



A Federal Policy and Climate Migration Briefing for National Advocacy Organizations and Philanthropy

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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 response to displacement and migration as climate adaptation options, 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 national advocacy and philanthropic organizations provided key feedback, both related to federal interventions and their roles within them. Opportunities for these stakeholders include the following:

- **Filling the knowledge gaps.** Though national data are fundamental, more granular information such as neighborhood-level vulnerability is needed, as is local data collection—for example, via citizen scientists. National environmental, housing, and rights groups and funders can complete the knowledge base.
- **Building capacity among local organizers.** Operational support, leadership training, and access to tools and knowledge (including in-house scientists, lawyers, and artists) are crucial for local groups to serve as key intermediaries with residents. However, they need financial and administrative aid.
- **Endorsing regional cooperation.** Local foundations and regional offices are well-connected and can support cross-jurisdictional agreements and serve as a financial backstop for legal and financial agreements.
- **Leveraging influence.** National-level advocates and funders can use their formidable platforms to highlight gaps in the populations served or policy outcomes and to educate policymakers about the urgency of appropriate public interventions.
- **Underwriting innovation.** Seed funding is key to convening global thought leaders and testing innovations that the public sector cannot readily support. The civil sector ensures that demonstrations are transparent and sustainable and yield public evidence.
- **Maintaining the long-term vision.** Multisectoral support is important for funding direct wraparound services for low-income and other disadvantaged households when the public sector may not offer them and for committing to communities and projects for the long term.

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.

The insights related to housing, the environment, civil rights, and environmental justice from national advocacy organizations were especially crucial, as were those from national foundations concerned with vulnerable populations and exposed ecosystems in underserved communities. They stressed the importance of taking a multisectoral approach to addressing the long-standing gaps in federal policy and its implementation. These civil society stakeholders could speak independently about the challenges that stakeholders at different scales (from neighborhood to planet) face in different communities.

Opportunities for national advocacy and philanthropic organizations' involvement in climate migration supports are summarized below across the same “pathways” as are described in the federal policy briefing. Unattributed quotations from these key stakeholders 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? Like the representatives of other stakeholder groups at the summit, participants from national advocacy and philanthropic organizations 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 should involve indigenous knowledge and citizen science, both to get an accurate picture of local conditions and incubate trust with communities. Gaps in data often exist, especially at the neighborhood level and for social and cultural characteristics in communities beyond the usual demographic groupings. The science for collecting and analyzing these data typically does not involve alternative, inclusive methods either. National groups can support federal, state, and local efforts against which triggers for local aid are measured.³

“I’m very concerned about which communities get mitigation dollars and which get relocated and oversight of that and making sure that it isn’t driven by racial bias or because of income level. The framework of who gets the assistance, that framework is hard to digest because usually these groups don’t want that sort of assistance.”

2. Individual Needs

What should the range of federal services be for someone facing climate relocation? National groups are the best advocates for meeting needs beyond current policy’s focus on property and possessions—and for the equitable distribution of services. In many cases, national groups are best positioned to provide services that will fill gaps created when public efforts falter. In others, national activist groups and philanthropic organizations can advocate for equitable, transparent, and predictable federal resources and their distribution to people of different income levels and demographic populations.

3. Individual Assistance Funding and Eligibility

National groups can also help fill gaps in the evidence base for the appropriate dosage of services for relocating residents. If 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, more research is needed. That includes practical knowledge about the necessary scale for aid funding and the ways people slip through the cracks. National groups also often have relationships with local advocates who understand the nature and strength of local community networks that can help determine whether public interventions should be community-wide or focused on individuals.

“This is how our entire disaster system works...to reimburse people for the value of what they lost, continuing to entrench inequalities based on whose properties is valued more.”

4. Community Decisionmaking

National groups can identify when public services have fallen short of inclusive and representative engagement with residents—and often have the resources to support the local organizations and leaders and consulting organizations better equipped for this work. The national groups can be neutral actors in places where public officials are viewed suspiciously. Because community engagement can be

overlooked by public entities, funders can support embedded, authentic, and inclusive engagement that matches communities' technological and access needs. This includes direct support of the organizations that do this work well and are trusted in communities.

“A lot of the times what communities’ leaders send to their populations saying that we’re staying here and we’ll be better. And we have to do the work to change that mindset.”

5. Needs of Governments That Face Relocating Populations

National groups have shown themselves to be indispensable allies in places that have experienced population and economic losses. In addition to the funding and knowledge these groups can bring to underresourced places, their lessons could be useful for climate-related relocation programs. In places where residents are leaving, national groups could help manage the losses while supporting communities as they weigh relocation against other adaptation options. Environmental advocates can also support the transition of abandoned properties and ecosystem benefits.

“There is a recognition that the people who are at risk of these relocations are there because of federal and other policies to begin with. Low-income housing is built in areas that are most at risk of disasters because of federal policies. I think even before a conversation for federal assistance for the relocation piece, there needs to be a recognition that federal policy needs to be reoriented to correct for these historic failures.”

