

Engaging Local Communities for More Effective Climate Mobility Programming

OCTOBER 2024

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Executive Summary

Climate change affects migration in diverse, locally specific ways. Some communities recover quickly after short-term evacuations, others experience longer-term displacement, and still others lack the resources and networks to move in the first place. Peoples' vulnerability to climate change, and their ability to cope and adapt, shape when and how they move. Along with national leadership and policies, effective climate mobility solutions need to account for local conditions and the priorities of affected communities. Localization—engaging, partnering with, and funding local civil-society organizations and authorities—is critical to impactful projects.

While important for many types of development work, localization is especially needed when it comes to climate mobility. Local actors possess critical knowledge about their communities' vulnerabilities and needs, and they are often first to sound the alarm about looming climate mobility challenges—from sea level rise forcing households in a coastal Mexican town to relocate, to salinization in a Bangladeshi fishing community affecting the health of women who stay behind as men migrate. Local actors also bring the networks and understanding needed to anchor projects in existing community dynamics and to ensure long-term sustainability. Finally, climate justice advocates have long argued for

giving local communities agency over funding and policy decisions, since the countries and communities most affected by climate change have often contributed the least to global emissions. In short, empowering local actors to take leading roles in climate mobility programming can help ensure these solutions reflect communities' needs and priorities, and promote more effective, sustainable, and just outcomes.

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As multilateral development banks, governments, philanthropies, and other donors begin to work more on climate mobility, most recognize this need for greater localization, but progress has been slow. Many of the most prominent climate mobility programs to date have included local actors only as implementors of international projects, rather than engaging them in project design and broader policy conversations. This state of play is not unique to climate mobility programming, but the field

brings certain additional challenges. Unlike more established development sectors such as health and education, there are comparatively few local actors that specialize in climate mobility, which can make it difficult for donors to identify the right local partners for a project. Local organizations whose work touches on climate mobility may also lack visibility among national authorities and international donors. And many local organizations (in this and other policy areas) have limited capacity to manage large, complex projects and meet audit and monitoring requirements.

As a result of these challenges, donors have usually defaulted to working with well-known international organizations and UN agencies (such as the International Organization for Migration), which have the infrastructure, technical expertise, communications capacity, and experience handling big-ticket and politically sensitive projects. These large organizations have partnered with and subcontracted certain project activities to cities and local organizations, but more work is needed to make these partnerships more equitable and to strengthen local actors' direct access to funding. Overcoming these challenges means rethinking how local actors collaborate with national governments, larger organizations, and donors, including with more inclusive planning processes, direct support, and by elevating local actors' visibility at the global level.

International donors, for their part, should make a proactive effort to champion localization in their climate mobility work. Philanthropy has an essential role to play as a first mover, testing out project approaches and local partners to see which are effective, after which other donors may choose to replicate or build on their work. Often, government and multilateral donors may need to accept higher levels of risk when entering new fields, such as climate mobility, and when working with new partners, so earmarking certain pots of funding for higher-risk, innovation-focused projects can be helpful. Donors,

especially philanthropy and governments, can also help grow the number of local actors working on climate mobility, including by providing core funding so they can develop their internal staffing and capacity on this complex issue and by offering small grants with simpler audit and monitoring requirements. Finally, national governments and other donors to international climate funds (such as the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage and the Global Environment Facility) can advocate for those funds to prioritize migration and displacement issues and to ensure small grants are made accessible to local actors.

Local authorities and civil-society organizations can also take steps to better position themselves to access funding and to play an active role in designing and implementing policy and programming. Some cities have had success through the Mayors Migration Council, which provides grants averaging USD 200,000 to pilot projects on migration, and most have subsequently been able to find other international funding or used their own resources to continue this work. Some local nongovernmental organizations have formed strategic partnerships with larger organizations that have better access to international funding, which over time has strengthened the local organizations' ability to apply for funding themselves. Finally, as donor interest in climate change and migration continues to grow, local actors could take steps to showcase their comparative advantage and how their work intersects with climate mobility issues to potential donors.

By addressing these challenges faced by local actors, their national counterparts and international partners and funders can better leverage local knowledge and capacity, boosting the effectiveness of climate mobility programming and leading to more resilient, empowered communities. Integrating localization as a guiding principle for climate mobility policymaking and programming from the outset can lay a strong foundation for this field as it grows.

1 Introduction

Climate change does not hit all communities the same way. Floods in one location can cause massive, long-term displacement and eventual relocation of residents, while they might only trigger short-term evacuations elsewhere. Addressing climate mobility—including migration, displacement, and planned relocation, and whether voluntary or forced, internal or cross-border, and directly or indirectly linked to climate change and disasters—depends hugely on how vulnerable communities are to begin with and the assets they have to cope and adapt. Designing solutions to prevent displacement and support safe climate mobility thus has to account for each community’s ability to recover, rebuild, and adapt, as well as their aspirations and priorities. What works to help one community adapt to drought may miss the mark or even backfire in another. In other words, because the impacts of climate change are highly localized, the solutions need to be as well.

Alongside international and national actors, local stakeholders—including municipal authorities and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—are particularly well suited to managing some disasters and climate shocks because of their first-hand grasp of local needs and dynamics. They can, in theory, complement national responses with initiatives tailored to local conditions and identify practices that could lead to maladaptation. For instance, local leaders and NGOs are more likely to know how and where to evacuate and relocate people after disasters, or which types of jobs are needed in the local labor market and which type of green skills development projects might be successful. While the national government is well placed to coordinate a country-wide response, often supported by international agencies, local actors bring crucial knowledge that can help secure a community’s buy-in.

