



Building Common Ground

Climate change and migration work in the UK

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Executive summary

1. Introduction

The climate crisis is increasingly reshaping patterns of migration and displacement, with far-reaching implications for people around the world.

In the UK there is a growing ecosystem of policy experts, activists, researchers, funders, artists and others who are focusing on the implications of climate change for people who move and for the communities and societies that receive them. There is an urgent need to build common ground at this intersection, opening up new spaces to support shared strategies and solutions.

This research briefing draws on a range of interviews from people working at the intersections of climate change and migration in the UK which took place between December 2023 and March 2024. It outlines some implications of climate-related migration in the UK, offers an overview of ongoing civil society activity in this space, and identifies some common challenges, gaps and recommendations for action.

We recognise that work on climate change and migration is taking place within a rapidly changing context. This briefing focuses on mapping the civil society landscape working in response to these complex issues. We hope that it is a useful resource for those within the policy-making community, including civil society organisations and funders, who are interested in working on climate change and migration. It is intended as an invitation to explore, develop and cultivate future work at this critical intersection.

2. The challenges

Climate change is already reshaping our world, and will increasingly do so over the coming decades. As its impacts intensify, many homes and livelihoods are being threatened. Some parts of the world - including many which are the least equipped to adapt - are likely to become unlivable.

The scale and dynamics of future migration patterns linked to climate change are unpredictable. Climate change currently forms part of a complex, interlocking set of factors including conflict, inequality, poverty and political instability, which can lead to people leaving their homes in search of safety or opportunity. Looking ahead, we can expect that migration will be an increasingly vital adaptive strategy for communities affected by climate change, and that significant cohorts of people will continue to need to move, both within their home country and internationally.

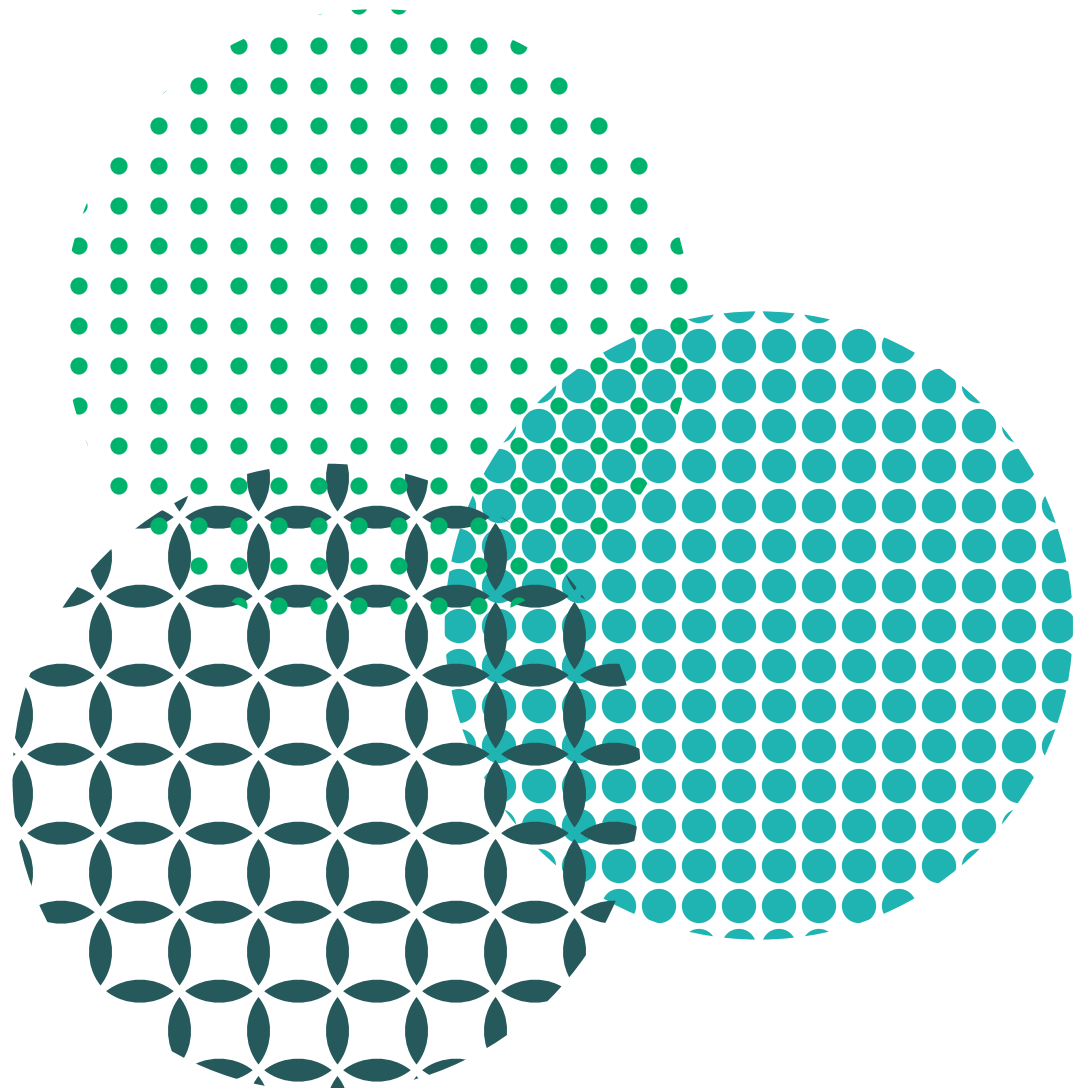
The repercussions of climate change will affect everyone, but particularly communities and societies already facing poverty or disadvantage. Ongoing trends suggest that most journeys made by people seeking to escape climate impacts will be within their home country or region; this often involves movement from rural to (often climate-fragile) towns and cities, creating new inequalities and pressures across affected areas. Climate-displaced communities and their hosts are often dependent on short-term humanitarian assistance to meet basic subsistence needs.

This research has heard that, in the UK, there will be a critical role for civil society in pointing the way towards - and pushing for - fair, responsible and humane responses to this set of interconnected challenges. Internationally, climate-related migration now features within a wide range of international policy fora and frameworks concerned with climate mitigation and adaptation, international development and poverty alleviation. A growing number of intergovernmental and civil society organisations assert the human rights and dignity of people affected by climate change, calling for the creation of safe pathways for all who need to move, and the right to stay for those who can.

Given the scale and complexity of the current context, work on climate change and migration will continue to need active engagement from a broad range of civil society actors working across multiple sectors. Civil society will need to champion joined-up, responsible and fair UK leadership on climate change, international development and migration, both internationally and at home; and engage wider communities in shared conversations and actions towards a more hopeful collective future.

Some researchers and NGOs argue that it will be increasingly unhelpful to define climate-related migration as a distinct 'type' of migration. In the future, the dynamics of *all* migration journeys - and the political and public responses to people who move - could to some extent be shaped and influenced by climate change. This makes exploring these intersections essential, and necessitates a connection with broader questions around the future of sustainable, pluralist, democratic societies.

This briefing maps some of the key work currently being carried out in the UK. It also offers a series of recommendations in order to support and build the impacts of this work.



3. UK civil society work underway

There is a wide-ranging body of civil society work at the intersections of climate change and migration in the UK. This work is being led by organisations including NGOs, think tanks, academic research units, intergovernmental organisations, community and campaign groups, arts organisations and funders. There are a small number of partnerships and networks based on shared goals, but the majority of work we heard about was being led by individual organisations. Only a relatively small number of civil society initiatives work at this intersection at any scale.

Our research highlights existing work across four key levers of change:

3.1 Research, policy and legal advocacy

A growing body of research and policy activity focuses on the implications of current UK policies on climate-related migration, and explores alternatives. Most policy work tends to be relatively specific, and much of it is led by individual organisations rather than through partnerships or networks. Current focuses include the scope of UK development funding and international climate finance; UK foreign diplomacy engagement on climate and migration issues; domestic humanitarian visas for people displaced by climate change; and new labour migration pathways facilitating 'green-skilled' migration to the UK.

