



A Federal Policy and Climate Migration Briefing for Local Community Groups and Justice Organizers

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Awareness is growing of the displacement, relocation, and migration taking place within the US because of the effects of climate change, including flooding from sea-level rise and frequent severe weather events, as well as the less recognizable chronic heat, drought, and air-quality changes. Residents have been moving and continue to move away from these acute disasters and chronic environmental changes. They also relocate because of public-sector incentives, infrastructure needs, and land conversions or because the local economic base has been devastated by diminishing population from others' moves. But public recognition of these changes contrasts with the blind spots in federal policy.

With Enterprise Community Partners, the Urban Institute hosted the Stakeholders Summit on Federal Policy for Climate Displacement, Relocation, and Migration on November 18 and 19, 2020, to discuss the challenges and opportunities for federal intervention. Participants addressed gaps in the federal response to displacement and migration within climate adaptation, with the goal of envisioning a new framework as climate policy evolves under a new presidential administration.

The recommendations for federal policymakers were synthesized in a separate report¹ and are outlined here. However, participating local environmental justice advocates, community development groups, and other grassroots organizers stressed the long-standing gaps and oversights in federal

policies and their implementation. Opportunities for community-based organizers and service providers include the following:

- **Centering self-determination.** Migration should not be a predefined climate solution. Adaptation should be part of community visioning and reality checks for people to define their own paths. The federal government should support a planning phase followed by action as agreed to by residents.
- **Accepting the scientific evidence.** The transparent provision of data to measure exposure and vulnerabilities is an essential public good. Local context, indigenous wisdom, and lived experience must inform data collection and decisionmaking.
- **Broadening conceptions of vulnerability.** Federal eligibility requirements and site prioritization should take into account past injustices—such as racial segregation, class disparities, and forced relocations—in addition to contemporary indicators of disadvantage or marginalization.
- **Having governments serve the needs of residents.** Programs should focus on people, rather than the timelines, bureaucracies, and silos of government. Reducing red tape is one solution, but reforming aid to streamline services ensures inclusion.
- **Impeding local discrimination.** By harnessing the positive intervention from federal support, we should take culprits to task and enhance local accountability and democratic and civic processes.
- **Embracing the range of community needs.** People at risk of or undergoing climate relocation are part of larger networks, beyond financial and consumptive transactions. For example, a community's cultural patrimony and social networks are assets and nonmonetizable services worthy of preservation and in need of public support.
- **Building the infrastructure of public-sector engagement.** Engaging communities in discussions about their current conditions and future aspirations must involve more than town halls and charrettes. It requires oversight task forces and financial support for local organizations whose networks and trust-building capacity are essential for disseminating information and authentically involving all residents in their community's future. The promotion of "community thinking" will lead to grassroots solutions and expand the limits of federal imagination.

Pathways Forward

The US must respond to climate change's acute and chronic effects with substantial climate action—both mitigation and adaptation. Displacement is one effect that is already occurring (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014; Kumari Rigaud et al. 2018; US Global Change Research Program 2018).² The stakeholders summit sought a new vision for a comprehensive federal policy on climate displacement. This vision builds from current statutes and programs across nine aspirational policy areas while keeping the principles of evidence, equity, efficacy, and efficiency in mind. Insights from local community organizers and climate justice activists proved especially crucial. Opportunities for these local organizations' involvement in climate migration supports are summarized below across the same “pathways” as are described in the federal policy briefing. Unattributed quotations from members of this critical stakeholder group who participated in the summit are interspersed throughout the brief.

1. Triggers and Community Eligibility

What conditions should consistently elicit federal attention, funds, and programs for climate relocation? Summit participants overwhelmingly argued that disaster declarations should not be the trigger for climate adaptation planning and action. Rather, the federal government should fund research to measure the physical exposure of all places to climate effects and assess their social and economic vulnerability—including the legacies of underinvestment, political marginalization, and capacity constraints in local government—to define “at-risk places” eligible for federal intervention and to inform residents. This inquiry, however, should involve indigenous knowledge and citizen science, both for getting an accurate picture of local conditions and incubating trust and partnership with communities.

“If we had an agreed-upon criteria where a community would be designated like, maybe an [environmental justice] community or frontline community, that communities who meet these standards of redlining practices, other historic injustices, there might be a way to get at prioritizing communities.”

2. Individual Needs

What should the range of federal services be for someone facing climate relocation? Most foreseeable federal interventions related to climate relocation focus on households' property and possessions—including titles, insurance, damages, and temporary shelter. This approach limits both the number of services and who is eligible for them. Groups at risk of not accessing services include renters, people with physical disabilities, households of color that have been historically denied housing choices, and people experiencing homelessness, in addition to some low-income property owners. Current disaster services do not meet all needs, nor would they cover relocation. Services from housing and employment

to “wraparounds” for health, education, and cultural integration must be offered to affected households clearly, consistently, and accessibly through community-based case managers and then monitored.

