CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT

Challenges and Gaps in the State of the Art





BU Initiative on Cities

The Issue: Climate Displacement

REPORT BY

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In the Fall of 2023, some 25 academics and practitioners from around the globe participated in two workshops on climate displacement, one in Toronto and one in Boston, funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connections Grant. Participants spanned geography, economics, sociology, urban planning, law, computer science, social work, health, political science, engineering, real estate, environmental studies, and several major non-governmental organizations engaged in refugee or rights with a climate lens. This report summarizes our in-depth discussions and the key takeaways that will be of value to policymakers and practitioners.

Climate migration - which we refer to as displacement to emphasize its involuntary nature - is "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" (IOM, 2019). Migration may be a short distance within one's home country or across longer distances and international borders; some may migrate seasonally for work, but permanent migration will grow over time (Wrathall, 2019). Most climate-induced displacees or 'climate refugees' will land in cities, many in the Global North, in pursuit of safety, opportunity, and, where possible, connection with existing networks. Climate- and weather-related displacement of people has become a growing concern worldwide. An increasingly volatile climate is uprooting communities globally, impacting both origin and destination places for migrants. Interdisciplinary research is critical in identifying the factors that influence who migrates, where they go, and how long they stay, as well as the determinants of adaptation and resilience.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report, between 3.3 and 3.6 billion people live in areas highly vulnerable to climate change. Millions are displaced each year due to sudden disasters such as flooding and fire, slow-onset land degradation, and social unrest caused by resource scarcity (Francis, 2019; Podesta, 2019; Balsari et al., 2020). While there is consensus in the literature about the close connection between involuntary migration and vulnerability to climate change, we know far less about the specific mechanisms, drivers, adaptive thresholds, migration trajectories, and their impacts on the receiving regions. Yet, these challenges for cities are immense, including inadequate and overloaded infrastructure, access to affordable housing, social tensions, increased poverty, and inequality. Cities have to contend both with internally displaced urban residents whose neighborhood is affected by climate impacts and climate gentrification as well as with international migrants pushed by the often combined effects of climate disasters, land and livelihood loss, and safety or conflict concerns.

Key Questions That Framed Our Workshops

∑ Photo Credit: World Refugee & Migration Council



Who are climate migrants and who are not? How will migrant demographics change over time? How might this change the way the world views migration?

How do specific urban policies and politics (e.g., housing, employment, social services) affect climate mobility? How do these affect the adaptive capacity and long-term economic stability of those who choose to migrate, who are forced to migrate, and those who cannot migrate at all?

What is the role of host-migrant proximity on attitudes towards migrants? What are the perceptions of climate migrants under different contexts, and how do these differ from perceptions of those fleeing war or famine?

How can facilitated climate migration protect against community breakup, cultural loss, and trauma associated with migration/loss of home? How do individual and community population dynamics affect migration patterns (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity/race, age, human, social and economic capital, social ties)?

How does place attachment, or "solastalgia," affect communities' adaptive capacity and ability to cope with loss? How do threatened individuals act for their own "survivability"?

How does a migration event affect a community's future adaptive capacity to climate or social stressors? How must we address this instability? In general, how do we cope with multiple moves and displacements?

With the dominant framing of migration and migrants as a threat, how might research promote more balanced framing of migration?

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Challenges We Identified

The 2023 Connections Workshops surfaced multidisciplinary perspectives on four aspects of climateinduced displacement, adaptation, and resilience: theory, methodologies, data, and action. Researchers emphasized the complexities of understanding displacement and immobility, binaries that are complicated by deep histories of land appropriation and systemic dispossession, the repeated cycles of outmigration and return, the multiple and evolving risks behind the decision to move, the unintended displacement consequences of risk management and other government interventions, the heterogeneity of climate and weather events, the implications of place attachment for psycho-social support mechanisms, and more.

Another major theoretical lens emerged on the communication of risk, including the impenetrability of finance capital logic, the lack of institutional trust in the face of misinformation, and the invisibility of climate migrant voices.

Workshop participants pointed to an abundance of methodological and data challenges, compounded by how climate and displacement research largely occurs within disciplinary silos. Hampering quantitative analyses is the need for fine-grained and comparative data on human mobility, the information monopoly of a set of mostly corporate researchers on risk, and the challenges of predicting future migration in light of the moving target of climate impacts and economic imperatives.

Qualitative research can shed light on the perceptions, motivations, and behavior of climate migrants. Because notions of risk and place differ across groups, grassroots knowledge is key to climate action and effective policy mobility. Yet, both quantitative and qualitative approaches struggle to integrate analyses across scales – from the global economy to nation-states to metropolitan regions, communities, and individual bodies – or conduct rigorous comparisons of very different contexts, from Miami to Mumbai. These issues impede the translation of research into climate action, which suffers from its own silos (e.g., the chasm between organizations working on climate versus housing and other urban issues).