6. Needs of Governments That Receive Migrants

Philanthropic organizations, especially regional and local foundations, could help support coordination and agreements between jurisdictions that people are leaving and those receiving migrants. By endorsing and providing financial and legal backstops for mutual adaptation agreements, funders could reduce angst in receiving communities. They could also support the growth and capacity of services—particularly housing, workforce training, and economic development—in the communities. These steps could produce benefits for the existing residents while minimizing negative perceptions of the newcomers. Finally, national groups can track households; apply their experience and wisdom to pilot programs; devise governance for regional plans, land and infrastructure cooperatives, and mutual

adaptation agreements; add expertise; and counter xenophobia through public awareness campaigns and resourcing cultural and recreational exchanges.

“[What] we struggle with in our organization is conflating the idea of a community and a local government. The local government that is receiving an influx of in-migration needs things, but so do the human beings who live in the actual communities.”

7. Costs and Cost Share

Although national advocacy and philanthropic organizations do not typically get involved in budget and appropriations discussions between governments, they can provide research and practical knowledge that yield tools and strategies for determining costs and their distribution, such as cost-benefit analysis innovations or civic-backed financing. Funding organizations can also help underresourced communities or people with their cost shares. Additionally, both advocacy and funding nonprofits can support the costs of services such as neighborhood cohesion and vernacular culture that the public sector typically overlooks. And they can negotiate with private-sector stakeholders about their financial obligations. In a few cases, they can be instrumental in pushing private actors to fund interventions to address the climate change-inducing actions for which they are responsible.

“So many programs are dominated by benefit-cost analysis...that in many cases does not take into account some of these other social impacts. I think that an area ripe for work is how you soften the BCA dominance.”

8. Time Frames

For many reasons, national advocates and philanthropy want to see immediate change. This urgency often conflicts with public bureaucracy and may create difficulties for at-risk communities and people who need to deliberate and determine the best series of moves for their residents and families. Consequently, national groups supporting local actions and federal policy must be prepared to be in the adaptation and displacement space for the long haul. They should also endorse local and national elected officials willing to take on the long-term planning, service building, and sensitive deliberations that accept the reality of climate risks and the need to address likely changes in their communities.

These officials—in both communities like coastal Florida that people are leaving and those like Chico, California, that are receiving migrants—have been vulnerable in the past.

“We hear anecdotes about local governments who implement a buyout program and their reward is being voted out of office. So, what is the incentive for local government officials to be making these decisions? Some sort of reframing of the timescales of decisionmaking. And maybe that’s payments in lieu of taxes for a certain amount of time or something that helps ease the transition so that local governments can actually make longer-term decisions without worrying so much on just the short-term cycle of local planning.”

9. Authorities

Finally, as with costs, national groups do not typically get involved in discussions about governance issues, either legal or constitutional, with different levels of government or in turf battles between sibling agencies. However, they can coordinate with the public sector to help create policies related to cross-sectoral authorities and can determine responsibilities for the private sector such as regulatory education, legal action, and direct organizing. Furthermore, these groups can elevate the authority of local governments and residents and help promote their “bottom-up” solutions through public awareness campaigns, direct organizing and capacity building, and policymaker training.

“You need to have good, strong democracy at the local level to navigate any resource or aids as a town together. I don’t think it’s necessarily about self-organizing and organizing. It’s just part of the way that towns either do or don’t move. And why they don’t move is frequently because they don’t have strong government to access any resources or programs.”

Conclusion

National nongovernmental organizations and funders in the environment, housing, and disaster assistance fields have played a crucial role in bridging gaps in federal policy with realities in local conditions by exposing the patterns in federal processes that lead to disparate outcomes for communities and ecosystems. The groups also lift up good practices among local activists and state and

local officials. By conducting research, convening stakeholders, and providing technical assistance to local communities, these organizations have their fingers on the pulse of climate migration questions and are equipped to frame the terms for federal policy reform.

The summit included the voices of national advocates and philanthropy to ensure that insights from the civil sector and their opportunities were considered in relation to the role of the public sector—the federal government, in particular. This group provided clear suggestions for federal legislators and executive branch appointees and civil servants. However, they also considered their own commitments and interventions. The group brought forward many opportunities, including support for direct services, research, practical insights, cross-jurisdictional mediation, and private-sector integration. Ultimately, the national civil sector could bring their finances, knowledge, and influence to bear for the benefit of communities without these resources.

“There is close to \$38 billion on the streets right now...So how is that money being used to address this issue? I think that our sector needs to look at this and see if we can leverage funding. We’re just fixing things with Band-Aids, and this should be strategic funding.”

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 Examples of supplemental research include Vogel and colleagues (2016), Mickelson and colleagues (2019), Saadian and colleagues (2020), Weber and Moore (2019), and Enterprise Community Partners (2018).

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