

# Policy Briefing

## Climate Change and Migration

May 2020



# Multi-local Livelihoods, Climate Change and Urban Vulnerability

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## Executive summary

The challenges posed by climate change highlight something South African workers have known for decades: that planning on the basis of geography is inherently limited. Multi-locality is an increasingly recognised strategy South African households use to strengthen resilience and mitigate risks. Spreading different components of households geographically can diversify income sources, build social networks and increase access to social services. While this strategy is being lauded for the opportunity it provides to lift rural households out of poverty, this policy briefing argues that it increasingly puts the burden of climate adaptation on already vulnerable peri-urban residents, which threatens to reverse the progress made by South Africa's expansion of social services and safety nets in rural communities.

# Rural climate change drives urban vulnerability

UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which focuses on sustainable cities and communities, aims to 'support positive economic, social and environmental linkages between urban, peri urban and rural areas'.<sup>1</sup> While these linkages are important to respond effectively to climate change, climate adaptation is still often framed as either an exclusively rural or an exclusively urban phenomenon. Rarely are responses framed around the rural-to-urban linkages that define the structure not only of South Africa's economy but also of the country's household livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the country, households have complicated relationships with balancing the strengths and weaknesses of urban and rural life. Working-age people are coming to cities for employment, while dependent care is still disproportionately rural. Researchers are developing tools to understand these dynamics,<sup>3</sup> but South African policymakers have been slow to adopt a systems approach to climate change responses.

When climate adaptation is framed as a rural phenomenon, it often looks at the disruptions that climate change holds for smallholder farmers and those who rely on natural resources to fulfil various livelihood functions. Alternatively, urban climate adaptation looks at transport, waste disposal, green building and other systemic approaches. Implicit in this is that climate change is shifting income and expenditure patterns of rural households, while urban adaptation is largely an issue for planners rather than households. What these approaches fail to take into account is that rural income and expenditure patterns are intertwined with the income and expenditure patterns of urban households and, in particular, peri-urban households. This policy briefing looks at peri-urban households whose multi-local livelihoods are increasingly precarious owing to the effects of shifting climate patterns in rural areas. It argues that climate adaptation policy approaches should consider urban-rural connectivity to best meet both household level and systemic adaptation needs.

Social grants have been lauded for staving off hunger and providing a basic net of social protection in many rural areas. However, they finance only a small part of the needs of rural households, and peri-urban workers supplement this income in important ways. This briefing argues, however, that when the livelihoods of rural households are threatened owing to climate change, it is actually the peri-urban households that are increasingly thrust into vulnerability, or pushed towards tipping points in their decision-making.

Some examples of this can be seen in the vignettes below, which tell the story of urban Gauteng residents whose livelihoods are entwined with rural areas affected by climate change. The stories of these respondents, who self-selected to share their experience

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1 Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, "Sustainable Development Goal 11", <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11>.

2 Government of South Africa, "National Climate Change Response White Paper", 2018, [https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/national\\_climatechange\\_response\\_whitepaper.pdf](https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/national_climatechange_response_whitepaper.pdf).

3 Maïke Hamann, "Exploring Connections in Social-Ecological Systems: The Links Between Biodiversity, Ecosystem Services, and Human Well-Being in South Africa" (doctoral thesis, Stockholm University, 2016).

and were then chosen from 25 participants based on geographic spread and diversity of services used, demonstrate the interlinkages between climate adaptation strategies and urban vulnerability.

#### BOX 1 THE IMPORTANCE OF PREDICTING INCOME AND EXPENSES

One domestic worker in Johannesburg who comes from the Eastern Cape supports her late sister's children, who live with her mother near Mthatha, in addition to her own children in Gauteng. January has always been a difficult time financially, owing to the need to buy school supplies. However, she always used to plan ahead for the expenses, keeping her living costs low by renting a back room and saving throughout the year. When the November rains came she would send money home for garden inputs, and in December she would return to help during that crucial month. That way, by January the early garden produce could be sold and so ease these expenses. With the later onset of the rains in recent years, however, she has been forced to go into debt every January. She also has to shorten her leave period in December to earn extra income in Gauteng. The high-interest, short-term loans are only repaid by August. She has tried several strategies to ameliorate this precarious financial situation, including moving into shared accommodation, but this was not safe for her children. She also considered sending her children to stay with her mother, but one has a scholarship to a private school that offers better education options than would otherwise be available. This school assumes households have access to data at home for homework, which is an additional financial stress and limits the time they can spend in the Eastern Cape, since there is very poor reception there.

