

Seize the Future:

Preventing disasters and protecting migrants

December 2024

The climate crisis is forcing people worldwide to move in response to environmental and economic shocks.

In the US, Hurricane Helene brought widespread devastation across the South, displacing hundreds of thousands of people from places that were unprepared for the scale of the flooding while causing further significant environmental damage. Wildfire season in the US West is no longer seasonal: the threat of wildfires is now year round as droughts become more frequent and intense, and temperatures rise. Even in places that were once discussed as ‘sanctuaries’ from the impacts of climate change like Minnesota, the cost of home insurance is spiraling upward as storm patterns shift and become more intense. Outside of US borders, the incidence and seriousness of disasters supercharged by warming are escalating for communities with even less capacity to prepare and rebuild than their US counterparts—often as a result of US policies, such as sanctions, regime changes, and the consequences of race-to-the-bottom trade deals. Beyond the acute damages imposed by unprecedented weather events like cyclones and droughts, slower moving disasters like desertification, biodiversity collapse, and sea level rise are threatening lives, livelihoods, and economies—and the very existence of entire countries.

Policy responses have not kept up with these challenges, and in many cases, the policy directions on offer are poised to make vulnerability worse, and more cruel to the millions of people fleeing the consequences of disasters.

Vulnerability to these catastrophes is not reducible to environmental change. Across both the Global South and North physical environmental threats collide with long-standing social, cultural, and economic inequities that leave marginalized communities with reduced capacity to plan and invest in disaster preparation. Among the many dire consequences of escalating disasters is the rapid growth of people displaced from their homes, adding to the already staggering number of people who have been forced to flee as a result of armed conflicts, repressive governments, and the longstanding global economic inequality that concentrates wealth and opportunity in the Global North.

The climate crisis is not currently the primary driver of international migration, but the number of people displaced by the climate crisis is set to grow massively. As migrants seek relative safety and opportunity in the Global North, they are increasingly confronted with vicious, xenophobic border and immigration regimes— conditions that are set to deteriorate further following the US general election. Although these tendencies are threatening to accelerate at the federal level, championing progressive state and local policies and increased community organizing are key to keeping people safe. It is imperative for the US to develop just, humane border and immigration policies that recognize that the root causes of migration are often intertwined with environmental degradation, economic instability, and social injustice.

Even as they navigate increasingly brutal immigration policies, migrant workers have proven essential to the U.S. economy, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and service industries, must be central to visions of more just futures in the climate crisis. Yet migrant workers often face precarious working conditions, exacerbated by climate stressors such as extreme heat. A just immigration policy must not only provide pathways to citizenship but also empower these workers to advocate for their rights and improve their working conditions. By strengthening labor protections and enabling unionization, the United States can create a more equitable labor market that lifts up all workers, regardless of their immigration status. Moreover, as climate change continues to drive migration flows within and across national borders, it is crucial to adopt a global perspective that encourages progressive labor policies in countries and regions of origin.

These policies must support labor rights both domestically and abroad, since many migrants who move to cities and land in precarious jobs are fleeing debt and agrarian distress in rural areas. By supporting the policy frameworks most conducive to economic development and job creation in the Global South, the US can start to address the root causes of distress migration while fostering international solidarity.

The climate crisis demands an internationalist outlook. But the impacts of climate change are highly localized and differentiated, and require solutions that attend to that variation coupled with structural reforms to the financial mechanisms that enable recovery when disaster strikes.

We see three critical pathways to preventing disasters and protecting migrants:

1. Preventing disasters and promoting community resilience in the US
2. Promoting just and humane migration policy
3. Addressing the causes of migration

1. Prevent disasters and promote community resilience in the US.

US disaster prevention and response policy is itself a disaster. An underfunded, reactive emergency structure has left people without support to prepare for floods, storms, and fires in the immediate aftermath, and especially over the long haul. It has allowed private companies to profit handsomely from rebuilding, ultimately facilitating corporate control over critical infrastructure. Working class communities of color, incarcerated people, unhoused people, elderly people, people who can't afford to evacuate or already face housing instability, and undocumented people face further challenges before, during, and after disaster strikes.

Meanwhile, as a result of this dereliction of responsibility by governments, the vast majority of disaster risk reduction and response for households is left to insurance markets. The profit-seeking and regressive risk transfer approach of private insurers is woefully inadequate. The cost of the damage from losses that private insurers cannot or will not insure is being borne by households—which can lead to individual financial ruin and contribute to systemic risk throughout the financial system—or is socialized onto public disaster response programs that are already stretched thin.

