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# Assessing local governments' preparedness and willingness to welcome climate and disaster-displaced populations

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Environmental hazards and climate change are displacing millions of people globally. Many regions and cities have, or will soon become, the frontline recipient destinations for domestic and foreign climate migrants, but how well prepared are local governments for resettling newcomers, and what factors determine when local communities are willing to welcome displaced residents? This paper reviews how local governments in the United States seek to actualize effective and equitable climate resettlement through the proposal of a community-led, inclusive receiving community framework. The framework identifies how the interrelationships between government, market, and community actors co-determine the preparedness and willingness of local governments to expand programs, plans, and initiatives for resettling diverse climate and disaster-displaced populations. The framework validates how equity and inclusion require deliberative logics of care and establishing strategic goals for mutual opportunity in climate destinations. Finally, this perspective proposes that local governments develop and complete an absorptive capacity impact assessment to help estimate the volume and types of climate migrants the community can receive over time and support community-led planning processes.

## KEYWORDS

capacity assessment, climate migration, climate mobility, hazard management and mitigation, managed retreat, receiving communities, resettlement capacity

## Introduction

Climate change and disasters drive millions of people to relocate annually. More than 3 million residents in the United States relocated due to environmental hazards in 2023, with about one-third of disaster survivors not able to return home for 6 months or longer or not at all ([Rumbach and McTarnaghan, 2023](#)). Globally, about 45.6 million people were internally displaced due to natural hazards in 2024 ([IDMC - Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025](#)).

Ideally, every displaced person could relocate to areas of minimal climate risks in which their presence would prove mutually beneficial for them and the host community, and governmental policies would offer choices in where and how to relocate. Yet governments have struggled to redirect migration flows to environmentally secure regions that could best serve newcomers. Building local capacity and willingness to accept newcomers takes time, so displaced individuals find and build home where they find economic opportunity and available shelter, often in locations subject to the same environmental risks that forced their exodus ([Guadagno, 2021](#); [Guadagno and Yonetani, 2023](#)). While many

destinations can integrate smaller numbers of newcomers, an influx of new arrivals might induce protectionism and backlash. Since reactionary modes of land use governance can lead to untenable growth, climate destinations must prepare and build a willingness among residents to accept new migrants and upgrade and expand infrastructure and services to accommodate population growth.

This perspective clarifies how preparedness levels influence the willingness of local governments to expand programs, plans, and initiatives for resettling diverse climate and disaster-displaced populations. A community's willingness to accept environmentally displaced peoples emerges when the inter-relationships between government, market, and community actors find mutual benefits. Previous research has established the importance of infrastructural capacities to accommodate new growth, but what social processes would ensure more equitable trajectories of newcomer integration, and how should success be measured?

This perspective seeks to move climate mobility research toward acknowledging that with sufficient planning and political will, cities in the United States can manage the growth challenges resulting from dynamic population shifts due to hazards and climate change.

The research focuses on:

- Evaluating how municipalities might conduct a capacity assessment to determine how many climate migrants their communities can realistically support, and
- Implementing inclusivity targets within local and regional plans, so that resettlement efforts benefit both long term residents and new arrivals while protecting the local ecological environment.

## The paradox of local inclusion following disaster resettlement

In disaster recovery policy and scholarship, inclusion objectives have largely focused on participation processes in recovery and reconstruction, aiming to ensure that those displaced by disasters are able to rebuild or secure housing at or near affected sites. Within the United States, very few local governments have experimented with moving displaced families into different municipalities. State-level managed retreat programs, such as the New York Rising Community Reconstruction and New Jersey Blue Acres flood buyout programs, enabled mobility away from high-risk areas but did not establish inter-municipal relocation programs. Indigenous communities in Alaska, Washington, and Louisiana are undergoing community-driven relocation at the frontlines of sea level rise and coastal erosion, but these efforts strive to relocate residents nearby. Disaster-based displacements have been far-reaching for many Americans, such as the thousands of Louisianans who moved out-of-state following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Puerto Ricans who moved to the continental U.S. after Hurricane Maria in 2017 (Sastry and Gregory, 2014; Hinojosa et al., 2018). There has been little governmental accounting for the outcomes of migrants within their new communities nor evaluation of their impacts on destination sites. Likewise, the lack of an official "climate refugee" status makes it difficult to evaluate outcomes for externally displaced climate migrants who have moved to the United States, and outcomes for residents and communities relocated following hazard events remain a significant research gap (Lieberknecht and Mueller, 2023).

