

CONNECTING

CLIMATE JUSTICE & MIGRANT JUSTICE:

A GUIDE TO COUNTERING DANGEROUS NARRATIVES



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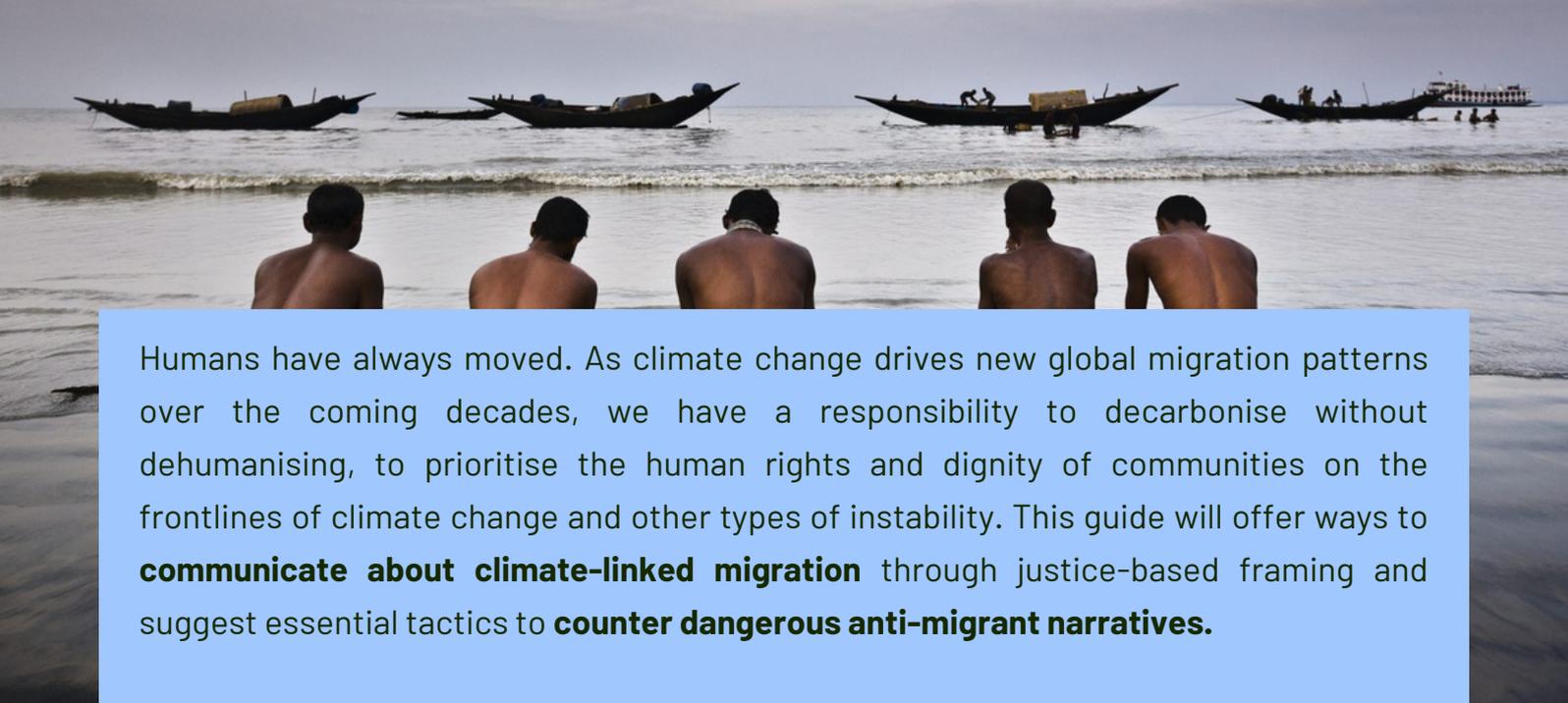
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CLIMATE AND
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Humans have always moved. As climate change drives new global migration patterns over the coming decades, we have a responsibility to decarbonise without dehumanising, to prioritise the human rights and dignity of communities on the frontlines of climate change and other types of instability. This guide will offer ways to **communicate about climate-linked migration** through justice-based framing and suggest essential tactics to **counter dangerous anti-migrant narratives**.