The disaster prevention and response system must be reimagined as one that reduces risk and provides protection equitably and fairly in order to deliver better outcomes. Communities—particularly those that already bear the brunt of environmental racism, injustice, and extraction—must be protected from the worst effects of the climate crisis. For example, forest restoration across the US West should be tied to rural economic development and that increasingly at-risk coastal communities have viable adaptation strategies or just pathways to relocation. Federal funds must be made available for critical adaptation priorities, including sewerage and drainage upgrades, agricultural subsidies that improve ecosystem health, and conservation policy that helps maintain biodiversity.

Policy recommendations

Decriminalize disaster response: FEMA and other post-disaster funds should be directed towards a trained, non-police/military workforce that equitably responds to disasters while increasing community resilience. Reforms to the disaster response system must be coupled with robust adaptation measures and investments in assets that blunt the impact of disasters, like community health and care facilities, equitable planning approaches in high-risk areas, accessible resilience hubs to convene in moments of extreme weather, and careful deployment of resources to rebuild resiliently for all communities impacted when disaster strikes.

Invest in care infrastructure as climate infrastructure: A robust care infrastructure could be strengthened nationwide through a Care and Climate Corps that recruits, trains, and employs people for living wages, with benefits. To improve the capacity of our green social infrastructure by including care workers in a corps program, more workers could be trained in climate-responsive care, including caring for clients, community and family members experiencing ills related to extreme heat, drought, freezing temperatures, and evacuation.

Rebuild the public sector workforce: A robust public sector would have the capacity to bring resilience-building services to the community. Local governments need increased staffing to implement resilience measures and to equitably allocate resources. Key areas include public health, human services, public works, parks and recreation, and sustainability, among others to achieve climate and resilience goals. The public sector at all scales of government need investment to prepare for and respond to disasters—whether it’s a pandemic or climate-related event—and to make sure all communities thrive in the low-carbon future and are able to bounce back when disaster strikes.

Improve emergency response coordination to protect vulnerable communities: The government must target resources to the most vulnerable communities, particularly working-class communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by systemic racism and historic economic disinvestment. Clear guidance to municipalities and counties is needed to foster cultural competence and meaningful collaboration with the community residents and advocates. Governments at all levels should also increase funding for initiatives to improve disaster preparedness and emergency response efforts for diverse and vulnerable populations.

Fix the insurance market with State Housing Resilience Agencies: Instead of prioritizing insurance company profits, policymakers should focus on reducing physical risk for households facing disaster fallout and keeping people safely and affordably housed as disasters increase in frequency and severity. States should establish Housing Resilience Agencies (HRAs) with two primary functions. HRAs should provide public disaster insurance for all households that fairly spreads the risk of disasters and provide access to equitable post-disaster recovery that increases resilience. They should also coordinate and oversee comprehensive disaster risk reduction to prevent and/or lessen damage before disasters strike—everything from deciding where it is too risky to build new housing, to helping people relocate from where it is too dangerous to stay, to carrying out community-oriented mitigation efforts.

2. Promote just and humane migration policy.

A progressive approach to migration must be humane, abide by international law, and factor in the US's role in exacerbating the circumstances that are driving migration— from environmental change to poverty inflicted by the US-designed and maintained structure of the global economy. Political and economic crises, fueled by climate collapse, are increasing global migration flows. At the same time, countries in the Global North scapegoat immigrants while benefiting from their labor. A just immigration policy must reduce the harsh and ecologically destructive militarization of the US border and criminalization of migrants, while creating clear, achievable pathways to legal status for millions of undocumented people who have made their lives in the United States.

The last comprehensive immigration reform was passed in 1986. The law legalized 3 million undocumented immigrants in exchange for increased enforcement, in the form of employment restrictions. The 1986 law set the framework for negotiations over immigration policy in the decades that followed: legalization paired with enforcement. In the decades that followed, the immigration enforcement system grew ever more cruel— millions of families have been ripped apart by deportations, while detention camps proliferate on the southern border.

The right stokes nativist anxieties about the changing ethnic composition of the United States, and blames immigrants for a host of unrelated problems: declining standards of living, skyrocketing housing costs, and the loss of good jobs. In response, consecutive Democratic administrations have ramped up enforcement in the hopes of appeasing the right wing backlash to immigration. This is a failed strategy. It should be clear by now that no amount of enforcement will appease the right enough to open up a path to legalization.

The imperative for just migration policy does not need to come purely from a place of humanitarianism or morality. The U.S. economy, from agriculture to construction, runs on migrant labor: 30% of farmworkers, roofers, and drywall installers are undocumented, while an estimated 24% of maids and house cleaners are undocumented. Since much of this labor is employed in outdoor occupations or in indoor locations without climate control, they are exposed to extreme heat and other stressors, and industries that rely on immigrant labor are heavily subcontracted, with high rates of wage theft and health and safety violations.

