

Communicating climate change and migration

A user's guide to navigating the research



About Climate Outreach and the Climate and Migration Coalition

At **Climate Outreach**, we help people and organisations tell a different climate story: from one of a lost cause to a story of people, progress and potential.

With 20 years of research and insight, we know how to make climate stories as powerful and impactful as possible.

We work with environmental groups, governments and communities, helping them to understand their audiences and communicate powerfully with them. Equipped with our insights, organisations and leaders can effectively engage and involve people at scale.

Our work on the connections between climate change and human mobility has focused on empowering civil society organisations to advocate for the rights and welfare of people on the move due to climate change impacts. We created the **Climate and Migration Coalition** to provide a platform for organisations to engage with climate-linked migration and displacement. Through partnerships, we provide training, insights and resources that build these organisations' capacity to engage with climate-linked mobility. We also engage in policy work around climate-linked mobility, focusing on advocacy on the rights and welfare of people at risk of displacement.

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Cover photo: It is not yet dawn, but Mike Winkler, a Quinault Indian, has already been digging in the wet sand along the edge of the ocean for hours. He is looking for razor clams, a protein staple that the Quinault Indian Nation have been harvesting from these coastal flats for over 10,000 years. Just last year the Tribal Council voted to permanently relocate the village of Taholah away from the coastline and the mouth of the Quinault River. The growing risk of inundation had become too great. Indigenous peoples in the Pacific North West have been fighting for years to preserve sustainable fisheries and indigenous knowledge, lifeways which have helped to keep the ecosystem vibrant and the climate stable for millennia.

Photo: Michael Snyder / Climate Visuals Countdown

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An overhead view of a group of fishermen in India standing in shallow water holding and pulling their fanned-out nets to catch fish. *Photo: Shibasish Saha / Climate Visuals*



A quick guide for communicators and practitioners

We encourage practitioners to engage with the extensive academic research on communicating about climate-linked migration, but to do so critically. The research contains many useful insights that can help shape the way we communicate about the intersection of climate change and migration. But it also contains biases and gaps. Practitioners should consider the following questions as they draw on this research field to shape their communication.

1. What's your goal?

Think about why you want to talk about climate-related migration. Is it to raise awareness, influence opinions or push for policy changes? Look for research with similar goals.

2. Does the context fit?

Check where and with whom the research was carried out. Are the study participants demographically similar, or living in a similar political context, to the people you are hoping to communicate with? If not, the results might not apply to your context.

3. What do impacted communities think?

Some research focuses on the experiences and perspectives of people on the move. Draw on studies that look at how people experiencing climate-linked migration want to be portrayed.

4. What do you already know and where are your knowledge gaps?

Identify what you and your team already know about communicating climate-linked migration with your audiences. Where are there gaps in your knowledge? What connections do you already have – or could you make – to fill those gaps, learning from the practical expertise of people, organisations and networks working on this intersection?

5. Are you checking for biases?

Be mindful of stereotypes or biases in the research. Get feedback to ensure your messages are fair and avoid repeating unhelpful biases and framings from the research.

Executive summary

Over the coming decades, climate change will reshape patterns of migration and displacement. Communicating effectively about this complex intersection is key to creating an accurate and nuanced public understanding of the topic. Many organisations avoid engaging with this subject, fearing that they will cause inadvertent harm or misrepresent the people and issues involved. However, the need for clear, empathetic communication on climate-linked migration has never been greater.

This report aims to guide practitioners in navigating the academic research focused on communicating about climate-linked migration. It is intended to help practitioners understand the relevant research insights available and consider how to deploy them when creating communication campaigns and projects.

Key findings

Our review of academic literature reveals the following:

- Research is unevenly distributed, with few studies focusing on the perspectives of people on the move and communities of origin.
- Studies disproportionately focus on WEIRD (western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic) populations, limiting the global relevance of the research.
- Current ‘test narratives’ in the research often simplify or misrepresent the complexities of climate-linked migration, portraying it as a crisis and ignoring nuance.
- There is limited interdisciplinary collaboration, with climate-focused research often overlooking migration expertise and lived experience.

We find that current research is not yet extensive or nuanced enough for us to make applicable recommendations. We therefore offer five guiding questions to help practitioners navigate the current and future research for their communications.

Future directions

To improve research on the communication of climate-linked migration and displacement, closer collaboration between migration, climate and communications scholars is needed. Greater representation of the perspectives of migrants and communities of origin within the research would bring a much-needed shift in focus. New research should explore how affected individuals wish to be represented in the public discourse. This requires research to have a much deeper focus on lived experience and to seek genuine involvement from grassroots organisations working with impacted communities. Future research should also test narratives and framings that highlight agency, such as migration as a form of adaptation.

