



**Friends of  
the Earth  
United States**

## HOW TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT MIGRATION CAUSED BY CLIMATE IMPACTS

The crisis caused by a rapidly warming world will be addressed with walls, bullets, drones, cops, and cages. -Todd Miller, award winning author of 'Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security'.

This is a briefing note for climate communicators talking to journalists about climate migration. However, this can also be used to message to the climate community on climate migration.

### DANGEROUS CLIMATE NARRATIVES NEED TO BE REFRAMED

In a bid to accelerate action, the climate “crisis” narrative was constructed and amplified largely by the Global North environment movement, which has a weak history of prioritising justice or race. This “crisis” framing has been extended to climate migration with little understanding of how it is being co-opted to push other agendas by the security establishment and anti-migrant groups.

- **The security establishment:** over the past decade climate change has been cast as a national and international security issue<sup>1</sup>. Military voices have used the future “threat” of mass climate displacement to give weight to this framing. This analysis prioritises national interest and risk management ahead of addressing the root causes of community upheaval, instability and migration in the context of climate change.
- **Anti-migrant groups:** are using this climate “crisis” narrative to stoke fears of uncontrolled immigration and anti-refugee narratives.
- **Conservationists:** some conservationists are known to support population control and closed borders and will find ideological alignment with anti-migrant groups and the security establishment. We can expect this alliance to grow in the future as more evidence of the catastrophic impacts of climate change emerge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hayes, B., 2015. Colonising the Future, The Secure and the Dispossessed, pp.40  
<https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-secure-and-the-dispossessed>

We are seeing a steady stream of reports with projections of how many people will be forced to move this century and how much of the earth's surface will be uninhabitable. These reports can contribute to the "crisis" narrative.

In Europe, the US and Australia, "crisis" narratives have already been harnessed by right wing politicians to turn populations against migrants, refugees and others fleeing serious risks by positioning them as the "other" and as a security threat. As a result of this, it has been extremely difficult to have a discussion based on human-rights and justice, and over the years immigration and refugee policies have become more draconian and inhumane.

This is not to say that the severity of climate impacts should be downplayed but when talking about future displacement in the context of climate change, the framing should also include

- Demanding that decision makers create compassionate policies that ensure all humans can live with dignity and that people have the right to move to secure their livelihoods.
- Positioning powerful governments and the fossil fuel industry as key contributors to creating a situation in which people need to migrate to find safety.

#### WHAT WE KNOW

- As climate impacts increase, some people will need to move to find safety and dignity.
- There is no conclusive figure of how many people will need to move. No consensual estimate exists, let alone a commonly agreed methodology. As a result, [predictions and estimates](#) have become one of the most contentious issues in the debates on climate migration.
- While much of the initial displacement of people from climate impacts is occurring within countries, there will be movement across international borders.
- Climate change is unlikely the only reason why someone will be forced to move to seek safety. People displaced by the impacts of climate change are also often displaced by other environmental economic, political, and social reasons: the political situation and economic conditions in many places of the world are deeply embedded in the environment. Any environmental disruption has immediate economic or political consequences. ([Gemenne & Zickgraf, 2019](#))
- Climate migration and displacement is not just a future risk. It is a reality today, which demands attention and policy responses now.

## HOW TO TALK TO JOURNALISTS ABOUT MIGRANTS DUE TO CLIMATE IMPACTS

Numerous communicators have put out well researched briefs on how to talk about asylum seekers, refugees and migrants using **values-based** language. This can be adapted when talking about migration due to climate impacts.

Climate and migration expert Dr Gemmene advises that “Climate migration encompasses different patterns of migration; thus one shouldn't think of climate migration as 'one new category of migration', but rather accept this is all part of global migration dynamics”. He also says the term “climate migration sets those displaced by climate change impacts apart from those displaced by other political or economic factors, as if ‘climate migration’ was a new, discrete migration category”.