However, despite broad consensus that local actors should have a greater voice in crafting climate mo-

bility solutions, it is not always clear how to do so effectively, and structural barriers can keep such actors from taking on greater roles. Some challenges relate to their limited capacities to manage large budgets or their lack of expertise in highly technical fields, while others come from having different priorities to national governments or international donors. Still others stem from the fact that many donors, such as multilateral development banks, have complicated contractual requirements, meaning they primarily work through loans to national governments that do not necessarily trickle down to municipalities and other local entities, despite increasing efforts to decentralize services in many low- and middle-income countries.¹ Thus, the relatively small number of large programs to date that specifically target climate mobility (rather than tackling the issue indirectly) have been implemented by the “usual suspects”: large development agencies and UN organizations.

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Moving forward, donors and development actors investing in the growing field of climate mobility solutions² would benefit from a greater understanding of how to effectively localize their work, including by better leveraging local knowledge and networks and building a pipeline of talent from within affected communities. At the same time, they should seek to address the constraints that can hinder smaller, community-based organizations’ full participation, and connect these efforts with national-level actions and policies. Such an approach requires making localization a core consideration from the start, rather than treating it as an afterthought, as it has been for much of the development sector.

This issue brief makes the case for greater localization of climate migration solutions, drawing on interviews and exchanges with donors, international

organizations, national development agencies, and local NGOs. It outlines localization's key strengths and bottlenecks, and offers recommendations for turning localization from a rhetorical commitment into practical action.

2 Three Reasons Localization Matters for Climate Mobility Programs

The earliest and most significant climate mobility programs—those championed in global fora and critical to building momentum behind this issue—were led by large development actors such as the German Development Cooperation Agency (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ) and UN bodies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).³ While these large organizations have subcontracted some of this work to local implementing partners, local actors were not the principal decisionmakers in charge of assessing needs or developing activities.

As the climate mobility field matures, donors and development actors will need to redouble their efforts to localize their interventions, simply because the complexities of the climate mobility phenomenon demand it. Localization ensures that interventions are better rooted in specific community needs, and if communities support and maintain these solutions, even after funding cycles end, they are more likely to yield sustainable dividends.

A. *Local Solutions Are More Responsive to Highly Contextual Needs*

The ways in which climate change and extreme weather events affect migrants and mobility are

complex and differ across locations. Natural hazards such as droughts and floods vary across regions, as do people's vulnerability to these hazards (e.g., whether people have the resources to evacuate or to invest in adaptation measures). Even within one community, people in wealthier neighborhoods may be able to invest in adaptations such as levies or have the option to move away, while poor people may not and may be repeatedly displaced when disasters strike.⁴ The types of projects needed to help communities adapt to climate change and manage mobility should mirror this diversity.

Climate mobility is also an area where donors and development actors often lack in-house expertise and a strong evidence base upon which to design solutions, making local knowledge all the more critical. The most widely available data and modeling on climate mobility offer information at global, regional, or national levels, and while newer models are increasingly able to pinpoint specific cities or localities that are hotspots of climate-driven in- or out-migration, this is still not the norm.⁵ Thus, information provided by local actors on context-specific needs and conditions is essential to the design of climate mobility interventions. For instance, in the coastal community of El Bosque, Mexico, the NGO *Nuestro Futuro* has been raising awareness of the need for planned relocation, as sea level rise has led to the loss of more than 200 meters of shoreline in five years.⁶ *Nuestro Futuro* has begun to document these trends to support future litigation and relocation programs, even as the national government has no policy on planned relocation and the international community has not been funding planned relocation programming in Mexico. As this example illustrates, local actors can play a dual role of warning residents about impending challenges and providing critical evidence to help development actors respond.

BOX 1 What Is Localization?

There is no single definition of localization. Some interpret localization to be process-oriented, shifting funding and contracts to local NGOs and bringing local actors to the decision-making table. Others include broader considerations such as “increasing international investment and respect for the role of local actors,” as described by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, or call for a more fundamental re-envisioning of the humanitarian and development system so it is driven by local actors. A common refrain is to make aid “as local as possible and as international as necessary.”

There is a similar debate over what counts as local. Some consider it to only include local community members and leaders, community-based NGOs, and city and local authorities, while others also include local chapters of international NGOs and development agencies, or even national governments in some cases (such as when international donors give money directly to national governments). This brief’s analysis starts from the narrowest definition of localization—funding and engaging local NGOs and subnational authorities—while recognizing that what it means to be local as well as other key concepts, such as engagement, remain contested.

Notable localization commitments from across policy fields—humanitarian and development aid, climate action, and migration and refugee governance—include:

- ▶ The **Grand Bargain** is a 2016 agreement between 67 leading donors and aid agencies to reform the global humanitarian architecture, with localization as a core priority. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) set a goal in 2021 that 25 percent of its funding would go to local partners by 2025.
- ▶ On climate action, more than 120 organizations have adopted the **Global Commission on Adaptation’s Principles for Locally Led Adaptation**, first launched in 2021. These principles cover everything from enhancing local agency, decision-making, and capacities, to strengthening local access to flexible and predictable funding.
- ▶ The **Global Compact on Refugees** (GCR) and **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration** (GCM) commit to multistakeholder approaches that include local actors. As of 2024, cities, local authorities, and civil-society actors have made 758 pledges in line with the GCR and 116 pledges related to the GCM. Similarly, there is growing interest (particularly from philanthropy) in funding and investing directly in refugee-led organizations.