3.2 Grassroots campaigning and community-organising

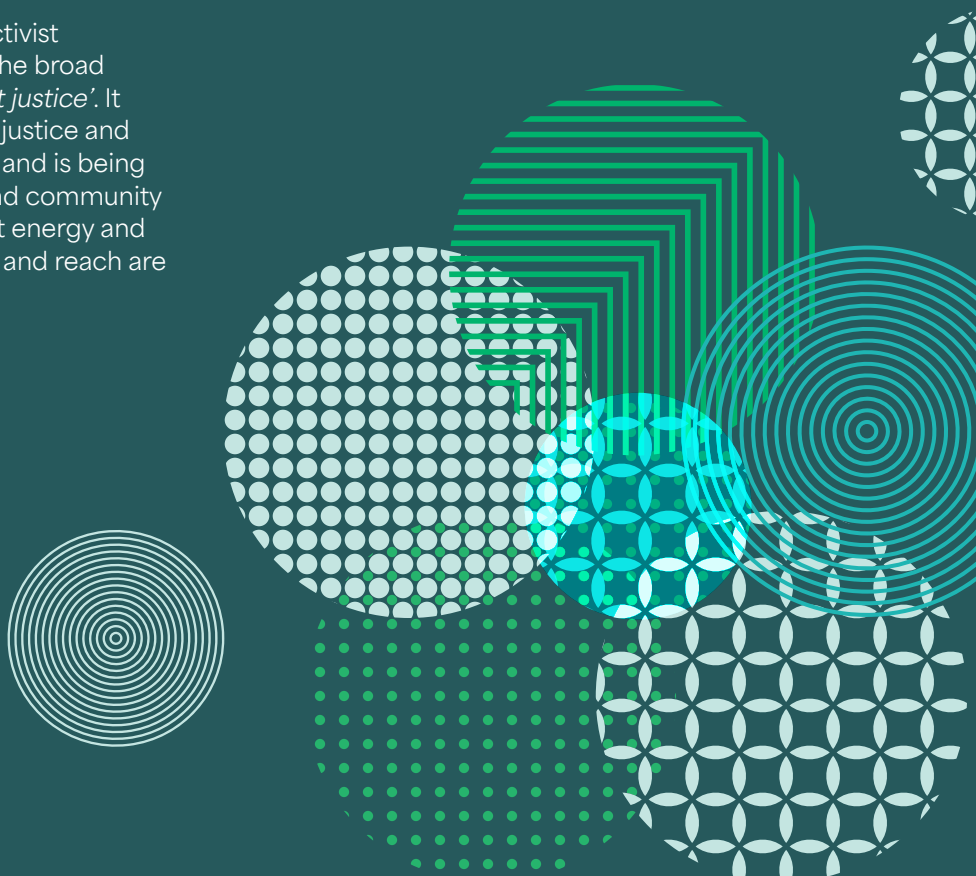
A new wave of grassroots and activist campaigning is growing, under the broad banner '*climate justice is migrant justice*'. It is closely affiliated with UK racial justice and migrants' rights campaign work, and is being driven by campaigning NGOs and community organisations. There is significant energy and momentum, although resources and reach are currently limited.

3.3 Strategic communications and media

There is currently relatively little media coverage connecting climate and migration in the UK press and when it does feature it is often presented in an alarmist and fatalistic manner. There is uncertainty, particularly among the larger environmental organisations, about whether or how to comment on migration issues in the media. A small number of NGOs are working to develop targeted, strategic communications on climate-related migration, including through new resources, training and support.

3.4 Arts and culture

There is a powerful emergence of organisations in the UK exploring how artistic and cultural projects can enable greater public engagement with climate-related migration. This includes some work through the artistic and creative networks around migration, Refugee Week activities, and support for broadcast TV, film and online media projects.



4. Growing the impact of this work

This research has found that there is a valuable, and growing, body of work on climate-related migration from a range of organisations, think tanks and funders already working - or looking to work - in this space. This is increasingly viewed as a critically important set of issues and one where more activity, focus and investment is now urgently needed.

There are a range of barriers and limitations. The intersections of climate and migration are viewed by many organisations as challenging and risky, not least because of the highly-charged political and media environment. Some organisations told us that whilst they recognise this work is critical and will only grow in relevance in the coming years, they nonetheless struggle to prioritise it in the face of other, more immediate pressures. There is a general lack of relevant capacity, connections and resourcing in this space.

This research has heard that, looking ahead, a strategic and joined-up approach will be needed among UK civil society actors and funders towards climate-related migration, to develop the work in this space and enable it to evolve in response to the fast-moving context. This should include consistent, long-term support to help sustain civil society relationships and narratives, and collaborative efforts to link up individual projects and policy objectives within broader strategies and goals.

We offer four broad sets of recommendations:

4.1 Building shared links, strategies and action

In our view, over the coming period, the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues will make it critical for funders and civil society organisations to build a stronger and more connected set of actors working on the intersections of climate and migration. It will be important to support and build on existing partnerships and networks, whilst exploring the potential for new collaborations between actors across and beyond the climate and migration NGO sectors. This should include shared analysis and strategies which cut across policy silos and levers of change towards wider collective impact.

Key priorities include:

- Deeper mapping of work that connects with climate and migration intersections, including the wide range of relevant actors outside the migration and climate NGO sectors e.g. in international development and foreign affairs;

- Developing and supporting theories of change that are informed by the broad range of issues at stake and by intersectional approaches;
- Learning from and strengthening the civil society work already underway;
- Supporting new relationships and alliances, including among organisations already working in this space; and helping to bring in new actors including those working on related sectors such as racial justice, international development and foreign affairs. e.g through networking opportunities and research;
- Strategic convenings and planning opportunities to help NGOs / funders to identify shared priorities and pathways for joint work;
- Identifying capacity gaps, mapping the funder landscape and unlocking new resources. This would likely require strategic coordination of funder investment.

4.2 Supporting legal and policy impact

There is a broad lack of advocacy capacity, linked to a need for more UK-focused policy-relevant research on climate and migration which could support this work. There is growing interest in the potential for strategic litigation which is likely to be a fruitful area for development.

Key priorities include:

- Linking key civil society organisations with think tanks, universities and others to support advocacy priorities and approaches;
- Building the evidence base of legal and policy options through UK policy-relevant research;
- Engaging a broad church of potential influencers, including think tanks, faith leaders, trades unions, inter-governmental organisations, financial institutions, and businesses;
- Identifying clear campaignable interventions for NGOs, think tanks and other influencers;
- Nurturing legal tools and pathways including strategic litigation.

4.3 Strengthening community-driven leadership and diverse engagement

There is significant momentum behind community-organising and grassroots campaign activity on climate and migration issues, which roots climate-related migration work in an explicit commitment to power-building, human rights and racial justice. This work supports leadership and engagement with climate justice work across racialised and diaspora communities, as part of building a more representative and justice focused climate movement.

However this work is currently chronically under-resourced and will need further support to develop longer-term strategies, and to broaden its reach and impact.

Key priorities include:

- An increase in resourcing and strategy support for community-based networks and coalitions working at the intersections of climate and migrant justice;
- Nurturing diverse leadership within the climate justice movement, raising up the voices of those who are most acutely affected, including women, people with lived experience of seeking sanctuary, and people of colour;
- Resourcing for organisations with grassroots networks to engage in climate-related migration campaigning and advocacy;
- Organising with communities *within* the UK at risk of displacement due to climate breakdown.

4.4 Shaping confident conversations and shared narratives

UK media coverage of climate-related migration is often polarised but currently has relatively low salience. This means that civil society actors now have a limited but important window of opportunity to help shape our future story about climate-related migration.