How we communicate about and frame climate-linked migration shapes public understanding and policy responses, and impacts the lives of those most at risk. Practitioners should draw on the rich research available when designing communications, but should engage with this research critically, understanding its shortcomings and gaps.

Why this report

Interest in the ways in which people are moving (or not moving) in the context of climate change is steadily growing. Many actors are increasingly recognising the impact of climate change on people's movement, particularly for the most vulnerable people and communities. Such actors include governments, academics, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), migration or human rights groups, as well as regional and local charities, migrant networks and diaspora organisations.

But as of yet there is no widely agreed-upon definition of climate-linked migration. The term is used to describe anything from internal and cross-border displacement due to disasters, to people moving seasonally or permanently as a way of adapting to slowly unfolding climate impacts, and planned relocation.

This makes it difficult to know whether campaigners, policymakers, researchers or anyone discussing this subject is talking about the same things. More importantly, the concept's misuse can have real consequences for the lives of people who are seeking protection, and whether or not they find it.

So while it is difficult to know how to communicate about the intersection of climate change and migration effectively, it's becoming increasingly important to do it well. So far, uncertainty around how to adequately communicate on this topic has meant that many organisations from both the climate and migration spaces often avoid the subject altogether, for fear of unwittingly causing harm. However, as Grove-White and Margolis (2024) observe, to move societal opinion towards an empathetic understanding of, and just response to, climate-linked (im)mobilities, there is a need for "confident conversations and shared narratives" among the actors working on this intersection.

For nearly two decades, Climate Outreach has advocated engaging people on these intersecting topics in a way that puts people at the heart of the stories told and that protects the dignity and rights of people on the move. We have promoted the use of narratives that are nuanced and that portray the variety of experiences of climate-linked movement. We have called for communication that raises awareness of dangerous narratives and their impacts on the public conversation, without downplaying the increasingly clear connection between climate change and new patterns of migration and displacement.

But what does this mean in practice for communicators who are engaging with their audiences on this intersection day-to-day? For this report, we consulted key practitioners on their specific needs. They raised questions such as "How can we communicate this intersection in a way that acknowledges vast regional differences and complexities, yet that is simple and effective enough to bring broad audiences in?", and "How do we achieve more aligned messaging for greater impact with an ever-increasing number of organisations coming to this from different angles?"

We thus set about reviewing the currently available academic literature² to determine whether it can provide useful answers to these questions. The insights that emerged from our conversations and from assessing what academic research has so far been done in this area are the subject of this report.

A note on terminology in this report

- **Climate-linked (im)mobilities:** We use this term throughout the following sections to describe the various ways in which people move in the context of climate change impacts. Used by some in the academic community, this term offers a useful way of describing the full diversity of climate-linked human movement. It aims to capture both migration (when people are moving with some agency) and displacement (when people are moving with little or no choice), as well as planned relocation. It also includes both cross-border and internal movement, and permanent, temporary and seasonal movement patterns. The term '(im)mobilities' recognises that climate impacts may cause some people to become stuck in dangerous locations, preventing them from moving when this might previously have been a viable option for finding safety.
- **The intersection of climate change and migration:** We use this phrase to talk about the general subject matter of this report, in reference to the sectors or specialisms from which practitioners tend to approach this topic.
- **Communities of origin:** We use this term to describe either the places that people resided in or the communities they habitually belonged to prior to migrating or being displaced. This terminology aims to acknowledge that place and community (rather than countries defined by state borders) play an important role in people's identity and sense of belonging. These terms also serve as a reminder that internal climate-linked (im)mobilities are just as important and warrant the same policy attention as international movements.
- **Receiving/host communities:** We use these terms interchangeably to describe the places where people who are moving in the context of climate change end up, whether this is within or outside the same state borders as the place they came from.

Who we consulted

We would like to thank the experts and practitioners we consulted for their invaluable insights, experiences and questions during the process of putting this report together, including:

- **André Dallas**, Co-Director for Migrant Justice, People & Planet
- **Ayesha Qaisrani**, Researcher, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
- **Ayesha Tandon**, Science Journalist, Carbon Brief
- **Innah Gasper**, Campaigns Strategist, Global Strategic Communications Council (GSCC)
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Section I - Five need-to-knows about the current academic literature on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities

1. Research on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities is a wide-ranging field that is skewed towards certain methodologies and voices

We started by searching for and collating the literature on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities. This led to a list of papers, which we then categorised by theme. We found the papers could broadly be categorised under five main types of research:³

CATEGORY A Influence of narratives and framing on public attitudes towards people on the move and towards policies on climate-linked (im)mobilities

CATEGORY B Attitudes and preferred narratives and frames of people experiencing climate-linked (im)mobilities

CATEGORY C Public attitudes towards people on the move and climate-linked migration policy

