

SUPPORTING THE AGENCY OF CITIES AS CLIMATE MIGRATION DESTINATIONS

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This Policy Brief addresses the impact of climate migration on urban areas, emphasizing the need for research and data, and collaborative multilevel governance to support local governments and communities in planning for inclusion and resilience. It highlights the challenges faced by both migrants and urban governance, stressing the importance of collective city advocacy for enabling policy frameworks and increased support at national and international levels.

This Policy Brief is an abridged version of a contribution to the KNOMAD-sponsored Special Issue in the journal *International Migration* titled [“Environmental \(Im\)mobilities: Improving the Evidence Base for Effective Policy Making”](#). For a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and detailed references, [please refer to the original contribution](#).ⁱⁱ



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Cities as Destinations in the Era of Climate Mobility

Although there are indications that a significant portion of climate-related migration will be directed to cities, the impact of such movements on people and destination areas remains under-researched. Those displaced by climate impacts or whose livelihoods have been disrupted by climate variability and change are increasingly drawn to urban areas, especially in regions experiencing rapid urbanization like Africa and Asia. The existing evidence suggests that climate mobility will largely align with ongoing urbanization trends, raising questions about the reception of newcomers in growing cities. Climate stressors contribute to rural-urban migration in various regions, especially in middle-income economies. However, scholars debate the exact role of climate factors in determining the type and volume of movement into urban areas. As climate impacts worsen, more people could move to towns and cities out of distress, making cities the theaters of first response to both humanitarian and longer-term development needs.

Dynamics vary across regions, yet many urban destinations worldwide are ill-prepared for an increase in climate mobility. Cities face significant climate risks themselves, especially in informal settlements in rapidly urbanizing regions. The arrival of newcomers can exacerbate risks, challenges, and vulnerabilities for both those who move into cities and existing urban populations who are also exposed and vulnerable to climate impacts. Local authorities, at the forefront of addressing climate hazards and vulnerabilities, often lack the capacity to anticipate and plan for growing climate impacts, including migration, without assistance.

Adaptive Potential of Urban Migration

Migration is often viewed as a household-led climate adaptation strategy in response to escalating climate hazards. However, the adaptive nature of migration remains debated and context-specific. Rural-urban migration, often seen as an avenue to lift people out of poverty, can expose those who move to new or more severe climate risks in cities exposed to coastal hazards, such as erosion, storms, and flooding, to river floods, extreme heat, and wildfires. Especially those settling in informal settlements that are built in at-risk areas, can face increased exposure to climate hazards. Additional challenges in urban areas, such as high unemployment, poor working conditions, food insecurity and high housing costs, contribute to stresses and hinder the adaptive potential of migration. Moreover, migration into cities can generate vulnerabilities for established residents, for example by contributing to environmental degradation and driving up prices in receiving communities. Policies that incentivize or tolerate urban growth in areas that face elevated climate risk, and the inability of many urban governance systems to cope with rapid urbanization, create undue risks for urban residents, including the risk of displacement within and from cities. There is a need for political leadership, community mobilization, and inclusive climate action to plan for climate driven urban growth and transformation so cities can be inclusive destinations rather than unwitting recipients of climate mobility.

Policy Recommendations to Strengthen City Agency

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how the collective resilience of cities and societies depends on protecting the most vulnerable populations, including informal and undocumented residents who often remain invisible and lack access to public services. Climate migration is poised to increase challenges of climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction and social and economic inclusion in rapidly growing cities.

Supportive national and local policies, including anticipatory investments in infrastructure, housing, public services, and the climate literacy and skills of migrants, can alleviate pressures and create opportunities for climate resilient urban development.

Key factors for effective local governance of climate action include enabling legal and political conditions, local autonomy to act, funding access, coordination across levels of governance, collaboration across city departments, with stakeholders and other cities, and the presence of a local climate champion.

Building on these factors, we advocate for three key strategies for creating enabling conditions for cities to handle the movement of people amidst worsening climate impacts and to use local climate action to foster their inclusion.

These strategies include supporting data and research for urban communities; collective mobilization of mayors and cities; and adaptation planning across territorial and sectoral boundaries.

Data and research for urban communities and collaboration: Local data and research are crucial for anchoring collaborative planning and action to address the impacts of climate change and climate migration. Yet, cities often lack local data on climate risk exposure and vulnerability, as well as climate risk modelling and demographic projections. To address these gaps, we recommend to:

- Improve access to international and national data and strengthen local data collection and analysis capabilities to tackle the lack of data on climate risk, demographic composition, and vulnerable populations in cities.
- Involve urban populations, including displaced people, in data collection to create a shared understanding of community challenges and potential futures, and support initiatives like “Know Your City” for broadening the participation of marginalized groups and collecting data on informal settlements. Data collection and analysis should be sustained over time through ongoing community engagement.
- Support research on how the arrival of migrants is affecting, and can support, cities' climate action priorities – and vice-versa, evaluating cities' commitment to equity and climate justice, for instance in land use practices.

Collective mobilization of mayors and cities: Cities are better able to manage climate displacement challenges when they have authority in matters of land use, zoning, and own resource mobilization. In recent years, local governments have also gained greater say in migration and refugee policy discussions. To advocate for a larger role in shaping policies, increased powers and resources, cities actively engage in national and international city networks. This collective mobilization of mayors and local governments is key for developing benchmarks and sharing learnings across cities. It also provides critical support for champion leaders who operate in hostile political environments. To strengthen cities' collective agency, we recommend to:

- Elevate the concerns of developing country cities in global city networks and strengthen networking among cities, including smaller municipalities, in the most climate-vulnerable regions.

- Elevate city leadership and good practices in international and national policy fora on climate and migration and frame climate mobility as a multi-level governance challenge that requires a “whole-of-society” approach, as exemplified in the growing “Welcoming” movement and in community-based resettlement efforts.
- Support practical cooperation and solidarity schemes among cities, such as skills partnerships that create pathways for circular mobility, city-to-city technical assistance, and mechanisms for pooled funding and service provision.

Adaptation planning across territorial and sectoral boundaries: The adaptive capacities of cities and communities facing climate displacement are intricately tied to and shaped by connections with other places, including various levels of government, supply chains, and diaspora networks. To resilience building efforts will span individual households, neighborhoods, settlements, and their links across different scales. Collaboration across national and regional planning bodies, urban and rural areas, can enable effective climate migration responses, including support for trans-local networks that sustain the resilience of households and communities. To promote the effective inclusion of climate mobility in adaptation planning, we recommend to:

- Ensure that adaptation planning includes strong mechanisms for coordination and collaboration across levels of governance and geographic scales to avoid negative spillovers and create synergies between measures and investments across different locations.
- Develop policies and programmes to support the transfer of resources, technology, knowledge, and skills, as well as the development of markets around the migration-related translocal (rural-urban) and transnational ties that connect communities and can support climate resilience.
- Support cities as hubs for cross-sector planning and collaboration, promoting integrated action plans for climate-resilient development that harness the contributions of all stakeholders, including migrants.

Conclusion

Cities, serving as primary migration destinations, play a pivotal role in enabling migrant's contributions to climate adaptation and resilience building across borders and communities. Despite their central role, cities worldwide often lack the necessary preparedness for a potential surge in population resulting from climate-related movements. The recommendations provided in this Policy Brief offer a framework for supporting cities' capacity to plan for climate mobility and include migrants, especially at-risk groups, in the urban fabric, thereby safeguarding the well-being of all city residents in the face of climate risk. Increased support for the agency of cities is critical for climate resilience in urban areas and beyond as cities anchor regional economies and migrant-based networks of people-to-people solidarity.

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