The basics

Who is affected, why it matters, and how to tell where risk is highest.

What is “climate immobility”, and who does it affect?

Climate immobility describes people who stay in places exposed to climate risk, either because they cannot leave or because they choose not to.

- **Trapped populations**: people who do not move, yet live in areas under threat, and who are at risk of becoming “trapped” or having to stay behind, where they are more vulnerable to environmental shocks and impoverishment (IOM, 2019). This applies in particular to poorer households, who may lack the money, documents, health or social networks they would need to move. It can include older people, people with disabilities, and people who depend on the land for a living.
- **Voluntary immobility**: people who choose to stay because of their ties to land, culture, community or identity, such as ancestral links with their land, even when the risks are high.

Good policy considers both groups. It makes staying safer through adaptation, and makes moving possible for those who need or want to.

What is the difference between climate mobility and climate migration?

Climate migration is one form of climate mobility.

IOM defines climate migration as the movement of people who, mainly because of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their usual home, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a country or across an international border. “Climate mobility” is a broader, umbrella term. Like “human mobility”, it also covers displacement, planned relocation of whole communities, temporary and circular movement, and people who cannot or do not move. The Institute uses “mobility” because policies that look only at migration can miss many of the people affected.

Why does the Institute talk about habitability?

Because framing climate mobility as migration alone can leave out many of the people affected.

Public discussion often presents climate mobility either as a large movement of people across borders, or as a humanitarian emergency to be dealt with once people have been displaced. Both frames focus attention on movement, and on the moment at which it becomes visible. They can leave out people who stay, people who cannot leave, and the communities that receive newcomers.

The Institute therefore approaches climate mobility through the lens of habitability: whether places, and the people in them, can continue to sustain a safe and dignified life and livelihoods as the climate changes. The question for policy becomes: what will it take for people to continue to live a safe and dignified life, whether they stay or move?

Seen this way, climate mobility calls for two linked pillars of policy response that operate together: helping people to stay safely where they are, and making movement safe, lawful and dignified when it happens. Choice is the measure of success: people should be able to remain in safety or move in safety, on terms they have a part in deciding.

Is all climate mobility the same?

No. The Climate Migration Council and others distinguish four situations, each of which may call for a different response.

- **Migration as adaptation**: people move, often temporarily, to reduce risk and, in some cases, to diversify income.
- **Forced displacement**: people are forced or obliged to leave their homes.
- **Trapped populations**: people remain in high-risk places because they cannot move.
- **Politically exploited movement**: movement, or stories about it, used by others for strategic, criminal or political ends.

Why respond to climate mobility?

Because it is already happening, and governments that plan ahead are generally better placed than those that only react.

The main risk is not movement itself, but the strain on the systems that allow people to stay safely, adapt locally or move by choice. Without planning, that strain can fall on housing and services, test social cohesion, and create openings for smuggling and exploitation. Well managed, climate mobility can be a form of adaptation. It can help meet labour shortages, support regional stability and protect lives. Many of the tools governments need already exist, and need coordinating and adjusting rather than reinventing. Acting early can also cost less: studies find that investment in resilience typically returns between two and ten times its cost.

How do you decide what qualifies as a climate-vulnerable country?

One approach is to use published indicators applied to whole countries or regions, rather than detailed assessments of individual people.

Established indices such as the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Country Index and the EU's INFORM Climate Change Risk Index rank countries on exposure, sensitivity and capacity to adapt, and are updated regularly. Governments can combine these with their own foreign ministry country assessments and with data from national weather and emergency authorities.

Assessing whole countries or regions, rather than each individual, can be quicker, cheaper and more consistent. It also avoids asking people to prove that climate change alone caused them to move, which is very difficult to do.

Can communities refuse relocation?

Planned relocation should be a last resort, carried out with communities rather than imposed on them.

Human rights law protects freedom of movement and choice of residence, and protects people against arbitrary displacement and forced eviction. Under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous peoples should not be relocated from their lands without their free, prior and informed consent. Fiji’s national guidelines, for example, provide for communities to be consulted and involved throughout.

This is different from a short-term emergency evacuation, where there is an immediate risk to life. Long-term relocation rarely succeeds without the community’s agreement, so meaningful participation matters both legally and in practice.



Institute for
Law and Policy
on Climate Mobility

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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