## Advancing inclusive rhetoric into reality

Contemporary policy discourse asserts that inclusive processes naturally yield inclusive outcomes. Such assumptions ignore how persistent power imbalances and institutional barriers can constrain actors from translating inclusive rhetoric into more substantive efforts. For instance, the phrase "community-driven relocation" has been proposed as an alternative to "managed retreat" because it better connotes the roles of process and community leadership in equitable climate resettlement (Hilke, 2025). Operationally, the terms "community-driven" and "community-led" are sometimes novel and underdefined in policy design. FEMA's "Whole Community" approach outlines two principles, "Involving people in the development of national preparedness documents," and "Ensuring their roles and responsibilities are reflected in the content of the materials," signifying that inclusivity should be considered but neither equitable outcomes nor significant community-based leadership are denoted (FEMA, 2020). The White House's, 2024 report on federal support for community-driven relocation promotes the idea that equitable, community-led processes would best respect individuals' autonomy and communities' self-determination to relocate (White House, 2024), but the document does not explore how the realities of classism, racism, xenophobia, and NIMBYism can permeate local land use politics. Consequently, federal guidance assumes local governments can respond effectively to policy gaps and leaves localities fully responsible for determining how to synergize meaningful public engagement or communication between sending and receiving areas.

Respecting local control remains a vexing challenge for federal and state governments attempting to make climate resettlement policies more responsive to the needs and desires of newcomers and long-term residents. For instance, many municipalities struggled to meet federal timelines while attempting to tailor programs like HUD's Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program to their unique demographic and political landscapes. Following Hurricane Sandy, communities in New York State needed to make recovery activities for flood buyouts and housing reconstruction meet the Low- and Moderate-Income (LMI) requirement for their CDBG-DR grant (McDonnell et al., 2018). While federal grants can provide an influx of funds that could be earmarked for inclusionary housing, municipalities dedicate greater efforts making reconstruction funds conform to the bureaucratic procedures and criteria demanded by federal programs instead of implementing or experimenting with local inclusion goals for new housing. Consequently, reconstruction for homeowners has been prioritized over meeting the long-term housing needs of renters (US Government Accountability Office, 2010; Ferreira et al., 2024). Because federal disaster grants are only available for disaster-struck counties, then destination areas outside of the disaster-affected region do not receive the funds needed to address the housing instability, food insecurity, or emotional support services needed for newcomers (Drew and Tamsamani, 2023).

Without major policy shifts to ensure more resources are distributed to receiving communities, then market forces such as rising rents and speculative development can displace both newcomers and long-standing residents. In climate resettlement contexts, where the receiving communities are expected to absorb displaced populations without adequate resources or programming, then rising income inequality and economic precarity can foster protectionist public attitudes. Without a clear processual definition of "community-driven"

resettlement, then the term remains more aspirational than actionable. Seemingly neutral criteria can mask structural biases, so explicit goals for equity should be proposed, such as inclusive zoning reforms, multilingual public engagement, and mutually beneficial outcomes tailored to economic and social goals.

## Research methodology

The motivation to analyze the capacities of climate destinations is the result of a study conducted from 2018 to 21 that evaluated the New York Rising Community Reconstruction Program (NY Rising) program’s state-funded flood buyouts that were instrumentalized for managed retreat in NY State following 2011’s Tropical Storm Lee and Hurricane Irene and 2012’s Superstorm Sandy (Enriquez, 2021). This dissertation focused on disaster recovery and general relocation patterns for flood buyout sites in five municipalities but did not investigate individual mobility patterns or buyout recipients’ out-of-state destinations. The author’s managed retreat research has since evolved from its singular focus on disaster recovery in sending areas to include ongoing interviews with public officials, NGOs/CBOs, and academics engaged with migration, mobility, and growth management in four metro areas in New York State with the potential to become climate destinations: Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and the Greater Capital District (Albany). While these Upstate NY communities are small to medium-sized Rustbelt contexts, the literature review was national in scope for generalizability and to review the range of policy approaches employed by municipalities throughout the United States.

