Myths and realities

Institute for
Law and Policy
on Climate Mobility

Climate mobility is often discussed through assumptions that the evidence does not fully support. Here is what research, and the practice of governments, suggest.

MYTH 1

"Climate mobility is mostly about people in developing countries moving to developed economies like the UK."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Most climate mobility is thought to take place within countries, and much of the rest within the same region.

The large majority of people who move in the context of disasters and climate change do not cross an international border. Of those who do, most move to neighbouring countries. Wealthier countries are affected too: close to half a million disaster displacements were recorded in Europe and Central Asia in 2025.

Many of the people most exposed are not able to move at all, because they lack the money, health, documents or networks to do so. Climate mobility policy is as much about them as about people arriving at a border.

EVIDENCE IDMC, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2026*; Hoffmann et al., *Nature Climate Change* (2020).

MYTH 2

"Supporting a legal framework for climate mobility would move immigration decision-making to international courts and away from the UK."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

The Institute's recommendations are for national policy, decided by UK ministers and Parliament and applied by UK decision-makers.

They work through tools the UK already has: adapting existing labour routes, issuing guidance to caseworkers, and deciding when to extend leave for people already here. No international court would decide who enters the UK. The approach also includes helping people to stay safely where they live for as long as that remains possible; it is not only a question of migration.

A framework can give the Government more control over immigration decisions. Without one, decisions tend to be made case by case, can be inconsistent, and may later be tested in the courts. With a framework, ministers can set the rules in advance.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Brief 04 (Home affairs ministries).

MYTH 3

"There's no real evidence climate change is affecting migration patterns."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

There is a substantial and growing body of evidence. Disasters displaced people 45.8 million times in 2024, the highest figure on record.

Weather-related hazards such as floods, storms, droughts and wildfires accounted for 99.5% of those displacements. The IPCC finds, with high confidence, that climate and weather extremes are increasingly driving displacement in all regions.

Climate is rarely the only reason a person moves; migration usually has several causes. Climate change can add to existing pressures, such as access to livelihoods, competition over resources and weak governance. For this reason, the Institute's policy briefs suggest assessing risk using published measures of climate vulnerability, rather than trying to establish the cause of each individual move.

EVIDENCE IDMC, GRID 2025; IPCC AR6 Working Group II (2022).

MYTH 4

"Climate mobility is a fringe or future problem, not something governments are already acting on."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Governments in many parts of the world are already legislating, negotiating and funding responses.

Australia and Tuvalu signed the Falepili Union treaty in 2023. It provides a permanent residence pathway for up to 280 Tuvaluans a year, and 8,750 people entered the first ballot. Fiji has national planned relocation guidelines and a dedicated relocation trust fund. The IGAD free movement protocol in East Africa allows people to move "in anticipation of, during or in the aftermath of disaster". Argentina has also proposed a humanitarian visa for people displaced by disasters.

Donors including the EU, Germany, Switzerland and Denmark are funding work to reduce the risk of climate-related displacement. Governments that act early can help to shape the agenda.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Briefs 02, 04 and 05.

MYTH 5

"Managing climate mobility is a humanitarian cause, not a serious policy solution to domestic and international issues."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Climate mobility is linked to the work of several government departments.

Security: displacement that is not well managed can put strain on institutions and create openings for organised crime and smuggling networks. The economy: well-designed labour routes from climate-vulnerable regions can help fill domestic skills gaps, including jobs needed for the UK's green transition. Housing and resilience: in the UK, flood displacement tends to last longer where affordable housing is scarce. Diplomacy: countries that act early can help to shape climate negotiations.

Humanitarian values matter. The case for acting also rests on the national interest.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Briefs 01–05.

MYTH 6

"It is impossible to plan for all environmental factors and the displacement they may cause."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Not every event can be predicted, but the overall pattern of displacement can be anticipated and planned for.

It is already known which places are most exposed to climate events, and which groups are most at risk. Renters, for example, are more likely than homeowners to be displaced. Early warning systems, funding that is released automatically when a forecast crosses a set threshold, and "no-regret" measures such as building affordable homes away from flood plains can all work without knowing exactly when the next disaster will happen.

