

From Scarcity to Abundance: Immigrants Organizing on the Frontlines of Climate Change

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In their latest assessment of climate impacts, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change (IPCC) detailed a stark picture of increasing droughts, floods, fires, storms, and heatwaves, happening faster and on a larger scale than previously anticipated. The report also states unequivocally that these impacts are falling hardest on those most vulnerable and “increasingly driving displacement in all regions [of the world].”¹

Immigrant communities in the United States feel nearly every aspect of the climate crisis as it reshapes our economy, politics, and lives. When climate disasters strike, immigrant communities are among those hit first and worst. And, when the storm passes, they are often left out of government-led recovery and adaptation. Climate has already become one of the largest drivers of migration, with three times more people displaced by weather-related disasters than conflict in 2020².

Climate change is an existential threat. Immigrant rights organizations must join longstanding movements for environmental, climate, and racial justice in the fight to slow climate change and mitigate its impacts on our world, our nation, and in our communities. As a movement, we can fight to ensure that climate policy is inclusive of immigrants, that immigrant communities are protected from the worst impacts of climate change, and that the U.S. is a global leader on preparing for and welcoming people displaced by climate change.

As climate change accelerates, so too does the global trend towards authoritarianism, fueled by right-wing movements and the scapegoating of immigrants. As Deepak Bhargava outlines in *Social Democracy or Fortress Democracy*, escalating climate change can popularize and propel authoritarian solutions to the climate crisis, policies like border militarization in response to climate displacement.

But, beyond our borders, the U.S. government’s response to climate impacts domestically can also foment a sense of scarcity, threatening a similar corrosive effect on social democracy. In this context it is imperative for immigrant rights organizations, especially those at the state and local level, to organize so that climate change is seen as the real threat, not migrants. We can organize in response to the increasing impacts of climate change with a vision for climate action rooted in equity, compassion, and pluralism.

¹ U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Climate Change 2022, Impacts, Adaptations and Vulnerability”, February 28th, 2022, https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6wg2/pdf/IPCC_AR6_WGII_SummaryForPolicymakers.pdf, SPM-11

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021: Internal Displacement in a Changing Climate (2021), 7, accessed July 6, 2021, https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/grid2021_idmc.pdf

The immigrant rights movement as a key constituency in the fight against climate change

Both in response to extreme weather and slow onset events, climate change is an increasing driver of global migration. But our current immigration policies do not include a specific pathway or permanent protection for climate-displaced people. When immigrants are discussed in the context of climate change, it is most often as the threat of billions of climate migrants arriving in the Global North, with advocates mimicking nativist rhetoric as an incentive for climate action.

When immigrants arrive in the U.S. they often settle in places that are more vulnerable to climate change and work in industries that leave them more exposed to impacts like extreme heat. Although immigrants are often living and working on the frontlines of climate disasters, they are often left out of recovery and adaptation.

For example, as communities in California's Central Valley were experiencing extreme heat and severe drought, undocumented residents showed up to receive emergency water relief but were turned away for not having Social Security numbers. Southeast Michigan recently experienced record flooding that disproportionately harmed Black and immigrant communities. Many immigrants lost all of their belongings and had nowhere to turn for relief because of immigration status requirements in FEMA's programs. Similarly, in the aftermath of devastating tornadoes that swept through Middle Tennessee in 2020, language barriers, status-based exclusions, and fears of immigration enforcement kept many residents from accessing emergency services and recovery programs. One man who was picked up and thrown out of his mobile home by the tornado was afraid to seek urgent medical care because he was undocumented and uninsured. Like COVID-19, climate impacts expose and exacerbate inequities in our systems³.

Immigrant rights organizations are already responding to the impacts of climate change – from helping communities recover from climate disasters, to welcoming climate-displaced people, to defending the rights of workers on the frontlines of climate change. We believe the immigrant rights movement can be a powerful constituency in the fight to win major action to slow climate change, mitigate its impacts, and make immigrant inclusion and migration central pillars of the climate justice movement.