Organizers also face the challenge of working to remedy the great variety of immediate climate injustices while at the same time advocating for reparative justice for systemic disparities. Slowing action on the ground is not just uncertainty and the dearth of data but also the ineffectiveness of risk management approaches, the lack of capacity in critical receiving areas, such as secondary cities, and the political will to dismantle the exclusionary practices of high-income neighborhoods and cities. Yet, there is a plethora of local policies, programs, and activism that communities can learn from and adapt to their own contexts, even in the face of national and international inaction.



Gaps in Research and Practice We Identified

- The need for proper interdisciplinary research partnerships between social and physical scientists to refine our understanding of human decisions about adaptation and migration, as well as the adaptive capacities of different groups and infrastructures across contexts.
- The need to build institutional capacity for adaptation with a focus on driving climate finance to places globally with meaningful risk reduction outcomes.
- The need to improve climate and risk communications to speak more effectively to climate migrants and practitioners (e.g., through participatory citizen science approaches).
- The need to leverage current investment, from private climate finance to public infrastructure spending, to ensure that it leads to transformative adaptation and justice and does so now.
- The need for more research in a number of specific areas, such as the health of both ecosystems and people under climate stress, the relationship of climate change to agricultural production and food security, and the need for reform of the risk reduction regime given shorter disaster cycles.
- The need to focus, as a scale of intervention, on urban regions, which often face the double responsibility of coping with internally displaced residents and receiving international displaced migrants. Urban regions are also where many justicedriven, innovative civic and public practices and coalitions emerge. Yet, most metropolitan areas are failing to plan for the necessary physical and social infrastructure to accommodate this influx. Most are already experiencing political paralysis in the face of housing shortages and an affordable housing crisis that increasingly excludes not only newcomers but also their current residents.

- The need to broaden the focus of climate gentrification research beyond coastal US cities like Miami and New Orleans (Aune et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2018) and green climate-adaptive cities like Philadelphia (Shokry et al., 2022). There is a real need to explore the double jeopardy as climate refugees encounter housing market pressures and socio-economic disparities in receiving cities (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Chapple et al., 2022; Wolch et al., 2014). In general, little research has been conducted on cities receiving migrants, aside from a handful of studies assessing the attitudes of host communities towards climate migrants, of which more understanding is also necessary (Lujalaa et al., 2020).
- The need for longitudinal studies of migrant and migration patterns (Obokata et al., 2014), as well as studies conducted in partnership (e.g., participatory action research) with those communities most affected (Boas et al., 2019).
- The need to build consensus around the framing of climate displacement internationally since debates about terminology abound and remain unresolved (Baldwin, 2017; Boas et al., 2019). Some researchers argue that climate migrants should be given refugee status, while others see the label as removing migrants' agency and ignoring the complexity of choice in climate-induced mobility (Munoz, 2021). The label 'climate refugee' does not currently hold legal protections on an international scale (Francis, 2019), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) does not promote the creation of an alternative category of 'climate refugee.' This may reflect fears about impeding national sovereignty, which could disrupt prior and future international migration agreements (Balsari, 2020).

Next Steps

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Going forward, we seek to fill gaps in climate displacement research by fostering new partnerships and piloting approaches to build institutional capacity for adaptation, improve climate communications, and leverage current investment. Climate displacement will likely have powerful impacts globally, and policymakers and community leaders will require knowledge of future migration flows and resettlement and adaptation practices to prepare for a range of impacts that will affect people and places.

We want to investigate the factors that influence who migrates, where they go, and how long they stay to develop a comprehensive and mixed-methods research framework, integrating primary interview and survey data with user-generated geographic information to aid in understanding the decision-making mechanisms in climate-induced migration.

We seek to broaden the existing knowledge base on the adaptive behavior of climate migrants, including those who voluntarily participate in or disregard government policy interventions such as managed retreat programs (Binder et al., 2015; Groen & Polivka, 2010; Henry, 2013). Identifying the factors that influence the willingness to participate in climate adaptation policies can aid in assessing and predicting policy effectiveness.

We aim to identify the determinants of resilience and adaptability in communities affected by climate displacement. Current research highlights social vulnerability as a factor determining the speed of recovery, mobility, or returns from migration (Keenan & Hauer, 2020; Myers et al., 2008; Islam et al., 2018). Studies have shown that disadvantaged groups tend to live in more disaster-prone and less prepared areas, making them more susceptible to climate displacement.

We want to explore how and why some receiving places recover faster than others from the socio-economic and environmental shocks of climate in-migration.

Other themes we would like to address include the distinctive causal mechanisms and outcomes associated with different climate-related disaster types, the impacts on labor and housing markets in receiving cities, the ability of institutions in receiving places to adapt to social and cultural integration, and the health implications of mobility and immobility. Ultimately, our goal is better to understand the determinants of resilient and adaptive communities and improve policies and interventions to yield positive outcomes for all.

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