DON'Ts	SUGGESTED FRAMING
<p>Don't frame using crisis language.</p> <p>Phrases like 'mass migration', 'unprecedented migration', 'climate crisis', 'waves of migration' and 'risks of mass migration' feed into the threat narrative.</p>	<p>Frame migration as part of the solution and a form of adaptation to climate change.</p> <p>The future will hold many challenges, of which this is one. Human populations have always been in flux. The challenge (as with other impacts of climate change) is to manage this through forward planning and building resilience. This means proactively creating safe pathways for those whose homes are affected to ensure a world in which all humans can live with dignity. Many impacts of climate change are now unavoidable – but the harm they cause is not inevitable if urgent and effective adaptation is put into place, supported by solidarity between citizens of different nations, who all face a shared challenge.</p>
<p>Avoid future numerical projections as there is no conclusive methodology and it feeds into the crisis narrative.</p> <p>This is tricky if you are pitching a paper citing the number of people that will be displaced as a result of climate impacts.</p> <p>For 2020 displacement figures experts</p>	<p>Ensure a values based framing with no crisis language is constructed around the figure.</p> <p>Leaving home must be framed as a last resort option.</p> <p>“The important thing for us to understand is that people leave their homes in search of shelter, food and safety as a last option. This research shows us that climate impacts make it more likely they are going to need to do so.</p> <p>While much of the initial displacement of people from</p>

<p>point to the <a href="#">Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020</a> as the most authoritative figure.</p>	<p>climate impacts is occurring within countries, there will be movement across international borders.”</p>
<p>Don't talk about climate migration as if it's a future threat. It is already a reality today and can't be discussed in isolation. It demands attention and policy responses now.</p>	<p>Climate impacts along with economic and political unrest are some of the reasons why people are already moving within countries and across borders to find a safe place to live.</p> <p>“For example, about half of the population in sub-Saharan Africa depend directly on subsistence agriculture as a primary source of income, which means that any change in temperature or rainfall has severe and immediate economic consequences for these households.”- <a href="#">Gemenne &amp; Zickgraf, 2019</a></p>
<p>Don't frame migration in a negative way.</p>	<p>Migration is an opportunity for people to build a better future for themselves, but is also one for the receiving country.</p> <p>“As the United States and other parts of the global North face a demographic decline, for instance, an injection of new people into an aging workforce could be to everyone's benefit.” - <a href="#">Lustgarten, 2020</a></p>
<p>Don't frame the issue as if nothing is being done about it.</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>• <a href="#">The Platform on Disaster Displacement</a> 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 (<a href="#">COP process</a>) has committed states to cooperating and sharing best practice on addressing climate-driven displacement.</li> </ul>

- [The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) (GCM) adopted in 2018 contains wording acknowledging climate change as a driver of mobility (more on this below).

## COMMS OPPORTUNITIES: USING THE CORPORATE PROFITEERING NARRATIVE TO PUSH FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

The Transnational Institute, Stop Wapenhandel and award-winning journalist and author Todd Miller and others have been exposing how corporate actors are getting ready to profit from climate impacts: there will be more walls, detention centres, surveillance and more impunity for repressive tactics, delivered through a suite of corporate service providers.

This expanding Border and Surveillance Industry or [Border Industrial Complex companies](#) provide the hardware, software and services to enable the containment, exclusion, surveillance and detention of migrant and displaced populations. The profiteering of these corporations, which are some of the worlds most ruthless and powerful, threatens the prospect of an open and responsive approach to the predictable impacts of the climate emergency, and will further curtail the freedoms and rights of citizens worldwide.

If done well, exposing this sector's growing power as well as powerful governments' migration failures may improve the chance that leaders come to the table to address safe pathways for refugees and migrants

This narrative also allows for a discussion about the human rights implications of migration policies without centering on the individual who has been manufactured to the "feared other".

### SUGGESTED FRAMING

As climate impacts escalate, more people will be forced to leave their home in search of safety and dignity. All indicators suggest that without urgent action, the current policy responses to forced migration (containment, exclusion, surveillance and detention), will be extended to all increases in migration flows. Every day, around the world, these policies give rise to human rights violations and rob people of their dignity. Corporate actors are profiting, or preparing to profit, from increasing public expenditure on these policies. These companies, their financiers and investors who are already profiting from the misery of others and those that are preparing to do so in the near future, need to be stopped. We need an approach to a future that is rooted in equity and dignity and will work to advance human rights for all.