Sources: Patrick Fine, “[Rethinking the Constraints to Localization of Foreign Aid](#)” (commentary, Brookings Institution, December 1, 2022); Thorsten Bonacker, Judith von Heusinger, and Kerstin Zimmer, eds., *Localization in Development Aid: How Global Institutions Enter Local Lifeworlds* (London: Routledge, 2016); International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, “[Localization](#),” accessed June 30, 2024; Veronique Barbelet, Gemma Davies, Josie Flint, and Eleanor Davey, *Interrogating the Evidence Base on Humanitarian Localisation* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2021); Movement for Community-Led Development, “[Coming to Terms: CDD, CLD, LLD and More](#),” updated May 20, 2022; Global Commission on Adaptation, “[Principles for Locally Led Adaptation Action](#)” (statement, January 2021); USAID, “[Localization at USAID: The Vision and Approach](#)” (brief, August 2022); Sabina Robillard, Teddy Atim, and Daniel Maxwell, *Localization: A “Landscape” Report* (Boston: Tufts University, Feinstein International Center, 2021); Global Compact on Refugees, “[Pledges & Contributions](#),” accessed June 30, 2024; UN Network on Migration, “[Pledging Initiative: Delivering on Migration](#),” accessed June 30, 2024.

Local actors can also help donors and international entities tackle critical blind spots that even national actors might not be aware of. For instance, climate change can affect men and women differently, but these differences may be overlooked or poorly handled without local context knowledge. In Bangladesh, Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program, a community-based migrant organization, found that as sea level rise degraded fishery-based livelihoods, men in the community attempted to adapt by seeking work abroad, leaving women behind.⁷ One unforeseen consequence was that women who replaced men in fisheries suffered adverse health consequences, as increased exposure to salinization harmed their fertility. This knock-on effect had been overlooked by other international and national entities active in the area, which often focus on the number of people who move rather than their characteristics.⁸ This type of local knowledge can shed light on what kinds of investments are most needed and refocus development programming, for instance with dedicated interventions on women's reproductive health or activities to enable women to move as well. Thus, local actors with knowledge and lived experience in their specific contexts, alongside international expertise and national policies and programs, are critical to designing effective solutions to the impacts of climate change on mobility.

B. Solutions with Community Buy-in Can Be More Sustainable

Local actors' strong community networks and understanding of how things work on the ground are crucial to anchoring climate mobility projects within existing community dynamics and ensuring activities are sustainable in the long term. Local buy-in may also provide national governments with more incentives to maintain interventions, even after international funding has ceased.

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Climate mobility is inherently a personal and sensitive subject, covering issues such as whether a community's residents should stay or move and how to invest limited community resources.⁹ Thus, local actors with existing connections to the target community may be more effective at making programs stick, rather than outsiders without a sense of local customs and cultures. For example, after Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu in 2015, a UN-led effort helped temporarily evacuate people on the island of Mataso, but NGO leaders critiqued this project as insufficiently consultative of local communities, who would have preferred to move through family networks and to different locations. Over the long run, the relocated people felt more isolated and more reliant on UN assistance than they would have if their move had been more connected to their social and kinship networks, which may have enabled a more resilient disaster recovery.¹⁰

Indeed, securing local buy-in for an intervention is critical to long-term sustainability. Local actors are the ones who remain after project funding ends, so it is important they feel invested in continuing to implement and monitor initiatives over the long term. For example, IOM Belize, in collaboration with local leaders, built shelters in migrant settlements vulnerable to floods and bushfires. IOM also trained and equipped local volunteers to maintain these shelters so they could remain in use after the project ended.¹¹ Community support for such projects is even more essential because it may persist even as donor interest change. In turn, it may help secure support from other levels of government, including national authorities, that can be compelled to sustain an

initiative that has a good track record in a region in need of assistance.

Cities have proven particularly effective at kickstarting local responses to climate mobility that can last over time. As of 2022, 28 cities from 22 countries had received funding (averaging USD 200,000) from the Mayors Migration Council to launch pilot projects on migration issues, and half of those projects were related to climate change.¹² Among cities that had finished their projects, 90 percent were able to sustain or expand these projects through other funding. Barranquilla, Colombia, for example, secured USD 2 million to continue its project focusing on connecting migrants to the labor market, while other cities have used their own funding to continue projects. Similarly, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development is piloting a model of “climate resilient, migrant-friendly cities and towns” in Mongla, Bangladesh, by setting up local adaptation plans and integrating (primarily internal) migrants into skills development initiatives and education systems.¹³ Central to this framework is participatory approaches to planning, led by city governments and bringing together civil society and local communities (see Box 3 in Section 3.B). These practices are meant to both ensure adaptation planning meets local needs and secure community buy-in to welcoming migrants, thus avoiding backlash and promoting success over the long term.

