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TITLE: Local perceptions of climate change impacts and migration patterns in Malé, Maldives

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ABSTRACT:

For the last few decades, Maldives has been seen as being at the forefront of addressing climate change impacts. The low elevation of the islands makes them vulnerable to slow-onset hazards, such as coastal erosion, sea-level rise, salinity intrusion, and change in monsoon patterns and hence rainfall. Consequently, migration has long been discussed as an adaptation strategy for the population. This study covers outcomes from our field research conducted among islanders in Malé, the capital of Maldives, in 2013. It contributes empirical evidence toward understanding complex relations among environmental challenges, climate change, and migration. We set up two main research questions. The first question explored islanders' perceptions of impacts of climatic variability in recent years and possible impacts of future climate change. The second question probed whether out-migration from the islands might be considered to be an adaptation strategy and whether the islanders were willing to move outside Maldives due to projected climate change impacts. We conducted our field research in the capital Malé and nearby residential islands, using quantitative questionnaires with local respondents (N = 347). Our results suggest that, besides a set of actually experienced environmental and climate challenges, slow-onset climate change impacts such as sea-level rise are perceived as being one of the key factors affecting Maldivian society and livelihoods. More than 50% of respondents perceive future sea-level rise to be a serious challenge at the national level and they accept that migration from islands to other countries might be a potential option. Conversely, from the individual perspective, sea-level rise is not perceived by the local population as being one of their own important challenges. The reason is that many other factors – cultural, religious, economic and social – play an important role in decisionmaking about migrating or not.

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