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# This Warming Planet Should Learn How to Talk About Migration

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Alejandro Martin Rodriguez

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Sustainability, Climate, and Geopolitics Program



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## About the Author

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## Sustainability, Climate, and Geopolitics Program

The Sustainability, Climate, and Geopolitics Program explores how climate change and the responses to it are changing international politics, global governance, and world security. Our work covers topics from the geopolitical implications of decarbonization and environmental breakdown to the challenge of building out clean energy supply chains, alternative protein options, and other challenges of a warming planet.

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## Introduction

The places where people can live—with or without dignity—are changing. Extreme heat, droughts, floods, coastal erosion, and sea level rise, among other climate impacts, are [reducing the area of the human climate niche](#), that is, the part of the world most suited for human life. Regardless of how much societies reduce their carbon dioxide emissions today, the locked-in effects of climate change will [continue](#) to impact them for decades, if not centuries. In this context, the World Bank [estimates](#) that more than 200 million people globally could be forced to leave their homes by 2050.

Governments all over the world must design and deliver effective policy responses to the risks associated with this large-scale movement of people. However, policymakers are limited in their options by the prevalence of misinformed narratives on migration (see box 1) that can make the sensible policy paths seem unattainable.

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### Box 1. Defining Migration, Human Mobility, and Climate Mobility

This paper uses “migration” and “human mobility” interchangeably to refer to all forms of human movement, including cross-border and internal migration, planned relocation, and forced and internal displacement, whether temporary or permanent. “Climate mobility” is understood as [the range of population movements that result from climate impacts](#). It is important to clarify that most projected climate-related displacement will take place within national borders. All types of human movement have relevant, albeit distinct, policy implications, and this paper seeks to assess them when exploring existing narratives.

## The Challenge: Policy Options Are Limited by the Way a Society Talks About Migration

Large migration waves are not a problem per se, nor are they new to human history. In fact, the large-scale movement of people around the world has been a [major driver of development and prosperity for centuries](#). However, if migration is managed poorly, it can present [associated risks that could destabilize communities](#), potentially leading to increased violence and even laying the groundwork for extremist groups to recruit and exploit vulnerable populations. The fallouts of this mismanagement could in turn overwhelm governance systems, which could lead to more poorly managed migration. This would perpetuate a self-reinforcing cycle of fiscal, political, economic, and social instability.

This paper examines one challenge to the proper management of climate-exacerbated human mobility: the prevalence of misinformed narratives that politicize how societies talk about migration. Narratives around the movement of people are often shaped by misconceptions and driven by misinformation. In some parts of the world, [harmful and dehumanizing perspectives](#) on migrants permeate political movements, media, and other forms of public discourse. Deep-seated societal challenges and fears are frequently redirected toward these populations, who are often scapegoated for political or economic purposes. In other parts of the world, mobility is sometimes perceived as a challenge undermining the prosperity and stability of sending communities, whose youth leave seeking better opportunities elsewhere. Both of these assessments can prevent policymakers in their respective societies from objectively designing and delivering policy responses that can help efficiently manage migration while maximizing the benefits that come from human mobility.

## The Alternative: Building Evidence-Based Counternarratives Creates Space for Better Policies

Unpacking this narrative challenge requires a thorough assessment of the existing discourse to understand where it comes from and what impact it is having on policy design and delivery. While doing so, this paper explores how to build counternarratives that are informed by existing evidence and data on climate and migration, and how this approach could help unlock opportunities to develop more efficient policy responses.

Evidence shows that the language used to describe communities can impact their well-being, and in turn their potential contribution to societies. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the criminalization and dehumanization of migrants often [results](#) in them being deprived of fundamental human rights and without a place in society, thus preventing them from fully contributing to its prosperity. Furthermore, tools such as storytelling represent [powerful messaging tactics](#) to shape how audiences think about an issue. In this context, reshaping how societies talk about migration can help policymakers better respond to the populations' needs and maximize the role they can play in society.

