

December 2021



On the Frontlines  
of the Climate Emergency:

# Where Immigrants Meet Climate Change

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## **Where Immigrants Meet Climate Change**

**On the Frontlines of the Climate  
Emergency: Where Immigrants Meet  
Climate Change** was commissioned by  
Unbound Philanthropy to explore the  
impact of the climate crisis on global  
migration and immigrant communities  
in the United States, and to inspire  
philanthropy to accelerate investment  
in the organizations and leaders who are  
stepping up to meet urgent, interconnected  
challenges with innovative solutions.

This report was researched and  
written by Nancy Youman and edited by  
Daranee Petsod. Taryn Higashi provided  
consultation and thought leadership on  
behalf of Unbound Philanthropy. It was  
designed by Ginger Daniel  
at Orange Strategies.

### **On the cover:**

*Migrants, who are mostly from Haiti, cross the Acandí River, near Acandí, Colombia on their journey north, in September 2021. Haiti is considered to be the most climate-vulnerable country in Latin America and the Caribbean.*

*“Haiti is grappling with multiple crises: a series of earthquakes and mishandled recovery efforts, political turmoil, and severe poverty... Haiti, caught at the intersection of natural disaster and colonialism, presents a case study in environmental injustice that portends what is to come as global inaction on climate pushes more and more people to leave their homes.”*

*“The Climate Crisis at Our Border”  
Brennan Center for Justice  
October 2021*





***We are unprepared for a world in which climate change and other factors compel millions more people to flee for survival.***

*The choice we face in the U.S. of how to respond—with border walls or with a welcoming culture—will be a defining political fault line for our generation. A new paradigm for vastly greater levels of immigration must be a central priority on both moral and strategic grounds. Such an approach is critical to the well-being of immigrants and to the social democratic project itself.<sup>1</sup>*

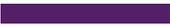
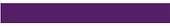
**Deepak Bhargava**

Distinguished Lecturer of Urban Studies  
School of Labor and Urban Studies  
City University of New York  
and Co-Editor, *Immigration Matters*

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# Executive Summary

Extreme heat waves, droughts, fires, hurricanes, and floods surging in the United States and across the globe are wake-up calls to the reality of a climate-altered world. While climate change affects everyone, the damage is compounded for countries and communities that are made vulnerable by restrictive immigration policies, patriarchal beliefs and systems, structural racism, and by economic stress and exploitation.

Climate impacts are increasingly potent factors fueling global migration. It's time to take a closer look at the vulnerabilities of displaced people, address the consequences for settled immigrant communities, and embrace their contributions to building resilient communities. Climate change is driving people to flee their homes and homelands, yet no domestic laws or multilateral treaties specifically cover climate displacement. Immigrants are subjected to occupational and environmental health threats in their countries of resettlement. In the United States, many immigrants work in the agriculture, construction, and landscaping sectors, where heat has become a serious occupational hazard; where federal labor laws and employer practices have not kept up with the changing climate; and where health care and sick pay are rarely available, especially for those with tenuous immigration status. And when climate-fueled disasters strike, it's most often immigrants who charge in to clean up and rebuild, even while those who are undocumented usually cannot qualify for disaster relief that would help their families recover.

In light of these realities, there is wide agreement that working at the nexus of immigrant and climate justice is imperative. Immigrant, climate, environmental, worker, and racial justice move-

ments—along with researchers, funders, and policymakers—have gotten active at this critical intersection. Shared priorities and collaborative projects to develop equitable responses to climate change are emerging, making this area ripe for development and philanthropic investment.

Commissioned by Unbound Philanthropy, this report seeks to inspire justice-oriented funders to invest at the nexus of the climate and immigrant justice movements, with a particular eye to the unique vulnerabilities and contributions of immigrants. Philanthropic investment at this pivotal juncture would help build a healthy and collaborative ecosystem across movements and is both a moral and strategic priority. This can enable forward planning of safe pathways for people who lose their homes; protections and opportunities for workers and communities who are striving to build resilience; and the power to win and implement urgent, equitable, and effective responses to climate challenges.

Migration and climate change are highly dynamic phenomena—indeed, the interplay between the two will only intensify and evolve in the coming years and decades. The opportunity and urgency of understanding the effects of climate change on migration and immigrants compels philanthropy to do its part to ensure a safe and just future for all. “The choice we face in the U.S. of how to respond—with border walls or with a welcoming culture,” says City University’s Deepak Bhargava, “will be a defining political fault line for our generation.”<sup>2</sup>

In this report the word *immigrants* is used broadly and includes all people who move across international borders. Any reference to the *immigration system* is inclusive of the asylum and refugee resettlement programs.



**Climate displacement is a huge global challenge.** *There are concrete things that the U.S. government can do and there are existing laws that the U.S. can build upon to make sure that all climate-displaced people have a safe place to live.<sup>3</sup>*

**Ama Francis**

Climate Displacement Project Strategist  
International Refugee Assistance Project

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# Migration and Climate Change

In its *First Assessment Report* in 1992, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that “the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration as millions are displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and severe drought.”<sup>4</sup> Today, climate change has become a major driver of migration, and millions of people are moving within and across borders, not only in faraway places but also within the United States. Such migration is caused by both rapid-onset weather events such as hurricanes that can suddenly displace people, as well as slow-onset phenomena like drought and sea-level rise that may force people to seek permanent resettlement elsewhere when life at home becomes unsustainable.

The twin Hurricanes Eta and Iota are a recent example. Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala got walloped by one after the other within two weeks of each other in November 2020. The storm damage contributed to the larger than normal flow of Central Americans seeking asylum in the United States, prompting a major [Politico](#) story: “It’s Not a Border Crisis. It’s a Climate Crisis.” These hurricanes compounded the effects of a long-term drought in the region that has reduced crop yields, made food scarce, and turned livelihoods from difficult to impossible. Consequently, families that for generations have grown coffee, fished, or farmed have little choice but to seek a viable existence elsewhere.

Many immigrants in the United States, particularly those in low-wage jobs and low-income neighborhoods, experience the harms of climate change in unique ways. In the wake of natural disasters such as hurricanes and wildfires, an itinerant, largely immigrant, disaster-recovery workforce does the difficult and sometimes dangerous work of cleanup and rebuilding. These workers often do not have health insurance or sick pay, and those with tenuous immigration status are especially vulnerable to wage theft and other labor-rights violations. For those working in agriculture, construction, and landscaping, heat has become a serious occupational



## WHAT IS CLIMATE MIGRATION?

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines climate migration as: “The movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border.” It’s important to note that a large majority of climate migrants move within their own countries, not across national borders.

## WHAT IS CLIMATE JUSTICE?

Climate Justice, according to the Climate Justice Alliance, “focuses on the root causes of the climate crisis through an intersectional lens of racism, classism, capitalism, economic injustice, and environmental harm. Climate justice supports a Just Transition for communities and workers away from a fossil fuel economy and focuses on making the necessary systemic changes to address unequal burdens to our communities and to realign our economy with our natural systems.”

