



# WELCOMING CLIMATE REFUGEES & PREVENTING DISPLACEMENT

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LABOUR  
FOR A  
GREEN  
NEW DEAL



As a number of recent extreme weather events and disasters have proven, the climate crisis is already impacting the lives of people around the world. Moreover, the communities on the frontlines of this crisis are nearly always among those who have done the least to cause it. Policy concerning migration to the UK with a Green New Deal therefore necessarily begins with a recognition of the grossly disproportionate contribution made by the UK and other wealthy countries to the climate crisis. This must also be accompanied by a recognition of the historic and continuing injustices of British colonialism and imperialism, through which the UK's wealth was generated, particularly through the violence of natural resource extraction. Migration policy with a Green New Deal must also recognise the ways in which unfair, restrictive trade deals and wealth-extractive operations by UK companies operating overseas drive global inequality and displacement. Moreover, as writer and migrant justice organiser Harsha Walia [argues](#), our global economic system has relied on maintaining a group of people regarded as “illegal” or “undocumented” so as to create cheap, easily exploitable labour within countries in the Global North.

**The UK's role in promoting fossil-based growth models and fossil fuel extraction have played a central role in the increase in global migration related to climate change.** As one of the largest cumulative contributors to global carbon emissions, the UK has an obligation to support those most affected by the climate crisis, including through efforts to protect the right of people to stay in their existing communities.

There is broad consensus among researchers that **climate change will significantly contribute to increased displacement and migration flows globally**. It is projected that on the current warming trajectory, applications for asylum to the EU could [grow by nearly 30%](#) by 2100, to 450,000 annually.

Climate change is often described as a ‘threat multiplier’, meaning that its impacts will both contribute to the displacement of people both directly and indirectly, for instance in the [exacerbation of conflict risk](#) over issues such as depleted resources, or in its contribution to widening inequalities within and between countries. Climate change will [increase the magnitude and frequency of natural disasters](#) and reduce food yields, causing millions to flee their homes and cross international borders. Natural disasters and hazards are already major drivers of displacement, with [over 200 million people displaced by disasters between 2008 to 2015](#). The increase in severity and frequency of such disasters due to climate change is already impacting

communities globally, and will cause the number of those displaced to surge in coming decades.

Under existing international frameworks, such as the [1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#), displacement and cross border migration resulting from natural disasters and climate change does not generally qualify displaced people as refugees. Indeed, there is presently [no formal definition](#) of or protection for “climate refugees” under international law.

**A Green New Deal must therefore commit to addressing the climate crisis through the lens of global justice and migrant justice.** This is particularly important in light of the UK’s colonial legacy, with both historical and ongoing contributions to global emissions and border-related violence. Climate justice is migrant justice, and a Green New Deal must therefore **support both the right to move and the right to stay**. This should include reform to existing immigration laws, including the immediate abolition of the Hostile Environment; a commitment to supporting those displaced by natural disasters and a changing climate; and immediate action to dismantle the fundamentally racist and unjust ‘Fortress Britain’ and ‘Fortress Europe.

A Green New Deal should focus on:

- **Migrant justice and ending the hostile environment.** A Green New Deal must replace the racist hostile environment framework with a commitment to universal freedom of movement and to welcoming all migrants to the UK, especially people for whom climate change is a contributing factor in the decision to leave their home country.
- **Refugee status for those forced to move because of climate change.** A Green New Deal will support the development of an international legal framework founded on the principle of free movement, allowing anyone to move freely and safely across borders, whether to flee the devastation of war or climate change, or to pursue opportunities or be close to family and community.
- **Supporting the right to stay through internationalism.** A Green New Deal must have at its heart an unwavering commitment to international cooperation and solidarity to support countries in the Global South to adapt to climate change and for individuals to remain in their home countries. This should be reflected in policies including financial support to fund decarbonisation; trade agreements that facilitate the free

transfer of climate mitigation and adaptation technologies; an explicit ban on NETs, geo-engineering technologies, or offsetting schemes that will sacrifice the rights of people in the Global South; and the increased voice, vote and power of developing countries in international institutions. For further discussion of these points, please refer to our briefing 'Supporting developing countries' climate transitions.'

## IMMIGRATION POLICY AND ENDING THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Sensationalism surrounding the growth in climate-related migration and asylum claimants has contributed to reactionary policies blocking the movement of refugees without concern for their welfare (Miller, 2017), with an extreme example of this phenomenon [visible in the U.S. border crisis](#). Immigration policy has emerged as a key political issue in the UK, with migrant communities serving as scapegoats for the impacts of increasing inequality within the UK which have, in reality, been caused by globalisation, unplanned deindustrialisation and austerity.