Anticipatory action, meaning action taken on a forecast before a disaster strikes, reached around 96 million people worldwide in 2025.

EVIDENCE Anticipation Hub (2026); ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Brief 03.

MYTH 7

"Support for greater climate mobility will lead to significant increases in international migration."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

The aim is to give people a choice, and for most people the first choice is to stay.

The first pillar of the Institute's policy framework is about helping people to stay safely where they are, through adaptation, resilience and early warning. The second pillar is about mobility. Where people do move across borders, managed routes can bring movement that is already happening into safe, legal and orderly channels. They are designed to manage existing movement rather than to create new demand.

Receiving governments set the numbers. The Falepili Union, for example, has a fixed annual cap. Some measures, such as extending leave for people already in the country, do not change who enters at all.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Briefs 02, 04 and 05.

MYTH 8

"It is a waste of money to invest in anticipatory action to reduce the risk of displacement now."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Waiting is often the more expensive option.

Most disaster funding is released only after an emergency has been officially declared. By then, homes, jobs and harvests may already have been lost, and displacement is more likely to become prolonged or permanent. Research suggests that how long displacement lasts depends to a large extent on how quickly people can be rehoused.

Investing before a disaster, in adaptation, early warning, and housing and services in the places people are likely to move to, can reduce emergency spending later and the number of people left in displacement for months, years or permanently.

EVIDENCE IDMC, *The Duration of Disaster Displacement* (2025); WFP anticipatory action evidence base 2015–2024.

MYTH 9

"Investing in anticipatory action is just another name for foreign aid."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Anticipatory action starts at home, and abroad it can draw on more than aid budgets.

At home, it includes early warning systems, housing and planning decisions, and funding that can be released before a flood or wildfire rather than after one.

Abroad, it can be supported by security and diplomatic budgets and by multilateral climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund and the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage. Diaspora adaptation finance, including green diaspora bonds and matched remittances directed to adaptation, can also complement public funding. It need not require a new budget line: it can be built into existing programmes.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Briefs 02, 03 and 05.

MYTH 10

"Spending abroad on managing climate mobility diverts money away from managing the impacts at home."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

It need not be a choice between home and abroad. The Institute's recommendations cover both.

One of the five policy briefs deals only with displacement within a country: housing, data and funding for UK communities at risk.

Much of the international work is low-cost: guidance for decision-makers, adapting existing routes, diplomatic engagement and use of multilateral funds. Investment in other countries can also reduce pressures that might otherwise reach the UK later, such as irregular migration, supply chain disruption and regional instability.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Briefs 01 and 03.

MYTH 11

"Government policy on climate mobility would not reduce the impact of displacement on the UK."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Policy can make a significant difference to whether movement is orderly.

Where there are no planned routes, people who need to move may have little option but irregular crossings and the asylum system. Where routes exist, the Government can decide who comes, in what numbers and to fill which labour shortages, and process cases through existing systems. Clear guidance can also lead to more consistent decisions and fewer appeals.

At home, housing and planning policy affects how many people UK floods displace, and for how long.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Briefs 03 and 04.

MYTH 12

"Governments should only worry about internal climate displacement."

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS

Internal displacement is the largest share, but it is not the whole picture.

Internal displacement deserves much more attention than it receives, and one of the five policy briefs is dedicated to it. But climate impacts do not stop at borders. Regional crises can affect trade, security and diaspora communities. Some countries of origin may become unsafe to return to, and neighbouring states often end up hosting people.

A complete response involves home, foreign, development and security ministries, alongside domestic departments.

EVIDENCE ICM and IRAP Policy Series 2026, Overview and Briefs 01–05.



Institute for
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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for Law and Policy on Climate Mobility brings together world-leading experts to research, inform, and advise on rights-based responses to climate mobility. We seek to mainstream climate mobility in legal and policy frameworks as the centrepiece to climate resilient governance structures.

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The Institute for Law and Policy on Climate Mobility
Faculty of Law, St Cross Building, St Cross Road, Oxford OX1 3UL
www.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies/institute-for-law-and-policy-on-climate-mobility

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