Utilizing Google Scholar, Web of Science, and university library search engines, the author has conducted targeted searches for recovery efforts following major disaster declarations including Hurricanes

Sandy (2012), Harvey, Irma, Maria (2017), Ida (2021), Ian (2022), and Helene (2024), the 2021 Western Kentucky tornado, the 2023 Lahaina fire, and prominent wildfires in California and flood events throughout the US since 2020. Over 60 articles were generated that met general criteria about disaster recovery, but many academic studies for relevant cases did not track relocation or migration pathways for displaced households, so gray literature and periodical articles were included that featured stories of relocatees or otherwise confirmed destination sites. Then, results were filtered such that only articles and reports in which some analysis and discussion of challenges and opportunities from accommodating the relocatees at the receiving sites were included. A total of 25 papers and reports were reviewed. Given the recency bias of searches that consist largely of hazard events still undergoing recovery efforts, the number of relevant articles, books, and reports should expand soon. Only two articles have been published for the four Upstate NY cities in which the author is assessing resettlement capacity, both centered on Buffalo. To expand insights on willingness and preparedness to accommodate diverse newcomers, including those who fled slow onset events and the loss of economic livelihoods due to climate change, the literature review was expanded by an additional 15 articles to include growth management and refugee integration efforts.

## Findings

Effective newcomer incorporation relies on opportunities from market forces and grassroots solidarity efforts to reduce structural barriers. Figure 1 offers a framework for understanding how receiving sites promote inclusivity, mutual benefits, and a sense of belonging based on the intersection of community, market, and government

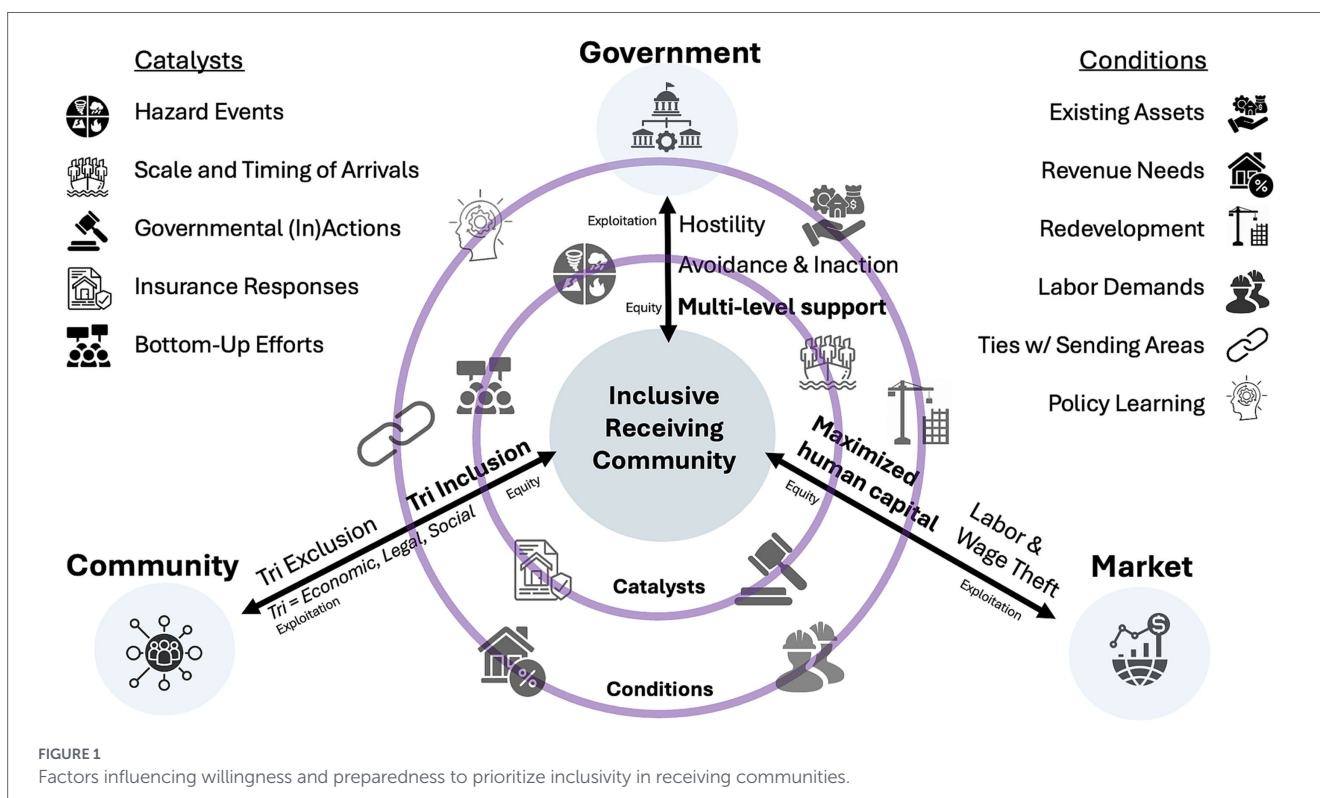


FIGURE 1 Factors influencing willingness and preparedness to prioritize inclusivity in receiving communities.