Movements, media outlets, academics, and organisations need to work together to build political will for safe pathways for migrants - across the Global North and South - with equity, dignity and humanity at the core.

The term migrant in this document refers broadly to immigration of all kinds.

WHAT ARE DANGEROUS NARRATIVES?

Together we can (1) frame migration as a key solution in this new era of climate change-driven extreme weather and displacement, (2) build solidarity with displaced peoples, and (3) build a more intersectional and powerful movement for climate action.

But this vision of solidarity is at risk – the very idea of climate justice is **threatened by dangerous narratives**: *using fear- or threat-based language or framing of migrants in an attempt to accelerate climate action, while scapegoating the most vulnerable people.*

Climate advocates – largely in the Global North – as well as policymakers and members of the media may increasingly frame the potential of increased migration as a “threat”, perhaps to incentivise climate action. This may be well-intentioned at times, however, rather than drive climate action, these messages play into national security narratives that could position militarised borders as the solution to climate impacts and could serve to both delay climate action and deny people’s humanity.

So how do we recognise and counter these dangerous narratives?

Dangerous narratives employ dehumanising language

We are seeing a steady stream of reports, speeches and media stories leading with widely varied projections of how many people may be forced to move this century – from millions to billions – and how much of the Earth’s surface will be uninhabitable due to climate change. But these numbers conceal important context about climate-driven migration, chiefly the lives of people on the move.

Condensing people’s individual lives into numbers – particularly large numbers – is a form of dehumanisation and othering.

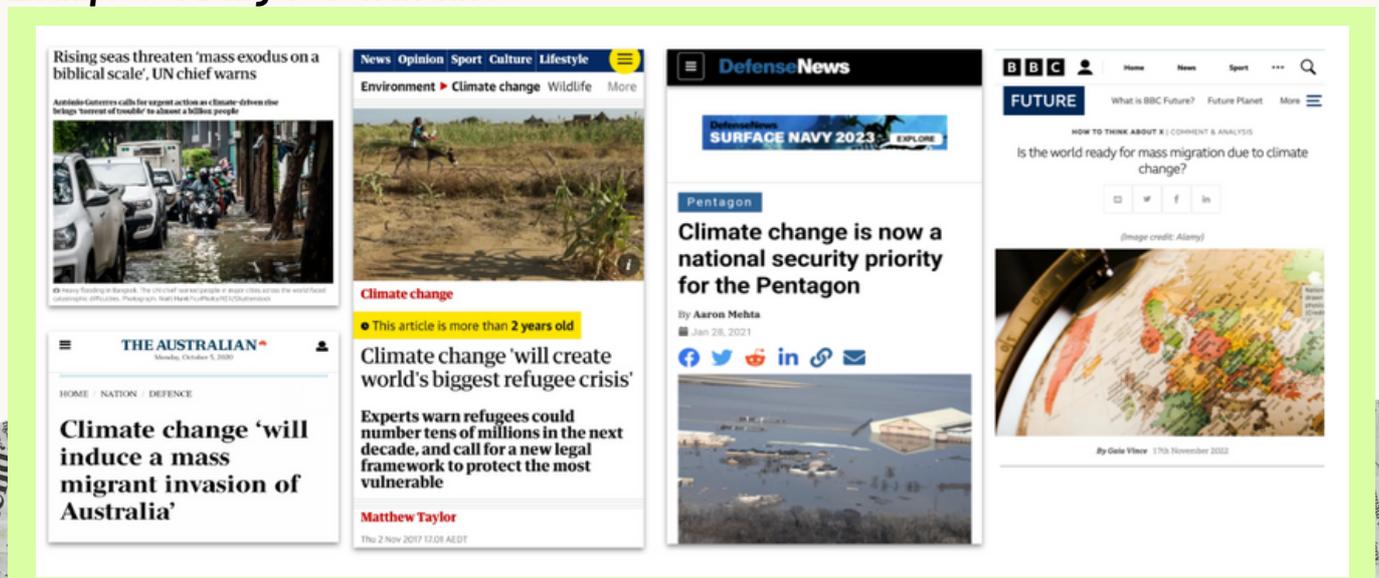
Every corner of the planet is susceptible to climate displacement, but these headlines invariably put the onus on people from the Global South.

