

# Post-Disaster Climate Migration Messaging Guide



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## OVERVIEW

**Extreme weather, driven by climate change, is increasingly contributing to community displacement and new patterns of internal and global migration.** For the seventh year in a row, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts an above average hurricane season in 2022 and recent [studies](#) have linked this activity to rising temperatures. While hurricane season officially began in June, the majority of hurricanes and tropical storms occur from August through October. Colorado State University is predicting 10 hurricanes for the 2022 season, including 5 major hurricanes – well above the average of 3.2 major hurricanes recorded from 1991-2020<sup>1</sup>.

This guide offers framing messages, guiding principles, and suggested language for climate and immigrant justice organizations who may respond if a major hurricane makes landfall in the Western Hemisphere.

**If there is a major hurricane in the region this year that results in displacement and increased cross-border migration, we recognize the potential for dangerous, racist narratives to take hold in media coverage. This is especially true in the context of midterm elections where anti-immigrant scapegoating will be at a fever pitch.**

After climate disasters, well-intentioned climate advocates, policy makers and members of the media may frame the potential of increased migration as a threat to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tropical.colostate.edu/forecasting.html>

incentivize climate action. Rather than drive climate action, these messages play into authoritarian, national security narratives that position militarized borders as the solution to climate impacts. We have designed this guide to instead steer the narrative in a different direction.

**Together we can frame migration as a key solution to the new era of climate-driven extreme weather and displacement, build solidarity with displaced peoples, and build a more intersectional and powerful movement for climate action.** We can work together when hurricanes and migration dominate the news cycle, as an opening to normalize and build support for people who migrate when faced with climate disaster and to push back on authoritarian narratives and solutions. While this guide was produced to address climate displacement and migration in the context of a hurricane in the Western Hemisphere, climate change is driving internal displacement and cross-border migration in regions across the world – notably in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Climate displacement is also not limited to the aftermath of fast onset events like a hurricane, but also slow onset events like droughts and desertification.

This guide was produced by a coalition of immigrant and refugee rights organizations with strong commitments to climate justice, including the Climate Justice Collaborative at the National Partnership for New Americans, Communities United for Status and Protection, the International Refugee Assistance Project, and Refugees International.

## FRAMING PRINCIPLES

*Adapted, in part, from the [“Offshore Detention in Rwanda: A Messaging Guide”](#) written by NEON Communications*

### \* **Call for protections for people displaced by climate impacts alongside demands for decarbonization.**

Increasingly frequent disasters – like hurricanes, droughts, and wildfires – are **climate impacts**. People migrating for safety and security is a form of **adaptation** to these impacts. With the right policy and legal frameworks in place, migrants and host communities can all benefit from this movement. When commenting on climate disasters that drive displacement, it's essential to highlight that scientists recognize migration as a form of climate adaptation to significant climate impacts that are already happening across the planet. Safe pathways for migration are essential climate adaptations, alongside strong calls for eliminating carbon emissions, increasing mitigation efforts, and equitable climate finance. The United States media and politics is dominated by a security narrative that scapegoats immigrants and refugees and frames migration as a security threat. In this context, it is especially important that we work to reframe migration as a necessary form of adaptation to climate change, and proactively include it in our calls for climate action following major climate disasters.

### \* **Start with values like family, care, compassion, solidarity and treating other people how we would want to be treated.**

Lead with values-based language when talking about people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants. People displaced by climate change are inherently connected to receiving communities, just as climate change is a global challenge, affecting all places and people in different but significant ways. Messages that start by appealing to shared values, rather than to the problem, have been shown time and time again to be more effective at shifting public opinion. They invite the audience to reflect on their deeply held principles and connect emotionally to the story. Remind the audience of our shared humanity and experiences when discussing public policy. None of us are one-dimensional victims or reduced to our various statuses. Instead, remind your audience that we are all people with families, aspirations, hopes, and fears.