There are multiple levers for change here, including strategic communications (largely media work), and artistic and cultural interventions which aim to explore and invite consideration of a much wider range of issues and perspectives. This work will be vital to build public engagement beyond 'worst case scenario' projections, and invite hopeful, informed responses rooted in shared values and new visions for the future. More confident civil society communications on climate-related migration, including through the media, arts and popular culture, could open up new, more positive narratives for the future.

Key priorities include:

- Targeted analysis of public opinion on climate-related migration;
- Shared resources on terminology, framing and UK media strategies;
- Supporting and growing a network of spokespeople including those with lived experience;
- Fostering more positive, solutions-focused narratives such as the role of migration in ensuring a skilled workforce for the green transition;
- Cultivation of cultural spaces to explore climate-related migration;
- Connection of key actors across the cultural space to those working in policy and campaigns, to support mutual learning and impact.



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1.

Introduction

1.1 Background

This research has been commissioned and supported by Unbound Philanthropy. Unbound Philanthropy works in the US and UK to contribute to a vibrant, welcoming society and an immigration system rooted in justice. It recognises that climate change is inextricably connected to its mission. As such, investment at the intersections of climate and migrant justice form a central plank of Unbound Philanthropy's ongoing work.

In November 2023, the Unbound Philanthropy UK office invited Ruth Grove-White and Ben Margolis to map civil society activity in the UK working at the intersections of climate and migration. The purpose of this research was to begin to define the key issues relating to climate change and migration in the UK; to highlight a wide range of both emergent and established work; to spark and nourish reflection among civil society actors and funders; and to canvass insights which could guide future work in this area.

We recognise that work on climate change and migration is taking place within a rapidly changing context. This briefing focuses on mapping the civil society landscape working in response to these complex issues. We hope that this briefing is a useful resource for all civil society actors and funders interested in working on climate-related migration, and that it acts as an invitation to explore and develop further work in this critical space.

1.2 Methodology

The research for this briefing was carried out between November 2023 and April 2024, and drew upon a range of inputs including desk research, interviews and a focus group to test emergent findings and analysis.

Between December 2023 and March 2024, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with NGOs, academics, think tanks and funders working across a range of issues at the intersections of climate change and migration. We are grateful to all those who agreed to be interviewed for their time and insights. All interviewees were invited to review a final draft of the report prior to release.

Additional thanks to City of Sanctuary, the Climate Justice Coalition, Climate Outreach, Counterpoints Arts, the International Organization for Migration UK, ODI and Tom Burke for sharing further insights, articles, reports and meeting invitations with us.

We are grateful to Aliya Yule, Fahmida Miah, Jon Cracknell and Sarah Cutler for their involvement in a focus group in April 2024, which was convened to test the emerging findings of this research and added further insights and analysis to the final draft of this paper.

All the observations in this research are based on information gathered through the course of this mapping exercise, as well as from our own experience over decades of work related to these issues. We want to thank Alice Sachrajda, Will Somerville and Jake Lee at Unbound Philanthropy for their input and support.

We recognise that this is a dynamic area of work and there may be activity which we have not been able to reflect in this briefing. This briefing is offered as a snapshot, and as a starting point for discussion and reflection on how civil society activity can be supported at the complex intersections between climate change and migration.

The content of this briefing is based on our own understanding and input from interviewees. It does not necessarily reflect the position of Unbound Philanthropy. Any errors and omissions are our own.

Interviewees

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Migrants Organise

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Anti-Slavery International

Fatima Ibrahim

Green New Deal Rising

Innah Gaspar

Global Strategic Communications Council

Jon Cracknell

The Hour is Late

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Inter-Narratives

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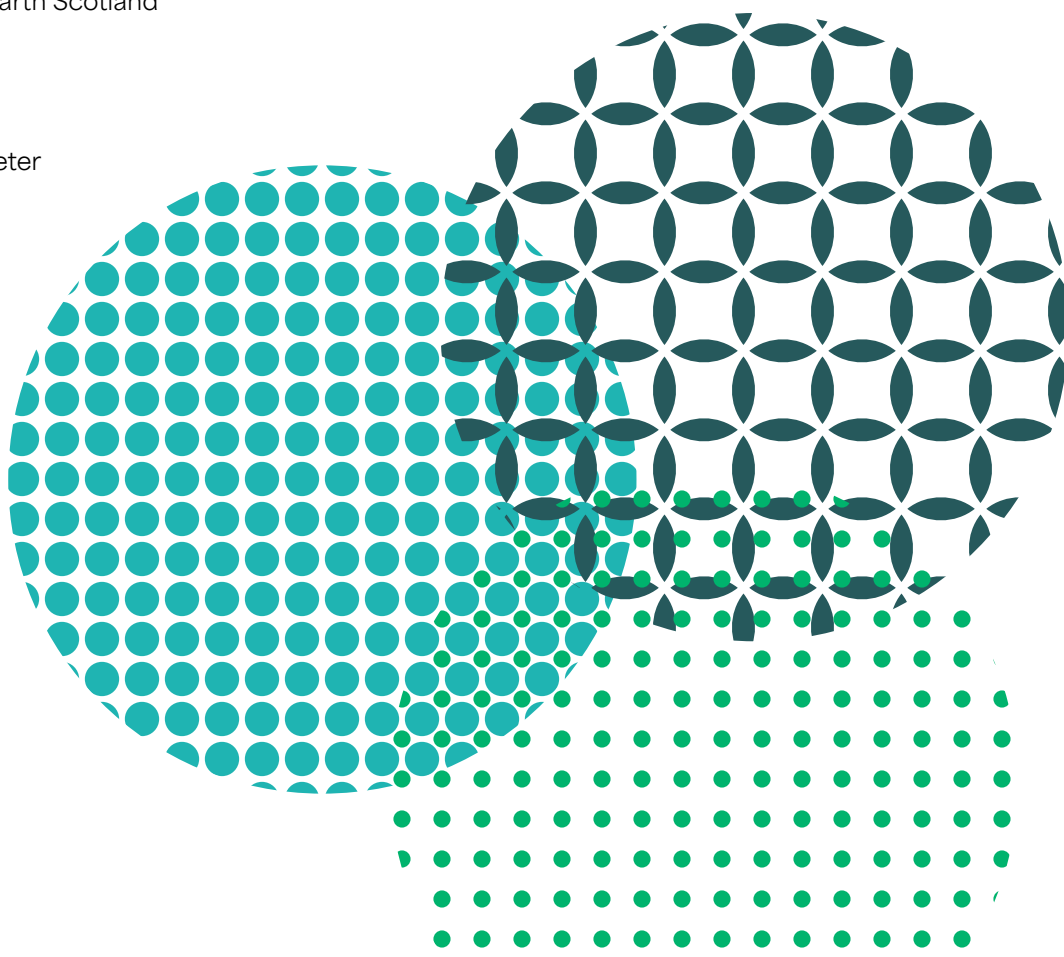
E3G

Tim Benton

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Yazan Miri

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants



1.3 Terminology

A wide variety of terms which relate to the intersections between climate change and migration are currently used by civil society organisations, including:

‘Climate migration’, ‘climate mobility’ -

These terms are largely used interchangeably to refer to the movement of people, either within their own country or internationally, due to a change in their home environment arising from the impacts of climate change. In our view these terms are overly-simplistic and fail to reflect that people’s decision to migrate, and their experiences in doing so, may be affected by a wide range of factors in addition to climate change.

‘Climate migrants’, ‘environmental migrants’, ‘climate refugees’ -

These terms are also often used interchangeably to refer to people who are obliged to leave their homes (or choose to do so) either temporarily or permanently, as a direct result of climate change impacts. In our view these terms are unhelpfully simplistic and are often associated with negative media coverage of the issues. The term ‘climate refugees’ is particularly misleading as this is not an officially recognised status within international law.

‘Climate justice’ - This term refers to climate change as a symptom of economic, social and political injustices, and calls for solutions to the climate crisis that build towards a fair and equitable society. Civil society activity on climate-related migration often sits within a broader climate justice framework.