CATEGORY D Discourse analyses and reviews of existing communications and depictions of climate-linked (im)mobilities

CATEGORY E Effects of climate-linked (im)mobility narratives and frames on public attitudes to climate change

Before we delve into each of these categories in more detail, it is important to note that these five categories are not equally distributed across the literature we collated for the purpose of this report.⁴ Currently, papers on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities from categories C and D are much more common than those in categories A, B and E. As a result, current research on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities is skewed in some important ways:

- The perspectives of migrants and communities of origin are underrepresented.
- The primary research has a much stronger quantitative focus than a qualitative one.
- Actors that are powerful in shaping the discourse, such as governments, media and INGOs, usually only feature 'secondhand': they are usually not the subjects of study for primary research, but rather their communications are examined through discourse analysis only. This is despite their outsized role in driving public opinion on climate (im)mobilities.

What we mean by 'narratives' and 'framing'

- **Narratives** refer to the stories that are told about an issue. They are used to convey meaning and shape how people understand and interpret the world. Often narratives are a way to convey complex information or a complex issue in a more accessible and engaging way. They tend to influence emotions, shape identities and guide decision-making. Often there are dominant narratives that permeate the way an issue is talked about, thought of and acted upon.
- **Framing** refers to the way in which information about an issue is presented or structured. It involves selecting certain aspects of an issue and highlighting them in a particular way, while downplaying or omitting other aspects. Framing can be intentional, but it also frequently happens unconsciously due to the influence of, for example, cognitive shortcuts, biases, emotional responses and external cultural and media factors. The way an issue is framed is important because it influences how people think about or respond to it.

CATEGORY A

Influence of narratives and framing on public attitudes towards people on the move and towards policies on climate-linked (im)mobilities

Papers that we've included in this category seek to understand how different narratives and frames influence people's attitudes to climate-linked (im)mobilities. These studies mostly conduct quantitative primary research (e.g. surveys, experiments) or meta-analyses to identify how different narratives and frames influence people in the receiving community's attitudes towards *people* moving for reasons related to climate change. In this category we've also included work that examines how these narratives and frames affect public perceptions of climate-linked migration *policy* in countries with prospective host communities.

In section II of this guide, we turn our attention to focus entirely on studies that fall into category A. This is the research that most closely aligns with the aim of this report, which is to understand what scientific evidence exists on how the way we communicate can shift public attitudes on climate-linked (im)mobilities and combat dangerous narratives.

CATEGORY B

Attitudes and preferred narratives and frames of people experiencing climate-linked (im)mobilities

This category includes papers that cover mainly qualitative primary research (e.g. interviews, small group discussions) or secondary analyses of people's attitudes towards, and preferred narratives about, their own (im)mobility in the face of climate change, or that of their community. In contrast to the other categories, these studies usually present global south⁵ perspectives.

CATEGORY C

Public attitudes towards people on the move and climate-linked migration policy

The papers we have included in this category mainly use quantitative primary research methods (e.g. surveys, experiments) to examine the attitudes of people in receiving communities either to climate-linked migration policy or to fictitious stories about migrants who move for reasons related to climate change. As part of this, public attitudes towards people crossing borders in the context of climate change are then compared with attitudes towards people on the move for other reasons: either people who would qualify for international protection under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, or people who move for economic or labour reasons. In this category we also included papers that investigate the sociodemographic (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) and values-based (e.g. political leaning, religion) drivers of primarily host populations' attitudes towards people on the move.

CATEGORY D

Discourse analyses and reviews of existing communications and depictions of climate-linked (im)mobilities

This category consists of papers that cover secondary research (i.e. analysing existing material rather than producing new empirical evidence), which often analyse material through the lens of critical theory. These publications mainly investigate and critique the dominant narratives in the media on climate-linked (im)mobilities in countries or communities that people are moving from and in those they are moving to – for example, narratives in the UK news media. This category also includes papers that analyse the narratives, frames and imagery in content published by other relevant actors in the climate and migration space, such as governments and INGOs.

