# UPPER VALLEY SUBREGIONAL WORLD CAFE REPORT

*Christa Daniels*, *Erich Osterberg*, *Lisa Wise*

**April 2023**

# UPPER VALLEY SUBREGIONAL WORLD CAFE REPORT
*Christa Daniels*, *Erich Osterberg*, *Lisa Wise*
**April 2023**

## Preface
The Northeast Safe and Thriving for All (NEST) Project, funded by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Climate Adaptation Partnerships program (formerly NOAA CPO/RISA), seeks to create among stakeholders an upper northeast region that is resilient, revitalized, and decarbonized. To meet this goal, the impacts of in-migration and out-migration must be considered in relation to direct and indirect climate impacts. These migration changes can present significant challenges to communities in the upper Northeast region.

## The NEST Project pursues three objectives:
1) Review the extent to which climate adaptation research, policy, plans, and projects in the region address central concerns of equity and justice under climate migration.

2) Bring together existing subregional networks in the Vermont and New Hampshire Upper Valley, Coastal Maine and New Hampshire, and Rust Belt cities in Upstate New York. These subregional gatherings will identify (a) how race, class, urban/rural status, and other identity divides shape beliefs and reactions to planning efforts for adaptation and climate migration. (b) how governance and capacity deficits impede planning and implementation, and how these constraints may be addressed. (c) which entities should be included in a regional in-migration adaptation network.

3) Partner with the biannual New England Local Solutions Conference on climate preparedness and resilience to focus the 2023 event on climate migration. This report focuses on the findings of a World Cafe event in the Upper Valley subregion of Vermont and New Hampshire.

An April 2021 report titled *Assessing the Migration System of New Hampshire and Vermont's Connecticut River Valley* showcases differences in historic migration trends between Vermont and New Hampshire in the Connecticut River Valley region. The report states Vermont has seen more out-migration, while New Hampshire has experienced in-migration. These findings proceed impacts in movements due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional details on the demographics of migration trends can be found in the report above. Based on projected climate impacts in regions outside of the Upper Valley, it is possible the area will see incoming migrants as a result of water scarcity, wildfires and sea level rise. The Upper Valley has been identified as a potential receiving area for climate migration. (See PLACE Initiative's *The Receiving Geography Guide*.)

## Introduction
The objectives of the World Cafe in the Upper Valley region were to build a network of individuals and organizations working on climate migration, gather input and information to inform the NEST research questions, and support the process for proactive planning for climate migration in the Upper Valley. The event took place in West Lebanon, NH, at the Kilton Library on March 29th, 2023. The room consisted of approximately 50 participants (not including table hosts). Participants included representatives from non-profit organizations and community groups (including land conservation, public health, social services, economic development), regional planning commissions, students, municipal volunteers and staff, academia, state agencies, a housing organization,

a local farmer, and local business owners. The World Cafe surfaced numerous challenges faced by the participants and possible solutions for proactive planning in the region. The findings are summarized below and listed in more detail at the end of this report in various appendices.

The event began with a brief welcome and context setting, land acknowledgment, and overview of group agreements. As an icebreaker activity, participants were asked to stand beside each other to form a line. The line represented how each participant felt about the Upper Valley region; One side of the line represented to what degree the community was viewed as welcoming, prepared, proactive, and resilient, the other side of the line demonstrated its opposite—a community viewed as reactive, unprepared, and unwelcoming. Participants positioned themselves according to their perceptions of the Upper Valley and their experience within the community. One participant pointed out that those who stood in positions representing a less prepared and less welcoming Upper Valley community tended to include more marginalized groups and people of color. This was an important illustrative activity to acknowledge that people were coming into the discussion with different experiences and perspectives to share.

For the World Cafe discussion, half of the tables focused on the scenario of projected in-migration and the other half focused on out-migration. Halfway through the event, all participants switched to a table discussing the other type of migration. Questions at each table included:

- Within these **in-migration** or **out-migration** scenarios, who are those that are moving? *(e.g., socio-economics, age, labor sector / type, race-ethnicity, education, family composition, ability/disability, urban/rural, seasonal/year-round, etc.)*

- Who is impacted by this type of **in-** or **out-migration**? *(Identify challenges and opportunities, positives in addition to negatives)*

- What does a proactive, welcoming, caring, and resilient community look like in each scenario of migration? *(in terms of infrastructure, economics, housing, municipal services, cultures, business and labor, social networks and structures, natural resources, etc.)*

- How can we have **in-** or **out-migration** that is equitable/sustainable for all?