responses to new residents. The convergence of outcomes produced by government support, community acceptance, and market responses will determine how well prepared and willing municipalities are to become a more inclusive destination. Outcomes are contingent on enabling and disabling qualities produced by ‘catalysts’ and ‘conditions,’ which can compel each domain to advance inclusivity and equity, or push efforts away.

## Factors influencing willingness and preparedness

To become more effective at embedding inclusion objectives in climate resettlement planning, municipalities must recognize which factors most relate to the willingness and preparedness of communities to welcome newcomers displaced by climate change and disasters. In general, the public derives their willingness to accept diverse in-migrants based on their ideologies of care and recognition of opportunity. Stakeholders’ logics of care determine their sense of moral obligation to help, in which underlying value systems also interpret the “deservingness” of relocatees to be granted residency in the community, while their sense of pragmatism recognizes the opportunities for mutual benefit that can be gained from accommodating new arrivals.

## Catalysts for triggering local response

Catalysts are external or internal pressures that compel local governments to act, whether proactively or reactively. The literature on climate resettlement identifies five common themes for catalyzing local response in receiving areas: hazard events, the scale and timing of arrivals, governmental actions and inaction, insurance responses to climate change and disaster events, and bottom-up, grassroots pressures.

## Hazard events

Environmental and man-made hazards produce displacements at small and large scales in sudden or prolonged periods. Sudden disasters, such as hurricanes, wildfires, and floods, tend to create immediate displacement. Local governments must respond quickly, often improvising shelter, services, and coordination with NGOs to provide housing. For instance, over 100 partners contributed to the creation of Ka La’i Ola, the 57-acre village in Lahaina that houses about 900 people displaced by the 2023 wildfires in Maui, Hawaii (Kalaiola.org, 2025). Despite efforts to resettle victims locally, tax records reveal that at least 369 residents have left Maui County with 242 moving out of state (Moore and Karacaovali, 2025). With mass-displacement events, some out-migrants may intend to return home but end up relocating permanently. In contrast, slow-onset events, such as sea-level rise or droughts, tend to lead to gradual migration without intent to return to sending areas. Most initial moves are domestic, though some internally displaced peoples eventually seek residency abroad.

Sudden and slow-onset events can overlap within peoples’ migration journeys. For example, many Haitians who awaited crossing the US-Mexico border in 2021–2023 had initially taken residence in Brazil and Chile following the devastating 2010 earthquake (Watkins et al., 2025). Political unrest, prolonged housing and economic insecurities,

and environmental vulnerability motivated thousands to make the perilous journey across the Darién Gap, which connects Colombia and Panama, through Central America and Mexico to the U.S. border. At one point, the volume of arrivals overwhelmed immigration processing capacities and about 15,000 Haitians were camped beneath the international bridge in Del Rio, TX (García, 2021). Once they entered the United States, many were soon deported back to Haiti or sent to Mexico while thousands granted temporary “parole” residency status were bussed to various cities throughout the US, with many settling in Florida, New York, and Massachusetts (Gauthier, 2024).

## The scale and timing of arrivals

The preceding example of Haitian migrants corroborates how the scale and timing of new arrivals tend to dictate how governments respond. Sudden, large influxes generate greater public attention, while the arrival of small numbers of in-migrants over a gradual period might not generate much visibility. Public perceptions of arrival groups often shape who is deemed a “legitimate” climate migrant (Harris et al., 2024). More visible axes of difference (e.g., race, language, legal status) can trigger backlash or encourage solidarity.