Even worse, perhaps to communicate urgency, media reports continue to refer to people as “masses”, “waves”, “floods”, and “threats” – one prominent official recently referred to “mass exodus on a biblical scale” – all conveying a false threat from displaced people and dehumanising their plight in the process, making it easier to garner support for anti-migrant policy.

In Europe, the US and Australia, “threat” narratives have long been harnessed by right-wing politicians to turn populations against people on the move, positioning migrants as the “other” and a supposed security threat. As a result, it has been extremely difficult to have public debate based on protecting human rights and migrant justice, leading to more draconian and inhumane immigration and refugee policies, and an increase of public money directed towards the border and surveillance industry, which is rife with abuse and violence.

History has proven that dehumanising language leads to violence and even genocide. Whenever we see threat language in our movements or in the media, we must point it out and resist it.

Examples of Dangerous Narratives





Brief history of dangerous narratives

For almost 70 years, oil and gas companies have known that carbon dioxide released from burning fossil fuels will threaten all of humanity. The criminal actions of fossil fuel companies have made many places around the world more dangerous and unhealthy – and the industry has spent billions of dollars on disinformation over the decades to convince the world that they are not responsible. Yet it is those who are typically least responsible for climate breakdown, poor and marginalised communities globally, who face its worst impacts.

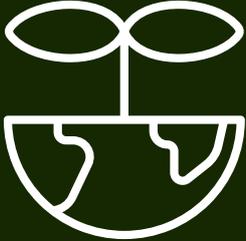
In the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of the early environmental conservation movement was accompanied by a strong white supremacist ideology that incorporated theories of overpopulation, population control and eugenics. These actors, in both the US and Europe, led to the vast, global anti-immigrant movement that we see openly embraced by far-right governments today. Many legacy environmental groups in the US and Europe still suffer from early ties to this anti-immigrant and white supremacist movement, but have made strides in recent years to bring their members in line with the demands of climate justice.

The tragic and violent results of this eco-fascist ideology, with roots in Nazism, can be seen in the 2019 mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand and El Paso, Texas, USA, where migrants were targeted and murdered by shooters citing eco-fascist ideas in their manifestos.

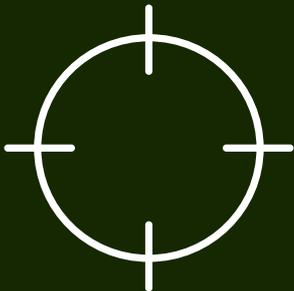
At the beginning of the 21st Century, as the effects of global heating took hold in earnest, another climate narrative emerged: Climate as a national security strategy. Oil companies like Shell, concerned about their bottom line, and powerful militaries like the US and UK, recognised that climate change had the power to destabilise industries, economies and nations, and started framing climate change as a threat to the status quo.



This is where our current dangerous narratives work comes in, with three overlapping forces at play:



- Some in the Global North climate movement have latched on to climate change being a national security threat as a way to drive more ambitious climate action and to expand its coalition of climate advocates to include security-minded voters. However, using migration as a cudgel for climate action has been shown to promote dangerous narratives about people on the move, and to actually delay and hamper climate solutions.



- Military planners, along with weapons manufacturers and the growing border and surveillance industry (BSI) are using this narrative to position themselves as providing “climate security” with more national spending being put towards border militarisation, making borders more dangerous and inaccessible to migrants.



- Anti-migrant groups and white supremacist groups are thrilled at the prospect of world militaries and climate activists adopting their white nationalist language and are using this climate “threat” narrative to stoke fears of uncontrolled immigration and anti-refugee narratives. And, in many countries in the Global North, they are having great rhetorical and electoral success.

FACTS THAT TELL THE STORY

- As extreme weather conditions and disasters (climate impacts) increase, people are moving to find safety and a life of dignity.
- Climate change is often one of multiple reasons why a person may be forced to move to seek safety. People displaced by climate impacts 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.
- Climate-linked mobility is emerging in both wealthy and poor nations, but it is the wealthy nations that have contributed most to the problem of climate change through dramatically higher per capita emissions, while less wealthy countries bear the brunt of the costs.
- Climate-linked mobility is a reality today, which demands immediate attention and policy responses. It is something we must address now, not put off for later.



COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

1. Estimates of migrant numbers are flawed

Just as climate disasters remain unpredictable, scholars do not have any agreed upon methodology to project the numbers of people who will be forced to flee climate disasters. As a result, predictions and estimates have become one of the most contentious issues in the debates on both internal and external climate-linked mobility.

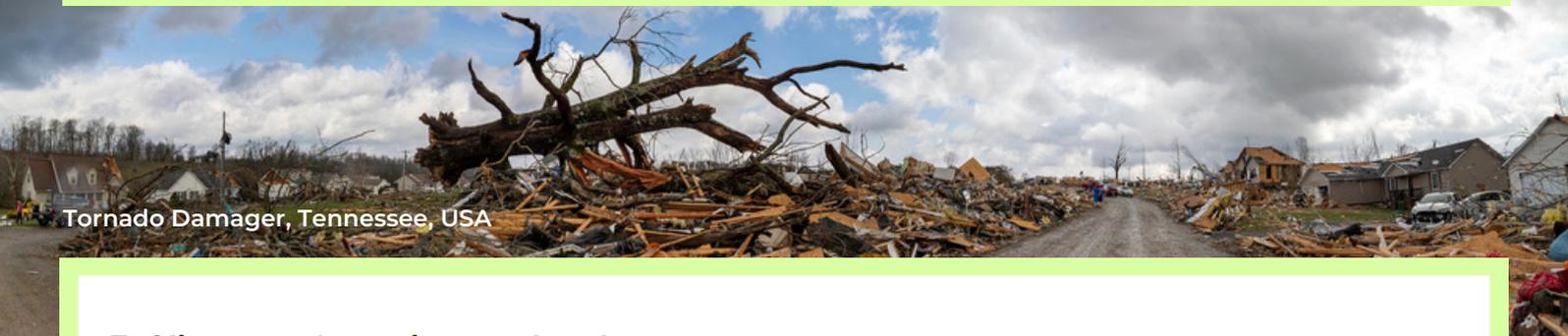
In addition, the use of large numbers without context in headlines and on social media is dehumanising and offers an impossible policy choice, leading to dangerous narratives and the cementing of anti-migrant attitudes.

2. Internal migration has positive and negative narrative impacts

While most climate-linked mobility occurs within countries, there is movement across international borders as well.

However, the narrative that “most climate-related movements of people happen within countries” can also serve as a convenient way to ignore the plight of people on the move – assumed to be from developing nations. This again plays into dangerous narratives on “climate-linked migration” as a security threat to the Global North.

On the other hand, solidarity between people displaced by climate disaster in wealthy and poor countries alike is a ripe area for advocacy and policy-making, with a focus on safe pathways for all.



Tornado Damager, Tennessee, USA

3. Climate refugee is not a legal category

“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.

But refugee advocates are, among other things, nervous that renegotiating that treaty will almost definitely result in weaker protections for everyone. While the term may resonate for organisers and for some people who indeed are forced to move in the face of climate disasters, care must be used to distinguish the concept of a “climate refugee” from the legal protections afforded to other refugees and asylum seekers globally. Focusing on the category of “refugee” may also ignore the complexity of factors that lead to a person’s decision to move from their home.

That said, climate-driven migrants may also fit the strict requirements for refugee or asylum status for other contributing factors to their displacement. It is important to use terms as precisely as possible.

PRINCIPLES FOR FRAMING CLIMATE AND MIGRATION

1. LEAD WITH VALUES: Humans have always moved for safety

Lead with values-based language. 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 again to be more effective at shifting public opinion. Values invite the audience to reflect on their deeply held principles and to 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. Finally, strive to centre the leadership and experiences of people directly impacted by the climate crisis and anti-immigrant policies.

NAME THE VILLAIN: Talk about how governments and corporations are profiting from abuse against migrants and refugees

The expanding border and surveillance industry (BSI) provides the hardware, software and services to enable the containment, exclusion, surveillance and detention of migrant and displaced populations. These technologies are deployed at the physical borders between states, within societies, and are increasingly externalised to third countries. The profiteering of these corporations, which are some of the world's 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.