‘Climate mitigation’, ‘adaptation’, and ‘loss and damage’ - The term **‘climate mitigation’** refers to actions taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (i.e. preventative action).

‘Climate adaptation’ - refers to the diverse ways in which individuals, communities, governments and others are seeking to prepare for, and adjust to, the impacts of the climate crisis. Migration forms part of the scope of adaptation discussions within international negotiations

‘Loss and damage’ is a term used in UN climate negotiations to refer to the consequences of climate change that go beyond what people can adapt to. Within the Warsaw International Mechanism agreed under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change there is

a workstream on human mobility which encompasses migration, displacement and planned relocation.

‘Migrant’ - A person who is living away from his or her place of usual residence, temporarily or permanently. We use this term to include a wide range of people, including some workers, students, people with family visas, people here on human rights grounds, survivors of trafficking, foreign national prisoners, and people whose status is undocumented.

‘Refugee’ - A person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. We use this term to refer to a range of people including people seeking refugee status (‘asylum seekers’), people granted refugee protection, and those who have been refused asylum.

In this briefing we mainly use the term **‘climate-related migration’**. We use this to include all internal and international movement of people linked to climate change. This term is largely interchangeable with the term **‘climate-linked mobility’**. We also talk about **‘the intersection between climate change and migration’** where the issues are more general.

We have noted the increasing use of rights-based language across UK civil society in reference to climate-related migration. This seeks to avoid defining and objectifying people based on their reason for moving, and promotes both the right to move and the right to stay wherever possible.

Further work to explore the implications of terminology in this area would be helpful for civil society actors and funders.

Finally, the focus of this briefing is on **international** rather than **domestic** climate-related migration. However, we recognise that as the UK is increasingly affected by climate change we are likely to see displacement of domestic communities (and indeed already are in places including [Fairbourne in Wales](#) and [Hemsby in Norfolk](#)) due to flooding and sea level rises. This is already generating important discussions, narratives and policy proposals which will grow in salience in coming years, but most of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

2.

Climate change and migration

2.1 The big picture

The impacts of the climate crisis are intensifying, with significant implications for human rights, dignity and equality in societies around the world.

Extreme weather events, including storms and heatwaves, are occurring more often and with greater ferocity. Slower onset changes including progressive temperature rises and rising sea levels continue to increase. These devastating impacts are widely expected to worsen in the coming years, making parts of the world challenging or impossible to live in. Many governments are proving unable - or unwilling - to take the steps needed to adequately protect their populations.

Climate change causes and impacts are closely associated with entrenched global inequalities. The repercussions of our changing climate on communities and nature are most obvious in low-lying countries and island states, as well as in countries across sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia which are already prone to droughts or flooding. However, nowhere is immune, as can be seen by recent wildfires in the USA and Australia and the loss of coastline and increases in extreme flooding events in the UK. 'Once in a hundred years' events are now becoming commonplace.

Without action, climate change is likely to rapidly intensify social inequalities around the world. Analysis by the International Energy Agency in 2023 found that the world's wealthiest 10% of people are relatively insulated from the impacts of climate change, whilst being responsible for nearly 50% of global emissions. By contrast much of the poorest 10% of the global population is on the frontline of the climate crisis, whilst only producing 0.2% of emissions. When historic emissions are taken into account the differences across nations and communities are even more stark.

Climate change additionally places particular stresses on people already facing poverty or structural discrimination, including rural communities, young people and children, women, people of colour, and indigenous populations.

2.2 What we know about climate change and migration

In 1990, the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change noted 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’*.

Since then, and with increasing evidence of the impact of climate change on migration patterns, climate-related migration has become an increasingly prominent focus of global debate and policy-making. Currently, the people most immediately affected are living on the frontline of climate change, with countries in Africa, South America, South Asia and Oceania predicted to experience particularly rapid increases in climate hazards over the coming decade. Many of the most affected countries have made little historical contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change impacts, and climate-related migration patterns, are highly varied, context-specific and often unpredictable. Environmental changes due to either sudden natural disasters or slow-onset changes form part of a complex, interlocking set of factors - including conflict, inequality, poverty and political instability - which can lead to people leaving their homes in search of safety or opportunity.

Research indicates that most people displaced from their homes due to environmental factors currently remain within their own country rather than crossing international borders. The majority of these journeys are temporary or seasonal rather than permanent, and often involve people moving from rural areas to (potentially climate-fragile) towns or cities. Greater urbanisation within countries on the frontline of climate change is creating new challenges and pressures in affected regions. Some people, often more marginalised groups, are unable to escape climate impacts due to a lack of resources or opportunity, and become effectively trapped in dangerous situations.

In recent years, there has been an increase in international flows of displaced people from highly climate-vulnerable countries. Where climate change does contribute towards international migration, people generally remain within their home region - a trend which reflects wider refugee patterns. Research by UNHCR indicates that 70% of all international refugees currently live in countries bordering their own. Climate-displaced communities and their hosts are often dependent on short-term humanitarian assistance to meet basic subsistence needs.

In countries such as the UK, USA and Australia, much public debate about climate-related

migration has centred on fears of an impending *“gigantic exodus”* of people seeking sanctuary. This dystopian vision has been used by some politicians and commentators to justify a securitised approach to migration, and a rapid rise in investment in border apparatus and surveillance. It has been unhelpfully echoed by others including climate-focused NGOs, and film-makers trying to raise awareness of climate change.

Internationally, however, migration is increasingly recognised as a critical adaptive strategy through which people cope with a changing world, which should be safely enabled rather than prevented. Climate-related migration features within policy fora and intergovernmental bodies including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); the Global Forum on Migration and Development; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN Network on Migration; the Nansen Initiative and the Platform on Disaster Displacement. It is reflected within global frameworks including the Global Compact for Migration and the Sustainable Development Goals.

There are still significant gaps within relevant international policy and legal frameworks. For example, there are currently no international legal instruments to help people to find safety in the context of climate change, and this is not covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention. Human mobility has recently been included as a workstream within the UNFCCC negotiations on Loss and Damage. However, a much greater focus on, and resourcing for, people who move will be urgently required as climate impacts intensify.

The global climate justice movement is increasingly focusing on climate-related migration as part of a wider call for action to address global inequality. A growing number of NGOs are centering their work around the human rights and dignity of people affected by climate change, including the creation of safe pathways for all who need them, and the right to stay for those who can.

Some researchers and NGOs argue that it will be increasingly unhelpful to define climate-related migration as a distinct ‘type’ of migration. It is likely that, in the near future, the dynamics of all migration journeys - and the political and public responses to people who move - will be to some extent shaped and influenced by impacts of climate change. This makes exploring the intersections between climate change and migration increasingly essential across a wide range of political spaces and civil society sectors.

2.3 Climate change and migration in the UK context

Both climate change and migration are highly relevant public and policy issues in the UK, within a fast-changing national and international context. Responding to the intersections between climate change and migration will become increasingly important in the UK over the coming period.

In the future, UK domestic immigration policy may need to flex in response to new climate-related pressures and demands. This could include the need for humanitarian pathways for people displaced by climate disasters, including from countries with political ties such as those in the Commonwealth. Some of the UK's largest established diaspora communities are from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh - all at high risk of climate change impacts - as are small island states with close historical ties to the UK such as Jamaica and Singapore.

There are increasing calls from business and industry to enable people from overseas to contribute their skills to the UK's burgeoning green economy. Potential demand for 'green-skilled migration' to meet vital skills gaps across this transition could play an important role over the coming period. This needs to be located within deep analysis of labour markets, skills and workforce planning in relation

to renewable industries, as well as consideration of the social and demographic implications.

Internationally, there are ongoing calls for a coherent and responsible UK response to global dynamics, with implications for climate-related migration. The UK could carefully explore its role in climate diplomacy, development and humanitarian assistance and international finance - including funding for Loss and Damage - with regard to ongoing climate-related migration trends.