The legal status vacuum has prevented local governments from more systematically dedicating greater resettlement programming for immigrants, shifting such burdens to local actors, especially non-profits and humanitarian organizations. Scholars, activists, and policymakers have long debated the merits of designating an official “climate refugee” status to migrants whose displacement was partially or wholly due to climate change and/or hazard-based displacement. Some have posited that climate change as a driver of displacement could evoke greater public support, but others remain skeptical that subjectivity to disaster merits more deservingness for entry or access to services than other residents. The third sector (NGOs, faith-based groups) can supplement or pressure local governments to act and plays significant roles in newcomer incorporation, helping migrants navigate access to resources and obtaining or maintaining legal residency. Displaced peoples often rely on social media to make their relocation decisions, but local actors might not be prepared for the volume and types of arrivals who were led by what they saw on social media, which includes rampant misinformation and the dangers of scams and human traffickers.

## Governmental actions and inaction

The ways in which governments prioritize and invest in mitigation and adaptation determines the necessity and volume of out-migration produced by hazard events. Protection for higher-value properties and politically influential communities reflects a hierarchy of “deservingness,” where some populations are shielded from climate risks while others are left vulnerable. In effect, both localized resilience and retreat are more attentively managed for some groups versus unmanaged for others. National Adaptation Plans rarely make concrete provisions for planned relocation, so *ad hoc* and individual moves persist as the norm for climate mobility (Hino et al., 2017; Mombauer et al., 2023). Unmanaged out-migration results in uncoordinated, piecemeal dispersion, in which receiving sites might experience intensified

competition for access to housing, infrastructural stress, and losses in agricultural and wilderness land (Teicher and Marchman, 2023). In addition to sprawl, unmanaged growth also results in social and economic dislocation, such as increased distances to jobs and social services (Forsyth and Peiser, 2021).

Local governments have embarked on a variety of local policy experimentation for new resident attraction, especially fiscally stressed, shrinking cities and rural areas. Those contemplating longer-distance relocation might seek out cities offering incentives to attract new residents, including relocation incentives to attract workers to fulfill labor needs and improve housing conditions (Pandy et al., 2025; Choosetopeka.com, 2025; Cityofjackson.org, 2023). Political leaders who have branded their cities as a “climate haven” or “climate refuge” have generated significant attention from both academia and news media (Marandi and Main, 2021). ‘Climate havens’ purportedly represent regions ideally suited to escape future disastrous environmental impacts, especially through avoidance of extreme heat and drought and geographic distance away from coastal threats and erosion. Proponents have labeled Duluth, MN, Madison, WI, Cleveland and Cincinnati, Ohio, and Syracuse and Buffalo, NY, among others, as potential climate havens, with Buffalo having adopted a local initiative declaring its climate refuge status (Pogue, 2021; Beinbuffalo.com, n.d.).

Critics have argued that climate havens are still vulnerable to climate change (Tempus, 2025). The concept largely originated as an economic development tool to stimulate urban reinvestment (Estes, 2024). Disaster victims often need social services, such as mental and emotional health support or flexible leasing terms, and immigrants often require assistance with accessing employment, education, and legal aid (Judelsohn et al., 2024). To integrate diverse newcomers successfully, cities must create or expand numerous social services.

Municipalities that attract immigrants would benefit from advancing welcoming city initiatives. Public officials have many incentives to adopt welcoming initiatives, from compliance with federal legislation in K-12 education and emergency medical care that requires offering services regardless of status, to meeting business owners’ desires to bring in new consumers and laborers (Williamson, 2018). Despite politicians’ efforts to restrict cities who have adopted welcoming and sanctuary city policies, many cities have expanded their efforts to support immigrants due to citizen pressure, especially since policies supporting public safety, health, and economic opportunity for immigrants can benefit all city residents (Abrego and León, 2025). For example, coalitions of immigrant rights groups and housing advocates have successfully lobbied for tenant protections and right-to-shelter laws in sanctuary cities, demonstrating how grassroots mobilization can protect both long-term residents and newcomers (Chishti and Putzel-Kavanaugh, 2024).

## Insurance responses to increasing risks

FEMA’s flood maps through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) and the private insurance market also help shape local comprehensive planning and growth management priorities. FEMA flood map revisions can result in expanded flood zones, which reduces developable land and increases insurance premiums for households in flood zones that reflect higher designations of risk. With less land area suitable for urban development, communities and public officials might discourage the arrival of newcomers in constrained housing markets, leading to the passage of exclusionary zoning laws, rejection of new

housing projects, and expansion of conserved lands to make room for nature but preclude the inclusion of additional, affordable housing.

