



Brain-be

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

# POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n° 1

## Environmental migration in Morocco: The case of Tangier and Tinghir

*This policy brief and its recommendations are based on 48 interviews conducted in Morocco for the MIGRADAPT project.<sup>1</sup> Gradual, slow-onset, environmental changes were found to interact with various migration factors in the selected study locations (Tangier and Tinghir). Our findings help to understand the complexity of the migration-environment nexus and the constant interactions between wider social, political, economic, environmental and demographic phenomena in Morocco. Communities' and individuals' vulnerability towards environmental change influences how environmental changes are perceived, how migration aspirations are formed, as well as how local adaptation strategies (including migration) are developed, contributing to the expansion and the evolution of existing 'cultures of migration'.<sup>2</sup>*

### Context and research objectives

This policy brief presents findings from two case studies in Morocco: Tinghir (High Atlas region) and Tangier (industrial port city), in the framework of the MIGRADAPT project. Morocco is a kingdom that relies heavily on agriculture and tourism, and which has gained some economic stability over the last years. The fieldwork conducted in Morocco sought to answer three distinct research questions. First, it aimed to understand how **migration aspirations** are developed by people living in these regions, and how they are connected to perceived changes in the natural environment. Second, it aimed to understand how environmental and societal factors are interlinked and contribute to **migration decisions**. Third, it aimed to grasp how migration networks contribute to the development of **adaptation strategies** in response to environmental changes.

#### BRAIN-be

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/projects/MIGRADAPT\\_en.pdf](http://www.belspo.be/belspo/brain-be/projects/MIGRADAPT_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> A 'culture of migration' can be defined as shared ideas and beliefs on migration in a particular region. Cultures of migration are established through the information sent by emigrants that have left these regions. These migrants provide feedback on their migration experiences and experiences in the immigrant country to their migrant networks living in their region of origin (Timmerman et al., 2014).

## Main findings

### Perceptions of environmental change in the study locations

Perceptions of climate change in Morocco are **very diverse and localized**. Our data indicates that respondents with a higher educational level tended to display a better understanding of dominant (e.g. scientific, global) climate change discourses – be it due to their occupation, education and/or migration networks – without necessarily relating them to their own living situation or local context. Conversely, respondents with little or no formal education, who had experience working in the agricultural sector – whether as an individual and/or as a household, and usually elderly – were generally aware of environmental changes through having experienced them first-hand. In such cases, these changes were often attributed to the existence of the natural seasonal cycle and/or explained through their perceived divine origins. Importantly, this group of respondents did not fall into the category of ‘immobile persons’ (those who were *willing* but *not able* to migrate) as they acknowledged that they would not be able to migrate and adjusted their aspirations accordingly. These findings demonstrate a rather **widespread awareness of climate/environmental changes amongst our sample, albeit not necessarily framed from a scientific perspective**.

### Environmental change and the development of migration aspirations and decisions

Very few respondents in our sample specifically referred to environmental *risks* affecting them. The gradual degradation of the natural environment in Morocco has indeed led to continuous interactions between environmental and societal stressors, making it difficult to distinguish environment-related risks from socio-economic ones impacting livelihoods. Therefore, **environmental changes were not necessarily perceived as warranting adaptation strategies, and certainly did not constitute a sufficient factor on which to base an aspiration or decision to migrate (whether internally or internationally)**. Rather, respondents cited a wide range of alternative reasons, mainly stressing economic, lifestyle, family or political motivations.

The **availability of (financial and social) resources and the awareness of existing climate change discourses played a role in how people perceived and framed adaptation strategies**, at a local and global level, and at an individual and community level. For the group of respondents who did not frame environmental changes from a scientific perspective, changes in the natural environment coincided with everyday hardship and did not necessarily inspire any individual action to counteract this change. For the group of respondents who displayed a more scientific understanding of climate change, the action required to deal with such change (e.g., large-scale community projects) was often deemed beyond the capacity of an individual or a household.

### Environmental change, ‘cultures of migration’, and migration aspirations

Perceived impacts of environmental changes varied according to one’s **social class, gender, and location**. For instance, people living in Tinghir were more frequently confronted with environmental changes than those living in Tangier. Such **differential effects of environmental change** are further strengthened by people’s **access to migrant networks** (and diffusion of dominant discourses about climate change) and **level of educational attainment**.