Overall, there will be a critical role for civil society in pointing the way towards - and pushing for the implementation of - fair, responsible and humane responses to this set of interconnected challenges. Given the scale and complexity of the context, this will require engagement from a range of actors, cutting across areas such as climate, international development and immigration / asylum (among others), and across thematic levers of change including policy analysis, advocacy and narrative and cultural activity. Beyond this, issues emerging around this work will be closely relevant to broader questions related to the future of sustainable, pluralist, democratic societies in the face of climate change.

2.4 UK public opinion

The salience of, and level of public concern about, the climate crisis has risen significantly in recent years. More than 80% of people in the UK now express some concern about climate change. Although attitudes vary widely across the country, denial of the crisis has become broadly relegated to political and social fringes. There remains widespread division, however, over what, and how fast, climate action should be taken, and how the UK should best meet its global responsibilities. The 2023 public backlash over the London Ultra Low Emissions Zone, for example, indicates that there is still significant work to be done to build a mandate for action.

On immigration, UK public attitudes have generally softened since the Brexit referendum in 2016, with residents currently more positive about migration than those in other comparable countries. The salience of migration as an issue of concern has, however, begun to rise in recent years, probably reflecting the high levels of hostile media reporting on small boat crossings made by people seeking safety in the UK.

Despite negative public coverage of asylum issues, the UK public has generally been supportive towards refugee protection. Research by British Future in 2022, for example, found that 75% of people surveyed in the UK agree that people should be able to seek refuge in other countries, including in Britain. Less than 20% were against such measures.

3.

UK civil society work underway

This section maps the range of civil society work on climate and migration currently underway in the UK.

The UK has a very large and active civil society sector. Thousands of organisations work on both climate change and migration or refugee issues at local, national and international levels.

Currently, a relatively small number of organisations work at any scale at the intersections of climate and migration in the UK. Our research has suggested that far more organisations are interested in engaging in this space but that significant barriers exist. We explore these barriers in more detail in Section 4.

Civil society organisations working on climate-related migration in the UK include:

- NGOs, including those focused on climate change; refugee and migration issues; race equality; poverty; international development; and foreign affairs
- Grassroots activist groups and community organisers
- Think tanks and academic research units
- Intergovernmental organisations and UN agencies
- Youth groups and networks

This section presents an overview of recent and ongoing work on climate-related migration. For the purposes of this report, and to support civil society organisations and funders looking for entry points into this area, we have grouped this work around four ‘key levers of change’: research, policy and legal advocacy; community organising and grassroots campaigning; strategic communications and media; and arts and culture.

We recognise, of course, that in practice most work cuts across these categories, often drawing to some extent upon multiple ‘levers of change’. We have found that work focusing on one ‘lever’ often reinforces or supports work within others. As such, we find it helpful to conceptualise the work in this space as part of an interlinked ecosystem of activity.

3.1 Research, policy and legal advocacy

In the UK, a growing number of think tanks, academic research institutions and NGOs are producing policy-focused analysis and research on climate-related migration. Until recently, the majority of this work has been largely global in outlook. An increasingly wide-ranging body of work is looking at the UK policy context, although this work is often fragmented and is not informed by broader political strategies or goals. Key areas of focus include:

UK international aid and foreign policy

A range of organisations and think tanks, including [Chatham House](#) and the [International Organization for Migration UK](#) are engaged with the foreign policy implications of climate-related migration. In recent years, the UK government has stepped back from international leadership on climate action and [reduced the UK foreign aid budget](#) to 0.5% of GNI. As noted earlier, this budget has also been significantly diverted away from critical programmes in Africa, Asia and elsewhere to fund UK domestic activity, with nearly 40% of bilateral Overseas Development Aid (ODA) funding concentrated on Home Office immigration management in the UK, particularly towards housing the growing backlog of people seeking asylum.

Proposals from NGOs including [Bond](#) and the [Climate and Migration Coalition](#) have called on the UK Government to redouble its efforts to meet climate commitments and to show leadership in tackling the climate crisis; a restoration of the foreign aid budget to at least 0.7% of GNI with some of this budget directed towards safe migration pathways for those affected by climate crises; for the UK to become involved in international fora such as the Platform on Disaster Displacement; and to step up UK leadership on Loss and Damage funding.

“[Ten years ago] there wasn’t anywhere, no levers to pull, no policy to improve [on this issue].... But over the last decade there’s now loads of international spaces and processes for organisations to intervene in.”

Some think tanks call for greater international responsibility in combination with a security-focused domestic approach. Onward, for example, in its [2023 report ‘Forced to Move’](#), calls for ‘the Government...to develop a response to protect the integrity of the UK border whilst building resilience abroad.’

People displaced by climate change

There are currently very few safe routes for people to seek asylum in the UK. Policy-makers and campaigners are wary of promoting changes to the 1951 Refugee Convention to include climate-related displacement, for fear of unravelling the international refugee framework. Instead, there is a focus on the domestic policy scope for bespoke UK visa pathways and support packages for climate-impacted communities.

Recent proposals include [extending humanitarian visas](#) for those living in the UK whose countries of origin have been impacted by climate change. Onward has advocated for a new temporary natural disaster visa scheme to allow displaced people to come to the UK. The [Council on Geostrategy](#) has outlined the potential need for visa schemes for climate-affected people with close historic ties to the UK e.g. from Commonwealth Small Island Developing States. [Anti-Slavery International](#) is working to highlight the increased risks of forced labour and human trafficking in the context of climate change, calling for UK leadership within wider global action.

Labour migration

A range of analysts have pointed to the potential need for skilled workers from overseas to assist the UK’s transition towards a net zero economy. Recent interventions have highlighted the value of ‘green-skilled migration’ to the UK. This includes the [ODI](#) in partnership with Green Alliance (2023); and the [Centre for Global Development](#) in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (2021), both of which have advocated targeted labour migration pathways for skilled overseas workers.

“NGO communities - climate, labour markets, and migration - are not talking to each other about the significant skills shortages that there will be in the future.... Migrant workers will be really needed.”

Race, migration and climate

Some UK policy and research work on racial justice intersects closely with climate impacts and migration. This includes the [2022 joint research paper](#) by the Runnymede Trust and Greenpeace, which highlighted the links between racism and climate change and called for policies which seek to redistribute wealth and power towards those directly impacted, in pursuit of just climate outcomes.

Wider research community

There is a wide body of academic research into climate-related migration in the UK. This includes research programmes at the universities of [Exeter](#), [Bristol](#) and [Oxford](#) among others, with key academics also playing a role in government fora such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. NGOs such as Climate

Outreach play a role in helping to communicate the findings of academic research into climate-related migration through networking, blogs and other outputs.

The majority of campaigning work on climate and migration issues is currently being led by grassroots and activist organisations (see Section 3.2) who play a vital role but are not yet aiming their messages at the centre ground of UK politics or society.

There is also growing interest in legal approaches relating to climate change and migration. We particularly heard about the work of [Earth Refuge](#) and the [Climate Litigation Network](#), which are seeking to open up the space for strategic litigation on behalf of those forced to move due to climate change.

Case study: [Climate Outreach](#)

'The concept of 'migration as climate adaptation' has emerged as a way of allowing and equipping people to use migration as a way of building climate resilience.'

UK think tank Climate Outreach has led the way in defining, evidencing and sharing information on climate-related migration for the past 15 years. This work was initially built around a coalition of primarily refugee rights focused organisations including the Migrants' Rights Network. Since then it has evolved into a looser network of civil society groups, with Climate Outreach providing training, resources, and communications guidance.