CATEGORY E

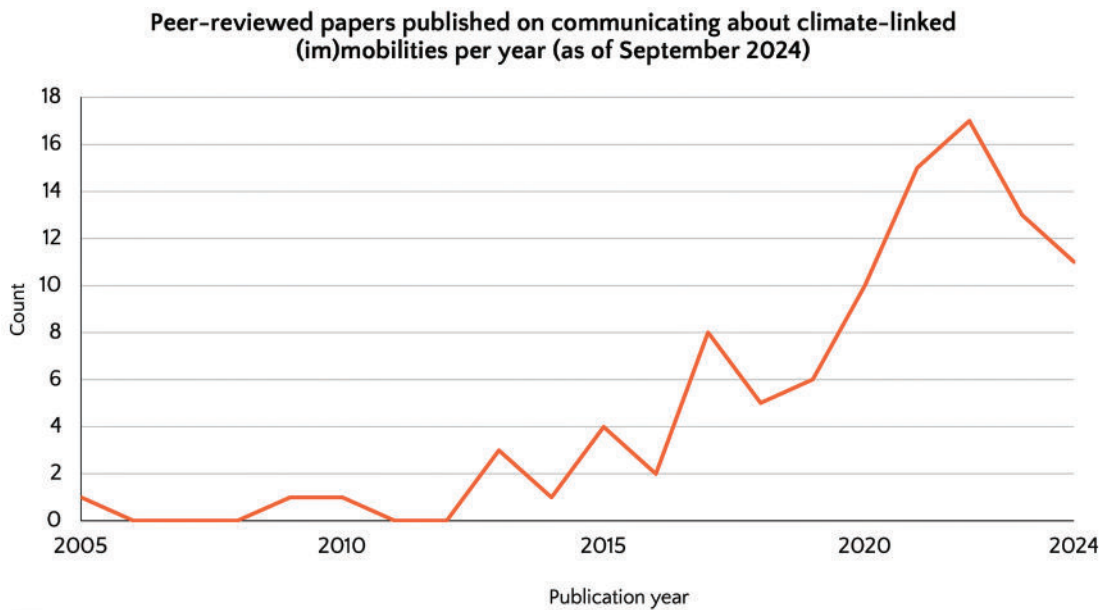
Effects of climate-linked (im)mobility narratives and frames on public attitudes to climate change

This category includes quantitative primary research (e.g. surveys, experiments) that examines how different narratives and frames about climate-linked (im)mobilities influence host populations' attitudes towards climate change. This also includes measuring the extent to which narratives and frames about climate-linked (im)mobilities have an effect on public risk perception of climate impacts and public support for mitigation and adaptation policies.

A man in Bangladesh sitting on the roof of a hut in flood water, with a boat carrying women and goods floating by.
Photo: Muhammad Amdad Hossain / Climate Visuals



2. There is a clear, recent rise in the amount of research published on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities



As this graph shows, there has been a clear rise in the number of articles published on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities in recent years. Since about 2020, the volume of papers published per year has sharply increased, indicating that the intersection of climate change and migration is getting more and more attention, from various sectors and fields. According to the practitioners we consulted, this trend mirrors a rise in interest in this intersection among policymakers and political actors.

3. Studies that test narratives and frames have a WEIRD research focus

As is the case with much academic literature in the fields of social psychology and environmental social science, papers in category A often have a WEIRD research focus. The WEIRD acronym is used to describe study participants that come from western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries or communities.⁶ Our deep dive into category A revealed that climate-linked (im)mobility narratives and frames were largely tested with samples in the US or European countries, with only one study conducted with residents from the Satkhira district of Bangladesh.

This is noteworthy in its mismatch with where the large majority of receiving regions and host communities actually are for people moving for reasons related to climate change, and who lives there. It is well established that most climate-linked mobility now and in the foreseeable future will take place within countries or regions,⁷ and almost all of the authors in the studies we reviewed acknowledge this in their papers. However, this fact seems to have little bearing so far on who the populations are that are being studied when it comes to investigating the effects of communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities. Research investigating how to communicate about this needs to go from being WEIRD to being WILD, as Newson et al. (2020) propose: what is needed is “research that is Worldwide, In situ, Local, and Diverse”⁸ and that is as varied as people’s experiences of climate-linked (im)mobilities.

4. Most literature shows a lack of interdisciplinary expertise on climate change and migration, with the majority of studies published in climate-related journals

The majority of papers we identified as relevant to our research questions are published in journals focusing on climate change/environmental studies, psychology, communications studies, area studies and international development, or on political studies and human geography more broadly. Very few are published in journals dedicated to migration studies. There is therefore a much larger group of people researching the communication of this intersection from a climate and policy perspective than from a migration one. This affects the types of narratives and frames that are tested and what they are meant to achieve, as section II of this report outlines.

The papers published in migration studies journals usually fall into Category D (discourse analyses and reviews of existing communications and depictions of climate-linked (im)mobilities). They mainly focus on critiques of terminology, such as the notion of ‘climate refugees’. They also critically examine media framings of people moving in the context of climate change as victims only or as real-world ‘proof’ that climate change is happening and intensifying.

This suggests that the lack of communication between migration, climate change and communications scholars is not only a conceptual problem but a methodological one, too: these areas have evolved from very different disciplines (be that anthropology, geography or psychology) and therefore do not share epistemological traditions. Their approach to studying the communication of the intersection of climate change and migration is therefore very different and likely leads to different ideas of what constitutes effective communication in the first place. For this chasm to be bridged, a real interdisciplinary approach relying on all three areas of expertise – migration, climate/environment and communications studies – is urgent and necessary.