“Assessment of existing cumulative burdens experienced by a community, whether social, socioeconomic, or environmental...would be an important consideration.”

3. Individual Assistance Funding and Eligibility

Which income levels, demographics (including race and ethnicity), and climate-hazard exposures should be prioritized for federal climate relocation assistance to households? The average amount of disaster aid that households receive is much lower than the federal caps, and the assistance rarely accounts for the actual costs of rebuilding or compensates for the disproportionate effects of even slight financial disruptions on lower-income, vulnerable households and the nonmonetizable costs to lives and livelihoods (Martín 2019b). These costs are disproportionately borne by people with low incomes, communities of color, and renters (Ratcliffe et al. 2020). Federal service providers must prioritize for eligibility low-income households in concentrated at-risk areas that have low public-sector capacity and progressively scale the total value of individual aid to make climate relocators whole. Factors that contribute to vulnerability—such as living in a historically segregated neighborhood, having a physical disability, and having an undocumented immigration status—should be considered in prioritization decisions.

“We have seen on the ground that [disaster aid] type of policy discriminates against low-income and Black communities that because of historical reasons, because of slavery, were forbidden [from] having ownership of land. That law reproduces an insult by forbidding them access to assistance and ends up forcibly displacing communities.”

4. Community Decisionmaking

Self-determination and procedural justice are important means and ends in climate adaptation decisions for communities and households. Having seats at the table is as important as outcomes. What kinds of engagement could be implemented to ensure procedural justice in adaptation planning? Summit participants stressed the importance of elevating residents at all stages of policy. Inclusive engagement helps communities understand their challenges and devise solutions. Agencies could advance science communications and improve resident engagement techniques, build capacity in

underprepared local governments, and require that decisions be made by and with residents and that funding go to local organizers consistently and transparently.

“[Engagement] we do with communities is offensive, disrespectful, and not good enough.”

5. Needs of Governments That Face Relocating Populations

Federal disaster policy focuses on rebuilding. How should federal programs support community rebuilding alongside relocation, which risks losing population, economic production, and municipal revenue? The federal government can slow losses in highly exposed jurisdictions through creative funding and programming—such as revolving loan funds, bond negotiations, and pilot relocation programs—but funding must also deter at-risk communities from further development of exposed land or unsustainable economic activities.

“There is no 1-800 number to call, so how does a community without a voice, who doesn’t have access to powerful decisionmakers and lawmakers, even be able to ask for assistance?”

6. Needs of Governments That Receive Migrants

Climate-related relocations typically involve moves to existing towns and cities, particularly large ones that are seen as having employment and housing opportunities and may have different demographic contexts from those in the communities people are leaving. These moves usually happen with minimal and time-limited public aid.³ Should federal aid be directed before and after a disaster to governments whose communities are likely to receive relocating people, and, if so, for what purposes?

Transformation requires understanding migration with and without federal aid. Local civil society can build bridges to understanding by tracking households; applying groups’ experiences and wisdom to pilot programs; devising governance for regional plans, land and infrastructure cooperatives, and mutual adaptation agreements; adding expertise; and countering xenophobia.

“If we build great places that are affordable and have opportunity and networks and social systems that are supported, people will want to move to those locations.”

7. Costs and Cost Share

Federal expenditures for hazard mitigation and climate adaptation have not increased significantly in recent years despite evidence of their benefits and the growing need. What would be an acceptable appropriation for a climate relocation program, and who should pay it? Federal resources can support community viability, neighborhood cohesion, resident livelihood, and vernacular culture, as well as one-way tickets out of harm's way. The costs can be justified with improvements to cost-benefit analysis tools and mitigated by distributing the burden across government tiers and private-sector actors according to their proportional contribution to the risks.

“Decisions that make a community eligible...are built on racist valuation practices.”

8. Time Frames

Federal buyout and formal relocation programs take a long time to come to fruition, and that creates challenges for people who need to prepare for and plan around such a major transition in their lives (GAO 2020).⁴ But speeding up the process could result in poor planning and worse outcomes. What is reasonable timing for federal aid for households, from eligibility, through consent, and after relocation? Aid must balance speed, quality, and suitability. The government must understand timing (from its own timelines to the deadlines it imposes) and its effect on service quality, migrants' well-being, and community outcomes.

“How does anyone make a decision about how to leave in six months? Understand that the first part of the process is not going to look anything like a government checklist. It's going to look like community meetings. It's going to look like creating a place of healing and trust before you even get to the agenda of a design or move.”