Table hosts helped groups move through the questions and collect notes from the discussion; participants also contributed to the note taking. Following the breakout group discussions, the full group reassembled and discussed the question: *What types of skills and trainings are needed to effectively engage in this issue going forward?*

A comparison of the varying challenges faced by both in-migration and out-migration revealed surprisingly similar results. While there were some differences between the groups, anticipated challenges and barriers were similar in many table discussions. These included affordable housing, transportation, job opportunities, the economy, childcare, access to social services, unwelcome prejudices, land use and planning, and climate-related concerns. **The World Cafe surfaced the important recognition that many of the challenges discussed in relation to in-migration already exist in Upper Valley communities, and will need to be addressed prior to anticipated in-migration issues that will likely exacerbate these identified challenges.**

## Who is Moving Out?

The World Cafe participants identified various groups of people who are either leaving the Upper Valley or facing challenges in their current living or work situations. Table 1 identifies various groups and types of individuals participants listed that are moving out of the region.

| TABLE 1: WHO'S MOVING OUT? |
| --- |
| Dairy farmers transitioning out of the profession |
| Aspiring homeowners facing financial constraints |
| Service workers dealing with job insecurity or unemployment |
| Aging adults experiencing health and mobility issues, and/or relocating to warmer climates |
| People of color encountering systemic barriers to housing and employment |
| Single parents struggling to make ends meet |
| Chronically ill individuals with disabilities in need of specialized living arrangements |
| Job seekers in search of work and childcare |
| Renters grappling with rising housing costs |
| Remote workers transitioning back to in-person work leaving for job opportunities, higher pay and for increased access cultural events/entertainment |

Overall, this list highlights the challenges faced by a diverse range of individuals in various stages of life, work, and housing situations. While some are leaving due to pursue economic or personal reasons, others are struggling to find affordable housing, employment, childcare, social services, or specialized living arrangements.



PHOTO: BRAXTON FREEMAN

# Who is Moving In?

The World Cafe identified several patterns and demographic changes that have occurred in the region due to the pandemic, economic factors, and other push-pull dynamics. Participants shared what they have observed and experienced locally during the pandemic, and shared ideas about potential future migration to the region. Table 2 showcases the groups identified.

| TABLE 2: WHO'S MOVING IN? |
|---|
| Remote workers who have migrated to the region |
| Retirees seeking a new place to settle |
| Refugees and asylum seekers (specifically Ukrainian refugees) |
| Immigrants looking for opportunities |
| People of color relocating from cities |
| City dwellers interested in pursuing farming |
| Entrepreneurs looking to establish businesses |
| Young families searching for a stable community to raise children |
| Young adults moving back to live with their parent(s) |
| Dartmouth University students staying/returning to the region |
| Seasonal workers attracted by job opportunities in various industries |
| Individuals seeking job opportunities in sectors like healthcare (hospitals), education (universities), and other industries |
| Wealthy, predominantly white, individuals who relocated to the region during the pandemic |
| Farm workers seeking employment in local agricultural industries, and/or fleeing dangerous situations, and/or to start families in the area |
| Travel nurses who have chosen to work in the region |
| Individuals seeking access to outdoor recreation Individuals avoiding climate impacts (e.g., wildfires, hurricanes) |

Other factors that have influenced migration include access to resources, including financial and educational, and the draw of certain infrastructural amenities, such as fast internet and specialized care. The impact of COVID-19 is also noted, with some areas seeing a surge in migration due to the pandemic, while a few others have experienced a decline or no major change.

Overall, this list highlights the complexity and diversity of factors—economic, social, political, and personal—that influence migration patterns. These results underscore the importance of considering the needs and perspectives of all individuals and communities involved, particularly those who may face systemic barriers to housing, employment, and resources.

## Overall Challenges

Rural communities face a range of challenges related to planning for equitable in-migration of people, including housing affordability, loss of open space and ecosystem preservation, inadequate infrastructure capacity, racial discrimination and economic inequality, jobs and local economy challenges, education and social services needs, climate and weather issues, transportation difficulties, land use and planning concerns, and more. Balancing the needs of residents with the preservation of natural resources and community infrastructure is a crucial issue that requires careful consideration and planning. The following is a compilation of various issues and challenges faced by residents and newcomers the region. Listed below are some of the patterns and themes that emerged from the World Cafe participants:

- **Housing Issues.** Participants mentioned the lack of affordable housing as a primary challenge to equitable in- and out-migration. Other factors include second home ownership reducing the availability of starter homes gentrification, and sight-unseen purchases. Older people may get pushed out as housing costs increase while access to assisted living options is limited. Renters who utilize social services may face landlord discrimination. Old housing stock can create health issues due to mold and lead exposure, and contribute to higher energy costs due to poor insulation. Also mentioned were seasonal workers who often rent short term housing from affluent owners, yet must relocate during the parts of the year the owners use the home.