Abandoned, flooded and ruined homes along the only road traversing Isle de Jean Charles, in the Terrebonne area of Louisiana, a result of rising sea levels. *Photo: Juan Diego Reyes / Climate Visuals*



5. Studies that test narratives and frames show a lack of collaboration – between academic disciplines, and with practitioners and those with lived experience

As highlighted in our previous point, there is a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration within the research, but this disconnect exists not only within academia. When looking at how the narratives and frames tested in survey experiments were developed and with whom, we found that most of the studies provide very little information on how the fictitious news articles, podcasts or videos aimed at influencing study participants came about. While a few of the studies we identified mention that narratives and frames were constructed by the researchers to imitate news articles, none of them mention involving people with experience of crafting compelling narratives or frames on this topic in practice – be that in the form of strategic communications specialists, campaigners, organisers or people with lived experience of climate-linked (im)mobilities. While it is of course possible that some of the researchers themselves have lived experience of climate-linked migration or displacement, the studies don't include any information on the researchers' positionality to suggest this.

The inclusion of such expertise in the development of narratives and frames for this type of research is, however, crucial if we are to progress our understanding. For this, the research community needs to involve expertise from outside of academia in their methodological development. So while it's a perfectly acceptable methodological choice to employ certain frames and narratives because that's how they're often depicted in the mainstream media, researchers should not defer to this by default, but rather acknowledge it as one of many choices that could have been made.

This is important because defaulting to the same narrow ways of telling stories of climate-linked (im)mobilities misrepresents the variety of experiences that people moving in the context of climate change have. It also provides practitioners with very little evidence on 'what works' to shift public opinion in the desired direction. As a research community, we cannot keep repeating the same frames and narratives that are being used in the mainstream media and expect new and helpful insights on how to tell better stories about climate-linked (im)mobilities. If evidence is to be useful for, and in service of, the people working on and organising around these issues, it's important that the research doesn't bypass their expertise – which can guide what is being produced.

Section II - Critical questions and reflections for research on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities

In this section we take a deeper look at the papers in **CATEGORY A**, as described in section I. We chose to explore this category in more depth because it most closely aligns with the purpose of this report – namely to find out whether there is empirical evidence in the existing peer-reviewed literature that offers practical insights for communicators for how to talk about climate-linked (im)mobilities. To do so, we asked a few key questions of the papers in category A: What narratives have been tested? How was their effectiveness evaluated? And how are climate-linked (im)mobilities presented? Here we present more detail about these studies and what we discovered in response to our questions. As such, this is not exhaustive, nor does it cover other research questions these studies explore.

About **CATEGORY A** research – the narratives and frames tested and how their effects are evaluated

The majority of studies in this category use randomised controlled trials (RCT) to test different narratives and frames with various population samples in relation to climate-linked (im)mobilities. To do so, the studies often used vignettes, such as fictitious news articles, podcasts, personal stories, short written descriptions or videos. In some cases, in addition to testing narratives and frames in this way, the authors also asked about the extent to which participants agreed with more specific messages or found these persuasive. For example, this included testing a list of climate change-related facts or different arguments for justifying the hypothetical acceptance of migrants. The articles provide examples of the vignettes used in the RCTs, but say very little about how or with whom the narratives and frames were developed. We can presume they were mostly developed by the authors themselves, other than in a couple of cases where the research re-uses and/or updates facts, figures and/or frames used in previous studies.

The studies test how changes to at least one of the following elements in each vignette influence participant responses to survey questions:

- type of movement (international vs domestic)
- reason for moving (economic hardship vs conflict, violence or political persecution vs a loss of livelihood owing to climate change impacts or damage to the environment more generally)
- characteristics of the person on the move (e.g. their religion, race, social status or level of education)
- attribution of external responsibility for the environmental changes that resulted in the need to move (caused by natural phenomena vs industrialised countries' emissions vs government inaction)
- inclusion of specific events, personal stories and/or information about the broader social and environmental context using, for example, statistics and graphs

Most studies measure the effects of their experiments in terms of at least one of the following impacts of the narrative or framing on participants' ...

- ... concern about or perception of risk in relation to climate change, migration in general or climate-linked mobilities in particular.
- ... opposition to or support for migration policy, climate policy or climate-linked migration policy.
- ... opinion on whether or not people migrating or being displaced in the context of climate change should be granted protection or be allowed to settle in the participant's country, often in comparison with people migrating or being displaced for reasons other than climate change.
- ... attitude/warmth/positive feelings towards people moving in the context of climate change, compared with other population groups with either different demographic characteristics or different reasons for moving. This includes one study which measures changes in "blame" ascribed to migrants for their situation and changes in participants' perceived dehumanisation of migrants.