Many localities have postponed or rejected the adoption of updated flood maps, and this avoidance has led to private insurance companies increasing home insurance premiums and pulling out of higher risk and repetitive loss markets (Crawford and Mangalmurti, 2025). When insurers exit high-risk areas, local governments face increased financial strain, and state governments have largely not required that private insurers continue to service or honor those areas. Recently, some exceptions have emerged with the enactment of last resort insurance laws, but this reactive solution might incentivize settlement in areas ill-fated against climate risks and sea level rise.

## Bottom-up efforts

Local governments ultimately enact, modify, and sustain policies driven by community and market actor demands. Within receiving communities, grassroots efforts have compelled local governments to mitigate the negative impacts of growth in four ways: (1) manage development pressure to preserve open space and environmental amenities, (2) resist displacement and rapid rent and home appreciation, (3) revitalize or redevelop deteriorating or underutilized neighborhoods and spaces, and (4) enhance the socioeconomic integration of relocatees.

The amenity migration literature suggests that individuals migrate to locations rich in environmental amenities and scenery (Moss, 2006). Features such as climate, topographic variation, and water area attract new residents, which then leads to job growth and urban development (McGranahan and Wojan, 2007; USDA, 2025). As climate change increases risks, those with the economic means could move from more vulnerable landscapes to new destinations with similar environmental qualities. This trend of climate mobility aligns with broader trends of counterurbanization from lifestyle-driven migration, such as retirement migration, digital nomad, and remote work, that creates land use and resource stress in highly sought after destinations, with growth threatening affordability for long-term residents and the preservation of open space and biodiversity (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011; Matarrita-Cascante, 2017; Winkler, 2013). In amenity-based economies, historically smaller and rural places must confront the challenge of infrastructural stress, as they must quickly provide public services like utilities, drinking water, and wastewater treatment to more residents and significant numbers of visitors (Lawson and Smith, 2023). Increased demand also reduces housing stock and leads to rapid rent and home appreciation, resulting in rural gentrification (Phillips, 2010).

Citizen pressures to resist rural gentrification through preserving open space and environmental amenities can contradict grassroots efforts to create space for marginalized peoples within cities, as advocates of expanding local housing supply often view increasing quantity as necessary to expand access and reduce costs. Still, the loss of green spaces can compromise environmental and climate justice, and cities can increase density limits to maintain conservation goals.

In contrast to gentrifying contexts, the shrinking and post-industrial cities literature has highlighted how immigrant incorporation can help to revitalize or redevelop deteriorating or underutilized neighborhoods and spaces (Flippen and Farrell-Bryan, 2021). Resettlement urbanism has been described as an opportunistic form of “unpremeditated urbanism that relies on, transforms, and amplifies as-found urban assets, like affordable housing, commercial space, institutions,

and public transit” (Özay, 2020). Citizens’ initiatives emerging from the bottom-up can stabilize communities and create social value through the spatial redevelopment of brownfields or vacant buildings, with the diverse cultures reinvigorating a city’s brand and citizens’ sense of civic identity (Mens et al., 2025).

Many citizens have exerted pressure to enhance the socioeconomic integration of relocatees. Even though immigrants and refugees have helped to reactivate many neighborhoods, they often remain excluded from urban governance and knowledge co-creation functions (Judelsohn et al., 2024). Sometimes, exclusion is more sociopolitical than spatial, but often newcomers’ living quarters might not be well-designed or located near needed services, schools, or jobs. In addition to more conscientious spatial planning, cities must identify and sustain infrastructures of care- social and ethical practices and political mobilizations that can sustain life in compromised urban environments. Communities with strong place attachment may resist demographic shifts, especially if newcomers are perceived as culturally or economically different, so cities need to advance narratives of belonging to navigate local tensions and use storytelling, personal narratives, public engagement, and inclusive planning to foster acceptance (Best et al., 2025, p. 188). Enabling conditions to aid these efforts are addressed next.

## Conditions for maximizing capacity

Conditions are structural and cultural factors that shape how well a local government can plan or respond. Catalysts create a sense of urgency while conditions determine feasibility. Together, catalysts and conditions form a matrix of local readiness and responsiveness. As depicted in Figure 1, the conditions include the quality and availability of existing assets, local revenue needs, economic revitalization and urban redevelopment activities, labor demands, residents’ ties with sending areas, and policy experimentation and learning.