## CLIMATE REFUGEES VS CLIMATE MIGRANTS OR CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION

‘Climate refugee’ is not a legal category. Formal pathways for climate migration are severely underdeveloped. Unlike for refugees, there is no specialised body of law regulating the treatment of migrants who are forced to flee due to climate-related impacts, nor are there dedicated international institutions.

Climate communicators may want to use the term ‘climate refugee’ as a way to push for legal recognition within the 1951 Refugee Convention or, more commonly, just as a shorthand term that captures people’s attention/understanding.

Refugee advocates are, among other things, nervous that renegotiating that treaty will almost definitely result in weaker protections for everyone.

The other issue with communicators using ‘climate refugee’ is that, to a lay person, it could sound like a category, that is comparable to the definition of a refugee. However, it is not a formal legal category that requires States to provide particular rights. One is a conceptual definition; the other is a legal one.

While the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) adopted in 2018 recognises climate migration and has the potential to encourage governments to expand legal pathways to safety for climate migrants, it is based on political promises rather than legal obligations. In addition, the [GCM actively seeks to reduce irregular migration](#) and is therefore likely to make it even harder for people to cross borders without authorisation in order to find safety.

### AVAILABLE FOR COMMENT

#### IPCC EXPERT

#### François Gemenne

F.Gemenne@uliege.be

Timezone: Paris, France

A specialist of environmental geopolitics and migration dynamics, François Gemenne is a FNRS senior research associate at the University of Liège, where he is the Director of the Hugo Observatory. He also serves as co-director (with Bastien Alex) of the Observatory on Defence and Climate of the French Ministry of Defence. He lectures on environmental and migration policies in various

	universities, including Sciences Po and the Sorbonne in Paris) He is a lead author for the IPCC.
<b>AFFECTED COMMUNITY EXPERTS</b>	<p><b>Solomon Yeo</b>  Campaign Director  Pacific Island Students Fighting for Climate Change.  <a href="mailto:pisfcc@gmail.com">pisfcc@gmail.com</a>  Whatsapp +6777988600  Timezone: Honiara, Solomon Islands</p>
	<p><b>Gouranga Nandy</b>  Journalist  <a href="mailto:gouranga.nandy@gmail.com">gouranga.nandy@gmail.com</a>  Whatsapp: +8801716639461  Timezone: Khulna, Bangladesh  Expertise: Climate-driven migration and displacement in the south-western Bangladesh. He has written numerous reports on the issue based on his firsthand experience with the affected communities. He also has contacts of affected people.</p>

## RESOURCES

We have drawn from works produced by Dr François Gemenne, the Transnational Institute, the Climate and Migration Coalition and Asylum Seeker Resource Center.

- Gemenne, François. 2011. [Why the numbers don't add up: A review of estimates and predictions of people displaced by environmental changes](#). *Global Environmental Change*, pp.S41-S49.
- Gemenne, François and Zickgraf, Caroline. 2019. [Op-ed: Refugees Shouldn't Be Used as Props to Alert to the Dangers of Climate Change](#). *ECRE Weekly Bulletin*.
- The Climate and Migration Coalition. 2012. [Communicating Climate Changes and Migration](#).
- Hayes, Ben. 2015. "Colonising the Future" [The Secure and the Dispossessed - How the military and the corporations are shaping a climate-changed world](#).
- Nash, Sarah and Zickgraf, Caroline. 2020. [Stop peddling fear of climate migrants](#), *Open Democracy*
- McAdam, Jane. 2021. [As Biden Seeks Answers on Climate's Impact on Migration, Sydney Declaration Provides Legal Ground Rules for Action](#), *Just Security*
- Greendreamer Podcast: [Militarism and its impact on societal and ecological welfare](#) (Interview with Nick Buxton of The Secure and the Dispossessed, Part Two)
- Asylum Seekers Resource Centre (Australia). 2015. [Words that work - Making the best case for people seeking asylum](#).

## AUTHORS

This briefing note is a collaboration between Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, 350.org, Friends of the Earth US and Climate and Migration Coalition. Please email [brami.jegan@gscnetwork.org](mailto:brami.jegan@gscnetwork.org) if you would like further information. This note was last edited in March 2021.