Beginning in 2010 with Theresa May as Home Secretary, **the Conservatives have introduced a series of hostile environment policies** designed to discourage migration to the UK and **make life as difficult as possible** for people who have not been granted 'leave to remain' status.

Several of these policies and their impacts are outlined below:

- Deportation targets and a ['deport first, appeal later' approach](#) that has led to thousands of people being deported before being afforded the chance to appeal the decision, including those affected by the [Windrush scandal](#).
- Every year more than [30,000 people are detained](#) under Immigration Act powers in the UK. [Around 2,000](#) migrants are detained at any one time, usually without trial, bail or judicial oversight, for months at a time and sometimes for more than a year. The current system thus treats migrants unjustly as prisoners, despite their violating no laws. Grave human rights violations are regularly documented at migrant detention

centres, most of which are privately run by companies such as [G4S](#) and [Serco](#), alongside [exploitative labour practices such as £1/hr wages for detained migrants](#). F

- The insertion of border controls [into everyday life](#) by asking banks, landlords, employers, [NHS workers](#) and charities to carry out immigration status checks.
- Encouraging 'voluntary' deportation such as through [racist 'Go Home' vans](#).
- [Financial and bureaucratic barriers](#) to securing 'leave to remain' status and increased complexity and costs of making Home Office applications.
- The removal of all non-asylum based immigration legal work from the scope of legal aid, [significantly reducing](#) the ability of migrants to access legal representation.

In order to ensure justice, the Green New Deal must **end mass deportation and detention and the hostile environment framework**.

The Green New Deal should introduce a commitment to **welcoming all migrants** to the UK, including those for whom climate change is a contributing factor in leaving their home country. Potential steps to implement this commitment could include:

- Granting right to remain status to all undocumented migrants, while removing all barriers to applying for and receiving right to remain status for those who have not yet entered the UK.
- Establishing the universal right to freedom of movement.
- Providing financial assistance to new migrants (having abolished 'no recourse to public funds').
- Investigating and providing compensation for human rights violations that have occurred as part of the hostile environment framework.

## **INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY TO MINIMISE DISPLACEMENT**

The Government should, within a Green New Deal, provide **support for adaptation and mitigation measures in developing nations** to pre-emptively minimise displacement.

Commitments made in the [2017 Labour Party manifesto](#) to work with communities in the Global South to develop long-term strategies to

strengthen economies and societies should be re-doubled, with a particular focus on climate resilience.

**Displacement due to climate breakdown is a human rights issue.** The focus of policy should be on ensuring [human security](#), by protecting the dignity and basic rights of those on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Adaptation and mitigation measures should be employed to reduce disaster risk and preemptively minimise displacement, as outlined in the [Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement](#).

In addition to actively supporting just climate transitions for countries in the Global South (see Supporting developing countries' climate transitions), the Green New Deal should:

- Provide for direct **transfers of finance and technology** to assist countries in the Global South to address the impacts of climate change e.g. improved flood defences, disaster readiness and recovery, water desalination, investment in infrastructure.
- **Promote and fund adaptation measures** that are rooted in the interests and demands of communities and social movements, rather than false solutions that suit corporate interests. An example of such a 'false solution' that has gained popularity in policy circles recently is "climate smart agriculture", which is often associated with genetic modification and [greater corporate control](#) over land and food systems in the Global South.
- **Provide sufficient funding for the expansion of resilient sustainable agriculture** rooted in local knowledges to reduce the risks associated with crop failure and increase [food sovereignty](#). This should be accompanied by an end to UK aid funding for the [expansion of the overseas operations of corporate food companies](#) directly associated with [increased food insecurity](#).

The UK has a historic duty to support migrants and refugees, including those who have left their homes due to climate breakdown. In the context of the Green New Deal, this means the complete overhaul of our existing immigration policy, which has to date been steeped in racism and injustice. As the climate continues to heat, increased displacement and migration flows are certain. The Green New Deal represents an opportunity to uphold international solidarity by protecting the rights of migrants and refugees, advocating for the right to global free movement, and accepting responsibility for preventing displacement wherever possible.

## Further References

Miller, Todd. *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration and Homeland Security*. City Lights Publishers, 2017.