Thanks to the powerful work of environmental justice organizations, the climate movement increasingly recognizes the need to center racial equity and the experiences of frontline communities. This includes a number of environmental justice organizations with immigrant communities among their base. The immigrant rights movement must learn from and join these organizations who have been fighting for decades to advance climate and racial justice.

Over the past several years, the immigrant rights movement has developed significant infrastructure to build and wield political power, combining effective electoral organizing with sophisticated advocacy at the state and

³ These stories were shared with NPNA from our member organizations who are organizing on the frontlines of the climate crisis, including CHIRLA in California, Michigan United, and the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

national level. Immigrant rights organizations can bring this political power and a new lens into the climate justice movement. The political infrastructure of the immigrant rights movement has the potential to accelerate state and federal climate victories, while ensuring those policies are inclusive of immigrants, welcome climate-displaced people, and advance racial equity and economic justice.

The importance of state and local organizing

Any movement strategy to align immigrant and climate justice movements, address climate change and its impacts on frontline communities, and prepare for a future of increased migration must be rooted in local power-building organizations. To win the transformative changes we need in climate and immigration policy, as Bhargava's proposed *Statue of Liberty Plan* outlines, we need to build power and support from the ground up.

It is in local communities where people most closely feel the impacts of extreme weather and increased in-migration. It is in local communities where the hurricane hits or the tornado strikes, where people help each other recover, and where people seek refuge when they can no longer safely live at home. Our cities and towns are where we can imagine a better future for our communities and build the power we need to win that future.

The immigrant rights movement knows well the shortcomings of movement strategies that focus on federal policy goals at the expense of state and local strategies. For years comprehensive immigration reform has remained stalled at the federal level. But cities and states have been leading the way on advancing policies that protect the rights of immigrants and promote equity and inclusion, like expanding access to driver licenses and in-state tuition, and limiting collaboration with ICE. These state and local wins have also been a vehicle for building power within immigrant and refugee communities, shifting narrative and culture, forging new coalitions, and expanding a community's sense of who belongs.

Similarly, we believe the immigrant rights movement must root our work to align with climate justice movements through policy campaigns, community organizing, and coalition building at the local level. For example, in Pennsylvania and Maryland, immigrant advocates at CASA are playing a critical role in efforts to ensure climate resilience investments are spent effectively and equitably. Through this work we can ensure that immigrants in the U.S. are included in solutions to combat the climate crisis, but also that we are effectively building the power we need to make more transformative shifts in our policies, systems, and cultures.

Combatting the scarcity mindset in the U.S. response to climate change

Beyond protecting immigrants living on the frontlines of climate change in the U.S., it is critical that the immigrant rights movement fight more broadly for racial equity and economic justice in our domestic climate policy and adaptation strategies. There are unique barriers that immigrants face, like language access or

status based exclusions, but our job is not simply to fight for equal access to existing preparedness and recovery - because we know those systems are actually broken and leaving millions of people behind.

Last year, the Washington Post reported on a Congressional advisory council that found “key FEMA programs are less accessible to disadvantaged Americans, especially poor people; and, that the more aid a place receives after a disaster, the more unequal that place becomes as it recovers.”⁴ The New York Times has also reported on “a growing body of research that shows FEMA...often helps white disaster victims more than people of color, even when the amount of damage is the same. Not only do white Americans often receive more aid from FEMA; so do the communities in which they live.”⁵ As millions of Americans experience disruption and displacement as a result of climate change in the coming years, a mismanaged or failed government response can further foment dangerous scarcity narratives.

Immigrant rights organizations can help to craft and win policy changes and investments that more equitably protect frontline communities - including Black, indigenous, and low-income communities - from floods, fires, heat, and hurricanes. Organizations in communities that are less vulnerable to climate impacts can also work to ensure their communities prepare to welcome people displaced by climate change from both within and outside of the U.S.⁶

Bhargava’s *Social Democracy or Fortress Democracy* highlights how the climate crisis has been used to accelerate nativist political movements, who use it as a justification for authoritarian policies targeting immigrants, specifically increased border militarization. However, these harmful ideologies may take root in climate policy debates far from our borders: from discussions over who is deserving of relief from climate disasters; to who should be welcomed into new communities when they are displaced; to which communities should receive infrastructure investments to reduce pollution or be protected from flooding; and, to whom will have access to jobs in a transitioned economy.