C. *Local Solutions Give Affected Communities Agency*

In addition to the pragmatic arguments for localizing climate mobility interventions—that it can enhance project effectiveness and sustainability—there is a moral case for localization. Because the communities worst hit by climate change are often those that have contributed the fewest emissions, the principles of climate justice call for these communities to be given more agency over decisions

about how to adapt to and manage climate impacts. This transfer of decision-making power usually held by international organizations and donors should start with national governments in the Global South, which have been at the forefront of arguing for greater climate justice and finance, and extend to civil-society groups, municipalities, and grassroots organizations in communities that most directly feel the uneven impacts of climate change (see Box 2). Environmental and climate justice considerations have been recognized in some form by Global North donors (for instance, Scotland has a dedicated fund for global climate justice),¹⁴ and some climate action organizations describe including local actors as an “ethical responsibility.”¹⁵

This concept of local agency is important when it comes to climate mobility projects because the perspective of international actors does not always reflect the views of the local community. For example, some local NGOs reject pro-migration narratives advanced by international experts and organizations and argue that climate migration is “not a choice,”¹⁶ instead wanting investments to help residents adapt in place. Similarly, local actors often feel that development projects ought to be far more ambitious (and costly) than what international donors provide, or in the case of climate action, they may want donor governments to cut emissions (e.g., closing fossil fuel projects) much quicker than those government plan to—diverging perspectives are critical parts of any just, equitable development cooperation.¹⁷ Treating local actors as an afterthought, rather than as equal partners, in program design and funding conversations leads to less effective solutions and can be seen as compounding injustice.

Localization can also make projects more cost-efficient and see more funding spent in target communities. International organizations often have higher operating costs than local ones in low- and middle-income countries,¹⁸ and traditional modes of aid and development assistance often see most

BOX 2**Localization and Climate Mobility in the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage**

In 2022, governments agreed to establish a fund to respond to loss and damage, the costs that occur after climate mitigation and adaptation fail. The mandate of the fund includes addressing costs related to displacement, relocation, and migration, as well as promoting direct engagement at the local level, where appropriate, “to facilitate efficiency and the achievement of concrete results.” Driven by a commitment to climate justice, the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage poses an opportunity to put localization at the heart of efforts to address climate mobility.

However, questions have already emerged about how to do so. Alongside efforts to increase the volume of funding—the USD 660 million committed so far is only a fraction of the annual estimated need for loss and damage funding, which is predicted to reach 300–580 *billion*—a key debate is how to localize the allocation of grants under this fund. Unlike other international climate funds dedicated to climate mitigation and adaptation, which primarily work through large projects awarded to national governments or international partners, the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage could offer small grant funding to local communities—presenting an important opportunity to test locally run climate mobility projects. This is due in part to strong advocacy from climate justice actors, who have insisted the fund should directly support the local communities hit hardest.

How this mechanism will be operationalized remains to be decided. During intergovernmental debates and meetings of the fund’s board, more than 350 civil-society actors signed a letter advocating for a dedicated funding window for local communities (i.e., earmarked funding and a specific process by which to access it). This reflected concerns that localization was being deprioritized, and the need for more work to ensure that loss and damage funding reaches the local level. The civil-society groups also argued that other international climate funds often consult them after decisions are made, rather than as part of decision-making, and called for the board of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage to include community representatives in equal roles as other board members.

Sources: Oxfam, “[Lessons Learned for a Loss and Damage Fund That is Locally-Led and Gender Transformative](#)” (Oxfam submission to the fourth meeting of the transitional committee, September 2023); Ayesha Dinshaw and Stefanie Tye, “[How Community-Led Funding Can Unleash the Potential of the Loss and Damage Fund](#),” World Resources Institute, August 28, 2023; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, “[Report of the Conference of the Parties on its Twenty-Eighth Session, Held in the United Arab Emirates from 30 November to 13 December 2023, Addendum, Part Two: Action Taken by the Conference of the Parties at its Twenty-Eighth Session](#)” (meeting report, March 15, 2024); Reinhard Mechler et al., eds, *Loss and Damage from Climate Change: Concepts, Methods and Policy Options* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Loss and Damage Collaboration et al., “[Open Letter to the Board of the Loss and Damage Fund on Direct Community Access](#)” (open letter signed by more than 350 national, regional, and international organizations, July 9, 2024).

funding go to large firms and consultancies based in Global North countries. One analysis of U.S. aid found that only 10 percent went to foreign governments, firms, and nonprofits, while 60 percent was spent on U.S. government salaries and goods or went to U.S.-based firms and nonprofits, and about 30 percent went to international organizations (multilateral bodies and NGOs).¹⁹ Thus, adopting a business-as-usual model in climate mobility projects

may recreate global inequalities, whereas a localized approach may get more funding directly to climate-affected countries’ governments, cities, and communities.

The growing momentum behind addressing climate mobility, including within the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, poses a narrow window of opportunity. The field is still being formed, with new

donors beginning to fund climate mobility projects every year and more partners able to implement these projects. Embedding localization as a guiding principle within this new field could set it up well from the start and serve as an important model for other humanitarian, development, climate, and migration programming going forward. Doing so, however, requires better understanding of why the localization agenda has been so difficult to implement thus far.

3 The Limitations of Localization, and Paths Forward

Localization can make projects more effective, sustainable, and just, but it is not a silver bullet. Local actors are often only included in a cursory fashion or as implementors of internationally designed and driven activities, missing some of the potential benefits of their involvement. In some high-risk conflict areas, such as Syria, local organizations may also be contracted to manage a project's operations so that international agencies do not have to deploy their own staff and take on the associated risks.²⁰ And focusing on the local level can bypass national governments—important players and key development partners in the climate mobility space since they are in charge of the formation and implementation of their countries' climate adaptation and mitigation policies, as well as migration policy.