*These are two key concepts used in this report with the caveat that definitions of terms like these are evolving as the field matures. Links throughout this report will take you to websites that provide additional definitions and information.*

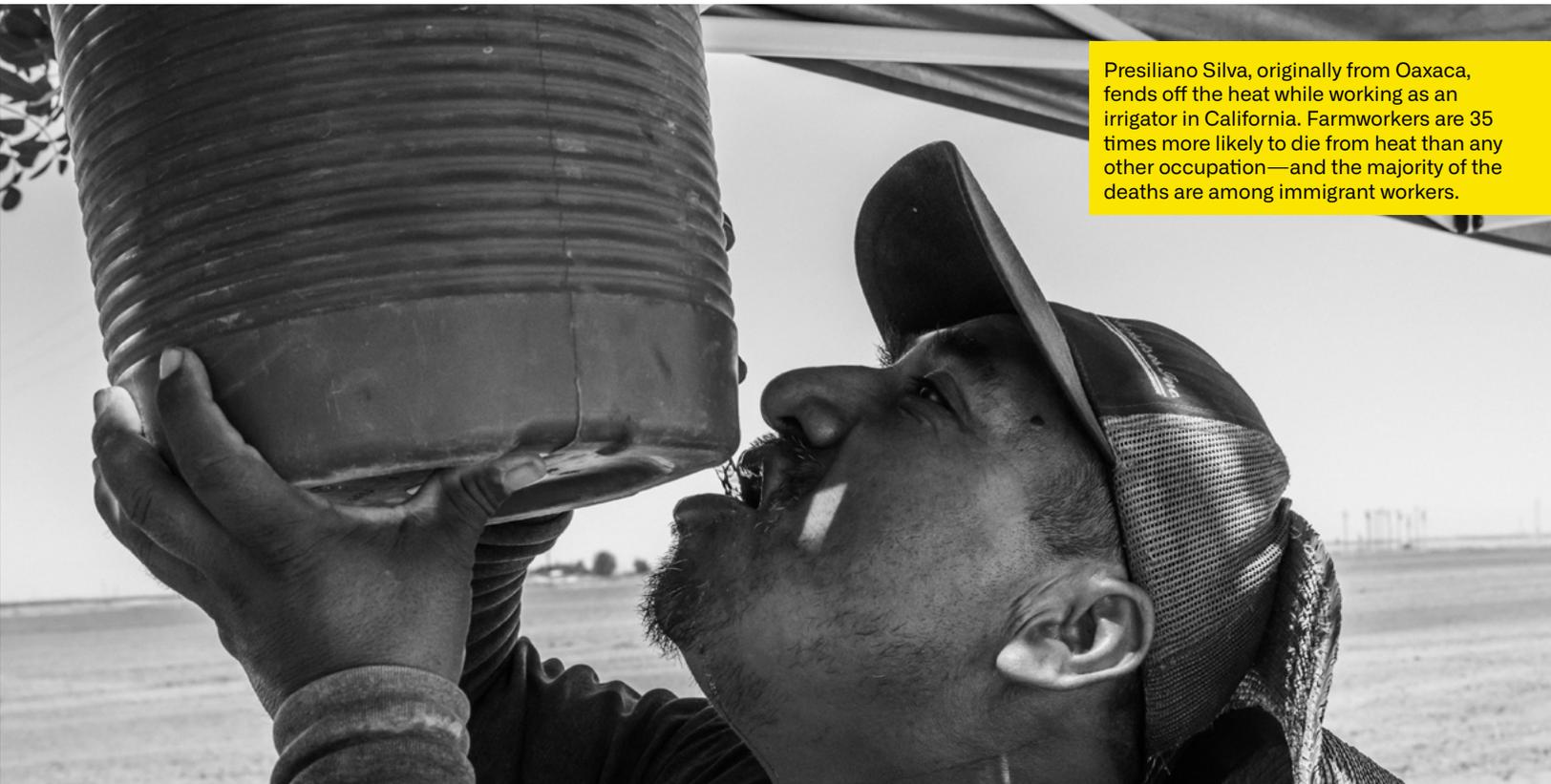
health threat—one that is not being addressed under outmoded federal labor laws and employer practices.<sup>5</sup> And it's not just outdoor workers who are at risk; the spotlight on slaughterhouses in 2020 surfaced not only Covid-exposure risks but also unsafe heat conditions.

In some regions, sea-level rise and flooding in rich coastal communities have spurred climate-related gentrification in low-income neighborhoods located on higher ground. Activists in Miami-Dade County, Florida, for example, note that high-income households are pushing residents out of immigrant neighborhoods like Little Haiti, creating more instability for many who fled climate-related natural disasters in the first place.

Despite many unknowns, these trends make clear that climate change will drive migration and also disrupt the lives of people who have already immigrated, both recently and long ago. Promising efforts in the United States are emerging to protect the rights of climate-displaced people, address climate impacts in immigrant communities and workplaces, and ensure the inclusion of immigrants and their communities in climate policies and the transition to a clean economy.

“ The immigrant experience of forced displacement has prepared us to lead the way in finding the solutions to defend tomorrow. Together with climate justice organizers, we recognize that our work is bound to one another. We are committed to build a movement that delivers a safe, just and dignified tomorrow for us all.<sup>6</sup>

**Greisa Martínez Rosas**  
Executive Director, United We Dream



Presiliano Silva, originally from Oaxaca, fends off the heat while working as an irrigator in California. Farmworkers are 35 times more likely to die from heat than any other occupation—and the majority of the deaths are among immigrant workers.



***We need to make sure that immigrants' freedom to thrive is built into our definition of climate justice.<sup>7</sup>***

**Saket Soni**  
Executive Director  
Resilience Force

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# Promising Intersectional Projects

**Propelled by the irrefutable urgency of the climate crisis and its devastating impact on communities, work at the intersection of migration and climate is gaining momentum.** Within the immigrant justice field, the focus has widened beyond immigration policy reform, giving room to consider intersectional issues impacting immigrant and refugee communities. On the climate side, a growing number of organizations recognize that climate change cannot be addressed without considering environmental equity, racial justice, and the impact on marginalized communities. In addition, many cities and localities are actively building resilience to climate change and adapting their infrastructure and built environments for a climate-compromised future. Increasingly, these efforts incorporate community input and consider the disproportionate impacts of climate change on poor and Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities.

Growing interest and activity at the nexus of immigrant justice and climate justice create many opportunities for philanthropy to support experimentation, cross-sector collaboration, movement building, and leadership development.

