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Changing migration policy for a changing climate
A typology of climate (im)mobilities policy options

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Summary

- Climate change is reshaping migration globally, and the Pacific Islands region is leading the way in climate (im)mobility policy innovation.
- We identify 12 unique, but interlinked climate (im)mobility policy clusters, demonstrating how existing policies can be adopted and adapted for climate change.
- Underscoring all policies is imbuing individuals with the agency to make their own decisions around mobility and to move between policy spaces over time as needed.

With the rate of climate change fast increasing, there is an ongoing and pressing need to better understand the drivers, patterns, and required support structures for people, households, and communities engaged with climate-related (im)mobilities. These decisions must be made domestically and internationally, given the sudden and slow onset process of intensifying and frequency of extreme weather events, warming waters and changes to temperature and rainfall patterns, resulting in impacts like erosion, frequent flooding, and soil arability. Although an increasingly global phenomenon, the exposure of states across the Pacific, including Australia and New Zealand, means that climate (im)mobilities will occur more frequently in these places.

While carbon-producing states have often avoided serious discussions or interventions around climate mobilities, 'Pacific governments are leading proactive policies for climate-related migration worldwide' (Ramsay et al. 2023). Many policies from developed states restrict mobility pathways for those facing the all-encompassing effects of climate change; therefore, we propose an alternative with more positive outcomes for states and people alike.

We recognise that local communities have the strongest and foundational knowledge of how climate change affects them in their places and futures. As more people in more places are affected, it will become essential for centralised authorities to devolve, innovate and share power with locally-led decision-making voices and structures. If the agency of climate-affected communities to make key choices is not acknowledged, then climate adaptation, resilience-building, and mobilities governance systems will be slow and ineffective.

Bringing clarity to climate mobilities governance

Notwithstanding the all-encompassing and profound implications of climate change and associated mobility needs, we acknowledge that constructing policy that covers all climate (im)mobilities would be near impossible. Instead, we have grouped the different types of policy responses (clusters) which meet different (im)mobility needs into a matrix. We identified twelve policy clusters where specific provisions could increase the support and protections within state policies which affect people considering (im)mobility. Based on existing mobilities governance arrangements and the potentialities of institutional frameworks, these clusters are intended to be overlapping — where people faced with (im)mobilities needs and pathway choices could potentially move from one cluster to another when required. Importantly, there are key policy provisions and goals for each cluster that address specific aspects of each form of mobility — elements that are either not addressed, or do not need to be addressed, by other clusters.

	Mobility needs	Policy cluster focus	Types of practices within the cluster
Mobilities within countries	Want to remain and adapt	In situ adaptation policies	Development policies, disaster risk reduction, vulnerability reduction, climate adaptation, resilience building.
	Want to remain despite challenges	Supporting voluntary immobility	Support both implementation of in situ adaptation programs and facilitate access to other mobility options if people do choose to move.
	Want to move but cannot	Avoiding trapped populations	In situ adaptation policies, evacuation programs, long-term development initiatives, and increased facilitation of mobility options and access to other pathways.
	Need to move to avoid immediate harm	Evacuations	Early warning, evacuation coordination, disaster response, disaster recovery, returns coordination
	To move locally	Planned relocations	Participatory, rights-based processes for community-led and state-supported planned relocations, land rights issue support, financial support, support for host communities
	To move within the country	Internal mobility policies	Internal migration support at the level of rights, livelihoods and employment, social services, housing, and similar.
	To move to a city	Urban mobility policies	Specific urban migration support, alongside internal migration support
Cross-border mobilities	To seek protection abroad temporarily	Temporary humanitarian policies	Temporary emergency protection through existing humanitarian pathways or specifically-created programs.
	To move abroad temporarily for employment, education, or similar	Temporary labour, education, and similar mobility policies	Labour mobility programs, education programs, bilateral migration deals, multilateral mobility agreements
	To move freely between associated states and territories	Permanent free movement agreements	Compacts of free association, constitutional associations, bilateral and multilateral agreements
	To move abroad permanently on humanitarian grounds	Complementary humanitarian pathways	Rights-based humanitarian pathways, complementary and compassionate protections from legal entities, special visa categories.
	To seek permanent protection abroad on refugee grounds	Refugee protections	Apply existing refugee protections in instances of displacement, persecution, or statelessness due to climate-related factors.

Figure 1: Typology of climate (im)mobility policies (Moore and McNeill, 2025)

Importantly, we suggest states do not premise eligibility or access to mobility pathways on people proving they have been materially affected by climate change. Such determinations are unhelpful as they misunderstand how environmental factors shape decisions to stay and move in a complex fashion. Determination places unnecessarily difficult burdens on people and administrative systems when adjudicating the degree of forcedness of the movement and establishing chains of causality from climate impacts.