\* **Provide aspirational calls to provide something good. Offer clear solutions and alternatives.**

Rather than focusing on fixing a broken system, assert better alternatives and solutions. We have the tools, ambition, and expertise to build safeguards for migrants in the U.S.: People across the Global North and South, rich and poor, are on the move, seeking relief from massive fires, heat waves, flooding, storms, drought and the other well-documented effects of climate change. We must democratize safe adaptation to climate change, including safe pathways for migration. Safeguards represent real security for communities.

Messages that provide a vision of how things could be (like people being able to reunite with their loved ones and rebuild their lives) cut through. It shows our audience that things can be different and gives them something to believe in. Offer a solution for today – including local, community-based solutions – and a solution in the long term. That means detailing a concrete, clear step this government could take right away (e.g., ending Title 42 and approving and extending TPS for affected countries ) as well as offering longer term systemic solutions.

\* **Pivot the narrative to the real villains. Point the finger of blame and name the motivation that underpins anti-immigrant policies and narratives.**

In an era of accelerating climate change and displacement, right wing movements and border surveillance and fossil fuel industry profiteers try to paint people who are migrating as threats, rather than climate change, which is the real threat to humanity. As a result, the rate of spending on border militarization in Western countries that make up the world's largest emitters has vastly outpaced their spending on climate action and climate finance.<sup>2</sup> Dealing with anti-immigrant narratives requires naming and describing the villains responsible. By attributing blame clearly we expose who is responsible and show that things could be different. Policy is the result of political choices made by people, but different and better choices could be made instead.

Clearly identify which actors drive and benefit from conditions that threaten human life and wellbeing, and focus attention onto these actors, as has been done in the context of fossil fuel profiteers and climate. The real villains include:

- Border and Surveillance Industry (BSI) corporate actors, including data miners, weapons and military equipment manufacturers, private detention, and transport companies, among others.
- The fossil fuel industry and companies and politicians who continue to delay a just transition to clean energy.
- State actors, across the political spectrum, employing BSI to scapegoat migrants for political gain.
- White nationalists, eco-fascists, far-right racist movements.

They are intentionally stirring up hatred and division, scapegoating people seeking asylum to both push through hardline policies and distract attention from their failures elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> See: [Global Climate Wall by the Transnational Institute](#)

\* **Center the leadership and experiences of those directly-impacted by the climate crisis and anti-immigrant policies.**

As we develop and advocate for solutions to the climate crisis, including how to plan for and facilitate climate-induced migration, it's essential that we listen to and uplift the demands of those most directly impacted. We must center the leadership of those impacted by both the acute crises of hurricanes and other extreme impacts of climate change and the legacy of colonialism underpinning the extractive economies fueling the climate crisis. In the context of a hurricane or other major disaster, we can listen to and uplift the demands of frontline communities in affected countries and their families in the diaspora in the United States who know what is needed to rebuild, recover, and seek safety.

## **EXISTING U.S. POLICY TOOLS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE IMPACTS AND DISPLACEMENT**

*Adapted, in part, from ["U.S. Opportunities to Address Climate Displacement"](#) written by the [International Refugee Assistance Project \(IRAP\)](#)*

**As the impacts of climate change accelerate, migration must be seen as an essential form of adaptation.** As environmental movements work to stop emissions, we must also invest in resilience and adaptation that make it possible for people to stay in their homes and communities. But when it is no longer safe for people to remain, people should have the resources and support necessary to relocate and find safety from the climate crisis. While much of the initial displacement of people from climate impacts is occurring within countries, displacement across international borders is already happening.

Despite climate change's increasing role in cross-border migration, it is not yet reflected in our domestic or international migration policies. Our organizations believe we need new and expanded pathways to reflect how and why people are migrating, including from the effects of climate change.

However, the Biden administration already has an existing set of immigration policy tools they can use to provide humanitarian relief and protection, allow people displaced by a hurricane or other climate impacts to seek refuge in the United States, and to prevent those already here from being deported into a disaster zone. These tools are insufficient, temporary fixes and do not meet the scale of the challenge we face, but they can and should be used more frequently to provide immediate relief. These administrative actions do not, however, lessen the imperative for Congress to take action to create new and expanded, permanent immigration pathways for climate-displaced people. In the wake of a major hurricane in the hemisphere, it is highly likely that immigrant and refugee organizations will call on the Biden administration to use some or all of the following tools.