To date, concrete localization efforts have been limited. This is not specific to the climate mobility field, as the development and climate sectors at large lag behind on this objective. In early 2024, only 10 percent of funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development went to local actors, well short of its goal of reaching 25 percent by 2025.²¹ Other donors such as Canada,²² the European Union,²³ and the United Kingdom²⁴ are not delivering on their lo-

calization ambitions either. Similarly, local access to climate funding has long been a priority, for instance through the Global Environment Facility (which has a dedicated Small Grants Program for local civil-society organizations and community-based organizations).²⁵ But such efforts have yet to achieve scale; one analysis of the 16 main international climate and development funds found that less than 10 percent of climate finance goes to the local level.²⁶

Climate mobility as a policy area poses certain additional challenges, pointing to a need to rethink the way local actors can best partner with funders, larger organizations, and national governments to access funding, shape program design, implement projects, and monitor their outcomes.

A. *What Makes Localization Difficult, Especially on Climate Mobility*

A fundamental challenge to localization in the climate mobility field is that this relatively novel policy area does not have clearly established networks of local actors with expertise and demonstrated project implementation capacity, unlike other development sectors such as health, education, and agriculture. Some local actors working on climate mobility do exist, but they may not have the websites, English-language communications materials, or networks to make themselves visible to donors. Others may work in this space but not self-identify as climate mobility actors—for example, a migration-focused NGO that works on issues associated with climate change, or an environmental NGO whose programs sometimes touch on human mobility. Thus, although there are tools to help match donors with local actors,²⁷ finding such actors ready to implement climate mobility projects can still be difficult.

This challenge of finding the right local partners is critical, but in some cases, it may not be necessary or reasonable to expect a local actor to have extensive in-house climate mobility expertise. For instance, a city investing in new housing could ensure it is climate resilient and decide to make it accessible to unauthorized migrants, even without expertise specifically on climate mobility. Similarly, a small NGO may have knowledge of the local environment, migration dynamics, or another related topic, but not all of the above, and still bring valuable insights to a climate mobility project (plus, specialization in climate mobility may make it harder for small organizations to access funding in other fields). IOM funded several development-focused NGOs in Ethiopia to implement green approaches to migrants' reintegration, and they were able to do so even though the NGOs' core work did not include climate change or migration.²⁸ This partnership was only possible, however, thanks to IOM's long-standing networks in Ethiopia. And while local actors can prove to be valuable partners even without specific climate mobility expertise, it may also confine them to narrower implementation role. For example, in a joint-UN program on climate migration in East Africa, UN agencies contracted with two local NGOs in Turkana County, Kenya, and Mogadishu, Somalia, to implement activities, but did not thoroughly consult national and local authorities or civil-society groups before deciding on the geography and scope of the interventions.²⁹

The other main challenge is the often-limited technical and administrative capacity of the few local actors who are active on climate mobility. Even actors with climate mobility expertise may lack some of the technical skills needed for projects, such as data analysis or engineering. And because of the cross-cutting nature of this field, actors may have specialized knowledge in one but not all relevant areas. For example, migrant-focused NGOs might know how refugee status affects access to social protections such as health services but not how climate

change affects social protection needs or access. Also, local NGOs and even local authorities typically do not have the structural and long-term funding needed to hire and retain sizable teams with such expertise. They also generally cannot receive multi-million-dollar grants because of their limited financial management and audit capacities, and they may lack the monitoring and evaluation expertise to meet reporting requirements. This can make such entities a poor match for donors' standard approach of making larger grants, which can be easier to issue and may be needed for some big climate mobility projects such as community relocation.³⁰

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As a result, donors tend to default to working with familiar (and large) implementing partners,³¹ especially as they are still testing approaches to climate mobility programming.³² UN agencies such as IOM have increasingly positioned themselves as trusted actors on climate mobility: they have offices in the countries where climate action is most needed, have produced extensive research on the topic,³³ and have implemented a wide range of pilot projects.³⁴ Still, new partnerships are emerging, and IOM, in particular, is working to strengthen the participation of local actors, including cities and civil-society groups. For instance, an IOM initiative launched in January 2024 seeks to enhance the capacity of municipalities in three Ethiopian cities and five Burundian provinces through research, training of local actors, and a community-based climate adaptation initiative in Ethiopia.³⁵ Other assets that larger, well-established organizations bring to a project include their track record of both navigating political sensitivities and heavily promoting project results. Since the climate mobility field is highly politicized,

donors may prefer to work with larger bilateral or UN agencies that have experience working on contested issues (and that donors trust to avoid political problems). Similarly, donors that want to be seen as active on climate mobility may opt to partner with these large international organizations in part because they, unlike many small local actors, have communication teams that can widely promote positive impact stories and showcase donors' contributions.³⁶ Ultimately, as donors have faced growing pressure from the public and their leadership to respond to climate mobility, these have largely been their go-to partners.

B. *How to Better Include Local Actors in Climate Mobility Interventions*

While local authorities and NGOs may not have the same ability to absorb large grants and manage sizable infrastructure projects as international organizations or a country's national government, they can fulfill critical functions within climate mobility projects. These include assessing local needs, guiding and implementing activities, and advocating for better, more context-appropriate responses to climate mobility challenges at the local, national, and international levels. Leveraging these strengths, however, may require new ways of working.