9. Authorities

Although the federal government's role in disaster assistance has expanded, questions persist about what authority the different federal agencies have to provide this aid, as well as what should be the responsibility of state and local governments and of the private sector (Lindsay and Webster 2020). What are the appropriate roles and obligations for the federal government, if any? Ultimately, climate policy should not be equated with disaster policy. Community planning and environmental goals should prescribe migration, but these broad approaches require clear lines of authority, oversight, and

leadership in government, combined with capacity building for underresourced local jurisdictions and the promotion of “bottom up” solutions from residents.

“Just passing through grants or resources doesn’t necessarily work. It just becomes an activity of whichever group is then hired and sub-consulted to do the work. And it doesn’t belong to the owners that have the ability to make sure that it’s fulfilled and implemented.”

Conclusion

Representatives of local community organizations—including civil rights, environment, and environmental justice organizations—are increasingly vocal about the needs of vulnerable households that are exposed to climate-related hazards and their financial and political capacity to respond (Martín 2019a).⁵ Exposure and vulnerability are the products of race- and income-based segregation, itself partially the result of past policies. Local groups are equipped to envision what could and should be.⁶

The summit included these voices to ensure that the experiences of relocated and relocating people are prioritized in decisionmaking processes and policy goals. From requiring authentic engagement, to providing resources and capacity for local groups, to centering marginalized voices, the federal government can create new pathways for the nation’s communities that are most vulnerable to climate effects.

Local organizations can contribute to these federal goals by doing the following:

- **Continuing advocacy.** Monitoring and calling out agencies, entities, and their agents for presupposing displacement without authentic partnership and citizen control are needed. Following Jemez principles, local groups secure inclusive and representative participation that ensures self-determination.
- **Supporting science.** In addition to insisting that citizen science and local knowledge be part of assessing climate exposures and adaptation solutions, local groups can help train and prepare their constituents for that participation. Federal scientists also need mediators that inform them about needs and provide feedback on language, tone, and accessibility.
- **Defining context.** Census numbers and surveys may reveal some information about communities, but histories, perceptions, and trust can only come from people. Local groups play a crucial role in bringing to the fore local narratives and truths that accurately define social vulnerability.
- **Defending residents.** Community-based groups can blow the whistle when residents slip through the cracks. Ideally, they let policymakers know when cracks develop and defend

constituents at risk of slipping through them. The diversity of complex services that are likely to be associated with adaptation options—especially relocation—creates potential for many cracks.

- **Assessing local impacts.** In both the communities people leave and the communities where they move, advocates can ensure that federal interventions do not increase discrimination or perpetuate poor governance.
- **Integrating community intersections.** Advocates know that communities are more than housing stock and business directories. Cultural assets and social networks need to be considered, especially if threatened with displacement.
- **Managing engagement.** As expert organizers, community groups are best-positioned to coordinate and execute engagement for local climate planning and action. Engagement techniques have evolved, and their outcomes are mixed. Adapting contemporary logistics to local circumstances brings value to the process and restricts agencies from claiming robust engagement from tokenism.

“What we have right now is government structures that are set up to protect capital and corporations. And we have to figure out how to reclaim the participation in government, not as an extra chore or duty, but as something that fits within a natural cycle of a community.”

Notes

¹ See Martín and Williams (2021).

² *Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change UNFCCC-Paris COP-21: Recommendations from the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility*, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, November 2015, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/201511-human-mobility-in-the-context-of-climate-change-unfccc-Paris-COP21.pdf>.

³ In cases of evacuation, mutual aid agreements can help with shelter, although the “host state” can request Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for this temporary assistance. For longer-term displacement, two cases of Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery funds’ being used by receiving communities to support newcomers from disasters have been documented; however, in both cases, the receiving communities were eligible for funds only because they had experienced a disaster in the same year.

⁴ “Climate Change,” Alaska Institute for Justice, accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.akijp.org/policy-and-research/climate-change/>.

⁵ A sample of think tank and grassroots proposals are the Climate Forum’s Equitable and Just National Climate Platform, which urges support for displaced families to return to their communities or to relocate to improved living standards and maintained social cohesion, as well as engaged planning and management; the BlueGreen Alliance’s Solidarity for Climate Action; the Climate Justice Alliance’s protections for the rights of climate, including “a right to return to lands that remain livable and/or providing full and fair compensation for losses” (United Frontline Table 2020, 41); and the US Climate Action Network’s Vision for Equitable Climate Action, which features a rights-centered approach and equity in adaptation and managed retreat.

- ⁶ Several local groups—including the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, West Harlem Environmental Action Inc. (WE ACT for Environmental Justice), Catalyst Miami, and Greenlining Institute—are producing climate adaptation plans with some consideration of climate migration.

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