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Integrating planned relocation in national climate action: five key insights for consideration by governments and policymakers

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POLICYBRIEF

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Integrating Planned Relocation in National Climate Action

Five key insights for consideration by governments and policymakers

1

Planned relocation generates many more positive impacts on people's lives when the whole process is people-centred. Planned relocation processes should cater to the needs of affected people and communities, involve them in all decisions, and build on local knowledge systems and practices.

2

A clear national framework or guidelines on planned relocation, designed with inputs from affected people, help governments and supporting actors to safeguard the rights of individuals and communities.

3

Planned relocation is a long-term process that requires proactive planning, long-term commitment, sustainable financing and support beyond the physical relocation of persons and households.

4

Governments and affected communities often differ in their perceptions and assessments of the need for relocation in relation to climate risks and socio-environmental thresholds. These differences need careful consideration in the planning stage.

5

No matter how well a planned relocation is conducted, there will always be an element of loss. It is important to acknowledge and address both the economic and non-economic losses associated with planned relocation.

Background

As climate impacts intensify and threaten the habitability of more and more places where people live and work, governments and regional organizations increasingly see the need to consider planned relocation as a policy option. Planned relocation processes in the context of climate change are challenging and poorly understood, with only limited guidance available for policymakers.¹ This policy brief offers five key insights to inform governments and policymakers interested or already engaged in planned relocation processes as part of their climate action.

What is planned relocation?

Planned relocation has several key features that distinguish it from other forms of human mobility, such as displacement or migration. First, planned relocation is a **collective process**, typically taking place at the level of a group or community, not of an individual or household. Second, planned relocation is a **coordinated process** in which communities are assisted by external actors (usually governments and non-governmental organizations) to physically move away from their current place of residence to a new and safer location. Third, planned relocation is **intended to be permanent**. Fourth, the reasons for planned relocation can be diverse, but this policy brief focuses on planned relocation in the context of climate change, that is relocations undertaken **in anticipation of or in response to climate-related hazards and vulnerabilities**. Planned

Guiding Principles

Planned relocation is about people, the improvement of their living conditions and well-being. Dialogue, consultation and collaboration with affected people in both relocating and host communities should therefore be at the core of each planned relocation process and decision. People's wishes to stay in place should be respected. Planning, design, implementation and the evaluation of relocation outcomes should be guided by the values of inclusivity and dignity and the principle of self-determination, empowering people to shape their own future in a positive way that meets their needs and individual circumstances.

relocation undertaken for climate-related reasons should not serve as a justification to vacate land for subsequent repurposing. Finally, planned relocation is **usually seen as a last resort option**, because the risk of adverse effects on people's lives and livelihoods is high.

With these general features in mind, we note that there is no single archetype for planned relocation processes, policies or practices. For instance, planned relocation can be undertaken within institutional or customary landownership. While planned relocation usually occurs within country borders, this is not always the case. Stakeholders' precise approach to planned relocation will always depend on context-specific considerations.

Policy context: integrating planned relocation into national climate change planning

In its 2022-2024 Third Rolling Plan of Action,² the Taskforce on Displacement of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) on Loss and Damage has called on governments to integrate human mobility into national climate change planning processes, such as National Adaptation Plans

(NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). It is crucial that these national planning instruments for climate action not only focus on migration and displacement, but also include planned relocation as an important and distinct pillar of climate-related human mobility.

¹ Available overarching guidance includes: Ferris, E., Riera, J., & Weerasinghe, S. (2015). [Guidance on Protecting People from Disasters and Environmental Change through Planned Relocation](#). Brookings, Georgetown University, and UNHCR. See also Ferris, E. (2017). [A Toolbox: Planning Relocations to Protect People from Disasters and Environmental Change](#). Georgetown University, UNHCR, and IOM:

² Task Force on Displacement, [Third rolling plan of action 2022-2024](#).

Key Insights

1

Planned relocation generates many more positive impacts on people's lives when the whole process is people-centred. Planned relocation processes should cater to the needs of affected people and communities, involve them in all decisions, and build on local knowledge systems and practices.

Affected people must be at the centre of planned relocation processes. All people concerned, whether they decide to relocate, stay behind or live close to an identified relocation site, should be involved at all stages of the planned relocation, from planning, to implementation, to monitoring and evaluation over the long term. This

requires incorporating existing local knowledge systems and practices. Particular attention should be paid to the rights and needs of special groups, including women, children and persons with disabilities. Needs and opinions may vary between and within communities, so relocation requires context-sensitive planning approaches.