In November 2023 Climate Outreach released a policy paper '[Resilience on the Move](#)', which highlights migration as a form of adaptation for the increasing numbers of people temporarily or permanently migrating (usually within their own countries) in order to find work, for food security and to find safer areas to live. The report calls for a focus on creating secure and meaningful work in destination locations; enhancing rights protection for people on the move; and providing training to support people in new locations. It is framed as a counter to security and military-focused policies and towards 'policies that facilitate movement and create safe, legal migratory options.'

3.2 Community organising and grassroots campaigning

Activists, community organisations and campaigners in the UK have long seen the link between climate action and migrant justice. Our research heard that a new wave of grassroots and activist campaigning is now taking place, under the broad banner '*climate justice is migrant justice*' and with calls for '*the right to stay and the right to move*'.

This campaigning activity draws upon a shared analysis of global inequality across the climate crisis, the legacy of British colonialism, and the need for richer countries such as the UK to step

up and take responsibility for building a more just, rights-based future. It is closely linked with UK racial justice struggles and the migrants' rights campaign work.

Several NGOs, community groups and others play an active and leading role in UK grassroots campaign work, including the [Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants](#), [War on Want](#), [Migrants Organise](#), [Global Justice Now](#), [Wretched of the Earth](#), and [City of Sanctuary](#). Many of these groups are connected through the [Climate Justice Coalition](#) which connects

and supports a range of NGOs in joint actions on climate and migrant justice. A significant further cohort of campaign work is being led by youth-led initiatives such as [People and Planet](#), groups such as [Green New Deal Rising](#) and by student groups within some universities.

Overall, we heard that there is significant energy and momentum behind grassroots campaign work, although resources and funding are extremely limited.

“There are not loads of organisations doing work on [climate-related migration], but in the last six months it has felt like a growing priority, particularly around the militarisation of the borders as a response to the climate crisis. People are really waking up now to how this is going to be a bigger problem in the politics of the future.”

A key campaign focus for current coalition work is the border surveillance industry and private sector contractors within the asylum

and migration systems. We heard about a number of campaign actions including [sign-on letters](#) and petitions aimed at political leaders. The Climate Justice Coalition is exploring the use of wider tactics such as divestment (both from the border industry and the fossil fuel industry), boycotting and direct action to bring about change.

A cross-cutting priority for work at the intersections of climate and migration is a recognition of the importance of participation and leadership from people with lived experience and from racialised communities. The UK climate movement has been - and remains - overwhelmingly white and middle class. There are growing calls for a more representative climate justice movement. This work is most developed in the community-organising and grassroots space, and connects to wider initiatives such as [Climate Reframe](#), the [Black Environment Network](#) and the [RACE report](#).

Case study: Climate Justice Coalition

The Climate Justice Coalition began life as the COP26 coalition, set up to increase the focus on justice at COP26 in Glasgow and led by several NGOs including War on Want, Friends of the Earth Scotland and [Stop Climate Chaos Scotland](#). The coalition now boasts several hundred members and has local hubs around the UK. Climate and Migrant Justice sits at the heart of the coalition’s work, with members running regular webinars, training and campaigns on climate-related migration.

The Climate Justice Coalition is committed to ensuring that indigenous, frontline and Global South communities are front and centre in their work and that their voices and demands are amplified. The coalition is concerned at the imbalance of power and resources they see between the climate and migration sectors - and the concentration of resources within a relatively small group of NGOs. Over the coming period they will focus on developing a strategy and building a broad coalition campaign at the intersections of climate and migration, with a focus on border securitisation and corporate power.

3.3 Strategic communications and media

Effective strategic communications can help to shape public and political attitudes on complex issues, by highlighting evidence, communicating human stories, and presenting new perspectives.

There is currently relatively little media coverage connecting climate and migration in the UK press. However what coverage there is tends to be negative, plays into fear-based tropes and narratives, and often frames the issue as unconnected to UK politics or society.

This research found concern from migrant and refugee organisations about a tendency amongst some climate-focused civil society organisations to refer to migration as a risk or threat arising from a changing climate. Some environmental groups have gone as far as using an anti-immigration message to promote support for action on the climate and environment. This is viewed as a barrier to solidarity and partnership between organisations, undermining the core principle of the right to move and the right to stay increasingly used by the migrant justice community.

“There is a risk of losing control of the narrative with powerful climate groups and climate communicators falling into these dehumanising narratives at a time when climate and migration get linked in the discourse.”

The relatively low salience of climate-related migration in the media provides an important window of opportunity for targeted, strategic communications. A number of campaigning NGOs are developing work to influence media and social media coverage of climate-related migration including the [Global Strategic Communications Council \(GSCC\)](#), [Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants](#), [Migrants Organise](#), [Climate Outreach](#), [Climate Justice Coalition](#) and others and more work to build on this is needed. Some NGOs would like to explore new narrative approaches.

There is a far more developed ecosystem of actors focused on strategic communication for climate-related migration in the United States. This is a useful resource for groups in the UK developing this work, although the political and societal context is very different.

Case study: Dangerous Narratives

In 2023 a joint communications briefing [‘Connecting Climate Justice and Migrant Justice: A guide to countering Dangerous Narratives’](#) was released by a group of organisations including [JCWI](#), [Migrants Organise](#), [Climate Justice Coalition](#), [350.org](#), [Friends of the Earth Scotland](#) and the [Climate and Migration Council](#). The guide offers *‘ways to communicate about climate-linked migration through justice-based framing and suggests essential tactics to counter dangerous anti-migrant narratives.’*

Dangerous Narratives challenges NGOs in the Global North to reflect on their own narratives and practices and to avoid framing climate change as a national security threat. It sets out recommendations for framing climate and migration in media coverage. Some of the interviewees for this briefing commented that *Dangerous Narratives* had been useful in supporting their own communications on climate-related migration. It was the result of wide-ranging consultations with significant input from organisations led by people with lived experience of climate-related migration.

3.4 Arts and culture

Arts and popular culture interventions can play a [vital role](#) in shaping the potential for social change - as exemplified most recently by the huge impact of the 2024 ITV drama [Mr. Bates vs. the Post Office](#). Music, art, film, TV and computer games can secure public engagement with complex issues, providing new and accessible narrative frames. This can - as with Mr. Bates - ultimately catalyse political and policy action.

A small number of organisations in the UK are now actively exploring how arts and cultural projects can be used to tell the story of climate-related migration, and provide the bedrock for more nuanced public conversations about diversity, integration and belonging.

“Most people want to know what a community embracing migration would look like, what it would take for communities to welcome migrants ... Stories of migrants’ experiences that are positive not negative, that’s how you cut through”.

There is an increasing focus on this work from organisations such as [Counterpoints Arts](#) which has organised a range of cultural events exploring aspects of climate-related migration.

They have recently included climate change at the heart of their new five-year strategy and increasingly bring a climate focus to Refugee Week which they host.

There is also a growing appetite amongst some media broadcasters to explore how migration could be explored and presented, within wider efforts to build public engagement with climate change. [Climate Spring](#) funds and supports broadcast TV and film projects working to shift public narratives on climate change, and is currently embarking on a new programme of work looking at climate-related migration in the UK. We also heard about an appetite for new online content such as podcasts which could help to unpack and explore these issues.

Historically, arts and culture work with a social change focus has been difficult to fund, as it can be challenging to measure direct impact and content is not necessarily positive and hopeful. There can be a disconnect between the highly intersectoral focus of many arts and culture organisations and the more political focus of many mainstream climate NGOs (and donors). Without a shared language and theory of change, it can be hard to build long-term impactful relationships.

Case study: Counterpoints Arts

[Counterpoints Arts](#) supports and promotes the arts by and about migrants and refugees within British arts, history and culture, working across issues of racial justice, displacement and inclusion. Counterpoints produces a range of programmes in the UK and internationally, including national [Refugee Week](#), [PopChange](#) and [Platforma](#) festival.

Counterpoints aims to build a network of artists and organisations who can develop shared language and practice on climate-related migration. This is being built through retreats, events and commissions, such as the [2023 salon held with Climate Spring](#) at the Southbank Centre. Counterpoints will be taking this work forward in 2024 through events including Refugee Week, whose theme is ‘Our Home’ and which will link with climate displacement issues.

