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A Global History of Disaster Migration

Millions of people are currently threatened by the environmental consequences of climate change. Sea-level rise and the likelihood of an increasing number of natural catastrophes in particular will presumably destroy more and more livelihoods, create social and political tensions, and, subsequently, force the displacement of many people. While climatically induced migrations can already be seen in many parts of the world, most drastically in the Global South, it would be wrong to assume that this is an entirely new phenomenon. This project looks at the historical intersections between extreme natural events, mobility, and migration from a global perspective in order to show how individuals and societies in different parts of the world have dealt with similar problems in the past.

Migration, here, is conceptualized in a very broad manner, encompassing not only permanent displacements of large numbers of people across huge distances, but also “small” mobile strategies such as flight, evacuations, a temporary retreat to a safe environment, forced displacements, and the slow abandonment of hazardous sites. Migrants were able to rely on ethnic and family networks, or governmental rescue operations and relief. At the same time, many were unable or unwilling to move out of harm’s way due to a lack of resources or a strong emotional attachment to the place they were supposed to leave. In fact, one of the main goals of this project is to explore the large bandwidth of mobile strategies to cope with extreme natural events in different cultural, historical, and natural environments.