This paper aims to understand the challenge that some migration narratives present to the design and delivery of policy responses to twenty-first-century climate-exacerbated migration and to explore counternarrative solutions that can create space for better policy discussions. It provides examples of both existing narratives and assessed counternarratives, in an attempt to showcase to policymakers in both receiving and sending societies how they can contribute to reshaping the way we talk about migration in a warming planet. To do so, this paper prioritizes three distinct narratives around climate mobility based on their prevalence among our target audience of policymakers.

## The Analysis: Three Narratives (and Their Counternarratives) Around Climate Mobility

In today's world, multiple narratives compete to explain how climate change could or might affect how and where people live. This phenomenon is perceived differently depending on the impacted societies, and different fears and concerns arise depending on how migration is perceived to be affecting sending or receiving populations. This paper assesses three distinct narratives around climate mobility that are prevalent in traditionally sending and receiving societies, in an effort to understand where they come from and how to respond to them (see table 1). They have been selected as representatives of popular narratives among policymakers and their constituents that may limit or condition the extent to which efficient policy responses can be designed and delivered in light of climate-exacerbated mobility in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> When assessed, these narratives are compared to existing counternarratives that can help overcome these limitations and create space for improved policy responses.

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1 For methodological information on why these narratives were selected, see [Seiger, Kajander, Neidhardt, Scharfbillig, Dražanová, et al. \(2025\)](#); [Linekar \(2024\)](#); [Huckstep and Dempster \(2023\)](#); and [Banulescu-Bogdan and Huang \(2024\)](#). Also informed by professional communications with senior and technical policymakers conducted informally by the author.

**Table 1. Three Narratives and Counternarratives on Climate Mobility**

<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Holder</b>	<b>Policy Implications</b>	<b>Counternarrative</b>	<b>Policy Evidence</b>
<p><b>Migration harms society:</b> Large-scale movement accelerated by climate change cannot be managed and will bring criminal and violent migrants who will take away our jobs and culture.</p>	<p> Policymakers and constituents in traditionally receiving societies, including high-income countries such as the United States, Australia, or members of the European Union.</p>	<p>Promotes exclusion of newcomers from receiving societies, limiting their potential contributions to securing growth and filling other relevant gaps.</p> <p>Misses out on opportunities presented by action on climate mobility.</p>	<p>Climate mobility can be managed, and it represents an opportunity for economic growth and job creation in receiving societies.</p>	<p>Supporting migrant workers can help <a href="#">meet</a> green labor shortages in cities and, together with investments in skills training, create up to \$280 billion in economic growth by 2040.</p>
<p><b>Giving up on adaptation:</b> Promoting climate mobility implies giving up on adaptation and the right for people to stay.</p>	<p> Policymakers and constituents in traditionally sending societies.</p>	<p>Prevents focus on climate mobility action that protects the right to stay and enhances adaptation and resilience efforts.</p> <p>Fails to acknowledge that most climate mobility is expected to take place within national borders.</p>	<p>Climate mobility action also involves helping people stay whenever possible.</p>	<p>The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union—the world’s first bilateral agreement on climate mobility —includes <a href="#">commitments</a> to adaptation and investment to help Tuvaluans stay.</p>
<p><b>It won’t affect me:</b> Other people are displaced by climate change, not me.</p>	<p> Constituents in both traditionally receiving and sending societies.</p>	<p>Prevents focus on climate mobility action that can help protect the right to stay and support people on the move to do so safely and with dignity.</p>	<p>Anybody, regardless of socioeconomic status, can be impacted by climate-exacerbated migration and could benefit from adequate climate mobility policies.</p>	<p>In 2022, more than <a href="#">3 million</a> adults were displaced or evacuated in the United States due to natural disasters.</p>

The three distinct narratives assessed by this paper reject or question the viability or relevance of climate mobility for the societies and political priorities of those who hold such views. The narratives have been selected for this analysis because, in doing so, they represent challenges to the effective design and delivery of policy responses to climate-exacerbated human mobility in the twenty-first century. There are other narratives that hold a more positive view toward climate mobility, some of which are presented in this paper as responses to the assessed narratives. There are also narratives that this paper does not aim to address, including views that reject the veracity of climate change—and thus that of climate

change–related displacement. For each assessed narrative, this paper seeks to understand where it comes from and how it limits policy options, reviewing recent examples from both sending and receiving societies. It then explores possible counternarratives that can advance evidence-based policy responses to the risks associated with migration on a warming planet.