**Temporary Protected Status (TPS):** The Secretary of Homeland Security has the authority to designate countries for Temporary Protected Status if there are conditions that prevent people in the United States from returning safely to that country, for reasons including ongoing armed conflict (e.g. Ukraine was designated in April 2022) and environmental disasters, including both sudden onset events like a hurricane as well as slow-onset events like drought (e.g. Honduras was designated in 1999 following Hurricane Mitch).

When a country is designated for TPS, people from that country who are in the United States at the time of designation have the opportunity to apply for temporary immigration status. TPS does not create a pathway for people outside of the country to migrate to the United States, and it is temporary, not a pathway to citizenship. But TPS grants essential, immediate protection and relief allows for individuals who are in the United States at the time of designation to apply to live and work without fear of being deported back to their home country while it is recovering from a devastating climate disaster or other conditions. The Secretary of Homeland Security can issue a redesignation at any time for a country previously designated for TPS, to reflect updated or ongoing conditions in that country. For example, immigrant justice organizations and allies in Congress are still calling upon the Biden administration to designate TPS for Guatemala and redesignate TPS for El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua since Hurricanes Eta and Iota devastated the region in late 2020.

**Deferred Enforced Departure (DED):** Similar to TPS, Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) is a temporary protection from deportation. Unlike TPS, DED is granted directly by the President, not the Secretary of Homeland Security, and is based on executive authority over foreign relations.

**Humanitarian Parole:** Individuals can apply and be granted humanitarian parole when there is an urgent humanitarian reason. This allows someone to receive temporary authorization to enter the United States. Like TPS, humanitarian parole is temporary and is not a pathway to citizenship. In response to the war in Ukraine, the Biden administration launched [Uniting For Ukraine](#), which allowed a streamlined process for Ukrainians to apply to enter the country with humanitarian parole. This was a remarkable and rapid use of humanitarian parole, but shows what is possible when the United States recognizes migration as a key and urgent solution to a crisis. A similar response could be launched to support people displaced by a major hurricane in the hemisphere seeking safety in the United States.

**Asylum and Refugee Resettlement:** The Refugee Act of 1980 defines a refugee as a person with a well-founded fear of persecution based on five categories: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. While this definition does not reference climate or environmental change, there has been a growing recognition, including by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, that many forced to flee countries experiencing climate-related stresses may be particularly vulnerable to persecution as traditionally defined. For example, there may be situations in which a government withholds or deprioritizes protection by denying relief aid to specific populations. The Biden Administration could take administrative action to clarify that existing U.S. refugee law can be applied to climate-displaced people.