- **Loss of Open Space, Agriculture Land and Ecosystems.** Preserving prime agricultural land, balancing open space preservation with housing needs, and protecting wildlife habitat was a concern at various tables.

- **Municipal and Private Infrastructure.** Insufficient community/municipal infrastructure was listed as an issue for increased population in the region. **Many communities currently rely on private water and septic systems. However, as density increases, the withdrawal of water from freshly drilled wells can impact existing wells.** This also applies to septic systems, with greater potential for nonpoint source pollution at the watershed scale as additional systems are added to the landscape. Newcomers to the Upper Valley region may be unfamiliar with private water/waste water infrastructure. Certain water/waste water infrastructure systems may not be scaled to accommodate the increased capacity demanded by in-migration growth. The costs of necessary infrastructure upgrades may result in increased tax burdens on residents. Additionally, second home ownership seasonal residences create challenges for municipalities to balance long-range infrastructure investments. Newcomers may also demand services not currently provided by local municipalities.

- **Prejudices/Racism/Social Justice Issues.** Tenant protection, xenophobia, NIMBYism (e.g., resistance to affordable/workforce housing), gaps between those with generational wealth and those without, cultural clashes, and gentrification were significant themes at almost every table during the World Cafe. There was the feeling that any effort to "welcome" in-migration newcomers may seem performative since marginalized people already exist in the community.

- **Jobs/Local Economy.** Challenges were shared relating to both long term and permanent workforce and seasonal/temporary workers in terms of recruitment, access to housing, childcare and transportation. Conflicts between lucrative short-term opportunites and long-term employment (e.g., travel nursing vs. hospital nursing staff) in relation to access to community services were also noted.

- **Education/Schools.** Equitable and accessible educational opportunities, capacity of school infrastructure, and recruiting/maintaining teaching staff was a prominent theme among participants.

- **Social Services.** Concern was voiced for residents who face challenges related to the lack of social services, such as childcare, shelter beds, and assistance for retirees.

- **Climate/Weather.** Incoming populations may lack experience with specific adverse seasonal weather conditions, such as mud season and ice and snow storms. Additionally, newcomers to New England may not understand how to prepare and endure power outages.

- **Transportation.** Insufficient public transportation options in rural areas, and a need for hire vehicles to manage day-to-day transportation necessities are issues faced by current residents and that may affect those who relocate to the Upper Valley.

- **Land Use and Planning.** Concerns were raised regarding thoughtful integration between commercial development and open space preservation.

- **Local Nonprofit Potential.** Participants noted that an influx of well-resourced newcomers may stimulate increased support for local nonprofit organizations. Introducing newcomers to local community organizations and the available opportunities offered would enhance access for involvement.

Overall, the list highlights the various challenges faced by both current residents and newcomers to the region. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated effort from policymakers, service providers, and the community as a whole.

## Solutions Summary

World Cafe participants generated a broad range of ideas for solutions related to community development and sustainability, with a particular focus on affordable housing, community cohesion, and equitable policies. These themes are interconnected and represent the challenges that many communities face in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**One of the most prevalent themes explored was the need for affordable housing.** Many ideas put forth as solutions included increasing housing availability and affordability through the use of land trusts, conservation banks, and public services. Other solutions proposed an increase in housing inventory, an expansion of water and waste water infrastructure, an increase in short-term rental options, and encouraging local developers to increase the availablilty of safe and affordable housing.

**Another important theme was community cohesion,** through establishing a sense of place and identity within the community. Participants proposed activities like community meal gatherings and "welcome wagon" events, and projects like community gardens and anti-racism workshops. These activities could help foster personal connections among community members while promoting cultural diversity and inclusion. Also, school facilities could act additionally as community centers.

**Equitable policies were another key theme.** Many suggestions centered on extra support and expanded access for marginalized communities through investment in affordable housing, cessation of local police-ICE

collaboration. Also considered was implementation of just-cause eviction policies, move-in costs limits, and wage transparency.

## Additional details on **solutions** proposed by the participants:

- Conservation land banks trusts and public services One potential approach to enhancing communities is to preserve open space and protect natural resources through land banks, trusts, and public service. This can help to preserve the character and quality of the community while also providing recreational opportunities for residents.

- Increase housing availability. The first step to increase housing availability is to inventory existing housing stock. After creating a baseline inventory, the region must increase the availability of housing through various means, such as building more affordable housing units, promoting mixed-use development, and revising zoning regulations to allow for higher density development. Additional solutions include the promotion of short-term rentals and seasonal housing to help residents afford housing and keep their homes. This can help to increase the availability of affordable housing options in the community.