## Narrative One: Migration Harms Society

### “Large-Scale Movement Accelerated by Climate Change Cannot Be Managed and Will Bring Criminal and Violent Migrants Who Take Away Our Jobs and Culture”

The first narrative assessed by this paper calls out perceived crises of uncontrolled migration as moments where potentially criminal and violent migrants can come into societies and take jobs from local populations, disrespecting local cultures and traditions and even seeking to replace them altogether. However, it lacks substantial evidence to support it. Research shows that migrants have not increased crime rates in the United States [for the past 140 years](#) and, in [OECD countries](#), they tend to contribute more in taxes and contributions than governments spend on them and play a key role in fostering trade and economic development. Countries with more migration also tend to experience [faster GDP growth and more job creation](#). Instead, the narrative is informed by [conspiracy theories](#) emphasizing mass migration and population replacement as well as the elicitation of strong emotions, to portray traditional institutions as incapable of responding to these crises. They are built upon [concerns regarding cultural identity, public safety, and a scarcity mentality](#) that is linked to growing economic inequalities.

This narrative, which is based on fear of the other or fear of the foreign, can be found in many high-income countries, including the United States, Australia, and countries within the European Union, where debates over migration are heated and sometimes influenced not by evidence but by misinformed rhetoric that demonizes foreign citizens. However, it is also found among sending societies that have become receiving ones, such as [as Kenya](#). Policymakers in these societies can benefit from unpacking its origin and impact.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign featured prominent examples of this narrative linking fear-based assumptions about foreigners with increases in the number of migrants coming to the country. These included baseless claims that Haitian migrants [were eating domestic cats and dogs in Ohio](#). City officials repeatedly stated that there was no evidence for these claims, yet they were used to incite fear and promote prejudice against migrant populations in the country. This pattern is not new, with fear-mongering narratives about migrants having [featured in public debates in high-income countries for decades](#). More recently, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni [stated](#) at the 8th European Political Community Summit in Armenia that uncontrolled migration flows “put citizens’ security under pressure” and also impact the stability of the state, the economy, competitiveness, social tensions, and, ultimately, “the quality of our democracies.”

This narrative, when advanced by high-level leaders and media personalities, can condition societies' attitudes toward migrants and limit the policy options that are available to policymakers. The comments prominently featured during the 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign, for instance, have later permeated official policy positions of the current administration, with the [2025 National Security Strategy](#) linking mass migration with increased levels of violence and crime as well as weakened social cohesion. The National Security Strategy even claims that migration policies promoted by the European Union are “creating strife” and transforming the continent in a manner that could lead to “civilizational erasure.”

When trying to unpack and understand this fear-based narrative and where it comes from, it is first important to clarify that it deals with perceptions around migration in general, and not necessarily climate-exacerbated displacement. Although academics and advocates may expect movement linked to life-threatening circumstances, including rapid-onset climate events, to cause greater acceptance by populations, the empirical evidence does not suggest that public attitudes are necessarily more positive toward climate migrants than other migrants. The [Migration Policy Institute found in 2024](#) that the limited amount of research that has been conducted on public opinion of climate migrants, specifically, has produced mixed results. Some point at climate migrants having more support from host communities than economic migrants, whereas other studies find similar levels of support. These studies often found that refugees or those qualified for asylum receive higher levels of support than other groups, although in places such as Vietnam or Kenya, the opposite findings seem to be true. Ultimately, the researchers at the Migration Policy Institute argue that there are limits to understanding the findings, as there is a “lack of conceptual consensus or clarity about who a climate migrant is.” Further, they say, many of these studies fail to distinguish between internal and international climate migrants, despite the fact that receiving societies may have very different public opinions on the two groups.