## TERMS AND CONCEPTS ACROSS CLIMATE AND MIGRANT JUSTICE

| Term   | Definition   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Immigration terms:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Refugees</li> <li>● Asylum seekers</li> <li>● Migrants</li> <li>● Terms to address climate displacement</li> </ul> | <p><b>Refugees</b> are people who have been forced from their homes for a specific set of reasons including war and persecution and meet the requirements for protection from the UN Refugee Convention. The U.S. currently resettles up to 125,000 refugees a year; there are more than 100 million refugees in the world, according to the UN.</p> <p><b>Asylum seekers</b> are people who seek refuge in a second country because of war, persecution or other human rights abuses. Seeking asylum is considered a human right, but it's a right that is endangered in the U.S. and Europe at the moment (see Title 42 below).</p> <p><b>Migrants</b> are people who move for many reasons – including climate impacts, family reunification, and economic reasons – but don't necessarily meet the definitions of refugee status or asylum.</p> <p><b>Terms to address climate displacement:</b> "Climate refugees" is a term that is often used by climate communicators because it captures people's attention/understanding. However, the term is highly contentious. Immigration advocates warn against using it because it suggests that climate-displaced people have access to a legal status/process that they largely do not. Instead, consider other commonly used terms like <b>climate-displaced people</b> or <b>climate migrants</b>. Generally, when referring to specific people who migrate, always use the term they prefer.</p> |
| <p><b>Title 42</b></p>   | <p>The Trump and Biden administrations have used Title 42 – a public health law that permits limited restrictions on immigration during pandemics – to reduce safe pathways and force asylum seekers to wait in makeshift camps in Mexico rather than being able to make asylum claims inside the US. This policy has made the border more dangerous for all and has put the U.S. commitment to asylum at risk. As of the time of this guide's publication, Title 42 enforcement is currently before a federal court, which has so far prohibited the Biden administration from lifting the policy.</p>  |
| <p><b>IPCC, UN science reporting on climate migration and displacement</b></p>   | <p>The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the world's most authoritative science body, with hundreds of scientists from across the world tracking and summarizing global research on climate change. The group's regular climate reports cover all aspects of climate change, including climate-driven migration.</p> <p>According to the IPCC, climate-linked displacement is already happening and will increase as the planet warms further. Moving to escape worsening climate extremes is a form of adaptation that allows people to survive the climate crisis. While much of the initial displacement of people from climate impacts is occurring within countries (internal</p>  |

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|   | <p>displacement), some will move across international borders seeking safety. With the right policy and legal frameworks, migrants and host communities can all benefit from this movement.</p> <p>In order to ensure that more people have the ability to stay in their homes and prosper, we need to reduce emissions in order to curb global heating, but this alone is not enough. Wealthy nations need to honor their commitments to adaptation financing and supporting countries that face dire impacts and irreversible loss and damage from climate change.</p>   |
| <p><b>International processes for climate-driven migrants</b></p> | <p>A number of international processes already exist that can potentially protect the rights and welfare of people who need to move as a result of climate impacts. Like all complex international political processes they are subject to delay and the competing interests of the national governments involved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The Platform on Disaster Displacement is a state-led international process that has created guidance for countries regarding protecting the rights of people crossing borders due to disasters and climate impacts.</li> <li>● The international climate negotiations (COP process) has committed states to cooperating and sharing best practice on addressing climate-driven displacement.</li> <li>● The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) adopted in 2018 contains wording acknowledging climate change as a driver of mobility.</li> </ul> |

## WORDS THAT WORK

Adapted, in part, from: [“Offshore Detention in Rwanda: A Messaging Guide” by NEON Communications](#) & [“How to Communicate on Climate-Linked Mobility” by 350.org](#)

| DO  | DON'T   | Why...   |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Frame migration as part of the solution and <b>a form of adaptation to climate change</b>.</p> <p>Example: “This means proactively creating safe pathways for those whose homes are affected to ensure a world in which all humans can live with dignity.”</p> | <p><i>Don't use crisis language when talking about climate linked mobility.</i></p> | <p><i>Phrases like ‘mass migration,’ ‘unprecedented migration,’ ‘climate crisis,’ ‘waves of migration,’ ‘flood,’ ‘surge’ and ‘risks of mass migration’ feed into the threat narrative.</i></p> |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Refer to <b>people first</b>:</p> <p>People seeking asylum or safety<br/>         People who have moved<br/>         Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters etc.</p>   | <p><i>Don't label people without context:</i></p> <p><i>Asylum seekers<br/>         Migrants<br/>         Refugees</i></p>   | <p><i>Move away from simplistic labels to a depiction of people with agency.</i></p>   |
| <p><b>Assert human rights:</b> People have the right to seek asylum, it is an issue of basic rights, the foundation of human dignity.</p> <p>Supporting people in a new place, striving to support themselves and their families, is the right thing to do.</p>   | <p><i>Never repeat harmful frames, even in negating them.</i></p> <p><i>Don't say: It is not illegal to seek asylum, not a security issue, not a threat, no need to fear, etc.</i></p> | <p><i>Using negations or trying to mythbust only strengthens the opposition's argument, especially the term "illegal." This only feeds false, nativist ideas about seeking asylum.</i></p> <p><i>Focus on people and our shared rights. Center compassion.</i></p>   |
| <p>Favor <b>values-based framing over numbers</b>:</p> <p>People leave their homes in search of shelter, food and safety as a last option. Research shows us that increasing climate impacts make displacement and migration more likely.</p> <p>While much of the initial displacement of people from climate impacts is occurring within countries, movement across international borders is also a valid climate solution.</p> | <p><i>If you have to include a figure for whatever reason, ensure a values based framing with no crisis language constructed around it.</i></p>  | <p><i>Avoid future numerical projections about cross border movement as there is no conclusive methodology and it feeds into the crisis narrative.</i></p> <p><i>For 2021 displacement figures, experts point to the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021 as the most authoritative figure.</i></p> <p><i>Don't talk about climate linked mobility as something that will happen in the future. It is already a reality today. It demands attention and policy responses now.</i></p> |