4.

Growing this work

This research has heard about a valuable, and growing, body of work on climate-related migration among a range of UK civil society organisations and funders. Looking ahead, the intersections of climate and migration are broadly viewed as presenting a critical set of issues, and we heard that more activity, focus and investment in this area will urgently be needed.

This can be a challenging space to work in. Some organisations say they struggle to prioritise what can be viewed as a broad and ‘future-focused’ issue in the face of other, more immediate pressures. There is generally a lack of relevant capacity, connections and resourcing for this work.

Some environmental NGOs are particularly uncertain how to navigate immigration and refugee issues given the ‘culture wars’. As a result the UK climate movement has not yet found a way to consistently engage with migration issues.

Many refugee and migration organisations, by contrast, see this link as important but are too stretched by more immediate pressures to respond. There is a strong feeling amongst many that the climate movement is far better funded and needs to step up and support work in this area. Due at least in part to the scarcity of resources and years of crisis management, there is a general lack of strategic leadership at this intersection.

“It would be great if someone would do some of the heavy lifting on policy work, scenario planning etc, that the refugee sector could engage with but wouldn’t have to drive. It’s not that people don’t think it’s important but the sector is just getting hammered, and there isn’t any capacity to deal with this stuff”.

Beyond the UK climate and migration sectors, there are a large number of domestic and international organisations focused on issues including poverty alleviation, international aid and development, foreign affairs, and racial justice, whose work currently - or potentially - connects with climate-related migration, and which could bring new capacity as well as new complexity into this space. This research heard that there is a need to support more expansive cross-sectoral relationships, analysis and joint work across and beyond a range of civil society sectors.

This section offers four sets of key recommendations and reflection questions, to help provoke further discussion and action.

4.1 Building shared links, understanding and action

We have highlighted a range of valuable work currently taking place on climate-related migration across a range of sectors, including refugee and migrant rights, climate, racial justice, foreign affairs, and international aid and development.

Some intersectional work reaching across the climate and migration spaces is underway in the UK already, and we heard about a small number of civil society partnerships and networks which coordinate activity around shared goals. However, many organisations we spoke with lack the resources or capacity to consistently engage with others on these issues, and in particular to build and sustain partnerships with those viewed as outside their own sector.

Over the coming period, the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues will require deep and broad collaborative relationships, shared understandings and joint action at this intersection. It will be critical to support the partnerships and networks already underway, as well as exploring new ways of cutting across sectors and policy spaces, and locating individual projects and activities within broader shared goals and strategies.

This could helpfully link organisations across and beyond the climate and migration NGO sectors, including in international development and foreign affairs, and through the levers of change we have outlined in this paper. In our view consistent, long-term commitment and support will be needed to help grow this space, and sustain and evolve civil society engagement and impact within a changing - and challenging - context.

Supporting this work could be usefully informed by frameworks such as in the [Making Change: What Works report](#) from the Institute for Public Policy Research and Runnymede Trust. This report highlights the need for **breadth** (a broad range of groups and activities), **depth** (adequate resources and capacity) and **inter-connectivity** (connections between key actors) across effective social movements. It also highlights the essential role for movement **cultivators** who can carefully and intentionally support the spaces for civil society work to flourish.

Recommendations

In practical terms, shared links, analysis and action on climate and migration could be developed through:

- **Deeper mapping of work that connects with climate and migration intersections**, including the wide range of relevant actors outside the migration and climate NGO sectors, e.g. in international development and foreign affairs;
- **Developing and supporting theories of change** that are informed by the broad range of issues at stake and intersectional approaches;
- **Learning from and shoring up the civil society work already underway**;
- **Supporting new relationships and alliances, including among organisations already working in this space and helping to bring new actors into this space**, including those working on related sectors such as racial justice, international development and foreign affairs. e.g through networking opportunities and research;
- **Strategic convenings and planning opportunities** to help NGOs / funders to identify shared priorities and pathways for joint work;
- **Identifying capacity gaps, mapping the funder landscape and unlocking new resources**. This is likely to require strategic coordination of a growing pool of funders working across climate, migration and other related sectors.

Reflection questions

- Is it helpful to conceive of work on climate-related migration as a distinct 'ecosystem' or area of work? How should strategies to support and encourage work in this area be developed and led?
- What would be the priorities for new partnerships or networks among civil society organisations and funders interested in climate change and migration? What other actors and influencers could helpfully be drawn into this work?
- How helpful are the IPPR / Runnymede Trust insights (see next page) for guiding the development of work in this space?

Making Change: What Works - IPPR & Runnymede Trust, 2022

The IPPR / Runnymede Trust have developed a helpful analysis of effective social movement ecosystems with two particularly relevant insights:

1. Movements need a well-developed ecosystem of influence
2. Successful movements are rarely organic: they require active cultivation

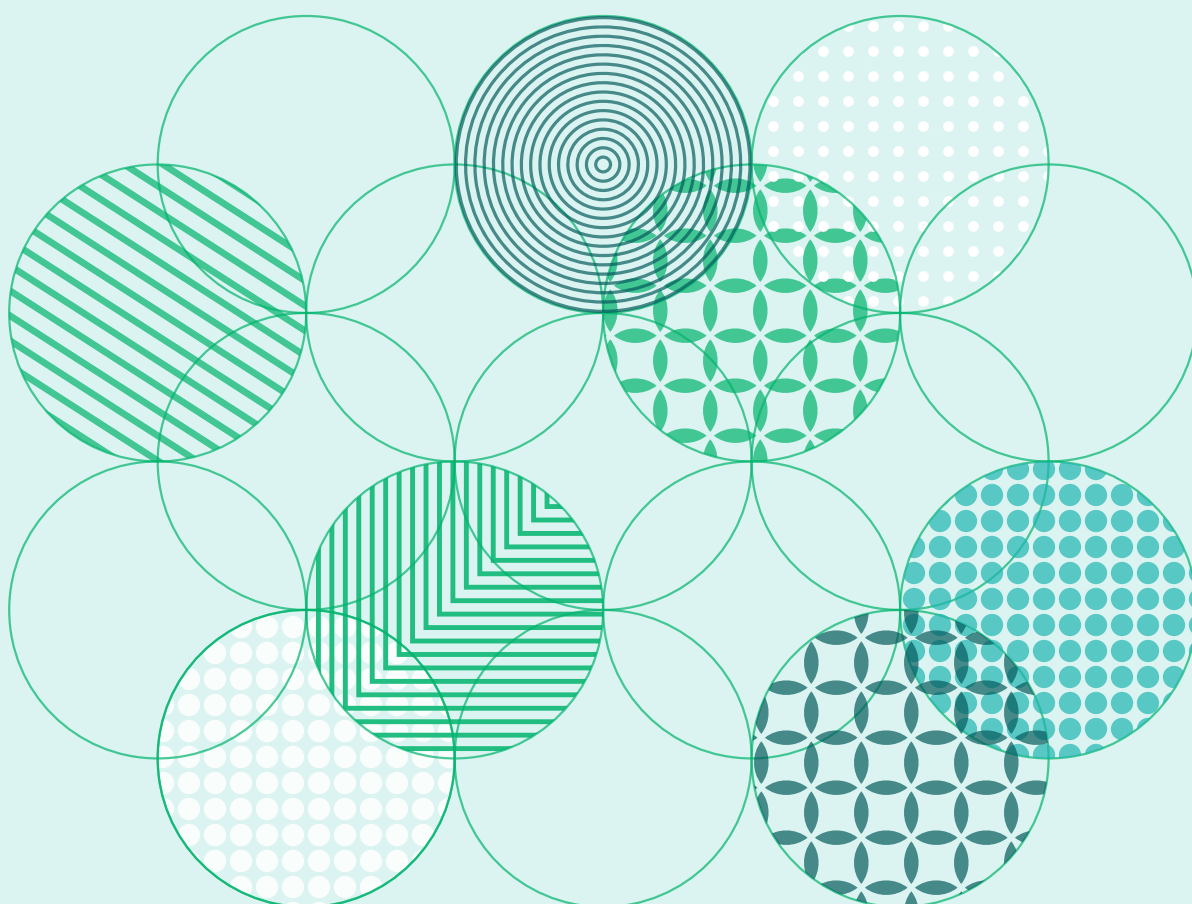
Making Change: What Works identifies three key characteristics for effective ecosystems of influence:

1. **Breadth (diversity):** The ecosystem has a broad range of different types of groups and activities, from research through campaigning to frontline services.
2. **Depth (capability):** Groups in the ecosystem have sufficient resources and ability to identify and move leverage points, including money, talent, and knowledge.
3. **Inter-connection (community):** The ecosystem is well connected, whether tangible (e.g. formal convening organisations) or intangible (eg trust and shared language).