It is also important to note how this narrative, while popular and influential in policy debates, does not seem to represent the overall view of high-income societies. Public opinion toward migration in some high-income countries has been polarized and has fluctuated over the past ten years. When migration has been a top policy agenda item—such as during the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the 2015–2016 migrant crisis in Europe, and the 2024 presidential election in the United States—polling shows [support for heightened restrictionism](#). This contrasts with some long-run movement toward more positive views of migration's impacts. In the [United States](#), for instance, 62 percent of respondents thought migration was a good thing for the country in 2001; in 2025, 79 percent of respondents thought so. In Europe, [evidence suggests that](#) there are more countries experiencing an upward trend in positive attitudes toward migration (including Belgium, Portugal, and Sweden) than countries experiencing a clear downward trend (including Italy and Hungary). Despite this growing support in some parts of the continent, half of the assessed European countries have witnessed relatively stable levels of support since 2002, and most Europeans seem to hold neutral views on migration policy, with a preference for controlled levels of migration.

This paradox may be explained by the fact that public opinion toward migration becomes [more polarized](#) during electoral periods, when effective campaign messaging influences how voters think about divisive issues. In this context, [one study suggests](#) that right-wing voters exhibit more negative attitudes, and left-wing voters express lower levels of xenophobia during electoral times than nonelectoral times. In August 2024, about three months before the election, 66 percent of Donald Trump supporters thought undocumented migrants should [not be allowed to stay](#) in the United States legally, while 87 percent of Kamala Harris supporters thought they should have a way to stay legally.

The challenge thus remains that, while populations might appreciate the role that migration plays in society, they may be vulnerable to this fear-based narrative at times of heated policy debate. Furthermore, some studies show how [experiencing economic hardship](#) or [working in low- and medium-skill industries](#) can lead to more anti-migration attitudes.

Anti-migration attitudes represent a barrier to the design and delivery of long-term policy solutions, reinforcing the need to promote evidence-based narratives that resonate with audiences to unlock solutions that address migration in beneficial ways. This can be done by highlighting how safe and regular pathways for migration can [promote](#) sustainable economic growth while empowering the green transition, for instance.

### ***Counternarrative: “Climate Mobility Can Be Managed, and It Represents an Opportunity for Economic Growth and Job Creation in Receiving Societies”***

This first assessed narrative jeopardizes the political consensus needed for migration reform to effectively address the expected human movements of the twenty-first century. A natural, facts-based counternarrative arises that shows how receiving countries could gain significantly by overhauling migration systems that are ill-equipped to handle the large-scale displacements climate experts expect in coming decades.

A recent study by C40 Cities, the Mayors Migration Council, and the Climate Migration Council (recently renamed the [Carnegie Climate Mobility Network](#)) showed that integrating migrant labor into urban climate action could help [unlock up to \\$280 billion in economic growth](#) in cities. This framing or counternarrative may be advanced by progressive enclaves in high-income countries, such as states or provinces like California or cities like Paris, that may be affected by hardening attitudes toward migrants but still need to face the practical implications of aging populations and [shrinking workforces](#). Highlighting the economic opportunities that come with human mobility can lead to better preparedness as well as to the design of forward-looking policy choices and investments necessary to sustainably integrate newcomers—domestic and international—and benefit from their contributions to society.

However, policymakers must also be aware of the limitations of this counternarrative, as exaggerated or overgeneralized messaging can [undermine](#) its credibility and make it fail to reach audiences that do not already share these opinions and beliefs. In order to present a compelling alternative to populist rhetoric on migration and climate mobility, communications must [acknowledge existing public concerns](#), including the cost of migration and potential risks, with solid evidence.

An example of a government that is trying to advance this counternarrative, while reaping the benefits of migration for its economy, is Spain. In 2022, the country saw the highest net migration in the past ten years, and in January 2026, its government [announced](#) plans to grant legal status to half a million undocumented migrants. Today, the Spanish economy is [growing](#) at a much faster rate than that of its neighbors, and the Bank of Spain [suggests](#) that migration contributed to one-fifth of its 3 percent GDP per capita income growth since 2022. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has defended these efforts as [not only moral but pragmatic](#), noting how they help prevent a population decline that would negatively impact his country's economy.

