

VoicesOnTheMove_Episode 02 Transcript

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Sophia Burton (Host): Did you know that in Afghanistan in 2018, more people were displaced due to environmental disasters than in any other country in the world? Yes, you heard that right. We're not talking about war and violent conflict here. We're talking about environmental factors as a root cause for flight and displacement. Hi, I'm Sophia Burton from Migration Matters, and you are listening to Voices on the Move, a podcast about the relationship between migration and climate change, the people it affects, and potential solutions. In this episode, we are bringing you examples from Somalia and Afghanistan.

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Maryam: We used to live in a remote area of the Sherzad District in Afghanistan, and we were farmers and raised livestock. Our living conditions were good. We had a lot of cows and sheep. But drought hit our community. We didn't get any rain for an entire year. The excessive heat damaged our farms, so we had to move away from there.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Maryam's experience reflects the reality faced by many Afghans today. Approximately 60% of Afghanistan's population is already grappling with climate change related impacts. In today's episode, we'll be exploring the evolving definitions of climate, migration and the people it affects. Often referred to as "climate migrants". We want to know: how does our understanding of the relationship between climate change and migration shape responses and approaches to supporting people whose lives are already impacted?

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Mo Hamza: Climate, we see it as a risk multiplier and how it interacts with other factors and drivers, such as poverty, for example, or inequality, or the lack of state support.

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Sophia Burton (Host): The voice you're hearing is that of Professor Mo Hamza, a professor at Lund University in Sweden and an expert in risk management and societal safety.

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Mo Hamza: We have environmental migrants, forced environmental migrants, environmental displacees, eco refugees, climate change refugees, ecological displaced persons and so much, so many, many more. The problem with these labels is that each and every, every one evokes a specific policy and specific security response as well. There's a connotation sort of to each one of them. Take just the term refugee. That's problematic. Why is it problematic? Because it has a very specific definition in the Refugee Convention. When we work with legal scholars, they unpick that term. Persecution is very important. You can Google the refugee convention, you can Google the definition, and you will notice that there are two

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very, sort of, important things, a person who flees their country of origin due to fear of persecution because of their belonging to a political ethnic group, etc., etc. Climate and the environment doesn't do that. In a way it sort of discriminates, and in a way it doesn't discriminate.

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Mo Hamza: If you look at the media, you get biblical Exodus. You get apocalyptic scenarios of swarms, hordes marching onto northern Europe. That's not helpful. It really is not helpful. It stigmatizes those migrants in the first place. But it's also a false image. We've got enough evidence now to sort of categorically say that the vast majority of mobility due to environmental degradation caused by climate change is short distance. It's seasonal. It's circular. It rarely crosses borders. So why do we call them refugees then? So that doesn't apply here.

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Sophia Burton (Host): What Mo Hamza is highlighting here is that the words we choose to describe, migration, and displacement are more than just an academic debate. They come with very practical consequences for policy, practice, and public perception.

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Mo Hamza: How you define a problem determines the solution. How you put a label determines sort of the reactions to it. It directly affects the realities faced by millions of people who are sort of subject to environmental degradation elsewhere.

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Sophia Burton (Host): This is why it's crucial for us to better understand the realities of those already living in these situations. Let's now go to Afghanistan. This is Herat, Afghanistan's second largest city. Nestled amidst the jagged beauty of surrounding mountains and brushing the borders of Iran. Herat has seen the ebb and flow of history, once being a key stop along the Silk Route. Today, it's a crossroads for many Afghans on their way to neighboring Iran. It's here in Herat, where we met Maryam again, a middle aged woman and mother of two working in agriculture. You heard from her in the beginning of this episode.

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Maryam: My family and I have been displaced from one province to another three times already. Much like most other people from our district. The weather was too hot. We could hardly get any water from the wells due to the extreme heat. My children were constantly sick with diarrhea. I even lost one of my children to it. We tried to help ourselves as best we could. During the drought, we tried cultivating crops that needed less water, such as medical plants. We also dug ditches to store water. We had to save more so that we wouldn't stay hungry, but it wasn't enough. Finally, we had to sell our farm and some of our cows for half of the original price.

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Sophia Burton (Host): When families like Maryam's are displaced due to climate related factors, they are often labeled as economic migrants, which overlooks the distinct mix of challenges they face. How should we categorize Maryam's situation? Here's something to consider. Afghanistan contributes very minimally to global greenhouse emissions, yet it is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change. This is an example of what people mean when they use the term climate injustice, when those who contribute the least to emissions suffer the most from its effects.

