

Repeated Droughts in Rural Thailand and Vietnam Trap Poorer Households, Reducing Migration

Following two consecutive years of drought, rural Thai and Vietnamese are considerably less likely to migrate, particularly poorer farmers without irrigation and families with limited income sources.

Esteban J. Quiñones of Mathematica, Sabine Liebenehm of the University of Saskatchewan, and Rasadhika Sharma of Leibniz University document increased risk aversion and reduced consumption and assets among households that experienced drought. These findings suggest that drought may create an obstacle to searching for work elsewhere, further increasing the vulnerability of poorer households.

Their findings highlight the need for policymakers and program directors to reconceive safety nets and social protection programs, including cash transfers and index insurance, that are responsive to climate change, sensitive to extreme weather events, and nimble in providing support to adversely impacted and vulnerable populations.

The research team integrated data from the Thailand Vietnam Socioeconomic Panel, a multitopic, longitudinal dataset of more than 3,500 rural households, with precipitation and temperature data from the Global Historical Climatology Network Version 2 and the Climate Anomaly Monitoring System, to explore the relationship between repeated drought exposure and migration from 2007 to 2017. Their analysis compared the migration decisions, consumption, and assets, as well as risk aversion of households that experienced consecutive droughts relative to those that did not.

Although migration rose by more than 10 percentage points in the study sample from 2007 to 2017, over the same period it fell by more than 5 percentage points for households exposed to consecutive droughts, with poorer households experiencing the largest drops.

The strongest reductions are in long-term migration journeys of 180 days or longer, especially longer-distanced destinations to another province and urban centers, as well as in search of work.

Climate change has increased the frequency and severity of extreme climate events, such as repeated droughts, and these types of destabilizing events are only expected to intensify in the coming decades. When faced with adverse climate events, poor populations suffer a double burden because they lack the means to migrate against extreme climate events, which makes them increasingly vulnerable to environmental changes in their places of origin. As a result, extreme climate events may trap poorer households in vulnerable communities.

Populations in regions that are heavily dependent on agriculture, such as those involved in this study, are most likely to be impacted by environmental shocks moving forward. Special attention should be given to climate change mitigation and adaptation measures in the context of broader livelihoods diversification strategies in these types of areas. The expansion of

irrigation, agricultural diversification, and particularly the use of drought-resistant crop varieties are direct policy measures that could help mitigate climate risk associated with dry spells and other environmental shocks. Furthermore, these types of households would benefit from diversified livelihood portfolios including non-agricultural sources that provide an opportunity to mitigate climate risks.

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