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

- **BSI corporate actors, including data miners, weapons and military equipment manufacturers, private detention, surveillance companies, 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, who employ the BSI to scapegoat migrants for political gain.**
- **White nationalists, eco-fascists, far-right racist movements.**

These actors are intentionally stirring up hatred and division, scapegoating people on the move to both push through hardline policies and to distract attention from their failures elsewhere.

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

This narrative also shifts the focus to the BSI as the real threat, instead of forcing individuals who have migrated to defend their very humanity.

This narrative also points towards the "Global North" countries that have historically benefited from colonialism and resource extraction from the "Global South" countries many people are often fleeing plus their responsibility to ensure safe pathways.



3. SHARE THE VISION: Right to stay and the right to move

International climate justice advocates apply two key principles to climate-linked migration:

- **The right to stay – funded climate adaptations that protect communities from the impacts of climate change so they can thrive and maintain their livelihoods and land; and**
- **The right to move – safely, and with dignity, when remaining is not possible or desirable. Migration is part of the solution to the climate crisis, ensuring that people are able to adapt to a changing environment. Safe pathways 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 that governments could take right away as well as offering longer term systemic solutions.

CORE MESSAGE

1. Lead with values →

We all want to have safe communities where our families can live with dignity. But as climate change creates more destruction at home and abroad, more and more people are being displaced from their homes and livelihoods. Instead of working to help these families who are forced to move, some corporations and politicians are trying to profit from their suffering, helping to create fear within communities.

2. Point to villain →

This allows them to sell more border walls, surveillance drones, and weapons, all so they can make bigger profits. Experts say these policies are creating a surveillance state that is being used against all of us.

3. Offer a new vision →

Instead of spending money to fortify our borders, governments should be investing in helping communities pick up the pieces after floods, fires and droughts, and preventing future climate devastation. They should be addressing the roots of the problem, rather than just making it worse. It's time to tell our government to put us first.

WORDS THAT WORK

DO	DON'T	Why...
<p>Frame migration as part of the solution and a form of adaptation to climate change.</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>Don't use crisis language when talking about climate linked mobility.</p>	<p>Phrases like "mass migration", "unprecedented migration", "climate crisis", "waves of migration", "flood", "surge" and "risks of mass migration" feed into the threat narrative.</p>
<p>Refer to people first:</p> <p>People seeking asylum or safety</p> <p>People who have moved</p> <p>Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, etc.</p>	<p>Don't label people, i.e. don't refer to generic asylum seekers, migrants or refugees, without context.</p>	<p>Move away from simplistic labels to a depiction of people with agency.</p>
<p>Assert human rights:</p> <p>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>Never repeat harmful frames, even in negating them.</p> <p>Don't say: It is not... "illegal to seek asylum", "not a security issue", "not a threat", or that there is "no need to fear", etc.</p>	<p>Using negations or trying to myth-bust only strengthens the opposition's argument, especially the term "illegal". This only feeds false, nativist ideas about seeking asylum.</p> <p>Focus on people and our shared rights. Centre compassion.</p>

DO	DON'T	Why...
<p>Favour values-based framing over numbers:</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 an important 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>Avoid future numerical projections about cross-border movement, as there is no conclusive methodology and it feeds into the crisis narrative.</p> <p>Don't talk about climate-linked mobility solely as something that will happen in the future. It is already a reality today. It demands attention and policy responses now.</p>
<p>Climate-linked migration is already a reality today so it demands attention and policy responses now.</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>	<p><i>Don't talk about climate-linked mobility as something that will happen solely in the future, or frame the issue as if nothing is being done about it.</i></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>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.</p> <p>The international climate negotiations (COP process) has committed states to cooperating and sharing best practice on addressing climate-driven displacement.</p>

AVAILABLE FOR COMMENT

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RESOURCES

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

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This briefing note is a collaboration between (alphabetical order) [350.org](#), [Climate and Migration Coalition](#), [Climate Justice Collaborative at the National Partnership for New Americans](#), [Climate Justice Coalition](#), [Common Defense](#), [Friends of the Earth USA](#), [International Refugee Assistance Project](#), [Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants](#), [Migrants Organise](#), and [Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change](#).

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