Case study: Cardoso Island, Brazil

“A new location was chosen with fertile land, fruit trees and fishing points essential for sustaining the community's traditional lifestyle”

— community member

Faced with severe erosion, frequent storms and rising sea levels, Cardoso Island, Brazil, broke in two, forcing the Enseada da Baleia community to relocate. The community refused the government's relocation plan because the proposed location would have disrupted their community traditions, identity and internal organization. The government suggested two options: moving to the nearest city or relocating within one of the other communities on the island. Both solutions were imposed top-down, without consulting or incorporating the views and needs of the community. Instead, the community organized their relocation without financial support from the government, relying on traditional knowledge to protect their way of life and cultural traditions. They chose a place that would guarantee the preservation of their values, identity and traditions. The case of Enseada da Baleia clearly illustrates how collaboration is crucial for planned relocation to proceed while respecting the rights of the communities and integrating their views and needs.³



Community members build a house in Nova Enseada, their chosen relocation site. © Carolina Kotchetkoff, 2017

³ Gini, G., Mendonça Cardoso, T., & Pires Ramos, E. (2020). [When the two seas met: preventive and self-managed relocation of the Nova Enseada community in Brazil](#). Forced Migration Review, (64)

2

A clear national framework or guidelines on planned relocation, designed with inputs from affected people, help governments and supporting actors to safeguard the rights of individuals and communities.

Relocation is a long-term process which requires thorough preparation, including mapping high-risk areas, potential relocation sites and a safeguard to ensure livelihoods. To guide the relocation process, a legal and policy framework, including a monitoring, evaluation and learning mechanism, can help safeguard the rights of individuals and communities. When a government relocates people, it will often need to expropriate people, both in high-risk areas and in destination sites. This requires recognition of existing formal and informal land (use) rights, clear expropriation procedures and adequate administrative capacity.⁴ Governments should seek to establish guidelines or frameworks that can help them address the different stages of planned relocation. This

should be in line with international standards and guidance, while applying relevant existing national frameworks and incorporating community-led input. The latter is central to ensuring that the socio-environmental thresholds leading to relocation are driven and defined in close collaboration with communities.⁵ This includes respecting and making use of existing community-driven frameworks (e.g. indigenous, customary or tribal structures). As just one example, the selection of destination sites should account for any customary land claims - which may be invisible to formal processes (especially when land is temporarily left fallow), leading to the under-representation of rightful users such as Indigenous groups in decision-making.

Case study: Cogeia village, Fiji

“We have to be ready to surrender some of that power to communities, to be humble in this process”

— Fiji Council of Social Services representative

The Government of Fiji has developed guidelines and procedures for relocating communities.⁶ The community-led relocation project in Cogeia, supported by FCOSS and Brot für die Welt, illustrates the importance of community inputs when formulating and applying such frameworks. After devastation by tropical cyclone Yasa in 2020, the residents requested a Trauma Informed Awareness and Healing Program. Led by FCOSS and Transcend Oceania, this programme transformed their perceptions of the proposed relocation. Their support increased: gifting land, wood and manpower to build 30 new houses. The application of national relocation frameworks appears positive in Cogeia because of deep engagement with the community.⁷



Cogeia residents with logs harvested from their forest, to build houses in the new site. © Aminiasi Tabakece, 2023

4 Almeida, B., & Jacobs, C. (2022). [Land expropriation – The hidden danger of climate change response in Mozambique](#). Land Use Policy, 123(C).

5 Bronen, R. (2023). [Rights, Resilience and Community-led Relocation: Creating a National Governance Framework](#). N.Y.U. Review of Law & Social Change, 45.

6 Office of the Prime Minister, Fiji (2023). [Standard Operating Procedure for Planned Relocation in the Republic of Fiji](#).

7 Yee, M., Piggott-McKellar, A., McMichael, C., and McNamara, K.E. (in review). Framing locally-led adaptation in a planned relocation in Fiji.

3

Planned relocation is a long-term process that requires proactive planning, long-term commitment, sustainable financing and support beyond the physical relocation of persons and households.

Planned relocation not only entails the physical movement of people, but requires thorough preparation based on frequent information exchange between affected people and governmental agencies. Once people have settled into their new homes, long-term measures are necessary to ensure lasting positive impacts on community livelihoods and well-being. Sustainable, predictable and long-term sources of finance are therefore essential. National governments may need partners to share the burden of such costs and develop the required technical capacity. Moreover, in the absence of such funding arrangements, there is a risk that members of hosting communities and relocated people themselves

bear large parts of the economic and non-economic losses associated with relocation. The experience of Fiji's Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund can inspire such multi-source financing, including contributions from national and international, state and non-state stakeholders. However, this fund is not enough for current, let alone future relocation needs. Further finance is needed even in Fiji where such a trust fund exists, as well as in other country contexts lacking such arrangements. The Loss and Damage Fund of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) may provide further access to funding in the future.

Case study: Central Mozambique

"We are now trying to make the relocation sites more permanent; building water points, a hospital and a school to give people the conditions to stay there. We are also planning to set up some development associations to create jobs."

— District administrator, more than four years after the relocation

Relocating people from high-risk areas to safer places is an ongoing process in Mozambique. After cyclone Idai, it happened at large-scale. At first, people received small plots of land and tents. This was appropriate as an emergency response, but not sustainable in the long term. Thereafter, people received construction materials to build semi-durable houses. Four years after the relocation, more durable houses are being built, while available basic services are gradually improving. The government is still committed to make relocation work.⁸



At a relocation site in Mozambique, workers recruited from both within and outside the community build more durable houses, four years after the site was opened using temporary shelters. © Bernardo Almeida, 2022

⁸ Fieldwork results by Almeida, B., & Jacobs, C. (publication in preparation).