## **EMBRACING CLIMATE JUSTICE WITHIN THE IMMIGRANT JUSTICE MOVEMENT**

Key organizations within the immigrant justice movement are keen to work together to build capacity within the movement to engage in climate justice campaigns, and to make immigrant inclusion and legal migration central pillars of the climate justice agenda. Growing out of conversations over the last couple of years among a group of immigrant justice organizations — [CHIRLA](#), [Florida Immigrant Coalition](#), [Michigan United](#), and

[One America](#) — the National Partnership for New Americans will establish a new Climate Justice Collaborative as a hub for this work within the immigrant justice movement.

The project will be rooted in local power-building efforts; add the unique perspectives of immigrants to the climate justice story; and it will foreground the galvanizing roles they play in accelerating state and national policy victories. Working at this nexus provides the opportunity for immigrant justice organizations to address the climate priorities of their communities, strengthen their capacity and flex their power, and build cross-movement solidarity while they influence the climate movement.

The three prongs of the strategy are:

- Build capacity of local organizations by providing tools, resources, staffing, and a structure for the development of a shared analysis and strategy;
- Give voice to immigrant communities in the national climate justice conversation and in coalitions like the Green New Deal Network and the U.S. Climate Action Network to ensure that federal policy and programs include immigrants; and
- Develop climate justice narratives that normalize migration as a natural response to dangerous climate conditions and that uplift immigrant communities, showing them as protagonists in the fight for climate justice and resilient communities.

Addressing the climate crisis is a new challenge for much of the immigrant justice movement.

Earlier climate-oriented initiatives were mostly reactive and isolated, such as aiding with recovery from climate disasters, defending the rights of immigrant workers facing harsh climate-compounded conditions, or welcoming newcomers who had been displaced by climate disasters in their home countries and were resettling in the United States. Those efforts will continue to be needed, but there is now momentum to develop an affirmative climate agenda for the immigrant justice community and a greater role for them in national movements for climate justice, resilience, and sustainable economic transformation.

With many climate policy makers, funders, and advocates increasingly focused on addressing both climate change and inequity, the immigrant justice movement sees opportunity and urgency to build alignment and alliances with their climate justice allies. An infusion of dedicated funding would support the development of their capacity to powerfully engage with climate issues as individual organizations, as a movement, and as part of cross-cutting coalitions.

## BUILDING ACROSS MOVEMENTS

Climate change is often referred to as a threat multiplier: It intersects with other forces, vulnerabilities, and inequities and makes them worse. It is exploited by those seeking to restrict migration, especially from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, further elevating the importance of building alliances and mutual commitments across movements.

An effective response to these compounding factors requires the engagement and alignment of multiple movements, including climate and environmental justice; immigrant and Indigenous justice; racial, LGBTQ+ and gender justice; economic justice; health and safety; and international development. An effective response also relies on knowledge, relationship and trust-building, vision alignment, a robust leadership pipeline, and collaboration. Climate and immigrant justice groups are beginning to build their capacity to undertake cross-movement work; they are hiring staff with deep expertise who straddle multiple movements; and developing partnerships. Examples include:

- The [International Refugee Assistance Project](#) (IRAP) works with [350.org](#), [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (NRDC), and the [Climate and Migration Coalition](#) in the U.K. on using existing legal tools, organizing strategies, and legislative changes to protect climate-displaced people.
- [United We Dream](#) and the [Sunrise Movement](#) campaigned together for strong protections for both immigrants and the climate in the “human infrastructure” bill, pressing the idea

## MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ALREADY LIVE AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE AND MIGRATION<sup>8</sup>



**Mariano Alvarado** is a member of a new “Resilience Force” that has developed in the Gulf Coast Region. He is from a small fishing village in Honduras. In the early 2000s, a heatwave ran through his village and created the Dry Corridor, a textbook example of the impact of drought. Mariano’s fishing job, along with the entire shrimp industry, was wiped out.

Mariano was faced with a choice. He could face long-term unemployment or leave. So he became a climate migrant. In 2005, he walked to the U.S. border, and crossed over to Dallas. Months later, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and Mariano went to New Orleans in search of work. He helped to rebuild the city. In the following decade, as climate change made disasters like Katrina more frequent, Mariano became a “resilience worker,” part of the resilience workforce — a mostly migrant labor force that drives rebuilding and recovery after disasters.

Mariano has made a life in New Orleans. He lives in a corridor in Louisiana known as “cancer alley”, a product of the oil industry. He’s a survivor of multiple floods and hurricanes. He has traveled to dozens of southern cities to help rebuild them. Mariano is as much a constituent of the climate justice movement as he is a constituent of the immigrant justice movement. And that’s true for millions of immigrants.



that climate justice is immigrant justice, a harbinger of things to come that would unite two powerful youth organizing networks.

- [Southern Border Communities Coalition](#) is working with the [Sierra Club](#) on advocacy against the militarization of the southern border of the United States.
- Powerful collaborations are emerging across issue divides at the local level, too. For instance, [PUSH Buffalo](#) works closely with [Justice for Migrant Families](#) to put climate migrants in the lead on community transformation and ensuring that immigrants and refugees, no matter their immigration status, are included in affordable green housing and community development programs.

The examples above are just a few of the many initiatives around the country where collaboration across movements is essential. What's needed to further these and other nascent efforts, and what activists are suggesting, are resources and struc-

tures for trust-building, visioning, alignment, and leadership development that will forge and deepen relationships and solidarity across movements. You can see the result of working across movements in Buffalo, says Rahwa Ghirmatzion, Executive Director of PUSH Buffalo, about the partnership with Justice for Migrant Families: "About 25 years ago we started to see this huge influx of immigrants, refugees primarily from Burma and Somalia at the time, and there were a lot of cultural conflicts. Now you just see a community that's much more informed and has a global perspective. Whereas other parts of Buffalo are still very insular, very segregated."<sup>9</sup>

To further understand what cross-movement work looks like on the ground, Unbound Philanthropy is grateful to [The Solutions Project](#) for thought partnership and collaboration on profiles of several of their grantees that work at the nexus of climate and immigrant justice. These case studies will be ready in early 2022. For more information, go to page 21.

## FOCUSING ON CLIMATE-IMPACTED PLACES

The effects of climate change vary from one location to another, and every place will have its own distinct conditions and immigrant profile, calling for innovative regional and local strategies tailored to the particularities of the place. Such strategies are beginning to emerge – like the first of its kind [Portland Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund](#) that prioritizes people of color and those with low income.

Florida, for instance, is not only in the eye of the climate-change storm; it is also home to many people who fled climate-induced disasters in Puerto Rico and Caribbean nations. In response, the Florida Immigrant Coalition and its members are building an intersectional strategy. This approach directly supports people who have been displaced by climate change; defends Miami immigrant neighborhoods from climate gentrification; fights for the health, safety, and rights of agricultural, construction, and other workers who are increasingly exposed to dangerous heat conditions; and aligns Florida’s immigrant and climate

movements to build power in the state. This is just one example of what state-based or local attention rooted in real-world experiences and concerns of immigrant communities could look like.