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Sophia Burton (Host): To shed more light on the situation in Afghanistan, we turn to Dr. Nassim Majidi. Nassim co-founded Samuel Hall, a social enterprise specializing in on the ground research on migration and displacement with migrants and local communities. Nassim spent seven years in Afghanistan conducting research and has a lot of insight to share with us.

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Nassim Majidi: We see livestock suffering. We see crops that are less diversified and less productive at a time when the country is facing one of the world's harshest, most severe humanitarian crises. Now, paradoxically, and perhaps the good news is that whether the current authorities in charge, the former government or the international community, everyone agrees on the priority to address climate change in the country. In 2016, for example, the current Taliban leaders, including the spiritual leader, actually surprised everyone by declaring that reforestation was a priority and was part of the Jihad. So it's really the only common political denominator between the former government and the current de facto authorities, and also the international community at large. So we have to use that.

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Nassim Majidi: Our research actually shows that communities know themselves what's best for them, so they have positive strategies and adaptive strategies that they put in place, but they also have to resort to sometimes harmful coping strategies. And those are the ones we want to prevent. They include, for example, households selling assets, households using contaminated water, which increases their vulnerability and creates a vicious, vicious cycle, notably on their health. We also see them cutting trees for income or selling land, slaughtering livestock to be able to survive.

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Nassim Majidi: Now the solution is to prevent those and invest instead in the more positive adaptation strategies. These include, for example, planting less water intensive crops. We've seen communities repurposing destroyed crops, improving irrigation systems, and here I would really draw attention to the need to invest in

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what already exists. So Afghanistan has a traditional irrigation system that's called the Karez system that has been known to work for decades.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Nassim makes a really important point here. We don't always need to be coming up with something new. We can use systems that are already in place and find ways to adapt them. But what else can communities and individuals proactively do to counteract displacement and the loss of their homes?

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Nassim Majidi: Climate change is a slow onset phenomenon in many cases. So what does that imply? It means that basically people, communities, countries have time to adapt. Understanding those adaptations is what matters, and research here is key. So we know that one of the adaptations and a positive one is migration. Currently, Afghanistan is ruled by what is called the de facto authorities, the Taliban forces, and they're not recognized internationally as a government in charge. And this is an issue because it's basically limiting funding that can go to supporting national systems in coping with climate change. We need to depoliticize aid to ensure that aid reaches communities, regardless of who the authorities in charge are. There needs to be investments in strengthening systems to respond to climate change. So increasing capacity building and training of government officials on sustainable resource management, on sustainable forest management, on climate change trends, on adaptation measures. We need to ensure continuity and sustainability so that the previous gains are also just not lost.

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Maryam: With what we had, we then went to Kabul. People claim that Kabul was a good place with many work opportunities, but for us it was hard to afford the monthly rent alone. So my husband started running a plastic selling shop. This shop was destroyed in a bomb explosion shortly afterwards. Winters in Kabul are freezing and we didn't have the resources to heat our homes. Rent and living expenses are also very high. So we moved on to the border town, Islam Qala to go to Iran, but we were soon deported from the Iranian border. So we came to Herat. Many people within my community here have helped me, but no organization has helped us so far. Life is difficult for us here. I want to go to Iran or Pakistan from here to work and to educate my children. But if accommodation and access to school and health clinics are made accessible for us here, then I would consider staying in my country. I'm a woman heading the household with no husband or caregiver for the children. In the last few years, we haven't received any support from aid organizations. That's because as we are constantly moving, we don't get to know the community leader in the current area well. This area was recently struck by three earthquakes within two weeks and our houses have been damaged, first from drought and now earthquakes. What we need most is support with shelter and food. That's what aid organizations could help provide.

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Sophia Burton (Host): You are listening to Voices on the Move, a podcast on how climate changes migration. The struggles Maryam has experienced are sadly not unique. Stories of climate induced displacement echo throughout various regions of the world.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Baidoa, an arid city in the heart of southwestern Somalia, has become a hub for those forced to flee their homes as urbanization increases. Somalia's already tropical climate is expected to get even drier, hotter and all the more unpredictable. This makes livelihoods dependent on farming, fisheries and forestry less lucrative. Rural communities, whose lives rely heavily on rainfall to support their crops and animals, have suffered some of the most severe droughts ever recorded in the region. It's here in Baidoa that we speak with Hafis, a 42 year old farmer who's been displaced within his own country not once, but twice.

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Hafis: I had to move from my place of origin to go almost 250km away to Baidoa. There have been some significant negative external shocks that I've had to deal with. First, there was a really bad drought back in 2017. It hit us hard affecting both people and animals in that area. Then in early 2018, after three months of no significant rain, it finally started pouring. The floods damaged property, including our makeshift shelters, all made of plastics and sticks. It made toilets collapse. Plus the heavy rain brought along with it diseases like malaria and typhoid.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Hafis, along with many in his community, have had to figure out ways to deal with the challenges they have been facing.