Local Engagement from Day 1

Local actors should be engaged from the start of a project in the assessment of local needs and development of solutions. These stakeholders are well placed to articulate local priorities, identify other partners who need to be mobilized, and ensure policies and interventions are relevant and inclusive. This community engagement can take different forms, such as consultations and town hall meetings. It could also involve participatory workshops in which a diversity of local stakeholders and resident

profiles are represented and that employ methods adapted to the local context and participant backgrounds (e.g., visualization, role-playing, storytelling, scenario-building).³⁷

The main limitation of community engagement to date is that it is often conducted in an ad hoc manner, rather than through sustained and inclusive consultations over time.³⁸ Improving on this status quo requires both forethought and resources. Meetings and other convenings require significant resources to organize, and local actors should be financially compensated for their time (e.g., when asking civil-society groups to convene local leaders or conduct a gender analysis to inform programming). Skilled facilitation is also critical to ensure consultations have clear objectives, that information is gathered in a way that can help shape future policy-making and programming, and that all participants have appropriate expectations for the process and feel their contributions are valued. Many development and climate actors have experience with participatory methods and can leverage resources at their disposal to overcome participation barriers and communicate results (see Box 3).

Ongoing Opportunities to Guide Projects

Embedding local actors in a program's steering committee can ensure they have a role throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation phases of the program. For such an approach to be effective, it needs a clear system for selecting members (e.g., local elections, transparent selection criteria), preparing them to participate in the committee (e.g., briefings, mock exercises), giving them a well-defined role in decision-making, and compensating them for their involvement. This practice has been widely tested by international organizations and enables local actors to provide more structural input than one-off, initial consultations. For example, between 2022 and 2023, IOM included the Senegalese municipality of Pikine and district council (*conseil*

BOX 3**Learning from Participatory Approaches to Climate Adaptation**

Development agencies have built expertise in participatory approaches for local stakeholder engagement on displacement issues, and climate actors are increasingly turning to these methodologies to develop climate adaptation plans. The United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat), for instance, has developed guidance for participatory local adaptation planning, with a nine-step process that begins with identifying relevant stakeholders and conducting vulnerability assessments. By 2009, the agency had tested this approach in Kampala, Uganda, and begun to mainstream climate change considerations into local development plans and pilot projects, made possible by the engagement of both a core planning group and a wider network of local stakeholders.

Other participatory planning exercises have underscored the need to tailor the approach to the local context and to mobilize the full spectrum of relevant stakeholders. Local champions, whether in local government or the wider community, may be different across contexts but are often needed to gather input from and cultivate the buy-in of local residents. One project conducted in three Latin American cities where local authorities lacked the internal capacity or expertise to develop robust climate resilience and urban development plans (Dosquebradas, Colombia; Santa Ana, El Salvador; and Santo Tomé, Argentina) found that participatory planning surfaced important contextual factors and challenges that could inform and strengthen such plans.

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départementale) of Rufisque in the steering committee of a small project on labor migration, agriculture, and urbanization.³⁹

Committees do not necessarily guarantee better program outcomes, and they can sometimes become tick-the-box exercises rather than substantively informing and steering projects, but they can help anchor activities locally. In all of this, internal and external communications are particularly important to committee operations, for instance to ensure committee members convey the trade-offs and reasoning behind key decisions to their wider communities.

A Direct Role in Implementation, and Funding to Match

Local actors should also have a greater role in directly implementing climate mobility projects. Donors can help ensure this is possible through direct support, such as grants to grassroots movements, civil-society organizations, or cities. Direct and predictable funding is critical to ensure that organizations have the permanent staff and structures to run a program and that staff are well trained. Local actors can also receive grants distributed indirectly, through a trust fund or pooled fund. The Pacific Island Communities Climate Fund, managed by the Global Centre for Climate Mobility, is an example of

this approach and provides small grants for community-based initiatives in the Pacific Islands.⁴⁰ Finally, local actors can receive international funding by acting as subcontractors for larger entities such as UN agencies or international NGOs.⁴¹ This method may be particularly relevant for local actors that do not have climate mobility experience but are keen to build their portfolio of work in this area.

Directing a greater share of international funding to local actors will require donors to reform certain administrative and financial processes.⁴² They may, for example, need to consider making more investments in small grant programs and simplifying selection processes and financial reporting requirements for small grants to make them more accessible to local partners. However, funding models that are project-based or rely on subcontracting through large international organizations (which usually receive funding for central overhead expenditures while local organizations might not) can make it difficult for local actors to build up the expertise and capacity to take on larger projects.⁴³ Donors with the technical and procedural capacities, and the risk appetite, could instead provide unrestricted, flexible funding to local actors, especially civil-society organizations, to enable them to build their capacity and staffing and to react to changing local needs and circumstances, for instance after disasters strike.⁴⁴

Local Voices on the Global Stage

Finally, efforts to raise the visibility of local organizations and their climate mobility work at the global level can help inspire other local actors as well as shape the priorities of donors and international players.⁴⁵ This outreach can happen in partnership with international actors, and ideally shift from the dynamic whereby a donor designs a program and selects a partner to implement it, toward a more balanced relationship between international and local actors working together to co-create interventions.⁴⁶ In 2023, for instance, the Cities Summit of the

Americas hosted mayors from across the region to discuss climate mobility, resulting in a USD 1 million commitment from the United States to fund climate migration projects in Latin American cities.⁴⁷