Another emerging cluster of work revolves around supporting cities in dealing with climate migration. “Whether it’s within or across national borders, most migrants’ journeys will end in cities,” notes [Grist](#), an independent nonprofit media organization dedicated to telling stories of climate solutions.<sup>10</sup> And increasingly, cities are preparing for climate-induced migration as part of their long-term sustainability planning. Some recognize their vulnerabilities to extreme weather events, and others are planning to welcome new residents.

Cities that are likely to be affected by climate displacement and migration can be categorized into one of three categories, according to an analysis in the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*: 1) vulnerable cities where displacement is likely and already happening (e.g., Miami, Houston, New Orleans); 2) recipient cities or places people escape to, usually temporarily, where the



The Gulf South Rising delegation at the global climate talks in 2019, discussing land loss and international climate solutions.

population can swell overnight (e.g., Chico, California in 2018 where people sought refuge from wildfires); and 3) climate havens in cooler climates (e.g., the Upper Midwest) that seek to draw people relocating permanently from areas with rising temperatures.<sup>11</sup> The report offers a framework and case studies to help cities navigate the challenges of planning for future climate-migration while creating more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable communities.

At the international level, mayors from around the globe, organized by the Mayors Migration Council and C40 Cities, are working together to draw attention to the need to accelerate planning for and investment in responses to the climate crisis and human mobility. Their [action agenda](#) and a \$1 million investment by the Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH were announced during COP26 in Glasgow. A 2021 Mayors Migration Council report, "[Cities, Climate and Migration](#)," provides examples of city leadership in addressing the challenges and opportunities that emerge at the nexus of climate and migration through case studies through case studies of Anchorage and Houston, Bristol (U.K.), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Freetown (Sierra Leone), and São Paulo (Brazil).

“ We must establish a new social attitude to see migration as a benefit, a necessity for our global survival, not as a threat to our individual privilege. Collective resilience means developing cities that can receive people and provide housing, food, water, health care and the freedom from overpolicing for everyone, no matter who they are, no matter where they’re from.”<sup>12</sup>

**Collette Pichon Battle**  
Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy



High schoolers from the Fridays for Future movement protesting outside Standard Chartered Bank in London, demanding that it stop funding fossil fuels and the climate chaos they cause.

## DEVELOPING A NARRATIVE CENTERED ON PEOPLE AND SOLUTIONS

If it weren't for storylines about projected waves of climate migrants fleeing uninhabitable regions of the world, immigrants and migrants would be mostly missing from the climate story. In an attempt to spur action to protect the climate, some environmental organizations have resorted to a migration crisis narrative that the news media amplifies using threatening images and language.

This narrative has not provoked the intended policy response, and while based on real trends that require attention, it ignores principles of justice and equity and undermines efforts to address both the root causes and the impacts of climate migration. It triggers fear rather than empathy or curiosity about how climate change affects migration and immigrant communities. It assigns blame to people from countries that have contributed little to the climate crisis, and it inflames anti-immigrant sentiments that seep into policy frameworks. In short, the climate migration crisis narrative gets it backwards: The real threat is not people forced to flee their homes but the super-charged flooding, heatwaves, droughts and storms that cause them to do so.

The fear-mongering narrative leads to narrow security-oriented policy approaches that opponents to immigration exploit. As [Grist](#) puts it: "All you have to do is turn on cable news to hear some politician or pundit avidly fear mongering about Salvadoran or Syrian or Sudanese refugees pounding at the borders of wealthier (read: whiter) nations. Instead of inspiring people to do something proactive about climate change... the idea of so many people displaced by global warming can be

weaponized into a rationale for border walls, military action, or other forms of protectionism."<sup>13</sup>

The bigger, truer picture: "Millions of people's migration stories are being rewritten by climate change in ways that aren't reducible to narratives of escape," asserts Sarah Stillman in her essay "Like a Monarch" in *All We Can Save*, a collection of writings by women at the forefront of the climate movement.<sup>14</sup> What's critically needed is disruption of the security narrative and new mental models that capture the fuller human story:

- Center the stories of people and reframe the broader portrayal of migration and immigrants in the context of climate change, positioning human mobility as a natural adaptation to climate change that's necessary and beneficial, as Colette Pichon Battle of the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy calls out so passionately in her [TED talk](#).
- Enliven the unique ways climate change strikes established immigrant communities where they live and work (e.g., extreme heat and smoke conditions, flooding, pollution from extractive industries, climate-induced gentrification).
- Highlight immigrants in roles that help address climate-related problems (e.g., as the essential, largely unrecognized workforce that rushes in to help rebuild after disasters, as part of the Green New Deal workforce, and as activists pushing for climate and related policy change). A great example is the Asian Pacific Environmental Network's (APEN) recent win, in collaboration with other allies, securing \$100 million of state money to



*We can't have climate justice unless there's migrant justice, and until migrant rights are put forth front and center.<sup>15</sup>*

**Kim Bryan**

Associate Director of Global Communities, 350.org



Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) staff and members march for climate and racial justice in San Francisco in 2018.

replicate community [Resilience Hubs](#) all over California. These hubs provide spaces where communities gather, organize, and access social services on a daily basis and that also will provide response and recovery services in disaster situations.

Building narratives that center people’s lived experiences would enrich a mostly technocratic narrative that currently focuses on concepts such as net zero, parts per million, and carbon emissions reductions targets. An explicit shift to the real-world consequences and both the human toll and human ingenuity crafting solutions would change a largely cerebral narrative into compelling stories that can activate every sector of society, mobilize diverse and forceful movements, and deliver policy wins that will transform all of our systems—social, political, and economic—from extractive models to regenerative ones.

**ESTABLISHING A LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CLIMATE MIGRANTS**

In the absence of any comprehensive legal or policy regime, and anticipating much greater numbers of climate displaced people, a variety of research-

ers and advocates are working at the international, regional, and national levels to develop solutions.

In June 2021, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) along with the ACLU of Southern California and 350.org, convened a three-part discussion among innovative legal, policy, and organizing experts to strengthen relationships and generate short- and longer-term action items to address climate displacement both across national borders and in-country. The convenings improved understanding of climate change and displacement through analysis of recent trends and future migration projections, research into narratives, case studies of climate migration from around the globe, and discussions of potential strategies and action plans to address climate migration. Additional convenings are planned for 2022.

President Biden’s February 2021 [executive order](#) called for interagency collaboration on an analysis of climate change’s impact on migration patterns and its security implications, as well as whether and how the U.S. can address these concerns, including through its protection and resettlement policy. In October 2021, the Biden administration

released a landmark [report](#) providing the analysis required under the executive order and recommending an interagency working group on climate change and migration to coordinate efforts across government to address the challenge.