Kitchen garden at M'bera refugee camp in Mauritania. Photo: Jose Cendon / EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid



Critical reflections on the way studies present climate-linked mobilities⁹ and what the research that tests narratives and frames can tell us

Papers define climate-linked mobilities in various ways, making results difficult to compare across studies

Among the category A publications we analysed, ‘climate-linked mobility’ encompasses a range of different things, depending on the article in question. The various narratives and frames tested in the studies range from broad statements about people leaving their previous place of residence because it became uninhabitable due to climate change or general resource scarcity, to stories of people displaced by specific climate impacts such as sea-level rise. While these various ways of depicting climate-linked mobilities are usually conscious choices made by the authors, they make it difficult to compare the effect of the narrative or frame across studies and identify differences or similarities in findings that could be of use to practitioners.

Papers acknowledge the complexity and multifaceted nature of climate-linked mobilities but this rarely translates into nuanced narratives

The papers talk about climate-linked mobilities in varied and sometimes contradictory ways: as multifaceted in nature but oversimplified in how it is presented; as future-oriented, alarming and fear-inducing in high-income countries, while most movement already happens in low- or middle-income countries and regionally; in terms of agency and choice but also as deterministic and subject to outside forces. And although some authors manage to hold this seemingly contradictory and multifaceted nature of climate-linked mobilities really well in the introductions and literature reviews of their studies, this complexity is then often lost when it comes to the narratives and frames that are being tested. Nuances are sacrificed at the expense of clearly measurable and statistically significant effects on participants’ attitudes towards, and preferences for, different ‘causes’ of migration and ‘types’ of people on the move.

Papers assume that climate change will necessarily result in more migration, despite its unpredictable effects on current and future movement patterns

Among the papers we reviewed in depth, the introduction or background to the research often cites sources that portray climate change as necessarily resulting in more migration, especially when alluding to future scenarios of millions or even billions of “climate migrants” on the move. These largely unsupported figures¹⁰ often appear to be cited for sensationalist effect and to express the urgency and need for research in this area. Even though the harmful and fear-mongering effect of these frames has been documented by many studies,¹¹ these numbers are still referenced. This feeds into the general idea that even if the exact number of people moving in the context of climate change remains unknown, this will certainly result in additional migration.

Firstly, this reading of the situation misses the fact that climate change will also increasingly impact current migration routes, thus leading movement patterns to increase in some areas but also to decrease in others.¹² Secondly, the WEIRD contexts in which the majority of these studies are conducted necessarily impact how ‘more migration’ is read. For example in the European context, long asylum application backlogs are commonplace, along with social, housing and health services that are under-resourced to adequately look after people in receiving communities. ‘More migration’ is often interpreted here as a higher strain on already creaking systems, which is then met with calls in the public discourse for increased border securitisation and deterrence.

Scholars should therefore be clear that the exact effects of climate change on migration patterns are difficult to predict, and refrain from inadvertently reproducing harmful narratives or frames in their work.

Papers treat climate-linked mobilities as a problem to be avoided wherever possible – migration as a strategy for adapting to climate change, along with the possibility of positive outcomes, is largely absent

In line with this, our analysis also shows that climate-linked mobilities in these articles is most often portrayed in terms of risk to be mitigated (people being ‘at risk’ of migrating), or as a threat (as perceived by receiving communities). This negative connotation of migration is even more apparent in studies that measure narrative and framing effects on whether or not participants think migrants should be “blamed” for the situation they find themselves in. People faced with climate impacts are at risk of being displaced, but the idea that people can be ‘at risk’ of migrating suggests a lack of understanding of both the various levels of agency involved and the means necessary for people to migrate.

In the studies from category A, migration to the US, European countries, Australia or New Zealand is usually portrayed as resulting in negative consequences, either for people who are moving or for prospective host communities. Positive outcomes of migrating for those moving in response to climate change – or even the possibility thereof – are largely missing. Firstly, this is noteworthy because it does not consider the growing concept of migration as adaptation, where migration can be a viable response and empowered way to cope with the impacts of climate change.¹³ Secondly, this also disregards the effect of the enabling political environments – or lack thereof – in which mobility takes place. Support structures strongly determine whether or not climate-linked mobility results in more positive or negative outcomes for people on the move. Their absence in the narratives and frames thus absolves those in power of the impacts of their political choices.

Two people in Tuvalu waist deep in water, transporting coconuts by floating them along the sea shore tied together. *Photo: Rodney Dekker / Climate Visuals*



Section III - Five guiding questions for consulting peer-reviewed papers to inform your communications

As the findings in sections I and II show, the evidence base currently available is not yet extensive or nuanced enough for us to make confident recommendations to practitioners on how to communicate about climate-linked (im)mobilities. We therefore identified five guiding questions to help communicators navigate the academic literature and evaluate the usefulness and applicability of current and future publications for their own work.