Public perceptions of migrants in Spain seem to align with this counternarrative; [in a 2025 survey](#), around 40 percent of respondents highlighted the positive contribution made by migrants to economic growth and believed that the government should grant permission to work or study to foreigners in the country. Conversely, 28 percent of respondents also worried about the possible negative impacts of migration on Spain's homeland security, and 23.5 percent worried about migration putting added pressure on public services, showing how supporting narratives around the benefits of migration to a society may coexist with concerns about more negative perceptions. What is important to consider in this case, then, is the extent to which these negative perceptions can prevent or condition policies that support the successful integration of newcomers and their contributions to societies. In the case of Spain, the negative perceptions do not seem to have significantly limited policy options, although Sánchez's pro-migration policies—while lauded in many progressive spaces worldwide—will ultimately be tested in the next Spanish general election, due to take place before July 2027.

## Narrative Two: Giving Up on Adaptation

### “Promoting Climate Mobility Implies Giving Up on Adaptation and the Right for People to Stay”

Whereas many in receiving countries denounce the perceived risks of letting people escape climate impacts by moving into their countries, policymakers in traditionally sending countries often understand that promoting mobility could drain their young workforce to opportunities abroad. They contend that relying on migration as a response to climate-exacerbated threats may distract from essential adaptation efforts that build resilience and

enable people to remain in their homes. This goes against the right for their people to stay and thus is counterproductive to the objective of securing a world in which climate hazards do not make more parts of our treasured planet uninhabitable. This narrative is based on a different type of fear, the fear of losing one’s home.

Leaders such as Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley have spoken on the need to [prioritize adaptation and resilience](#) as responses to climate impacts on societies. A more specific example of this narrative can be found in Tuvalu’s [negotiations](#) to establish the Falepili Union with Australia. The Falepili Union secures a pathway for Tuvaluans to obtain Australian permanent residency and citizenship. During the negotiations, many in the small island nation worried that this could lead to most Tuvaluans leaving the country, thus not recognizing the need to respect Tuvaluans’ right to stay. One of the most outspoken critics of this union was former prime minister Enele Sopoaga, who, during the 2024 general elections campaign, [argued](#) that the treaty between Tuvalu and Australia could “actually physically eliminat[e] the survival of Tuvaluan people.”

To address this fear, the Falepili Union treaty included provisions to honor Tuvaluans’ right to stay, and Article 2 of the union guarantees that both Australia and Tuvalu pledge to promote Tuvalu’s adaptation interests and to work together in the face of the existential threat of climate change. In a [joint statement between Tuvalu and Australia](#), both parties highlighted how the latter will “support Tuvalu’s efforts to enable its people to continue to live and thrive in their territory and retain Tuvalu’s deep, ancestral connections to land and sea.” In this regard, the Falepili Union includes provisions leading to Australia agreeing to an [enhanced development partnership](#) with Tuvalu to protect its future, identity, and culture, increasing from around \$13 million in official development assistance for 2023–2024 to an estimated \$63 million for 2024–2025. This example provides good guidance on a counternarrative that can help address the fears associated with giving up on the right for people to stay.

### **Counternarrative: “Climate Mobility Action Also Involves Helping People Stay Whenever Possible”**

As seen in the example of Tuvalu’s negotiations with Australia, it is important to promote a counternarrative highlighting what climate mobility looks like as a policy response to climate-exacerbated impacts. First, it implies noting how most climate-exacerbated displacement is expected to take place within national borders, thus not directly jeopardizing a country’s potential economic future and labor market. Second, it also implies prioritizing efforts that prevent people from being displaced in the first place, such as adaptation and resilience, whenever possible.

To address legitimate concerns about population loss among climate-affected nations, this counternarrative highlights that climate mobility as a concept encompasses [not only cross-border migration](#) but also internal displacement, planned relocation, and, importantly,

immobility. Policymakers highlighting this language can help capture the fact that most movement exacerbated by climate change is expected to take place [within national borders](#), even if this does imply that populations might have to move away from their former home base and into other parts of their country.