“This report is really important because this decade is a make or break one for climate, and people who are already on the move need protection now,” Ama Francis, climate displacement project strategist at IRAP, told the *Los Angeles Times*. “It says we recognize you, you matter and there are things the U.S. government can do to protect you.”<sup>16</sup>

IRAP and Refugees International, among others, had been working for months behind the scenes to feed ideas to the Biden administration and push them toward far-reaching humanitarian policy equal to the magnitude of the challenge. Refugees International assembled a high-level task force of experienced stakeholders who published their [recommendations](#) in July. And in August IRAP published its [shadow report](#), encouraging

the Biden administration to make use of “existing U.S. legal tools and international and regional legal norms that the U.S. government can build upon to expand protection for climate-displaced people.” Such existing tools include recognizing climate-displaced people as refugees under the current U.S. refugee definition and broadening eligibility for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) with a pathway to permanent residency.

There is wide recognition across the migrant justice field that those at risk of being displaced by climate change need solutions today and that filling the policy vacuum with a comprehensive legal framework at both the global and country level is a concrete and urgent opportunity. And while the policy analysts map out and build support for policies that could be adopted by the United States and in international forums to ensure pathways for climate-displaced people to enter, gain legal status, and resettle in the United States, immigrant justice organizers want to be ready to campaign for humane treatment and just accommodation of climate migrants.



## THE TIME IS RIPE FOR FUNDER ENGAGEMENT

Many conditions are converging to make the time ripe for philanthropic investment at the intersection of immigrant and climate justice. A small but growing number of immigrant justice groups has expanded beyond an immigration policy reform focus to collectively define and advance a policy agenda that addresses the impacts of climate change on immigrant communities. Likewise, climate justice organizations are increasingly rooting their work in racial and environmental justice, recognizing that climate change cannot be addressed equitably without considering the power dynamics and implications of race and indigeneity and working shoulder to shoulder with impacted communities.

Meanwhile, climate funders face increasing pressure to up their support for Black, Indigenous, and people of color-led organizations and solutions. Top philanthropies give a tiny fraction — just 1.3%, according to [Donors of Color](#) — of their U.S. climate funding to Black, indigenous, and people of col-

or-led environmental justice groups, who deal with many of the most immediate impacts and do some of the hardest work on the frontlines of climate change.<sup>17</sup>

Governments are responding, too. Decades of organizing and activism led to the Biden-Harris administration’s substantial priorities on environmental justice and equitable economic opportunity in the clean energy sector; its Justice40 Initiative seeks to direct 40% of federal climate investments in communities of color and economically disadvantaged areas. Many cities and localities—and a few states—are actively building resilience to climate change and adapting their infrastructure and built environments for a climate-compromised future. Increasingly, these efforts consider the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities and look to communities for leadership.



***We're only going to find solutions to the grave challenges of this time if we see them as interconnected and solve them through partnering at the intersections.***<sup>18</sup>

**Taryn Higashi**  
Executive Director  
Unbound Philanthropy

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# Entry Points for Funders

**The promising intersectional projects described in this report offer a glimpse into what is emerging and possible at the intersection of climate and immigration, and these efforts are winning support from a growing number of funders.**

Some funders approach this grantmaking through their economic and worker justice portfolio, while others consider it as part of larger strategies related to cities and urbanization or specific programs such as environmental justice, immigrant justice, racial justice, and support for the liberation and healing of Black, Indigenous and other people of color communities. Those funding internationally are supporting efforts to address root causes of migration and displacement and developing legal and policy frameworks to protect the rights of climate-displaced populations. In short, funders who are new to the issues or who want to deepen their understanding and engagement can find multiple entry points for funding at the nexus of migration and climate change. And those already funding in this space have ample opportunities to both broaden and deepen their investments.

## IF YOU ARE AT THE BEGINNING

### **Connect with Your Grantees**

Ask them what they are seeing on the ground and support their efforts to weave both climate and immigrant justice into their strategies. They may recognize the wisdom of getting smarter about either topic but lack direction, confidence, know-how, resources, and capacity. With dedicated support, these groups can make the space to find their role, build connections to and trust with allied movements, and develop the capacity to support this work over the long haul.

### **Think Local**

If you are a local funder, get to know the particular effects of climate change on your foundation's geographic area(s) of focus. How do these impacts connect to your funding priorities? How do they affect your grantees and their work? How might you partner with other funders across portfolios?

### **Take an Intersectional Approach**

Climate justice funders can incorporate an explicit focus on migration and/or immigrants into their grantmaking, and immigrant justice funders can embed climate issues into their funding strategies.

### **Convene Stakeholders**

Bring your grantees, funders, government officials, and other key stakeholders together on a regular basis to discuss and develop a shared analysis and strategic vision on working at the intersection of migration and climate change.

## IF YOU ARE READY TO FUND, CONSIDER SUPPORTING:

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### **Capacity within Each Movement**

Support the immigrant justice movement's emerging desire to incorporate climate justice into their priorities and fund strategy development, policy advocacy, community organizing, and alliance building, among others. Also fund the climate justice movement to integrate immigration and migration into their work within an equity and justice framework.

### **Cross-Movement Work**

Strong cross-movement relationships and infrastructure are essential to building power and addressing the threat multiplier nature of climate change. Support the engagement and alignment of multiple justice movements and fund knowledge building, leadership development, solidarity and trust building, vision alignment, and collaboration across these movements.

### **Youth Leadership and Activism**

Young people are leading visionaries and activists at this intersection. Invest in their creativity, leadership, and the central role they play in educating and engaging others about the complex interconnections among issues, and in holding power to account.

### **Collaboration**

Intermediaries and pooled funds can help you make an impact quickly, learn from other funders, and leverage your investment. Take a look at what [The Solutions Project](#) is doing to fund and amplify grassroots climate justice solutions created by organizations led by Black, Indigenous, immigrant, women and other people of color across the United States. Or how the [Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice](#) allocates resources to organizations that historically have had a hard time accessing funding but are essential to making progress in addressing intersecting climate, gender, and racial justice crises. The [Four Freedoms Fund](#) and the [Climate and Clean Equity Fund](#), each of which funds intersectional justice advocates at the state level, can also serve as a resource. The Climate and Clean Equity Fund's

new report, [Accelerating Equitable Climate Policy: A Landscape Analysis](#), identifies key ways funders can seize current opportunities and accelerate equitable climate action. And for those working at the international level, climate migration and re-location are one theme of the [Climate Resilience Justice Fund](#).

### **City-Based Strategies**

Cities are at the frontlines of the climate crisis, as directly impacted places, places in which people seek temporary refuge in the wake of a climate-induced disaster, and havens for those permanently escaping unsustainable conditions. Support the development, implementation, and evaluation of city-based strategies that can be adapted in other geographies. Convene stakeholders from multiple cities to learn from one another and strategize together.

### **Humanity-Centered Narratives**

Fund the creation of a collaborative ecosystem that includes multiple stakeholder groups such as field leaders; narrative, cultural, and strategic communications strategists; policy and academic experts; journalists; and funders to develop a broad array of narrative, story-telling, communications, media, and social media strategies and infrastructure.