4

Governments and affected communities often differ in their perceptions and assessments of the need for relocation in relation to climate risks and socio-environmental thresholds. These differences need careful consideration in the planning stage.

When governments conduct risk assessments for planned relocation, they tend to focus on potential economic losses and damages. People affected by climate change, however, may not necessarily base their decision to relocate or stay on the same criteria. Some may attach great value to non-economic losses and damages (NELDs), including social or spiritual connections to where they live; some may have

made high personal investments in a property; others may assess the probability of a risk as (much) lower. This raises questions about the consequences for community cohesion and who bears responsibility for assisting “voluntarily immobile” people to stay in place. Risk assessments hence need careful consideration, without undermining people’s agency and their right to self-determination.

Case studies: Southern Chile and coastal Ghana

In Villa Santa Lucía in Chilean Patagonia the local population rejected the government’s relocation plans after a mudslide in 2017, despite projections that mudslides are likely to occur more frequently under intensifying climate change. Based on specific representations of nature and human-nature relations, the community made a completely different risk assessment that did not warrant relocation.⁹

In Weija Gbawe Municipal District in coastal Ghana, the government used community-based communication tools to inform exposed communities about the risk of living in a perennial flooding area. The aim was to help people make more informed decisions on moving or not, without forcing them to relocate.¹⁰



Villa Santa Lucía was severely damaged by a mudslide in December 2017. Residents chose to stay. © Airbus / CNES, 2020 via Google Earth.

9 Wiegel, H., Warner, J., Boas, I., & Lamers, M. (2021). [Safe from what? Understanding environmental non-migration in Chilean Patagonia through ontological security and risk perceptions](#). *Regional Environmental Change*, 21(2), 43.

10 Nansam-Aggrey, Frank Kwesi (2023). [Assessing Community-Based Flood Risk Communication Systems for Persuasive Relocation: A Case Study of Weija-Gbawe Municipality](#). Presentation at the Climate Academy.

5

No matter how well a planned relocation is conducted, there will always be an element of loss. It is important to acknowledge and address both the economic and non-economic losses associated with planned relocation.

While planned relocation is sometimes portrayed as a climate change adaptation strategy, particularly when it is desired or even initiated by the affected community, it is important to also acknowledge that communities will still experience losses and damages in the process. In particular, they will incur non-economic losses and damages (NELDs) which are hard or impossible to quantify. These relate to the loss of cultural connections, heritage sites, social cohesion or simply of a familiar environment, filled with memories. Many communities share a special bond with the place they grew up in and see themselves intrinsically connected to the

land and sea. It is impossible to “relocate” this connection. It is important to acknowledge that NELDs occur and that they differ not just from community to community but also from individual to individual. Pre-relocation measures that can reduce NELDs are consultation and collaboration methods that uncover people’s needs. Post-relocation measures that can reduce NELDs include mental health programmes and recreational or spiritual activities that give meaning to people’s lives and reduce dissatisfaction, sadness or depression.

Case study: Coastal Ghana

“Those gods were living here before we came ... The gods will never follow us ... We can leave, but if we leave and they are still here, they will put trouble on us ... They know we are the ones giving them food”

— fisherman from Fuveme, a village severely affected by coastal erosion, where negotiations about planned relocation are ongoing

The fishing village of Fuveme in Ghana’s Volta River Delta has been wiped off the map by coastal erosion over the last decade. Living nearby in temporary shelters, community members are reluctant to be relocated further inland, because they fear to not only lose their livelihoods, but also the connection to their gods, ancestral spirits and the land that is of high importance for the Anlo-Ewe people as a whole.¹¹



Houses and shelters of the displaced people from Fuveme are flooding again during a tidal wave event. © Friedrich Nikolaus Neu, 3. April 2022

¹¹ Neu, Friedrich N. (2023) [Political Ecology perspectives on planned relocation of coastal dwellers in Ghana’s Volta River Delta](#). Presentation to the Climate Academy.

This policy brief is an outcome of the Climate Academy 2023 on planned relocations

This policy brief was prepared as part of the 16th Climate Academy held in September 2023 with academics, practitioners and policymakers who have extensive expertise on the topic of planned relocation and climate change policymaking. Stage I of the academy comprised 12 webinars focused on identifying policy gaps and agenda-setting for planned relocation in the context of climate change. Participants approached the topic from a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective, drawing on case studies from across the globe. Recordings of these discussions are available online. Stage II was a one-week in-person gathering

in Senegal, during which participants worked intensively to refine research and practices focusing on specific outputs that aim to collectively inform policy gaps identified by the academy. This academy was organized by United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) and Munich Re Foundation in coordination with United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and International Organization for Migration (IOM - West Africa Office, Senegal & Global Data Institute, Germany).

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