1. What's your goal?

What is the objective of your communication? Identify the key reason you want to communicate about climate-linked (im)mobilities and what you are trying to achieve – whether that's raising awareness, influencing public opinion or changing policy – and consult papers that state a similar purpose.

2. Does the context fit?

Consider the context in which the research took place and the types of participants the narratives and frames have been tested with. How do these compare to the context you are working in? Are the people you are trying to engage with sufficiently similar to the study participant sample to say that the results are applicable to your audiences?

3. What do impacted communities think?

Can you find information on how people moving in the context of climate change want to be presented or spoken about? Some of the studies in category B can be a starting point, but remember that climate-linked (im)mobilities cover a range of experiences that will differ from one person to the next. Where possible, refer to the work of organisations, networks and people working directly with, and/or who have experience of, climate-linked (im)mobilities to inform your work.

4. What do you already know and where are your knowledge gaps?

With your team or colleagues, identify what you already know about engaging with your audiences on the intersection of migration and climate change, based on your experience. Where are there gaps in your knowledge? What connections do you already have, or could you make, with people, organisations and networks working on this intersection to fill those gaps and learn from their practical expertise? When doing so, take care that this is a reciprocal arrangement, bearing in mind that organisations working with or run by migrants are often time- and resource-strapped.

5. Are you checking for biases?

Consider possible unconscious bias or stereotypes that the research may be (unwittingly) playing into – for example in the way climate-linked (im)mobility is presented in the research you consult. Can you ask for feedback on your communications from different people with migration, climate and communications expertise, so as to avoid oversights and inadvertently repeating the shortcomings of the studies you consulted?

Conclusions and future directions for the research

In conducting the desk research for this report, we were glad to see increased academic attention being paid in recent years to the field of communicating about climate change and migration. However, our review identified a strong need for more specific research into how narrative and framing impact people's perception of climate-linked (im)mobilities, and how people experiencing climate-linked (im)mobilities want to be depicted (research categories A and B respectively, as defined in section I).

Here, we therefore suggest some key ways in which current research could be expanded and improved to better serve practitioners and those working on the intersection of climate change and migration day-to-day. These suggestions are not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather some ideas for future research directions that arose for us based on the conversations we had with practitioners as part of this work. If you have other suggestions, we'd love to hear from you!

- ▶ **Re-centre the research focus** on geographic areas and populations that are most likely to see climate-linked (im)mobilities, and include more diverse audiences as research participants (from WEIRD to WILD, as described under need-to-know 3 in section I). Additionally, explore communicating about *internal* climate-linked mobilities and narratives of climate-linked *immobility*.
- ▶ **Seek closer collaboration** between migration, climate and communications experts in research design in order to capture the nuance and complexity of climate-linked (im)mobilities while still telling powerful stories that practitioners can use and apply in their work.
- ▶ **Strive for greater representation** of the perspectives of migrant communities and/or communities of origin in the narratives and frames that are tested with audiences. Consider research that explores how people moving in the context of climate change want to be represented (see category B in section I) and connect with grassroots organisations that represent and include people with lived experience of climate-linked (im)mobilities.
- ▶ **Explore more stories** of climate-linked (im)mobilities that include agency on the part of people on the move, for example by including narratives of climate-linked mobility as adaptation.
- ▶ **Work more directly** with – and possibly include as research participants – powerful actors such as governments, media or INGOs, in order to capitalise on the outsized effects they have in shaping the public discourse on the intersection of climate change and migration.

A child walks along the remaining roof beams of a house with another damaged house to the side, in India. *Photo: Sujan Sarkar / Climate Visuals*



Methodology

From June to July 2024, we conducted online desk research ('search round 1') for peer-reviewed papers looking at communicating about the intersection of climate change and migration, using Google Scholar. From this, we produced a list of 36 articles published in peer-reviewed journals that we deemed relevant to this report, and grouped them into 5 categories (see section I) based on their abstracts.

In August 2024, we then convened a round table and conducted one-to-one interviews with various practitioners and communicators working on the intersection of climate change and migration. In these we presented the categories we had identified and discussed their key interests, needs and questions about the research. We also gathered ideas for additional keywords to include in a second round of desk research.

The second iteration of collating papers ('search round 2') took place in September 2024 and included a wider search for studies that could be relevant to this report, again on Google Scholar. The keyword search included combinations of the following terms, using all combinations of the form '(search term 1) AND (search term 2) AND (search term 3)'.

Search term 1	Search term 2	Search term 3
Migration	Climate (change)	Communication
Migrant	Environment	Framing / frame
Refugee		Message
Mobility		Depiction
Displacement		Portrayal
Resettlement		
Relocation		

Search round 2 identified an additional 62 papers that, based on their abstracts, dealt with communicating about the intersection of climate change and migration, even if only tangentially.