### **Legal Protection**

Support broadened use of existing legal frameworks and the development of new ones that expand legal protection for climate-displaced people. Fund the legal scholarship, litigation, power-building, and advocacy necessary to enact and implement these frameworks both within the United States and at international level.

### **Internal Displacement and Migration**

Most climate migrants remain in their home country and do not cross international borders. This is already happening in the United States. Funding is needed to address this entirely separate set of challenges and opportunities at the country level and internationally.



## CASE STUDIES

To help funders see what work at the nexus of climate and immigrant justice looks like in practice, Unbound Philanthropy is grateful to be partnering with [The Solutions Project](#) to profile a range of their grantees. These case studies will be published in early 2022 as a companion to this report and will showcase some of the extraordinary climate changemakers, innovators, and “solutionaires” who demonstrate the range of ways immigrant communities interact with the climate crisis; how they step up and innovate solutions to meet climate challenges; and what results from lifting up the voices, experiences, and expertise of community-based and base-building organizations accountable to the people they serve. Organizations and ideas featured will include:

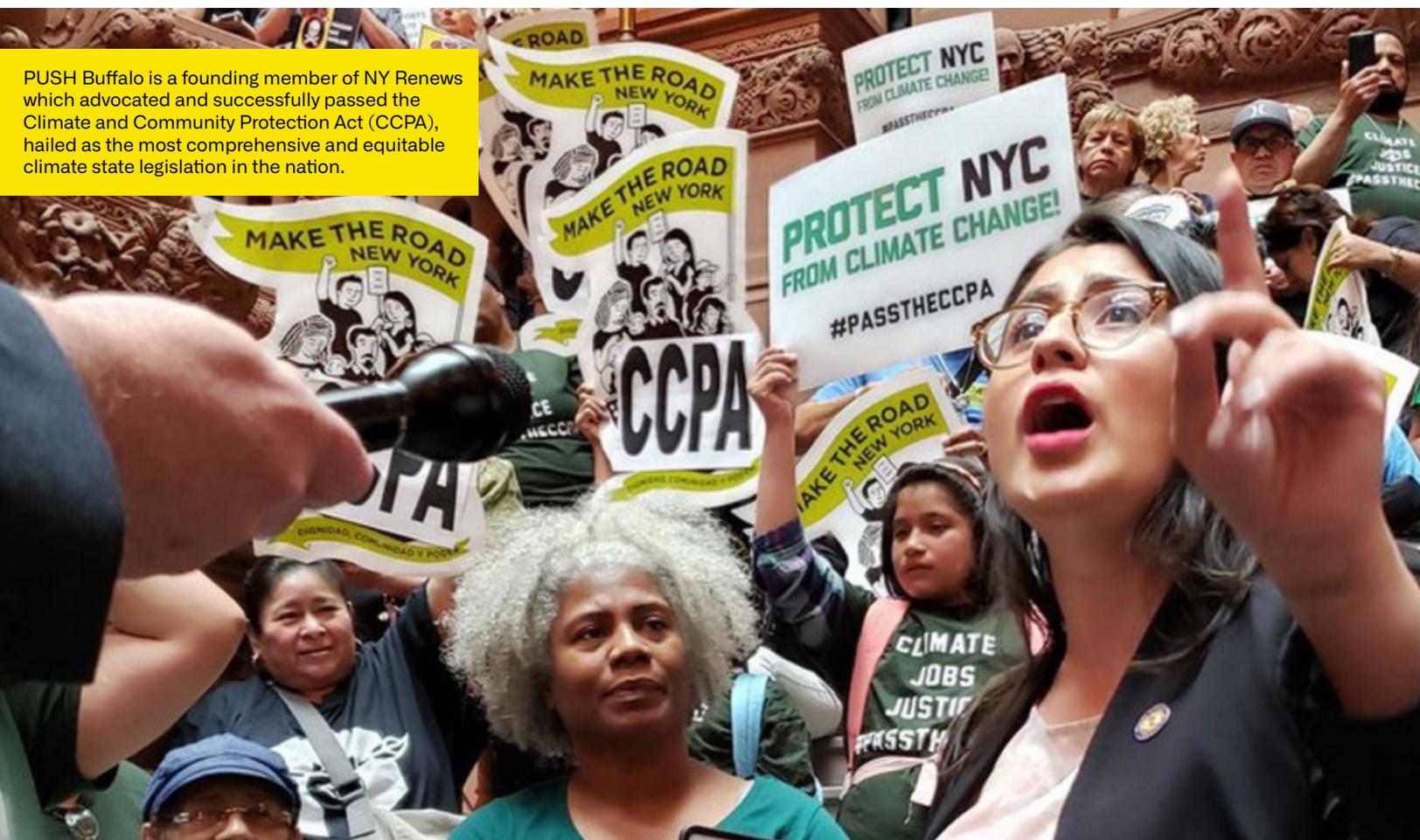
- [Asian Pacific Environmental Network \(APEN\)](#)'s community organizing and advocacy with key allies that secured a \$100 million allocation from the State of California to scale up “Resilience Hubs” across the state. These hubs are long-standing spaces where community members can regularly gather, organize, and access

resilience-building social services—and where they can receive emergency and recovery services in disaster situations.

- [Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy](#)'s activation of people from every element of society to aid in shifting attitudes and restructuring the economic and social systems at the root of the climate crisis, which in turn will increase support for efforts to address displacement, recovery, and restoration.
- [PUSH Buffalo](#) + [Justice for Migrant Families](#)' collaboration and community organizing that make possible the leadership and activism of climate migrants who are building a regenerative economy in their new hometown.
- [United Farm Worker Foundation](#)'s recent policy wins and their use of innovative technology to ensure farmworkers can enforce these policies.

See the full set of case studies [here](#).

PUSH Buffalo is a founding member of NY Renews which advocated and successfully passed the Climate and Community Protection Act (CCPA), hailed as the most comprehensive and equitable climate state legislation in the nation.





**Many of our frontline grantee partners are rooted in immigrant communities who are experiencing disproportionate impacts of the climate crisis.** *These groups are innovating solutions that often benefit not just their own communities but everyone. As a funder focused on climate justice, we know that immigrant justice and climate justice are inextricably linked, and that we have an opportunity and an urgent need to partner together to create the shared future that we all want.*<sup>19</sup>

**Gloria Walton**  
President and CEO  
The Solutions Project

On the Frontlines  
of the Climate Emergency:

**Where Immigrants  
Meet Climate Change**

# Conclusion

**Work at the intersection of migration and climate is necessary for a future with equity, dignity, and humanity as core principles.** There are opportunities to invest right now, as priorities and centers of gravity begin to emerge, both within each movement and as the links strengthen across movements. In commissioning this report, Unbound Philanthropy hopes to spur philanthropic interest in exploring and supporting these promising interconnected bodies of work through direct grantmaking and collaborations with other funders. Investing now in this emerging nexus of cross-cutting movement and power-building, leadership development, policy design, and communications and narrative change will pay significant dividends as climate change intensifies and movements for justice mature and converge.

