Migration and Climate Change: The Case of the GCC Countries

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Executive Summary

The migration literature has mainly focused on the impact of the climate on migration. Little attention is given to the impact of migration on the climate. The GCC countries offer an opportunity to examine what happens to the local environment when large numbers of people move in (relatively fast). In its quest to diversify the local economy, the region has to find ways for expatriates to contribute to the world's pursuit of fighting climate change.

Introduction and Motivation

The migration literature has long focused on the impact of immigrants on economic indicators such as labor markets in destination countries (for instance see Docquier et al., 2014) or on development in the origin countries (see Ratha et al., 2016). As the academic literature on the impact of migrants has matured, more research is linking people's movements with climate. On one side, climate can be a main factor behind displacement, such as Somali farmers having to relocate due to severe drought in the Horn of Africa, and flooding that pushed millions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the South of Sudan to leave (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022d). On the other hand, a large intake of people could potentially exacerbate environmental conditions at the destination location. This policy note examines the latter approach focusing on the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC).

Climate and the Gulf Region

The Gulf region lies in a harsh climate zone of mostly arid desert, extended summer days with extremely high temperatures, and lack of rainfall (average precipitation per year across the region is 90 mm ranking all six countries in the bottom 10 in terms of average precipitation; World Development Indicators [WDI], 2023). There are already serious concerns about the potential impact of climate change on the region as evidenced by the push of the local governments to be active global negotiators on issues related to climate (Al-Sarihi, 2023). Climate can for instance cause a rise in sea level affecting all coastal areas in the region with a specific impact on islands. Bahrain projects land loss of anywhere between 5 and 11% by 2100 (Al-Olaimy, 2021). Such loss is expected to impact food security through fauna and fish stocks in the region. Some 13 species of the United Arab Emirates' fish stock have already been depleted beyond sustainable levels (Zaman, 2016) even though the local government has engaged in programs to counter this with