Internal climate (im)mobilities policies

We distinguish between the broader requirements for communities to adapt to the challenges of climate change, and more specific support for communities who are grappling with decisions of mobility but are not ready or do not aspire to move. In the first cluster, ***in situ adaptation policies*** are needed, focusing on development strategies, disaster risk reduction, addressing vulnerabilities and resilience, and climate adaptation. The Pacific region has many examples of adaptive resilience frameworks, simply requiring coordination of contextually appropriate practical strategies to ensure that assistance is readily available for at-risk communities and households. For the second cluster, policies that support ***voluntary immobility*** are necessary. People who choose to stay in place also need to be supported to do so. However, if they do later choose to become mobile, access to adjacent policy clusters must be facilitated. Lessons can be learnt from examples like the community of Togoru in Fiji, who chose to stay after considering relocation (Yee et al. 2022) and the Vaima'anga community of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands who, despite out-migration trends to New Zealand, also chose to remain in place (Newport et al. 2024).

The third and fourth clusters involve evacuations and emergency mobility. Pacific states, Australia, and New Zealand, have a wealth of experience with ***evacuations***, especially around early warning systems and evacuation coordination. Including migration conversations in disaster response and recovery could further strengthen this cluster, as could dedicated improvements in long-term returns coordination so that communities build back better. The fourth group is those who want to move but are ***trapped***. This group requires a melding of the earlier in-situ adaptation policy cluster and the evacuation cluster so that people — especially those in marginalised groups or experiencing socio-economic disadvantage — have options for both emergency evacuations away from harm and longer-term mobility away from hazards.

Pacific states are clearly leading the way on the development of dedicated ***planned relocation or managed retreat*** policies. Fiji and Solomon Islands now have specific relocation policies, with other state and regional-level proposals in development. For other states yet to adopt their own guidance, there is a clear need and benefit in doing so. Persisting with ad hoc approaches may result in costly, slow and ultimately failed projects which are unsatisfactory for communities. New planned relocation policies should adopt a participatory, rights-based, and community-led approach to considering, planning, and implementation.

There are people who move elsewhere within countries — individually or as groups. The sixth cluster focuses on ***internal migration support***, such as displacement policies in Fiji and Vanuatu, which seek to ensure that people do not fall through the gaps and miss out on rights, support, and assistance when moving internally (Moore, 2023). The seventh cluster addresses ***urban mobility*** and the specific challenges that people moving to central urban locations may face, like employment, housing, and access to services. Some structures are in place already; however, ensuring that institutions and facilities have the capacity to assist more people as they move due to climate-related decisions is important.

Cross-border climate mobilities policies

The eighth cluster looks at temporary movement post-disaster. There have been calls for Australia to formalise and expand

pathways **for *temporary emergency travel*** and stay when disasters occur (McAdam, 2024). While creating new temporary visa programs is a large undertaking, this outcome could also be achieved through the adaptation of existing programs, thereby ensuring that individuals can seek temporary refuge when disasters occur.

Ninth, states should continue to invest in ***temporary labour and education pathways***, particularly with climate-exposed states in the Pacific region. While current policies are not explicitly climate-related, they could be adapted easily (Rimon 2022). These pathways have benefits for the migrants, their home state, and the host state when executed well. Australia's PALM schemes have faced criticism; therefore, ensuring the programmes foreground the agency and dignity of participants, and include pastoral care and oversight, is important.

The tenth cluster considers ***permanent free movement agreements*** through regional, bilateral, or constitutional agreements. Examples include the *Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union*, or long-standing free association agreements between Cook Islands, Niue and New Zealand. Critically, these are not premised on being affected by climate change but provide people the chance to move freely between countries and positively contribute to both societies. Access could be expanded.

Finally, there are long-term protection schemes. The eleventh cluster is ***complementary humanitarian pathways***, particularly those protecting the human rights of individuals or reuniting separated families. New legislation is likely unnecessary; however, a clarification of how existing law and practice applies to situations where people move in the context of climate change or cannot be returned to potentially dangerous climate situations would be advantageous.

Finally, jurisprudence from New Zealand shows that while no one has yet been granted protection on ***refugee grounds***, it remains a live possibility as the twelfth cluster (McAdam, 2015). As climate effects increase, it is likely that a small number of individuals will successfully pursue claims for refugee-style protections when returning home may place them at risk.

A need for refreshed policies and revitalised implementation

Our tool demonstrates how existing policies could be adopted and adapted to respond to climate-induced (im)mobility. This is a practical way for policy-makers and partners to better understand and adapt practices to meet the needs of specific mobilities within and across diverse contexts. With Pacific leaders endorsing the *Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility Implementation Plan*, the need for practical examples is pressing. At its heart, our typology emphasises the agency of people to make their own choices as they engage in specific forms of (im)mobilities across a range of situations (Ng Shiu et al, 2024), in an increasingly volatile climate.

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