Why connect the movements for immigrant justice and climate justice in the United States, and what becomes possible if we do? Saket Soni, Executive Director of Resilience Force, ties it all together: “First, millions of people become climate migrants because of U.S. carbon emissions. Second, because in the United States, millions of migrants live in communities on the frontlines of climate change — in the path of hurricanes, floods, fires, and environmental hazard zones. And third, climate will be a major driver of our nation’s culture and politics in this century. And we can, and should, make immigrant freedom a plank of the movement for climate justice. Without that, migrants at the gates become an even greater emblem of threat, weaponized by the Right for political advantage in our anxious national politics.”<sup>20</sup>

## **For more information**

about the strategies shared in this document or to contact individual organizations, the author of this report, or Unbound Philanthropy, please e-mail: [Climate-migrantjustice@unboundphilanthropy.org](mailto:Climate-migrantjustice@unboundphilanthropy.org)

# Resources and Food for Thought

If you want to go deeper on some of the topics this report touches on, the following articles, books, talks, and interviews are good places to start.

## GREAT READS

**“The Great Climate Migration” is a series of articles from *The New York Times Magazine* and ProPublica** that looks at how “food scarcity and rising temperatures have already begun to reshape how and where people live”:

- [\*\*Where Will Everyone Go?\*\*](#)  
By Abrahm Lustgarten, Photographs by Meridith Kohut  
July 23, 2020  
*“Today, 1% of the world is a barely livable hot zone. By 2070, that portion could go up to 19%. Billions of people call this land home. Where will they go?”*
- [\*\*How Climate Migration Will Reshape America\*\*](#)  
By Abrahm Lustgarten, Photographs by Meridith Kohut  
September 15, 2020  
*“Millions will be displaced. Where will they go?”*
- [\*\*Climate Change Will Make Parts of the U.S. Uninhabitable. Americans Are Still Moving There\*\*](#)  
By Lucas Waldron and Abrahm Lustgarten  
November 10, 2020  
*“Instead of moving away from areas in climate crisis, Americans are flocking to them. As land in places like Phoenix, Houston and Miami becomes less habitable, the country’s migration patterns will be forced to change.”*

## [\*\*A New Framework for U.S. Leadership on Climate Migration\*\*](#)

**The Center for Strategic and International Studies**

By Erol Yayboke, Trevor Houser, Janina Staguhn, and Tani Salma

October 2020

*“Climate migration is poised to be one of the biggest human development and security challenges of the next several decades, yet policymakers and the research community are just now understanding the myriad impacts of climate change on human mobility. A new framework for addressing these challenges is needed—one defined by the United States taking action to slow the effects of climate change, reforming its own immigration policies, and leading multilateral efforts.”*

## [\*\*Groundswell: Acting on Internal Migration\*\*](#)

**The World Bank**

September 13, 2021

*“Millions on the Move in Their Own Countries: The Human Face of Climate Change... No region is immune to the potential of climate-induced migration, driven by impacts on communities’ livelihoods, and loss of livability in highly exposed locations: Over 216 million people could move within their countries by 2050 across six regions.”*

## [\*\*Dangerous Narratives and Climate Migration 350.org\*\*](#)

February 11, 2021

*A reflection on “why the climate movement has been telling the wrong story and how to make it right... Current narratives around climate and migration, often deployed by the global north climate movement and security think tanks are feeding into the populist right-wing agenda and are potentially more detrimental than useful in supporting people that have been forcibly displaced. In order to ensure we don’t amplify existing human rights abuses, we need to explore and redefine how we communicate around the climate migration nexus.”*

## GREAT READS (continued)

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### Cities, Climate and Migration

#### **The Mayors Migration Council**

March 2021

*“Whether cities are the origin, transit point or destination for climate-induced migration, the climate migration nexus is relevant to them in two fundamental ways. First, because climate-induced migration flows affect urban communities, infrastructure, services and socio-economic health. Second, because local action to mitigate or adapt to the climate crisis have the potential to advance the inclusion of migrants and displaced people or further entrench their marginalization and exposure to inequality and risk.”*

### International Climate Migration: What Can U.S. Communities Do?

By Judy Dorsey and Jim Hight

*In this white paper, the authors provide an introduction to the complex topic of international climate migration for local governments and community leaders engaged in climate action planning.*

### On the Frontlines: Climate Change Threatens the Health of America’s Workers

#### **Natural Resources Defense Council**

July 2020

*“The climate crisis is dramatically changing the work environment for American workers, making existing workplace hazards worse and creating new ones... Yet, thanks to regulatory rollbacks, loopholes, and a lack of urgency, federal and state agencies are not holding employers accountable for unsafe and unhealthy work practices. This NRDC report brings together the latest research along with new reporting to better understand the many climate-related risks workers face, and how we can address them to improve worker safety in our changing world.”*

### Too Hot to Work

#### **Union of Concerned Scientists**

August 17, 2021

*“Outdoor workers are encountering a deadly risk more frequently than ever before: intensifying extreme heat. As climate change brings one record-heat decade after another, these workers will increasingly find themselves in an impossible situation—having to choose between risking their lives to go to work or their livelihoods to stay safe... With economic and legal systems that routinely discount these workers’ health and safety, those working in outdoor occupations have little or no recourse. Policymakers and employers must take action now to protect them.”*

### Storm Chasers

#### **The New Yorker**

By Sarah Stillman

November 8, 2021

*“A migrant workforce trails climate disasters, rebuilding in their wake.”*

### All We Can Save: Truth, Courage and Solutions for the Climate Crisis

#### **Anthology**

Edited by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katherine K. Wilkinson (One World, an imprint of Random House, 2020).

*Writings by 60 women at the forefront of the climate movement and curated by two climate leaders, and there is also a project. The All We Can Save Project’s goal is “nurturing a welcoming, connected, and leaderful climate community, rooted in the work and wisdom of women.”*

### Op-Ed: Why Immigrant Youth Should Lead Climate Change Strikes

#### **Remezcla**

By Juliana Macedo do Nascimento

September 20, 2019.

### Migrant Justice is Climate Justice

#### **United We Dream**

A call to action and further resources.

### Climate and Environmental Justice

#### **Climate Reality Project website**

*Provides introductory explainers on key data, issues and ideas drawn from grassroots partners and organizations who’ve been fighting for climate and environmental justice for years.*

Additional resources are published all the time. Unbound will periodically update an expanded list of resources that you can find [here](#).