Many local actors may be new to engagement in national or international policy conversations and could benefit from support in this area. This may involve providing training and technical assistance, or setting up networks and peer-support groups for local NGOs and local authorities to help them participate effectively in regional and global processes. This support could be provided, for instance, through the Mayors Migration Council or civil-society platforms (such as Samuel Hall's Feminist Coalition-Building Exercise on Gender, Climate Change, and Mobility).⁴⁸

4 Conclusion: Strategies to Localize Climate Mobility Programming

Governments, international organizations, and civil-society groups tend to agree with the principle of localization. Almost all now recognize the value of systematically including local voices—in ways that go beyond box-ticking exercises. Thus, the question is no longer *why* to pursue localization, but rather *how*. Embedding localization into the field of climate mobility will require concerted effort from international, national, and local actors. International donors and other development actors will need to strengthen their approaches and networks for identifying local partners, invest in meaningful consultations, and rethink certain internal structures and processes to ensure they are able to effectively fund and support local actors. Local NGOs and municipalities, meanwhile, will need to showcase their added value to climate mobility projects and strengthen their capacity to play an active role in them, often in partnership with international actors and following

national policy frameworks and priorities. In this, both sets of actors could benefit from learning from existing approaches to localized programming and exploring new ways of working together.

Recommendations for International Partners

International donors (whether multilateral development banks, governments, philanthropies, or the private sector) and development agencies aiming to better localize their work may need to adapt some of their traditional modes of working and proactively seek out and foster local and national partnerships. At minimum, they should aim for robust local consultation across projects, and at best, provide flexible funding and directly contract with local actors to implement projects. Promising strategies for doing so include:

- ▶ **Leverage philanthropy to build up new approaches:** Funding projects with local actors is often riskier and more resource-intensive in terms of project management compared to big-budget projects implemented by UN agencies. Compared to other players in the donor landscape, philanthropic actors are often more able to work with small-sized and higher-risk initiatives. They are therefore well positioned to push the envelope, as the Mayors Migration Council does at the city level and as the Climate Justice Resilience Fund does with its participatory and practitioner-led approach to grantmaking, including with local projects on climate mobility.⁴⁹ Foundations could choose to either pilot new approaches or work with new local partners, creating proof of concept for project types that larger donors may then decide to take forward.⁵⁰ Philanthropy may also be better able to offer funding to local actors that is flexible, long term, and not tied to a specific project, giving them the stability to grow their staffing and expertise on climate mobility and their capacity to secure other kinds of funding in the future.
- ▶ **Experiment with funding local-level climate mobility responses, even if the risks are greater:** Government donors have some, but not unlimited, flexibility in how they allocate grants. Often, the best tool to kickstart novel and/or riskier types of programming is dedicated funding earmarked for such projects. The European Union's Lives in Dignity Grant Facility⁵¹ and the United Kingdom's Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund⁵² are good examples of government funding mechanisms that are explicitly intended to enhance innovation and, in the case of the EU grant facility, to support localization. While local projects on climate mobility are not necessarily risky, donors may wish to use these limited pots of money to simultaneously test out new approaches to climate mobility and ways of engaging with local partners. However, these should not be the only funding mechanisms for localized climate mobility programming. Donors should also consider the potential benefits and trade-offs of more systematic reforms to other funding streams to make them more accessible to local actors.
- ▶ **Prioritize mobility projects within other climate financing sources:** From the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage to the Global Environment Facility's Small Grants Program, there is growing interest in ensuring that climate funds both reach local actors and cover displacement-related projects. When it comes to deciding which of the many potential climate-related topics should be prioritized and how to make the funding accessible to local communities, these climate funds rely on guidance from their donors (national governments) as well as information from experts and other stakeholders on the

needs of different countries and communities. Climate funds will not necessarily go to migration or displacement projects and to projects that espouse the principles of localization, given the host of other priorities; donors and other stakeholders that wish to see funding for such projects will need to advocate for this outcome.

▶ **Invest in growing the pipeline of local actors prepared to take an active role in climate mobility programming:** A

fundamental challenge for localization efforts in this area is that even if donors want to turn to local actors for climate migration projects, it is often hard to find partners with the right blend of expertise, technical skills, and capacity. Four ways to support growth in this pool of local actors are: (1) Donors could signal they are ready to support long-term programs in this field, for instance by updating their funding strategies to prioritize localization and climate mobility, which could encourage local organizations to pivot and/or showcase their activities on climate mobility. (2) They could provide civil-society organizations access to core funding, given this is often a main obstacle for smaller organizations seeking to build expertise and capacity on climate mobility issues. (3) International actors could identify and partner with municipalities that have shown political commitment to addressing climate mobility by developing local climate mobility plans and policies, or that have participated in city networks or peer exchanges on climate mobility. (4) Donors could enhance the visibility of local initiatives and actors among other donors by showcasing their work in global dialogues and funding research that identifies good local practices, potentially inspiring others to take similar actions.

▶ **Produce actionable and local climate migration data, evidence, and knowledge:**

Without a clear picture of migration- and climate-change-related challenges at the local level, cities and local actors cannot effectively plan or advocate for greater funding, and donors will find it hard to know how to best prioritize their funds. Local researchers in academia and civil society can be key players in analyzing local contexts and challenges, often in partnership with international actors that have relevant expertise.⁵³ Donors can help promote the growth of this evidence base and the roster of local experts based in the Global South by funding research, modeling, scenario exercises, and more. In turn, more work is needed to translate the knowledge and data produced by these and past research projects so that they can effectively inform future programming. This could involve disseminating studies' results in local languages as well as organizing workshops dedicated to discussing findings with local partners.