Outdoor workers are particularly vulnerable to increasing heat waves and require additional job protections to ensure they are empowered to advocate for their own safety in the workplace. A progressive agenda would strengthen occupational health safety guidelines, issuing mandates on

employers to reduce work hours during inclement weather and ensuring a federal standard for heat, wind, and cold protections. Rather than scapegoating immigrants, jobs for all workers must be improved by limiting the practice of subcontracting, and holding employers at the top of the labor market responsible for labor violations committed by their subcontractors.

Policy recommendations

Create a path to citizenship: The United States depends on undocumented immigrants for their labor and tax contributions, without affording them the rights and recognition they deserve. A just immigration policy must include a path to citizenship for all 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Under the status quo, 11 million immigrants live under the threat of deportation and face rampant exploitation in their workplaces.

Build green social housing: Right wing movements often blame migrants for the rising cost of housing and present mass deportation as a solution to the housing crisis. Rather than scapegoating migrants for a crisis they are not creating, local, state, and federal governments must contribute to building green social housing to ensure everyone has access to adequate shelter. Immigrant families are an important constituency for the growing tenant movement, but are barred from most forms of affordable housing. Like many other low wage workers, the immigrants that work in America's big cities often have to travel for hours because they cannot afford to live near their jobs. The United States must expand the supply of affordable housing, and make it available to all, regardless of immigration status.

Counter mainstream narratives around crime, race, and punishment: Social movements, local governments, places of worship, union locals, and other community institutions should amplify stronger narratives around ways to reimagine public safety and organize more people into solidarity for campaigns to win community-led, prevention-based solutions. They should also support efforts around communications and organizing to help shape the narrative and advance framing that can tell the story to lift up the historical context of migration, the real economic and environmental issues driving the conditions, and solidarity efforts between impacted communities.

Make it possible for people to come safely and gain legal status: The quotas set out in the Immigration and Naturalization Act could and should adequately reflect migration flows, allowing migrants from sending countries to apply for visas to live and work in the United States. Further, immigrants living and working in the United States should have the option of applying for legal permanent residency on a rolling basis. Lifting quotas that bar the vast majority of immigrants from applying for residency is the only just solution.

3. Address the causes of migration.

The United States must address the adverse effects its foreign policy interventions have on human and economic development abroad, which increase violence and instability, thereby driving migration. Actions such as economic sanctions, exporting a militarized war on drugs, and supporting regime change efforts destabilize nations and often entire regions. US positions in the major International Financial Institutions like the World Bank and IMF also contribute to the flows of migrants as economic crises (often caused by actions from the US, like rising interest rates) are met with mandates to cut spending and raise taxes in countries that are already struggling, leading to further out-migration.

Policy recommendations

Eliminate unilateral economic sanctions: The US must cease the practice of imposing sweeping, unilateral sanctions immediately, lift existing sanctions, and stop using its privileged position within the international financial system to strangle other nations and the tens of millions of people suffering under sanctions. These measures constitute collective punishment of people living in targeted countries and violate international law. Beyond prompting waves of migration, US-imposed sanctions are directly associated with excess mortality, increased poverty, and severe social and economic impacts for residents under these conditions. Moreover, these unilateral sanctions—referred to by the United Nations as “unilateral coercive measures”—infringe upon the human rights of individuals in the affected countries. Although presented as an alternative to war, sanctions can cause comparable harm and result in significant casualties.

Redirect funding from war on drugs policies in Latin America to climate-critical projects: The militarized war on drugs exported by the US to Latin America has led to increased violence and instability. These policies intensify danger and strengthen the influence and power of criminal organizations. The militarization of drug enforcement is tied to abuses by security forces, targeting the most vulnerable and violating human rights. Instead of funding war on drug policies that escalate violence and instability, US aid to Latin American countries should focus on fostering climate-critical projects. Such projects can create economic opportunities that reduce pressure to emigrate and build resilience against climate disasters.

Stop both overt and covert regime change efforts: The US should engage diplomatically with other nations and avoid regime change campaigns, recognizing that stated goals like democracy promotion fail to materialize following US-backed coups and interventions. These interventions have consistently failed and destabilized targeted countries and entire regions.

Support workers rights abroad: Just as migrant labor in the US is precarious, so is migrant labor around the world. If the US wants to lead on a global migrant protection agenda, it needs to encourage other countries to adopt progressive labor policies embedded in trade deals and through bilateral diplomacy. High road labor standards can boost economies and create jobs while also reducing climate harm to workers—and thereby reduce distress migration into the U.S. In the Global South, macroeconomic restructuring since the 1980s has reduced public sector jobs, union organizing, and protection for workers, while reducing job security. Non-formal workers are extremely vulnerable to climate events, including droughts, floods, and fires. While uneven in its actual implementation, mechanisms such as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) can foster new opportunities for collective bargaining and worker organization that rectify inequities in global supply chains.