In Solomon Islands, for instance, the Walande community was reluctant to relocate and leave behind their small island in the southeast of Malaita province, after spending years building stone walls and new homes to protect their village despite regular cyclones and king tides making their island increasingly uninhabitable. Whereas members of their community started to discuss the idea of relocating in the late 1980s, it was not until 2009 that their last members relocated internally to mainland Malaita, although the community did so without significant government or international support. Their case shows an example of a [“last resort” movement](#) that takes place within national boundaries, and these examples are expected to represent the majority of cases of climate-exacerbated displacement.

The narrative that accepting climate mobility gives up the right to stay can be further countered by promoting adaptation efforts to prevent displacement in the first place. Adaptation and resilience must be understood as [dimensions of climate mobility action](#), with the Falepili Union’s focus on Australia’s development assistance to Tuvalu being a great example. These clarifications, when accompanied by credible policy options and funding support, can help reassure audiences in sending societies that supporting responses to address, minimize, and mitigate climate migration will not risk triggering a mass exodus weakening their societies, but rather prioritize their preparedness and resilience to avoid displacement.

This counternarrative reframes human mobility as an adaptation strategy to climate change and a tool that communities can apply to [minimize harm for themselves and improve their quality of life](#). When policymakers and other relevant stakeholders employ mobility language to highlight adaptation as well as the right for people to stay, they open the door for discussions around policies that are not usually associated with migration, such as encouraging livelihood diversification to enhance climate resilience. Such policies may be more attractive to both established receiving countries seeking to curb uncontrolled migration as well as sending countries aiming to retain their young, skilled citizens.

Still, when promoting this counternarrative, policymakers could be advised to stress how protecting the right to stay, as a priority within climate mobility action, is not always viable. In some instances, ensuring that people can move with dignity—with efforts such as planned relocations, if done with strong community consultations, securing their consent, and when all reasonable measures to help them stay have been exhausted—is actually the most humane way to deal with climate impacts. This does not imply giving up on the adaptation of communities but rather enabling the “last resort” policy solution that they face.

Understanding mobility as a form of adaptation that encompasses both the right of people to move and the right to stay can also help engage another critical target audience for efficient design and delivery of policy responses: the professional climate adaptation and disaster aid community. These experts, who have been working on climate adaptation for over a decade, control the flow of finance from multilateral development banks, climate funds, and national resilience institutions. They might not have fully considered mobility as a focus area for their engagement and investments, even though human mobility represents a thread that touches on one of the most fundamental consequences of climate change: where people can live. Highlighting the diversity of responses related to mobility can empower policymakers in impacted countries to design good policies across the climate mobility spectrum and put together project proposals to access funding coming from these institutions. This is needed in order to finance no-regret policies that will enhance adaptation and resilience, such as investing in migrant integration in urban areas or building better cities that can accommodate more people, regardless of where they come from or why they moved there. These policies can counter the narrative that mobility dooms countries to lose their youth and abandon adaptation, instead presenting a more accurate range of responses across the climate mobility spectrum.

## Narrative Three: It Won't Affect Me

### “Other People Are Displaced by Climate Change, Not Me”

The third and final narrative around climate mobility assessed by this paper promotes the belief that climate-exacerbated migration will only impact a very specific type of person in faraway, unrelated lands. Media discussions frequently highlight the effects of climate change in regions like the Pacific Islands or the Sahel, which are especially susceptible to climate change impacts and [urgently require](#) more and better development aid and climate funding. As a result of this media framing, many in high-income societies believe they will never be impacted by climate-exacerbated displacement and thus should not prioritize policy responses to address or prepare against this risk. Contrary to the previously discussed narratives, this narrative is not based on fear but rather a level of indifference toward what is perceived to be a foreign problem. Still, this indifference limits the extent to which policymakers can push for responses to climate mobility, as their constituents might be less interested in prioritizing action. Assessing the accuracy and veracity of this narrative, however, shows how it fails to acknowledge that mobility linked to climate change can and does happen anywhere.

