

Policy Recommendations to Address Climate-Forced Displacement in the United States: *The Need for an Equitable and Just Response*

Climate-Forced Displacement Policy Solutions:

HUMAN RIGHTS GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Climate change is ravaging communities nationwide, particularly Indigenous peoples and communities of color, who are at extreme risk of displacement. Yet, federal climate adaptation and disaster relief programs are not designed to assist Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities with the greatest need. This disparity is made worse because the government has not developed a coordinated plan—or dedicated proper funding—to support communities who wish to adapt to live safely where they are or relocate out of harm's way.

Problem

The US Governmental Accountability Office identified that “unclear federal leadership is the key challenge to climate migration as a resilience strategy.”¹ Yet, there is no federal lead agency to manage and coordinate the federal government’s response, nor is there dedicated funding to support community relocation efforts or adaptation measures that can protect communities from forced relocation and, instead, allow them to adapt in place (i.e., make necessary changes in infrastructure to remain where they live). Additionally, funding for adaptation or relocation does not account for the full costs to a community, including the loss of sacred sites, cultural values, burial sites, health and social wellbeing, and other intrinsic values that frontline communities, and in particular Indigenous Peoples, experience when separated from their ancestral lands and subsistence way of life. This is why it is even more imperative that Tribes and community representatives are included in planning and that the federal government response to climate forced migration be rooted in human rights.

Recommendation²

We recommend that the federal government work with frontline communities to establish a governance framework to assist communities to adapt or relocate in response to climate threats. It is essential that this not be a top-down process, but, rather, a framework centered on protecting the rights and dignities of communities and providing them with effective support.

Using the recommendations for a working group in Section 4, establish a governance framework that includes, but is not limited to, the following:

1. Designate a point federal agency or interagency working group (as described above) that will develop and coordinate all federal government responses between multiple agencies and jurisdictions;
2. Develop an understanding of climate risks and how communities are being affected and the role of local and tribal governments, state agencies, and the federal government;

3. Develop a set of criteria and thresholds that will trigger state, local, tribal, and federal government responses and action;
4. Advocate for congressional action to designate federal funding for adapt in place and relocation efforts and agency responses;
5. Dedicate technical and financial resources to support frontline communities in their decision making and meaningful engagement with federal agencies;
6. Designate an independent oversight committee that includes community-elected representatives to monitor all government responses, to ensure transparency and accountability and respect for human rights, including the role of the interagency working group mentioned above;
7. Undertake a review of all federal regulatory permitting processes involved in relocation efforts in an effort to simplify them;
8. Pool together all existing federal funding programs that support a community's decision to adapt in place or relocate to relieve a community's burden of navigating various funding requirements;
9. Support tribal, state, and local government efforts in assessing and identifying communities at high risk of climate-forced displacement;
10. Support Indigenous communities who choose to relocate in acquiring lands that are sufficient and appropriate to meet the needs and lifeways of the community;
11. Provide planning guidance for tribal governments, local governments, municipalities, cities, and states for adapt in place and relocation;
12. Raise awareness about climate-forced displacement and the role of robust community engagement in ensuring just and equitable government responses;
13. Create more spaces for information sharing and learning among local governments, state and federal government agencies, and other nongovernmental entities and frontline communities, in an effort to continually improve policy practices and responses;
14. Support communities to collect and steward socioecological data to monitor their environmental hazards. The government should support and resource frontline communities to collect, analyze, and interpret data that they can use to advocate for effective and appropriate responses. In accordance with data sovereignty, this data should be owned and held by communities and their designates, not government agencies.

¹<https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-20-488.pdf>

²These recent executive orders provide room to address these recommendations: EO 14008: Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad; EO 13990: Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis; EO 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government.