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Hafis: For us, perhaps one of the most challenging things to deal with was the lack of water. You see, water is a basic necessity, and during these tough times there was simply no clear water to drink. It was a real struggle. First, we reacted to the flood by digging canals to redirect flood water away from our farms. We filled sacks with sand and stones, strategically placed them in areas prone to flooding. We also dug dams to collect the rainwater. We would store this precious water for use during the droughts. Another thing we did was storing the crop yield specifically for drought periods. This stock of food is essential for both animals and people when food becomes scarce during droughts. Water infrastructure projects like harvesting rainwater, facilities to store water and better irrigation systems are important for us. We want organizations to help us invest in these. It is the rainy season and again, we may not be able to harvest the rainwater, but these measures would help mitigate the effects of droughts and ensure access to clean water. If we are better prepared, we can continue to farm our land and we won't have to move away.

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Sophia Burton (Host): In her research, Nassim has observed similar dynamics for families trying to cope with the effects that such environmental changes can have on their livelihoods.

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Nassim Majidi: In Afghanistan, in Somalia and many of the other contexts where we work, such as South Sudan, climate change is actually leading families to move, but sometimes they have no other choice than to settle in what we call camps for internally displaced persons. So there the benefit is that they may have access to certain services. They may manage to find a sense of community, but resources are strained. So in the case of Hafis, currently, Hafis works as a casual laborer in construction in Baidoa. There he gets \$5 per day.

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Hafis: Whatever little I managed to earn from construction work goes straight towards covering our family's bills. There's just no room for savings, so we don't have the means to move again and go back to where we come from.

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Sophia Burton (Host): People internally displaced due to climate related reasons face conflicting dynamics. They're stuck between two worlds: the changing rural areas they know and the unfamiliar urban spaces they find themselves in. It's a tough spot, balancing the past and present, climate and conflict, and showing resilience while coping through various strategies. From Afghanistan to Somalia, many of the people Samuel Hall's researchers interviewed dealt with long term environmental degradation, like desertification and infertile soil. The tipping point for them was often the latest environmental disaster or insecurity, pushing them to make the difficult decision to move to the city. It became their only option. So where do we go from here? According to Mo Hamza, it's crucial to view migration not just as a crisis, but as a potential adaptation strategy to climate change.

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Mo Hamza: Migrants are assets. They're not necessarily a drain or a burden on where they go. Where we've seen that sort of happen, they transfer knowledge and experience, they contribute to their host society, and they contribute back home as well through remittances, if home still exists.

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Nassim Majidi: We need funding to sustain what? To sustain system strengthening first, so here we're talking about irrigation systems, natural resource management. And then funding to sustain community level strengthening, investing in the awareness, and in community based resource management. Just imagine how transformative it would be if communities were actually better supported to practice what they already do in terms of sustainable resource management. But if they were also just better informed, better equipped, reassured, so that they could

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always think a step ahead for the challenges that might come tomorrow. This is where we can support them with preparedness campaigns; that could play a really big role to ensure that every individual is aware, builds that awareness, becomes an actor in solving the issues around climate change in their communities.

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Nassim Majidi: Community development requires a long term approach, requires a depoliticized approach, and requires an investing in capacity building at all the levels we talked about today, individual, community, and national level.

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Sophia Burton (Host): And that wraps up this episode of Voices on the Move. Thank you to the researchers sharing their insights with us. Dr. Nassim Majidi of Samuel Hall and Professor Mo Hamza of Lund University. And thank you to Maryam, Hafis, and all the people who've shared their personal experiences with us. To protect their identities, we've changed their names. Check out the show notes for further links to the research that informed this episode.

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Sophia Burton (Host): Until next time, where we explore the concept of habitability with stories from farmers and fishermen in Ghana and Mali. Voices on the Move is a podcast series developed by Migration Matters, York University, Samuel Hall, and the HABITABLE research project. The podcast is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Our producer and senior story editor is Bernadette Klausberger. Our editorial team includes Devyani Nighoskar, Viola Vuyanzi, Ellen Mainert, Eline van Oosterhout, and Selma Blanken. The series is edited by Line Schulz. Audio engineering by Tim Strasburger-Schmidt and Eduard Hutuleac. Original music and sound design by Eliah Arnold. Studio facilities provided by alias film und sprachtransfer. The voice actors in this episode are Leo Skozowski and Dulcie Smart. I'm Sophia Burton, your host. Until next time, with more Voices on the Move.