Most South African households use strategies of multi-locality, or the practice of spreading the basic functions of a household across more than one location simultaneously, to strengthen household resilience.<sup>4</sup> This is a coping strategy necessitated by South Africa's apartheid legacy, which relied on labour migration, forced removals and other policies that separated families for decades, entrenching mobility as a central part of a household's social and economic planning. Anticipatory capacity is a key component of resilience, and climate change has complicated planning through the uncertainty of weather patterns. Rainfall has decreased in most parts of the country, but it has also gotten more uneven, with heavy rainfall and drought both risks. Without the ability to plan, households are using multi-local strategies to diversify income sources, build social networks and increase access to social services. While this strategy is increasingly lauded for the opportunities it has provided to lift rural households out of poverty,<sup>5</sup> it increasingly puts the burden of climate

4 Loren B Landau, "Temporality, Informality & Translocality in Africa's Urban Archipelagos" (Working Paper, Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa, Accra, 2019).

5 Ronald Skeldon, "Going Round in Circles: Circular Migration, Poverty Alleviation and Marginality", *International Migration* 50, no. 3 (2012): 43-60.

adaptation on the already vulnerable peri-urban residents, which threatens to reverse the progress made by South Africa's expansion of social spending.

A second vignette shows how climate change is undermining strategic public sector efforts both to build rural social protection and to foster equality.

## BOX 2 THERE CAN BE NO EQUITY WITHOUT WATER

A municipal official in Gauteng who comes from Limpopo is responsible for supporting his grandmother, who lives in a village in a part of the Letaba River catchment that sees intense industrial agricultural cultivation. The village has a few water points, and some residents who can afford it have sunk boreholes. He was saving for this as his grandmother was becoming unable to fetch water from far away, and did not have an entrenched social network on which she could rely. The hope was that this would also provide some food security for the household, as gardening would become more viable. In the years that it took to save towards this goal, however, the water table has dropped, and it is no longer viable to pump water from a borehole. Since then he has had to make frequent trips at significant expense to ensure the basic needs of the household are being met. Not only must he pay for transport to get there, but his wife is a nurse and works frequent night shifts, so they also have to pay for additional childcare when he is away. They cannot get a live-in nanny as they do not have an extra bedroom in their home. While he hoped that a borehole would be a sustainable investment, its failure means that he will need to continue supporting his grandmother indefinitely.

These cases show how climate change is driving urban vulnerability through the multi-local nature of South African households. Both households would benefit from lower transport and data costs, as well as housing options that allow for more convenient care arrangements. There are additional worries about tying livelihood interventions geographically. At the moment, migration theorists and policymakers seem to agree that climate change can be a source of displacement.<sup>6</sup> While this may be true in the case of certain climactic events, the slower, gradual progression of multiple vulnerabilities (caused by climate change and related concerns), rather than large-scale displacement, will become more widespread. This will lead to livelihoods being increasingly unbound from geography.<sup>7</sup> Government should thus apply its geographic planning lens in new ways to meet the needs of citizens. This 'un-placing', rather than displacing, will require a significant shift in policy and planning systems, because it cannot be addressed through disaster

6 Oliva Dun and François Gemenne, "Defining 'Environmental Migration'", *Forced Migration Review* 31 (October 2008), <https://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/climatechange/dun-gemenne.pdf>.

7 Reinette Biggs et al., "Strategies for Managing Complex Social-Ecological Systems in the Face of Uncertainty: Examples from South Africa and Beyond", *Ecology and Society* 20, no. 1 (2015).

response or temporary relief. Current planning mechanisms do not accommodate gradual changes.