Runnymede and IPPR show that a healthy ecosystem requires a diversity of groups that undertake a range of functions across four key areas - we see actors working across these categories on climate and migration:

- **Rebels:** push for radical change and draw attention to the scale and nature of the problem
- **Reformers:** work with power holders who have direct influence over policy and practice
- **Organisers:** build coalitions and organisations to drive change
- **Helpers:** prioritise service delivery to directly combat problems

The most healthy movements have active '**cultivators**' - organisations or people who do the work that is in everyone's interest but is no-one's individual responsibility. This includes convening and bridging gaps between organisations; developing trust and relationships; strategically resourcing and funding work; collective care for the wellbeing of organisations and people; and sharing the learning. In our view, more 'cultivators' will be needed to support work at the intersections of climate and migration and this space will struggle to grow significantly without them.



4.2 Supporting legal and policy impact

UK civil society will need greater strategic capacity, resources and reach in order to bring about lasting policy impact. There is a rich body of specific, policy-relevant research but little of this work is currently prominent in civil society advocacy work or supported by an influencing strategy. There is growing interest in the potential for strategic litigation in this space and this could also be a fruitful area for development.

Recommendations

In practical terms this could include:

- **Supporting key NGOs, academics and think tanks** to develop advocacy strategies and theories of change for policy influencing work on climate and migration;
- **Engaging a broad church of potential influencers**, including think tanks, faith leaders, trades unions, inter-governmental organisations, financial institutions, and businesses;

- **Building the evidence base for pragmatic policies** by investing in relevant, policy-oriented research;
- **Nurturing legal tools and pathways** including strategic litigation.

Reflection questions

- How can UK civil society organisations best navigate a landscape dominated by power dynamics around both climate change and migration over the coming period?
- What more can be done to link academic research into climate-related migration with civil society advocacy and policy work?
- What scope is there for new, positive policy approaches towards, for example, green-skilled migration?
- What strategies will best influence change and at what levels (e.g. city and devolved nation level; national government; international fora)?

4.3 Strengthening community-driven leadership and diverse engagement

Our research has heard about the growing momentum and energy in the UK's grassroots and community-based campaigning space. This roots climate-related migration work in an explicit commitment to power-building, human rights and racial justice.

This work is still relatively emergent and will need further support to develop longer-term strategies, and broaden its reach and impact. It is well-placed to support leadership and engagement with climate justice work across racialised and diaspora communities, as part of building a more representative and justice focused climate movement. This includes engaging grassroots organisations and communities around shared values and calls to action.

Recommendations

In practical terms this could include:

- **An increase in resourcing and strategy support for community-based networks and coalitions** working at the intersections of climate and migrant justice;
- **Nurturing diverse leadership within the climate justice movement**, raising up the voices of those who are most acutely affected, including women, people with lived experience of seeking sanctuary, and people of colour;
- **Resourcing and supporting climate NGOs with grassroots networks** to engage in climate-related migration campaigning;
- **Resourcing for refugee and migration groups** to engage more actively in climate change related work and spaces;
- **Organising with communities *within* the UK** at risk of displacement due to climate breakdown.

Reflection questions

- How can UK civil society shift the dominant frame of ‘climate refugees’ towards approaches that reflect the agency and rights of people impacted by climate change?
- How can leadership among, and solidarity with, diaspora communities best be nurtured within the climate and migration intersection?
- How can climate justice campaigns develop a clear set of goals and objectives for organising and campaigning? How can the differing political strategies, and capacities of organisations across different sectors be addressed?

4.4 Shaping confident conversations and shared narratives

Media coverage of climate-related migration is often polarised but currently has relatively low salience. This means that civil society actors now have a limited but important window of opportunity to help shape our future story about climate-related migration.

There are multiple levers for change here - our briefing has focused on strategic communications (largely media work) which are likely to focus on policy aspects of climate and migration, and artistic and cultural interventions, which have the potential to explore and engage with a much wider range of issues. This work will be vital to build public engagement beyond ‘worst case scenario’ projections, and invite hopeful, informed responses rooted in shared values and new visions for the future.

Recommendations

In practical terms this could include:

- **Further and targeted analysis of public opinion** on climate-related migration;
- **Shared resources on terminology, framing and media strategies** relevant to the UK context;
- **Supporting and growing a network of spokespeople on this issue**, particularly individuals with lived experience, including through media and communications training;
- **Fostering more positive, solutions-focused narratives** such as the role of migration in ensuring a skilled workforce for the green transition;
- **Cultivation of cultural spaces** to explore climate and migration issues;
- **Connection of key actors across the cultural space to those working in policy and campaigns**, to support mutual learning and impact.

Reflection questions

- How can civil society help to shift narratives about climate-related migration away from being presented as a burden or a threat, and towards being part of a positive, solutions-focused conversation about the future?
- What are the most important and influential strategic communications channels - and who are the best messengers - on climate-related migration?
- What are the opportunities to connect people working across the arts, strategic communications and policy?
- How can donors be supported and encouraged to fund longer-term arts and cultural work and to understand and fund the intersectoral nature of many critical challenges related to climate and migration?



5.

Conclusion

This briefing has focused on four levers of influence for climate-related migration based on our understanding of the current ecosystem, widely-accepted campaigning theories of change and what we heard from our interviewees. Whilst all four require further investment and focus from civil society organisations and funders, one thing we heard time and again is that change will only happen if there is a shared approach across all of these levers, albeit different organisations might focus on different areas, and that they might well have very different capacity, resources and timeframes.

There is a strong recognition from the organisations interviewed for this research that an increased focus on the intersections between these two critical issues is vital, but that this must be done carefully. All of our interviewees recognised that this work is highly complex, requires the building of trust and understanding, and will take time.

Key players will need to (and some already are), carefully consider what goals they want to achieve by entering this space, what their added value might be and where to focus their efforts. Whilst there are significant potential rewards, there are also major challenges to be aware of. If not done thoughtfully, this work could set back trust, understanding and the political space for change.

Long-term investment from funders and larger organisations is vital but requires a shared focus and potentially new infrastructure to enable more coherence and joined-up working. New coalitions are already emerging but further spaces for convening will be vital - both for short-term and long-term goals.

This briefing contains a number of recommendations for future work. Underpinning all of these, we think it will be vital to see:

- **Significant investment** from funders in developing further work - in part based on the recommendations of this report - across the different levers of influence, and through both rapid response and longer-term strategic investment;
- **Relationship-building and connections**, to help organisations from a range of sectors to come together and build trust, understanding and shared approaches;
- **Supporting diverse leadership in this space**, including among people with lived experience, women and people of colour;
- **Commitment to intersectional work** which reaches across silos to meet the complex challenges of our changing world, and calls for dignity and humanity for all on a healthy planet.



Building Common Ground

Climate change and migration work in the UK

By Ruth Grove-White and Ben Margolis

With support from [Unbound Philanthropy](#)

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