After reviewing the abstracts of articles from search rounds 1 and 2 together (a total of 98 papers), we identified category A (see section I) as the most directly relevant to our research question: understanding the empirical evidence produced from the testing of narratives and frames about climate-linked (im)mobilities with different populations. We therefore conducted an in-depth review and analysis of all eight articles from this category only.¹⁴ The remaining 90 papers fell into at least one of the other four categories we identified as being less relevant to review in detail for the purpose of this report. Section I of this report predominantly deals with findings that emerged from our collection of 98 papers, whereas section II predominantly focuses on our findings from reviewing the subset of 8 papers that test narratives and frames about climate-linked (im)mobilities.

Finally, in November 2024 we convened a second round table with practitioners to present our initial findings to them, and collected feedback and ideas for how to sharpen the insights and conclusions resulting from our desk research and literature review.

Endnotes

1. Grove-White, R. and Margolis, B. 2024. *Building Common Ground: Climate Change and Migration Work in the UK* [Online], Unbound Philanthropy, p. 6, accessed 19 November 2024. Available at: <https://unboundphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Building-Common-Ground-FINAL.pdf>
2. The UK context in which we work, as well as capacity constraints within the team, meant that we only reviewed English-language papers. We acknowledge that articles in other languages may hold answers that English-language literature doesn't currently provide.
3. Please see the methodology for further details. In order to gain as broad an overview as possible of the peer-reviewed literature on communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities, our categorisation was done based on abstracts of papers. It is possible that a more detailed review of the articles might have led to them being put in a different category, or uncovered additional categories.
4. Additionally, some papers approach communicating about climate-linked (im)mobilities from various angles, making these categories less clearcut than they may appear here. However, we hope that this is nonetheless a useful typology to provide an overview of the English-language publications available.
5. We use the term 'global south' here to collectively describe the countries affected by histories of colonisation and global economic power imbalances. We are aware that global north/south are contested terms, and use them as the best wording available to date to concisely describe these country groupings.
6. Henrich, J. 2024. 'WEIRD', in M.C. Frank and A. Majid (eds.) *Open Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* [Online], MIT Press, accessed 25 November 2024. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21428/e2759450.8e9a83b0>
7. Tandon, A. 2024. 'In-depth Q&A: How does climate change drive human migration?', *Carbon Brief* [Online], 11 April, accessed 13 September 2024. Available at: <https://interactive.carbonbrief.org/climate-migration/index.html>
8. Newson, M., Buhrmester, M., Xygalatas, D. and Whitehouse, H. 2020. 'Go WILD, not WEIRD', *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion*, 6(1–2), pp.80–106. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1558/jcsr.38413>
9. Here, we use the term 'climate-linked mobilities', as opposed to 'climate-linked (im)mobilities', because none of the studies in category A test narratives or frames that deal with climate-linked immobility.
10. Huang, L. 2023. 'Climate migration 101: An explainer', *Migration Information Source* [Online], 16 November, accessed 25 November 2024. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/climate-migration-101-explainer>
11. See, for example: Sakellari, M., 2021. 'Climate change and migration in the UK news media: How the story is told', *International Communication Gazette*, 83(1), pp. 63–80; Stanley, E., 2021. 'Climate crises and the creation of 'undeserving' victims', *Social Sciences*, 10(4), p. 144; Saad, A., 2017. 'Toward a justice framework for understanding and responding to climate migration and displacement', *Environmental Justice*, 10(4), pp. 98–101;
12. Qaisrani, A. 2023. *Challenging misconceptions on human mobility and climate change* [Online], International Centre for Migration Policy Development, p. 5. accessed 19 November 2024. Available at: <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/59424/file/Challenging%2520misconceptions%2520on%2520human%2520mobility%2520and%2520climate%2520change.pdf>
13. Adger, W.N., Pulhin, J.M., Barnett, J., Dabelko, G.D., Hovelsrud, G.K., Levy, M., Oswald Spring, Ú. and Vogel, C.H. 2014. 'Human security', in C.B. Field, V.R. Barros, D.J. Dokken, K.J. Mach, M.D. Mastrandrea, T.E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K.L. Ebi, Y.O. Estrada, R.C. Genova, B. Girma, E.S. Kissel, A.N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P.R. Mastrandrea and L.L. White (eds.) *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, US, pp. 755–791.
14. In order to gain as broad an overview as possible of the peer-reviewed literature on communicating about the intersection of climate change and migration, our categorisation was done based on abstracts of papers. Based on this reading of the abstracts, we found eight peer-reviewed papers that specifically test narrative and framing in relation to climate-linked (im)mobilities. Had we reviewed all 98 papers in detail, it is possible that this might have led us to additional papers with answers to our research question.