## WATCH AND LISTEN

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### [Climate Change Will Displace Millions. Here's How We Prepare](#)

**Colette Pichon Battle's TED Talk, 2020 (12 minutes)**

*"Scientists predict climate change will displace more than 180 million people by 2100 – a crisis of 'climate migration' the world isn't ready for, says disaster recovery lawyer and Louisiana native Colette Pichon Battle. In this passionate, lyrical talk, she urges us to radically restructure the economic and social systems that are driving climate migration – and caused it in the first place – and shares how we can cultivate collective resilience, better prepare before disaster strikes and advance human rights for all."*

### [Ezra Klein Podcast with Kim Stanley Robinson](#)

**Interview with author of *Ministry For the Future***

**November 30, 2020 (90 minutes)**

**(Orbit, October 2020)**

*A science fiction novel that Ezra describes as, "The most important book I've read this year: How climate change will force humanity to rethink capitalism, borders, terrorism, and currency."*

### [Floodlines: The Story of an Unnatural Disaster](#)

**The Atlantic Podcast hosted by Vann R. Newkirk II**

**(8 episodes)**

*A 2020 investigative podcast that revisits Hurricane Katrina and reappraises the response and recovery effort.*

### [Mothers of Invention](#)

**Podcast (3 seasons)**

*Feminist climate change solutions from (mostly) women around the world. "With ten years to go before we see irreversible changes to our planet, former Irish president Mary Robinson, comedian and writer Maeve Higgins, and series producer Thimali Kodikara dig into the biggest climate issues of our time with love, laughter and memorable storytelling." This linked episode deals with migration, as does this one, produced by the International Rescue Committee. See information on the full seasons [here](#).*

### [Migrant Justice = Climate Justice](#)

**Panel discussion**

**November 9, 2021**

*This special event took place on the sidelines of COP 26 in Glasgow and explored the intersections of climate, migration and the urgent need to shape new narratives for our changing future.*

### [Intersectional Justice: Migrants on the Frontlines of Climate Change](#)

**Webinar co-hosted by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees and Unbound Philanthropy**  
**July 28, 2021**

Additional resources are published all the time. Unbound will periodically update an expanded list of resources that you can find [here](#).

# Research Methodology

Unbound Philanthropy commissioned this report to explore the intersection where climate justice meets immigrant justice in the United States and catalog the related issues and communities; inspire interest and activity among activists and funders; and share opportunities for funders to learn and strategize together to keep up with this interconnected constellation of issues. The inquiry ranged from climate displacement and adjacent topics such as racial and economic justice, youth and state/local organizing, to communications, framing and narrative strategies, and models from global efforts. Special attention was given to learning what funder allies are already doing, in illuminating funder education opportunities, and identifying potential strategies or projects where funding can catalyze field education and action related to addressing the impacts of climate change on immigrants living and working in the United States.

This report is based on a review of recent literature and interviews with dozens of experts, thought leaders, organizers, and funders (listed below with their affiliation at the time of the conversation). They were generous with their knowledge and networks, and Unbound is very grateful for their time and perspectives, which contributed to the analysis and ideas presented in this report. And thank you to Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees for early thought partnership and for the webinar “Intersectional Justice: Migrants on the Frontlines of Climate Change.”

## INTERVIEW LIST

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**Action Aid** – Brandon Wu

**Alianza Americas** – Dulce Dominguez, Helena Olea

**Robert Bosch Stiftung** – Christian Strob

**Brendle Group** – Judy Dorsey

**Center for Cultural Power** – Favianna Rodriguez

**CHIRLA** – Apolonio Morales

**Climate Action Network-U.S.** – Keya Chatterjee

**Climate and Energy Funders Group** – Paige Brown

**Climate Equity Action Fund** – Roger Kim

**Climate Justice Resilience Fund** – Heather McGray

**Climate Nexus** – Jeff Nesbit, Bob Tanner, Shravya Jain-Conti

**Conservation Biology Institute** – Phoebe Barnard

**Donors of Color** – Danielle Deane

**Ford Foundation** — Sarita Gupta

**Four Freedoms Fund** — Rini Chakraborty, Anita Khashu

**Global Whole Being Fund** — Negar Tayyar, Ariadne Papagapitos

**Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees** — Kevin Douglas, Ivy Suriyopas

**Heising-Simons Foundation** — Devra Wang

**Jamie Henn** — consultant (co-founder 350.org)

**Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice** — Erin Rogers

**International Refugee Assistance Project** — Nisha Agarwal, Ama Francis, Kate Jellema

**The JPB Foundation** — Angela Cheng, Anna Loizeaux

**Helen S. Kim** — trainer, Rockwood Leadership Institute; consultant

**Mayors Migration Council** — Kate Brick

**Michigan United** — Adonis Flores

**Mott Philanthropic** — Cuong Hoang

**National League of Cities** — Anna Marandi

**National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights** — Alma Maquitico

**National Partnership for New Americans** — Nicole Melaku, Ahmed Gaya, Stephanie Teatro

**One America** — Roxana Norouzi, Rich Stolz

**Open Society Foundations** — Laine Romero Alston, Andrea Ackerman, Sarah Rosengaertner, Emma Greer

**People's Action** — Mehrdad Azemun, Kaniela Ing

**Pop Culture Collaborative** — Bridgit Antoinette Evans

**V.K. Rasmussen Foundation** — Irene Krarup

**Refugees International** — Kayly Ober

**Resilience Force** — Saket Soni, Vanessa Fernandez

**Rhodium Group** — Trevor Houser

**David Rockefeller Fund** — Lukas Haynes

**Roosevelt Institute** — Rhiana Gunn-Wright, Emma Oppenheim

**Rooted in Vibrant Communities (RVC Seattle)** — Ananda Valenzuela

**John Slocum** — Chicago Council on Global Affairs

**The Solutions Project** — Gloria Walton, Sekita Grant, Sarah Shanley Hope

**Aryah Somers Landsberger** — Philanthropic Advisor

**Sunrise Movement** — Evan Weber, Will Lawrence

**350.org** — May Boeve, Kim Bryan, Thanu Yakupitiyage

**United We Dream** — Greisa Martinez

**U.S. Department of State** (on leave from Prof. of Law, University of Hawaii at Manoa) — Maxine Burkett

**U.S. Immigration Policy Center at UC San Diego** — Tom Wong

**Wallace Global Fund** — Heather Coleman

**Way to Win** — Leah Hunt Hendrix

# Endnotes

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17. "[Climate Funders Justice Pledge](#)," Donors of Color Network, accessed December 4, 2021.
18. Taryn Higashi, "Intersectional Justice" webinar.
19. Gloria Walton, in conversation with Unbound Philanthropy, November 10, 2021.
20. Soni, "Intersectional Justice" webinar.

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On the Frontlines  
of the Climate Emergency:

## **Where Immigrants Meet Climate Change**

For more information about the strategies shared in this document or to contact individual organizations, the author of this report, or Unbound Philanthropy please e-mail: [Climate-migrantjustice@unboundphilanthropy.org](mailto:Climate-migrantjustice@unboundphilanthropy.org)