▶ **Share lessons and good practices on localizing climate mobility programming among donors:**

The climate mobility donor landscape is fragmented and lacks mechanisms to systematically share knowledge. And because humanitarian and development funding is not always advertised (and when it is, funding notices and decisions may lack detail), there is scarce public information about which donors are supporting climate mobility projects and how funding is split between actors. This is especially true when funding goes to large UN organizations that then disperse it to a range of local implementing partners. Making such information available could help boost understanding of models of

cooperation at the international, national, and local levels, and perhaps encourage other donors to replicate or experiment with similar approaches.

Recommendations for Local Actors

Municipalities, local NGOs, and other grassroots or community-based organizations can do more to position themselves to become key partners in climate mobility activities. Approaches include:

- ▶ **Be strategic about engagement with international partners and aware of the trade-offs:** The largest funding sources (especially multilateral development banks and big climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund, as well as certain government funding streams) are unlikely to fund small local actors directly. Instead, local actors may need to look at philanthropy as a starting point,⁵⁴ since philanthropic organizations tend to have greater flexibility and more modest grant management requirements, before looking for larger funding sources such as the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage or donor governments that may only fund larger projects or have grant requirements too complex for small organizations. Still, philanthropic funding can be relatively modest and raise questions about sustainability. Some local actors have been successful in receiving funds from intermediaries, such as the Mayors Migration Council or Cities Alliance.⁵⁵ Such intermediaries can help get funding to the local level and enhance learning and cooperation among local actors. Ideally, intermediaries should also help local actors build their capacity to eventually access funding directly.
- ▶ **Design partnerships with large NGOs and UN agencies in ways that are equitable, sustainable, and strengthen local actors' capacity:** Small local actors typically lack the finance, auditing, and fundraising staff to apply for and manage large funds. Partnerships between smaller and larger NGOs or between small local actors and large UN agencies can help. For instance, partnerships between the Bangladeshi NGO Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program and the large French aid organization Secours Catholique over many years have been key to enabling the former to grow its staffing and capacity, including on climate mobility.⁵⁶ Similarly, civil-society organizations in Ghana have formed consortia (although not specifically on climate mobility) around a relatively large lead organization able to access international funding, which is then split among smaller organizations that take the lead on specific activities.⁵⁷ Such partnerships should be designed so that local actors are seen as full partners, rather than just implementors or beneficiaries, and increasing local capacities should be an explicit goal rather than a potential positive side effect.
- ▶ **Showcase the comparative advantage of local actors by speaking donors' language:** As donor interest in climate mobility increases, local actors should seek ways to better articulate their work and how it meets donors' strategic priorities. Often, the types of work done to help a community adapt to climate change have impacts on residents' mobility. Similarly, the work done to protect displaced people and other migrants may support those moving because of climate impacts or protect them from climate shocks.

However, these projects are not always articulated as addressing the intersections between climate change and migration. By investing in communications capacity, and in some cases making minor changes to projects, local actors could make their work's climate mobility dimension more visible to donors. In other cases, an organization may wish to make more substantive changes to its activities to appeal to donor priorities.

There are challenges and limitations to shifting power and funding to local actors, and there will always be a need for national and international partners

to implement larger programs and ensure policy coherence and coordination across programs. But the benefits of localization are undeniable. Turning the principle of localization into reality can be difficult, and particularly so in a new, politicized, and complex field such as climate mobility, but there are small, practical steps that can be taken now to pave the way toward more systematic integration of local partners and better program outcomes in the years to come. Moving forward, prioritizing localization while testing and scaling climate mobility solutions will be critical to ensuring effective, sustainable, and just programming.

There are small, practical steps that can be taken now to pave the way toward more systematic integration of local partners and better program outcomes in the years to come.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgments

This issue brief was produced by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) as part of a four-part series on issues related to climate change and migration, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. An early version of this brief was tabled at a roundtable entitled “Localizing Solutions to Climate Mobility” in July 2024.

The authors thank the participants of that roundtable, especially advisory board members Hind Aïssaoui Bennani, Alex de Sherbinin, Dennis Mombauer, and Lisa Thalheimer, for their expert feedback. They are also grateful to the officials who agreed to be interviewed for this study from the International Organization for Migration, Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program, Nuestro Futuro, Programa Salvadoreño de Investigación sobre Desarrollo y Medio Ambiente, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development, South American Network for Environmental Migrations, and FIMA.

The authors also thank their MPI colleagues, including Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan for her smart review, Lauren Shaw for her thorough edits, Michelle Mittelstadt for her dissemination support, Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh for her valuable research assistance and the interviews she conducted, and Chiara Lonoce for her support with research.

MPI is an independent, nonpartisan policy research organization that adheres to the highest standard of rigor and integrity in its work. All analysis, recommendations, and policy ideas advanced by MPI are solely determined by its researchers.

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Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI
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Suggested citation: Huang, Lawrence and Camille Le Coz. 2024. *Engaging Local Communities for More Effective Climate Mobility Programming*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



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The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, nonpartisan think tank that seeks to improve immigration and integration policies through authoritative research and analysis, opportunities for learning and dialogue, and the development of new ideas to address complex policy questions.



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