### BOX 3 THE FALL OF SMALL-SCALE FARMING

One construction worker in Gauteng, who comes from the North West, used to support his family with piece jobs, because they had a sizeable maize field that satisfied much of the food needs of the household. Over the last decade, however, rainfall has become more erratic, with heavy downfalls around harvest time interspersed with periods of drought, destroying the expected harvests for all but two of the past 10 years. The resultant food insecurity has meant erratic work and income are no longer enough to feed his family. While in the past he dealt with intermittent homelessness by returning to the North West until work became available again, his wife and children had to move back to her mother when they could no longer make ends meet. When they moved, she struggled to get a place for them at school, and now that they have found places she is hesitant to move again. Furthermore, he takes chronic medication that is difficult to access if he does not go to his normal clinic, so he wants to avoid long trips away. While work has picked up again, when his wife returned to her mother their field went fallow, and without that option to provide food for the household he does not see a way to support his family. His wife has begun a charcoal business to support them.

The story above demonstrates the wide range of services that households need to access. To enable multi-local livelihoods, all service delivery departments need to have geographic flexibility to make their services available to all who require them. Another respondent was also struggling with the trade-offs that came with multi-local living; not displaced by climate change but not 'rooting' either because of its effects.

### BOX 4 NO PLACE TO ROOT

A cashier in Johannesburg said she always thought she would send her children to Limpopo to grow up in her village, because there they have better social networks and a safer environment than in Johannesburg's townships. It would also be more affordable, without the need for scholar transport, after-school care and so on. However, her mother's house does not have running water, and the water source is far away, making it difficult to send her children when they were small. The household used to rely on rainwater run-off for cooking and other essentials, but recently rainfall has not been reliable and they need to buy drinking water. Additionally, the changing rainfall patterns are contributing to damaging run-off in the household. Every time it rains heavily, the pit latrine overflows. They tried to dig another latrine in a different

part of the yard, but the rocky substratum prevented it, and they are stuck with the situation for now. She does not want to subject her children to the unsanitary environment, but is equally concerned that in Johannesburg her children may receive inadequate care given the long hours she is away from home. She has already had to switch crèches twice, because the staff were hitting her children at one, and another that she was happy with could not accommodate her working hours. Her oldest child is four, and before he starts Grade R she needs to decide whether it would be better for him to live in Limpopo or in Johannesburg. She is in her 30s, and has not made provision for either building a house in Limpopo or saving towards something in Johannesburg. While she sees stable housing as an urgent priority, she cannot choose which location to invest in.

The effects of climate change are currently being spread between rural households and peri-urban households in the same way that households are spreading their employment, access to services, employment and other livelihoods across geography. On the one hand, this presents an opportunity – if government invests heavily in climate-adaptive practices that support resilience, multi-local households everywhere will benefit. However, it also comes with a risk – if action is not taken to build resilience simultaneously in rural and urban areas, the most vulnerable in the current system will be further marginalised by the effects of climate change.

## Conclusion

There is currently a disjuncture between the multi-local livelihood strategies households use and the spatialised planning strategy in government. While all service delivery sectors would benefit from considering multi-local livelihoods, responding to climate change in particular demands an integrated response. The policy recommendations below are a starting point for how different stakeholders could better integrate rural and urban linkages, which are strong at a household level, in planning.

# Recommendations

- The South African Presidential Climate Change Commission should build more high-level political will for addressing climate change, going beyond the remit of the Department of Environmental Affairs.
- Rural and urban municipalities should invest in developing and implementing climate adaptation strategies, with the South African Local Government Association creating and coordinating the implementation of a framework to integrate different approaches.
  - » Rural municipalities should implement adaptation approaches such as climate-smart agriculture, and intensify planning around water use in agricultural zones. There should also be an emphasis on investing in areas of excellence in public services, particularly education.
  - » Urban municipalities should focus on just and equitable spatial planning, lower carbon transit systems and innovative management systems.
- It is crucial to build equity in rural-urban connectivity. Plans to achieve SDG 11 should be reviewed, taking into account the multi-local nature of rural and peri-urban livelihoods.
- Service delivery departments should plan with mobility in mind, and ensure their services can be accessed by multi-local households.
- In the government's response to climate change, strategies should facilitate multi-local livelihoods, such as low-cost, flexible, mixed-use housing, cheaper data and public transport.

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## Cover image

People fill their cans with water due to elevated temperature and drought, at Lindlay town in the Free State province of South Africa on 14 January 2016. (Ihsaan Haffejee/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

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