Waleign and Lujala’s (2022) climate change resettlement capacity (CCRC) framework suggests that asset-rich communities are more prepared to absorb newcomers. Their subdimensions include natural, financial, human capital infrastructures, physical capital infrastructures, and social capital. Access to and quality of assets matter significantly, and since their framework can apply to all developmental contexts, conflicts and crises can impact access and quality of assets. Their categorization of assets aligns with the community capitals framework from Flora et al. (2010). Physical infrastructures such as energy and transit systems and social services such as schools and hospitals must be robust enough to handle increased demands (Clark-Ginsberg et al., 2023). They must also be maintained and remain resilient against changing environmental conditions. Institutional structures also influence communities’ preparedness (Junod et al., 2023). Institutions administer policy, while broader systems of governance react to policy gaps and shortcomings. Together, the conditions of assets help to determine the capacities of all stakeholders, including their knowledge, skills, and abilities to manage and accept change within the time they must act.

Broader economic conditions influence localities’ revenue needs, economic revitalization and urban redevelopment activities, and labor force demands. Local governments rely on property tax revenue to maintain public services, so cities boost their tax base by approving new development and redevelopment. Newcomers willing and able to fulfill economic priorities can provide growth for immigration-dependent industries such as agriculture, construction, and elder care. When communities, market actors, and governments facilitate the fulfillment of labor gaps by new arrivals, they must strategically

collaborate so that they maximize human capital, reduce worker exploitation, and mitigate the effects of reduced affordability.

One of the most dynamic elements of climate mobility is how relocation decisions are contingent on residents’ ties to sending areas. Diasporas can lead to chain and return migration and transnational lifestyles, all of which might ease cultural integration and foster community acceptance but require different long-term commitments to infrastructural and housing needs. Many local practitioners who have worked in cities absorbing disaster-displaced populations might speak anecdotally about synergies between sending and receiving areas, such as the economic, social, and spatial transformations produced by Katrina relocatees in Houston or Hudson Valley residents whose rural towns took in New York City transplants following the global pandemic of COVID-19, but despite knowing that synergies exist, local planners need to stay engaged with these populations to forecast how relocatees’ ties in sending areas evolve over time. Institutional memory helps, as cities that have previously managed migration and disaster response are better equipped to adapt to new migrations, and have learned from previous successes or pilot programs, which might evolve into permanent programming or infrastructure. Nevertheless, institutional knowledge is threatened when actors leave or experience fatigue. The stress from managing and living through polycrises can lead to crisis normalization in which repeated exposure to disasters can lead to apathy or burnout among officials. Residents in these towns may also experience compassion fatigue, but local governments can combat this through sustained engagement and ensuring the availability of adequate mental health support.

## Conclusion

This perspective assessed how local governments can actualize effective and equitable climate resettlement in receiving communities. Building willingness requires both responding to and reshaping policy as well as public morality, given the contentious nature of the democratic principles of plurality, equity, and diversity in land use governance. The framework, presented in Figure 1, identifies how the inter-relationships between government, market, and community actors co-determine the preparedness and willingness of local governments to expand programs, plans, and initiatives for resettling diverse climate and disaster-displaced populations. Five catalytic and six condition categories help to push actors toward identifying more equitable outcomes for both long-term residents and newcomers. This framework revealed three areas in current practice and scholarship that merit additional research and policy experimentation: tools to assess local and regional resettlement capacity, embedding inclusive objectives for resettlement into all local and regional plans, and including non-humans in resettlement frameworks.

## Recommendations to improve localities’ preparedness

### Assessing local and regional resettlement capacity

Absorptive or resettlement capacity impact assessments can help estimate the volumes and types of migrants a community can receive over time. They can also be used to as a tool to map and inventory

assets and resources and provide a roadmap for incorporating resettlement considerations in other plan updates. Table 1 offers a simplified way to begin assessing local capacities, which can help estimate the volume and types of climate migrants the community can receive over time and support community-led planning processes, which should involve extensive public engagement.

At minimum, capacity assessments serve as a guide in planning processes for growth and comprehensive planning, but they also offer an instrument to provide data for conducting more effective public engagement to build public willingness to support receiving newcomers.

While initial steps involve planning that can primarily be completed internally through in-house staff, follow up steps should involve community participation and community advisory boards. Local governments would conduct workshops and public meetings, such that if all steps are completed, this process illustrates a community-led inclusive receiving communities' framework. Advisory boards could assign weights (or coefficients) to each factor to reflect levels of preference or importance within local context, and external partners can help figure out ways to ensure regional-scale collaboration. Ideally, state, federal, and philanthropic funding sources can support the abilities of smaller and fiscally stressed localities to complete assessments. Ultimately, the processes and conversations entailed with completing the absorptive capacity index assessment can reveal opportunities to expand or constrain local preparedness and willingness.