The fall 2025 [Climate Change in the American Mind survey](#) highlights the tension between how much people believe climate change is an issue and how much they believe it will impact them personally. Almost two-thirds of respondents thought that global warming

will harm future generations of people (68 percent) and people in developing countries (62 percent), whereas less than half (44 percent) thought they themselves would be harmed. The number of respondents who admitted to considering moving to avoid the impacts of global warming is even lower, standing at 12 percent.

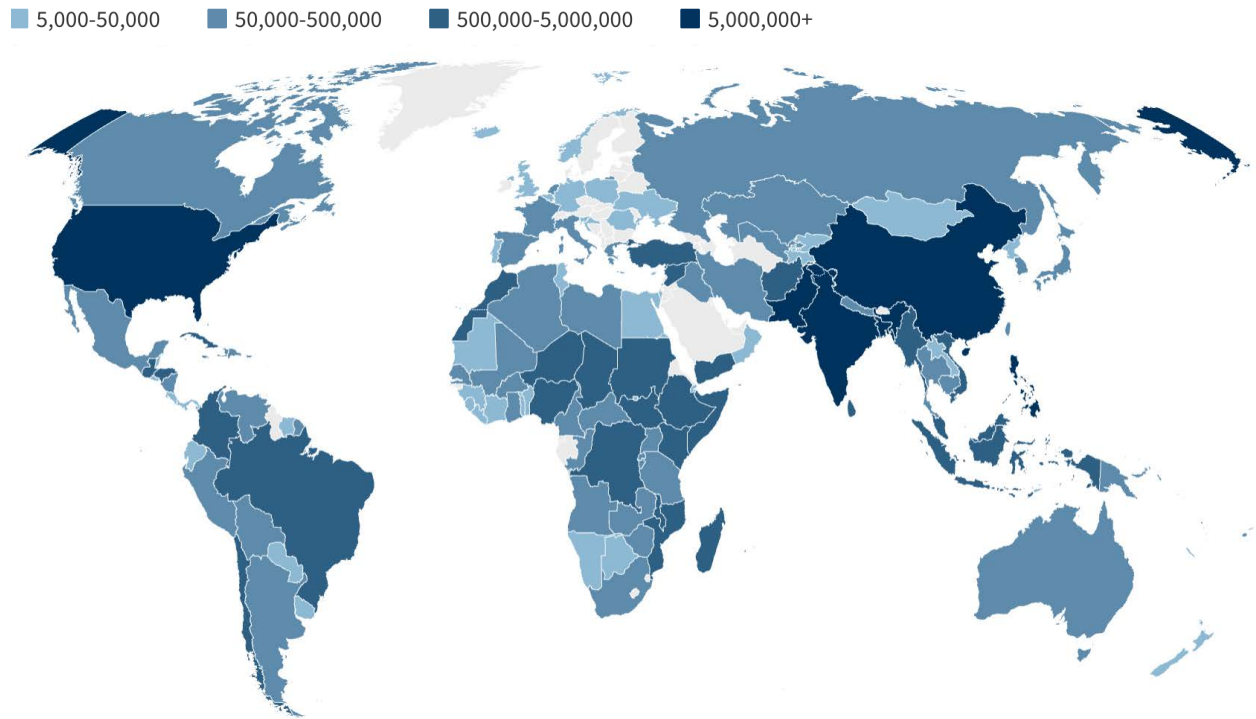
This belief is not only found in high-income places such as the United States. In a 2023 [research study](#) by the Mixed Migration Centre of the Danish Refugee Council, participants located in seven locations across the African continent did not perceive future climate-exacerbated impacts, regardless of how severe, as a key reason to move away from their homes. They also “rarely mentioned their children or descendants” having to move because of worsening climatic conditions.

This shows how audiences in different societies around the world are unaware of or misunderstand the risks that climate-exacerbated mobility can present in a world on fire. As a result of this, policies that prioritize addressing these risks and maximizing opportunities presented by human mobility, as previously identified, become less popular and attainable.