Morocco’s migration history and patterns have led to the advent of **different ‘cultures of migration’** and distinct **migration aspirations**, which take shape

differently in both study locations and **contribute to deepening existing social inequalities**. Socially advantaged respondents were often part of a culture of migration in which information received through transnational networks had resulted in less explicit aspirations to migrate, whereas those who were socially disadvantaged would perceive migration as something to aspire to, being further influenced by the visible positive impact of financial remittances sent back by migrants (e.g. building of concrete houses in migrant-sending households). Cultures of migration impact both migration aspirations and the realization of such aspirations: respondents who were conscious of their inability to migrate (because of a lack of social or financial capital) projected their migration aspirations onto future generations (e.g. their children or grandchildren).

## Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings yield important policy implications and recommendations related to: 1) the ways in which **migration can serve as an adaptation strategy** in response to environmental changes, 2) the need to **reduce the vulnerabilities** of Moroccans living in or migrating from gradually degrading areas, and 3) the importance of **sharing knowledge and scientific discourses** regarding environmental changes and their impacts.

### Priority Area 1: Enabling adaptation strategies (including migration) to cope with environmental change

Migration, as a means to deal with increased demographic pressure and diversify a household's income through new job opportunities, can be perceived as an adaptation strategy to environmental changes in natural resource-dependent communities. At the same time, our findings indicate that migration can also reinforce inequalities among Moroccan communities. People and communities without transnational migration networks are, for instance, less likely to benefit directly from migrants' financial and social remittances and may therefore be more vulnerable to the adverse impacts that environmental change may have on their livelihoods.

#### It is recommended:

- That *policy makers and academics* approach **migration as a (potential) adaptation strategy and as a long-term and complex process, possibly spanning over several generations**, rather than as a strategy that automatically and inevitably yields benefits for migrants, communities of origin and of destination.
- That *local and national policy makers* support and promote the **development of community-based and country-wide adaptation strategies, including migration**. Given the individual and fragmented nature of the sending of remittances and their unequal distribution across regions of origin, **diaspora initiatives should not be considered as the sole or main source of adaptation support** in the face of environmental change. Diaspora communities could however be involved in the development of adaptation strategies and their actions could supplement existing governmental initiatives.
- That *policy makers* actively **integrate international and local migration and environmental policies by considering policies developed at the local, regional, national, and international level**.

### Priority Area 2: Reducing migrant and non-migrant populations' vulnerabilities to environmental change

Environmental migration challenges the traditional dichotomy between *forced* and *voluntary* forms of human mobility, introducing debates around the protection that should be afforded to people who move (or stay put) in the context of climate change. Since both gradual and sudden environmental changes interact with other migration drivers, in practice, the creation of a distinct protection category for 'environmental migrants' is far from being a straightforward matter. Political will, international cooperation and integrated regional adaptation policies are needed to craft more efficient and inclusive migration policies that address the vulnerabilities of migrants and non-migrants in a changing climate.

#### It is recommended:

- That *international, regional and national policy makers* invest more effort in developing **differentiated and regional approaches to deal with environmental change and migration**. Such a regional approach would be justified by the local/regional specificities of environmental change and of how they relate to migration

dynamics. At the same time, regional approaches within countries should better consider the broader social, political and economic context.

- That *international policy makers* develop a **clearer legal framework regarding migration**. This revision of existing migrant categorizations would enable policy makers to better consider the nature of environmental factors in migration dynamics.
- That *policy makers* **include affected populations to co-create and co-produce policies on environmental change and migration**.
- That *policy makers at all levels* give attention to **differential vulnerabilities and adjust their policies accordingly**. Such an approach could reduce vulnerabilities to environmental change and better protect specific target groups, such as migrant workers or women. Importantly, such vulnerabilities may also evolve over time, depending on a person's life phase (e.g., student; single; married with children; elderly).

### Priority Area 3: Disseminating knowledge about environmental changes and their impacts

Given that knowledge about environmental changes and their impacts is often disseminated in very abstract and general terms, people often do not apply these discourses to their own living environment. By contrast, policy makers often fail to incorporate affected populations' views about environmental changes in their policies, which eventually jeopardizes their implementation.

#### It is recommended:

- That *policy makers* **communicate better about environmental changes applied to local contexts**. This could include providing specific examples that consider how environmental changes interact with other changing socio-economic and political factors in a given context.
- That *policy makers* consider **existing ideas and knowledge concerning environmental change, adaptation strategies and risk perceptions of the affected populations** when establishing migration policies and environmental adaptation strategies. They should involve affected populations to ensure that their policies and initiatives are supported by the target group.

## Read more

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- Interview in EOS by Wim Swinnen, with Van Praag, L. (2019): Noem deze migranten geen klimaatvluchtelingen, EOS (5), <https://bit.ly/3lj35N9>

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