## Embedding inclusive resettlement objectives into all local and regional plans

Localities need to assess local capacities to accommodate new growth and will need to embed inclusivity measures, ideally embracing non-humans and ecological entities, into resettlement objectives in local and regional plans. While various types of plans have examined resettlement for disaster affected populations, most cities do not produce a “receiving communities” plan or strategy document. Instead, most planning for climate and disaster-displaced populations is *ad hoc*, reactive to specific disaster events, and done without a formal plan. Case studies can illuminate how planners have attempted to bring coherence for relocation as adaptation and welcoming initiatives without a formal plan, but practitioners need tools to embed resettlement outcomes and inclusion in climate-receiving communities across the full range of plans they produce. This plan alignment approach is particularly important because inclusive communities require coordination and collaboration at all levels of government, while some agency sectors within each level might be hostile to inducing principles of equity and inclusion within policy design.

Adopting planning tools for assessing resettlement capacities will require development and experimentation in the local communities that have emerged as climate recipient sites. Ultimately, researchers need to support application of resettlement capacity assessment tools across a range of urban and regional contexts, and the lessons learned will support mainstreaming and adoption in state and local policy. Similarly, researchers need to highlight best practices for embedding outcome-based inclusive resettlement objectives into local and regional plans, particularly so that inclusive policy language includes measurable achievements instead of mere rhetoric. For example,

TABLE 1 Absorptive capacity impact assessment.

Questions	Measures and considerations
How many new residents can move here?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Existing Conditions. Existing housing units available. Current demands for water and energy, critical infrastructure, and transportation systems. Current tax revenues.</li> <li>Redevelopment and New Development Potential. Identify available areas well-suited for new development &amp; redevelopment under existing zoning and building codes. Estimate their increased demands for water and energy, critical infrastructure, and transportation systems. Tax revenue potentials.</li> <li>Maximum Capacity Scenarios for existing and potential new units under various amendments to current zoning, and land use and building codes. Scenarios should include estimates on increases in water and energy, critical infrastructure, and transportation demands. Tax revenue potentials.</li> </ol> <p>= Total population and physical infrastructure capacities</p>
Who can move here? Who can we serve with existing social & civic assets?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Surplus (or deficit) capacities for schools, hospitals, and social services.</li> <li>Critical labor/workforce needs.</li> <li>Social services and cultural assets in place.</li> <li>Sister Cities/mutual agreements</li> </ol>
How would conditions change in-migration rates and populations?	<p>Event and Condition Adjustments</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social – NIMBYism and YIMBYism; naturally occurring cultural clustering and outmigration; diasporas</li> <li>Political – funding openings or freezes; welcoming city initiatives</li> <li>Economic – major labor/industrial openings and closures</li> <li>Environmental – natural hazards, climate impacts, technological hazards, cascading events, and other environmental changes occurring, or might occur, that need to be considered</li> </ol>

researchers could include non-humans and ecological species for a fully inclusive approach to managing climate mobilities.

## Including non-humans in resettlement frameworks

Resettlement frameworks should recommend pathways for multi-species climate mobility—companion species moving with humans, translocation and assisted migration, and corridors that

facilitate natural movements. Just as most national governments have not established rights to climate mobility or a climate refugee status for humans, most have also not established rights to mobility for non-humans and ecological species. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) does not mention the right to climate mobility for non-humans or recommend legal personhood to ecological entities, though it does discuss climate mobility for humans in depth (Simpson et al., 2024). In the United States, companion species and service animals are protected during evacuations, given that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) allows service animals in public emergency shelters and transportation and the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act of 2006 requires state and local emergency plans to account for the needs of companion animals and service animals during mass evacuation and sheltering. However, animals are not federally protected following this period.

In addition to companion species, more than two-thirds of species are constrained in their movement between habitats by damaged corridors (Daskalova et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2023). Researchers and practitioners need to advocate more explicitly for paired mobility in receiving areas, though recent gains by environmental and Indigenous activists in establishing rights to nature and legal personhood for ecological entities show promise in helping to allow for co-adaptation and receiving sites for nature (Soliev et al., 2025).

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

JE: Resources, Formal analysis, Project administration, Visualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Supervision,

Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

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The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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