## Choose your words carefully

| Terms/phrases to say:     | Terms/phrases to avoid: |  |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| <p>✓ As caring people</p> | <p>✗ As Americans</p>   | <p><i>Decenter national identity as this is exclusive and unhelpful. Instead lean on values of care and compassion, a value most people want to identify with.</i></p> |

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| <p>✓ This government has detained people.</p>   | <p>✗ People have been detained.</p>  | <p>Point the finger at who is responsible. This helps people believe that individuals have made political and policy choices and therefore things can be different.</p>  |
| <p>✓ Wherever we come from, we have the right to be safe.</p>   | <p>✗ No human being is illegal.</p>  | <p>Universalize the act of moving - everyone does it at some point in their lives. Do not repeat the opponents' frame of illegality - even to challenge that assertion.</p>  |
| <p>✓ This government has created a situation where people are forced to take unsafe routes.</p> <p>✓ The way you enter a country should not impact your claim.</p>  | <p>✗ Illegal routes</p> <p>✗ There is no such thing as illegal routes.</p>         | <p>Saying "illegal routes" - regardless of your intention - reinforces the negative framing of the far right. Talk about the government forcing people to take routes that are not safe and that the government could choose to provide safe ways to move.</p>   |
| <p>✓ Safe routes</p>  | <p>✗ Safe and legal routes</p>   | <p>Avoid reinforcing the idea that routes to safety are imbued with legality/illegality.</p>   |
| <p>✓ People have the right/must have an opportunity to rebuild their lives and be reunited with loved ones.</p> <p>✓ Migration is an opportunity for people to build a better future for themselves, their families, and for the new communities that welcome them.</p> | <p>✗ This could happen to anyone of us</p> <p>✗ Anyone could become a refugee.</p> | <p>This ignores the fact that because of global inequality, legacy of colonialism and Western intervention, Black and Brown people in the Global South and post-colonial countries are significantly more likely to become refugees.</p> <p>Research shows that people find it hard to believe that this could be them. And when they do imagine it happening to them, it provokes emotions of self-preservation rather than compassion.</p> |
| <p>✓ People seeking asylum are making brave, impossible choices to rebuild their lives elsewhere and to reconnect with family and loved ones, after losing so much.</p>   | <p>✗ People are fleeing war and violence</p>                                       | <p>Avoid leading with violence and persecution. This feeds the victim narrative. It also makes it difficult for a persuadable audience to connect as they won't be able to see themselves in that situation. Talk about people with agency making brave choices to restart their lives.</p>  |

## RESOURCES

**[Words that work: Making the best case for people seeking asylum](#)**

*Asylum Seeker Resource Centre & ASO Communications*

**[Words to win by | People seeking Asylum - Australia](#)**

*Anat Shenker-Osorio*

**[Changing the Conversation on Asylum](#)**

*Ellie Mae O'Hagen and Freedom from Torture*

**[How to Communicate about Climate Linked Mobility](#)**

*350.org*

**[Progressive Playbook: Climate and the Race Class Narrative](#)**



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