The scarcity mindset can be activated as climate change increases people’s sense that there is not enough for everyone. The combination of our failing disaster response system that leaves millions of Americans behind and the pervasive narratives about large-scale global migration in a warming world can be exploited by right wing movements to build support for anti-immigrant, authoritarian policies.

⁴ Dreir, Hannah. “Assistance Not Approved.” Washington Post. April 25, 2021.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/04/25/fema-disaster-assistance-denied>

⁵ Flavelle, Christopher. “Why Does Disaster Aid Often Favor White People?” The New York Times. June 7, 2021.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/07/climate/FEMA-race-climate.html>

⁶ See, for example the work of PUSH Buffalo.

<https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/national-politics/the-race/climate-change-could-make-americas-coldest-cities-to-day-the-climate-havens-of-tomorrow>

Failure to engage with these trends and present alternative, inclusive responses to the climate crisis will likely have disastrous consequences for our communities. If we fail to act, we not only leave our communities vulnerable to the worst impacts of a growing crisis and excluded from the solutions, we risk ceding to a nativist narrative that ties climate action at home to hardening borders.

The Climate Justice Collaborative

It is now more clear than ever that all movements for justice need to become climate justice movements. That's why the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) has launched the Climate Justice Collaborative with member organizations across the country, including CASA, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), the Florida Immigrant Coalition (FLIC), Michigan United, OneAmerica, the National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC), and the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC). The Climate Justice Collaborative will build the capacity of the immigrant rights movement to engage in climate justice campaigns and to make immigrant inclusion and migration central pillars of the climate movement.

The Climate Justice Collaborative is the culmination of years of conversations within the immigrant and climate justice movements. At the 2018 National Immigrant Inclusion Conference (NIIC), after a year of devastating climate disasters, a set of NPNA members resolved to begin convening with climate and migrant justice partners to map climate impacts on immigrant communities and build strategies to organize at the intersection of climate and migration. In the last three years, these groups, led by One America (WA), have held hundreds of one-on-one interviews, virtual and in-person discussions with dozens of partners, and structured meetings between climate and migrant justice partners. At the 2021 NIIC, these partners asked NPNA to use its unique role to convene, structure, and accelerate this work.

As part of the emerging ecosystem of organizations working at the intersection of climate and migration, NPNA hopes to contribute to several strategies to slow climate change and mitigate its impacts, defend social democracy, and protect the rights and dignity of people displaced by climate change.

First, the Climate Justice Collaborative will build the capacity of the immigrant rights movement to address the unique challenges and opportunities outlined above. The climate crisis is a new challenge for the immigrant justice movement; and, so far, most of this work has been reactive and isolated. With resources, technical assistance, and a national community of learning, we believe immigrant rights organizations could be powerful advocates at the local, state, and federal level for environmental justice and equitable climate action.

Immigrant rights organizations with membership bases and a commitment to power building and leadership development can also ensure that community members living on the frontlines of the climate crisis, including those who originally migrated to the U.S. because of climate impacts in their home countries, are leading this

fight. We envision an organized, national constituency of climate-displaced people as a potent force in the climate justice movement.

NPNA also recognizes that transformative changes to climate and immigration policies will come not only from powerful base-building, electoral organizing, and political advocacy, but from deep culture and narrative change. To combat the rise of right-wing authoritarians and build the future we need, it will take a cultural shift from a sense of scarcity to a sense of abundance. The Climate Justice Collaborative, with partners across the field, will invest in building narrative and culture change infrastructure to normalize migration as a solution to climate change, not a threat, to position immigrants as heroes in the fight against climate change, and to build broad public support for the US becoming a global leader in welcoming climate-displaced people.

The stakes are high and the work is urgent. Immigrant communities in the U.S. are already experiencing the devastating impacts of a changing climate. Communities are already being displaced and forced to migrate across borders because of climate change, without clear pathways to move safely and with dignity. Immigrant rights groups, led by immigrant communities at the frontlines of the climate crisis, can and must play a powerful role in slowing climate change, mitigating its impacts, and defending social democracy.