### **Counternarrative: “Anybody, Regardless of Socioeconomic Status, Can Be Impacted by Climate-Exacerbated Displacement and Could Benefit from Adequate Climate Mobility Policies”**

In order to foster the necessary policy demand for preparedness and change, and to address climate displacement in the twenty-first century, policymakers could look at counternarratives built on evidence showing that mobility as a result of climate-exacerbated impacts is already happening in most places in the world. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, in the years 2021–2025 a total of 127 UN member states [witnessed](#) more than 5,000 internal displacements due to climate-related disasters (see figure 1). These figures represent best estimates and likely understate the true magnitude.

**Figure 1. Countries and Territories That Witnessed More Than 5,000 Weather-Related Disaster Displacements, 2021–2025**



Note: GRID data on internal displacement records the amount of new internal forced movements of persons from a variety of hazards. This map by Carnegie reflects GRID data on disaster displacements triggered by weather-related natural disasters such as storms, floods, and droughts, and excludes geophysical events like earthquakes.

This map is illustrative; boundaries, names, and designations used do not represent or imply any opinion on the part of Carnegie or the authors.

Source: 2026 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID), Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/>.

In Canada, wildfires alone [internally displaced](#) 185,000 people in 2023. In Pakistan, floods [displaced](#) over 8 million people in 2022, causing [an estimated \\$30 billion in economic damages](#). Other factors such as increased air pollution levels linked to wildfires or rising sea levels are expected to influence the capacity of vulnerable populations to stay in their homes, regardless of their nationality or income. Policymakers making the case to link these events and their outsized impacts with narratives around climate mobility will be better placed to advance policy responses that prioritize recovery and preparedness.

In the United States, recent events such as the [2025 Southern California wildfires or the 2024 Hurricane Helene](#) led to loss of life, severe physical and mental health issues, and property destruction. Thousands of families lost their homes, and many remain displaced in temporary and insecure housing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2022, more than 3 million adults were [displaced or evacuated](#) due to natural disasters in the country, yet

the country [fails to acknowledge](#) its internal displacement crisis and adopt a coherent policy framework to address it. Changing narratives to first recognize the prevalence of climate mobility in the country could help create a more receptive policy environment for such a framework development. Specifically, it could help promote support for climate mobility policies that might one day, and sooner than potentially expected, benefit those that think they will never be impacted by climate-exacerbated displacement.

In this context, it is important to note that the ability of affected populations to respond to these mobility challenges, intensified by climate change, does largely hinge on their financial resources. Still, the narrative that climate mobility is a foreign phenomenon does not hold when considering the extent to which high-income economies and their populations are exposed to climate impacts.

Promoting counternarratives that highlight the mobility stories of impacted populations, regardless of their socioeconomic status, captures the reality that anyone can face the distressing experience of being forced to leave their homes. This can in turn foster a more receptive political environment for developing and implementing policies that address climate mobility and alleviate potential challenges at their core.

## Conclusion: Better Narratives for Better Policies

The nature and scale of human mobility in the twenty-first century is shaped by the impacts of climate change on societies, livelihoods, and resilience. However, the three narratives around migration assessed by this paper fail to acknowledge how migration is operating in an ever-warming world, instead promoting understandings of the relationship between climate change and migration based on fear and misinformation. This can prevent policymakers in impacted societies from designing and delivering sound policies capable of addressing the risks linked to climate mobility and unlocking the potential opportunities that it can bring to societies to make them richer and more resilient.

In a warming planet, people move to survive. Policymakers and other relevant stakeholders hoping to respond to these moves, including civil society as well as private sector leaders, can first learn how to talk about mobility in order to identify ways to discuss, design, and deliver evidence-based policies highlighting the need for preparedness through a risk-management philosophy. Narratives that are evidence-based can allow them to identify opportunities for growth and development amid large-scale human movement. This includes maximizing the role that migrant populations can play in labor markets in high-income societies as well as enhancing the resilience and adaptation efforts of traditionally sending societies. In doing so, responses to climate mobility can ensure that people remain at the heart of climate action, even in a world where many may be forced to leave their homes behind.





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