- Partner with local developers. Local developers can also play a key role in addressing the housing crisis by building new housing units or renovating existing properties to increase their capacity.

- Encourage a higher vacancy rate. A higher vacancy rate can also help to alleviate the housing crisis by providing more options for renters and buyers. This can be achieved through policies that encourage landlords to keep their units vacant for longer periods of time or through other incentives that encourage landlords to maintain their properties.

- Welcoming framework. Addressing identity questions can also be a way to promote community cohesion (above) and foster a welcoming environment for newcomers. This can be achieved through initiatives that celebrate diversity andcultural traditions, such as community gardens that grow traditional foods or cultural festivals that showcase different ethnicities and cultures.

- Local businesses and colleges. Local businesses and colleges can also play a role in addressing the housing crisis by investing in affordable housing options, creating job opportunities for residents, and providing services and support to those in need.

- State match funding, extra support to marginalized communities. States can also provide match funding and extra support to marginalized communities to help them address unique housing needs. This can include funding for affordable housing initiatives, social services, and infrastructure improvements.

- Water and waste water, and social services. Inventory and assess water/waste water management concerns, and expand access to water and waste water.

- Expand Access to Social Services. Identify scope of community access to social services to help identify where to apportion resources to help. Social services play a crucial role in community building as they address the fundamental needs of individuals and families, ensuring that no one is left behind.

- <u>Federal funding, fear of government</u>. While federal funding can be a solution to the housing crisis, there may be a fear or distrust of government that prevents some communities from accepting these funds. Addressing this fear and building trust can be key to unlocking additional resources.

- <u>Secure funding, create aggregator of public funds</u>. Securing funding can also be a challenge for some communities, particularly those without an aggregator of public funds. Building partnerships and collaborations with municipal and state levels can help to address this issue.

- <u>Increase knowledge of municipal processes</u>. Some residents may be less familiar with municipal processes, which can hinder their ability to access resources and participate in planning/decision-making processes. Building personal connections and community networks, and linking these networks to local municipal governments, can help to bridge this gap and provide access to resources and support.

- <u>Foster a sense of place</u>**.** A sense of place and pride can also support a welcoming environment and community engagement. However, this must be balanced with a sense of humility and openness to change, as an overly arrogant or closed-minded attitude can hinder progress and inclusion.

- <u>Create communication networks</u>. Create know your neighbors, community meals, Build communication networks. This will assist with the development of broad spectrum social capital within local communities.

- <u>Create livable wages</u>. Cities and counties across the country have passed living-wage ordinances, which set wage standards for city employees, government contractors, and companies receiving public subsidies, to help ensure the creation of good, family-supporting jobs. The region should work on policies, ordinances and incentives to establish livable wages.

## Next Steps for Capacity Building

At the conclusion of the Upper Valley World Cafe, participants provided input on various capacity building and training needs that would benefit the region. The list of training needs focused on various aspects of climate migration planning, including engagement and decision-making, communications, planning and development, and financial/capacity needs. Specific training topics include building trust between communities and organizations, civic health, participatory decision-making, anti-racism education, communication strategies to integrate communities, understanding zoning and land use, housing affordability, climate resilient agriculture, financial and tax considerations, and capacity building for local governance structures. The goal of these trainings would be to empower communities to proactively plan for climate migration and create welcoming communities that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## Conclusion

Communities should proactively plan for climate migration because it is becoming an increasingly pressing issue due to the effects of climate change. As extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and other climate-related phenomena continue to displace people, communities must plan and prepare for the influx of climate migrants. This planning involves not only accommodating those who have been displaced but also considering the potential impact on existing community resources and infrastructure. A proactive approach to climate migration planning can help communities mitigate potential conflicts and challenges, ensure equitable treatment for all residents, and create more resilient communities that can withstand the effects of climate change. It is clear the Upper Valley would benefit from proactive planning for the impacts of climate migration. Even more importantly, the World Cafe highlighted significant challenges and barriers faced by existing residents in the region. Vulnerable populations, specifically Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) tend to bear the brunt of the challenges uncovered. The next steps for the region include:

- Confirm and identify demographics of migration in the region.

- Identify who's working on what in the region. Determine what each organization/agency is doing in regards to addressing challenges and supporting solutions) This would be the creation of a database or inventory of resilience resources are distributed.

- Create case studies of how municipal governments in the region are addressing this issue.

- Form a collaborative or Community of Practice around climate migration in the Upper Valley with participants from above.

- Identify resources available for trainings and capacity building that was identified at World Cafe.

- Prioritize a timeline to provide trainings. This will include who can offer these resources, and could include collaborative fund raising (listed above).