding livelihoods after migration.

However, social capital also has its limitations (Elliott, Haney and Sams-Abiodun. 2010). For example, some poorer households were not able to afford property near family or friends. Multiple properties in the same community may not have been available for sale at the time households were compensated. And most importantly, the dam led to the dissolution of a tight knit community. Migrating to a destination where a few family members or friends lived was no substitute for the social support available within the origin community.

This research has important policy implications for environmental migration more broadly. First, environmental migrants faced with stressors including hurricanes, droughts, and sea-level rise are likely to draw on translocal ties to move to unaffected areas. Individuals and communities who lack spatially distant ties—particularly the most socioeconomically disadvantaged—may not have the resources to migrate, or may risk impoverishment in their destinations.

Second, attachment to place, local livelihoods, a desire to maintain social capital, and the costliness of long-distance migration all encourage households to remain close to their place of origin. As more populations in the US and globally plan for climate-induced resettlement, the key challenge will be finding suitable land near the area of origin that enables communities to maintain social capital while reducing vulnerability to climate change.

Third, it will be important to determine the situations when collective resettlement of a community works better than providing cash compensation to individual households. The most effective migration assistance policies will vary based on a community's historical, geographic, economic, and social context, as well as the type of environmental change experienced. Additional qualitative research is needed to better understand environmental migration in these other contexts.

#### References:

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