When a Community Has to Relocate Because the Environmental Risk is Simply Too Great

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Summary

As climate change and disasters render some areas uninhabitable, planned relocations—moving entire communities to safer locations—are becoming a necessary measure for some communities around the globe. Successful relocations require clear legal and policy frameworks, strong community participation, inclusive planning, and adequate financing. Past failures often stemmed from poor consultation and funding gaps. Effective, rights-based relocations, while a measure of last resort, must integrate into national adaptation and development plans, ensuring long-term support, dignity, and protection for affected communities through coordinated global and national action.

IPEG

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All over the world, local communities are grappling with the threat of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change. Many communities and local governments are adopting measures to reduce their environmental risks through risk-reduction and climate change adaptation measures, such as building seawalls and introducing drought-resistant crops. But what are the choices when those efforts are not enough? When a disaster destroys a community or when communities realize that the place where they live is no longer habitable? Planned relocations – moving the whole community to a safer place – is one option. But planned relocations are major undertakings with economic, social, cultural and political consequences and not to be taken lightly. As the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of internally displaced persons affirmed in her report last year, planned relocations should be considered as a last resort – after all other adaptation measures have been exhausted.

Planned relocations, we believe, can be effective in protecting people from disasters and the adverse effects of climate change and can support solutions to displacement but need to be based on a policy or normative framework which defines institutional responsibilities and sets standards in order to ensure that the rights of all those affected by relocations are upheld. They also need to be carefully planned and financed, and most importantly, engage affected communities. Too often, past relocation efforts have not been successful because of lack of community participation, inadequate planning and insufficient funding.

While there is a growing body of literature on planned relocations, there is much we do not know – particularly about the long-term outcomes of relocations efforts. There have been few surveys of people who have been relocated about their experiences. And even fewer efforts to look at the outcomes for those who have stayed behind or are otherwise affected when a community is moved away, such as a nearby school or business or property owner. And most of the 400 or so documented cases of planned relocations have focused on a few regions (particularly North America and the Pacific) although it is clear that relocations have taken place – and are taking place – in all regions. While planned relocations are a global phenomenon, each context is different, making generalizations difficult. The situation of those relocated after the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes in 2010 was very different from Alaskan communities forced to relocate because of melting permafrost and coastal erosion or the Sugdub community in Panama which relocated mainly because of rising sea levels and flooding. In some cases, communities decide to relocate after a disaster; in others, they try to move before disaster strikes or when their human settlement was no longer habitable.

In many cases, those living on particularly marginal land are also politically and economically marginalized populations, such as Indigenous communities who have suffered the consequences of economic exclusion and political neglect, compounding already-difficult planning

processes. And it seems that in many cases, as the environment deteriorates, some individuals decide to move on their own, particularly the young and economically active and often under duress, leaving behind those who, for various reasons, either cannot or do not want to move.

Policies and frameworks

While many factors need to be considered in planning relocations, policy, normative and institutional frameworks are paramount. They are key enablers for ensuring that people's rights are protected when planned relocations take place. Guidance is available to support governments in developing policies and frameworks relevant to their own particular contexts. Such frameworks should also ensure community engagement, inclusive planning and adequate finances.

Community engagement

In most cases, 'community' refers to those living in a specified geographic area (which may or may not overlap with ethnic or cultural communities), although this becomes problematic in urban areas where, for example, people living in an apartment building may not have other ties with each other. Communities themselves are different, making generalizations difficult. Some have established representative leadership who can take the lead in guiding relocation. Others have less representative leadership and decisions are made by a single person. In some communities, including Indigenous communities, there are different political interests and internal disagreements over the process can complicate relocation planning. Sometimes communities do not trust the government.

In some cases, communities themselves decide that relocation is their only option and seek governmental support. One Alaskan indigenous village, Newtok, began exploring the possibility of relocating their community to an environmentally safer area, way back in 1996, leading to a decades-long search for funding of the initiative. In 2024, the last of the 300 or so Newtok residents moved to a new site, Mertarvik at a cost of over $100 million.

In some cases, communities themselves carry out the relocation on their own with little governmental support or documentation of either the process or the results. In other cases, the government decides that communities need to be relocated, as in Vietnam, where large numbers of people were relocated to protect them from landslides and flooding. In still other cases, communities decide that it's time to relocate and ask the government for assistance, for example in Fiji and Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana, USA.

Problems emerge when communities are not part of the relocation planning process. In the IFRC-supported relocation process in Sri Lanka, communities were not involved in the selection of beneficiaries – who would get a new house in a new location – leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the process. In the recent relocation of the Sugdub community in Panama, the housing built for relocated families was not culturally appropriate and could have been avoided if communities had been consulted.

The question of how to engage affected communities in the process – including those to be relocated, those who stay behind, and receiving communities – is a complex one. Organizing meetings between those planning relocations and affected communities is a start, but rarely sufficient as these meetings may consist of opportunities for communities to be 'told' about the relocation plans and it is unclear how and whether community concerns will be incorporated into the planning.

There have been few systematic surveys after relocations to gather reflections from affected communities on their experiences. One such survey of 132 relocated households in Vietnam, found that most had received adequate information about housing and transportation, but one-fourth had not received such information. The project used both concentrated relocation (new villages) and dispersed relocation (into existing residential areas) allowing for flexibility based on household preferences and local conditions. Households were able to retain agricultural land enabling temporary or circular migration and income diversification. The relocation was also explicitly linked to the National Target Program on New Rural Development.

Almost 90% reported less exposure to natural hazards (landslides, flooding) in their new location and 95% indicated that they planned to stay. About 75% of respondents were satisfied with the support they had received and most felt that services and infrastructure were better after relocation. However, 60% reported more health problems after relocation, although their access to health care was better. The biggest challenges were with income and livelihoods – almost half said their income declined after relocation. In terms of process, respondents reported that there were many meetings with government officials but these were mainly informational in nature and communities and local authorities had little input into the process.

Careful inclusive planning

Given the many details involved in planned relocations, careful planning is essential. **Affected communities, national government agencies, local government authorities and the private sector need to work together to ensure that relocated communities receive the services they need**. Land issues are almost always problematic: where to get the land for the new site (and pay for it), what happens to the land and property that is left behind by those relocated, how to ensure that the relocated community does not face other environmental risks. Construction of new infrastructure – roads, electricity, water and sanitation systems – is often the most expensive aspect of relocation. The provision of services requires the participation of education ministries, health ministries need to plan for the relocation of clinics or the access of relocated populations to health services in the new site, and security forces and first responders need to be engaged.

Perhaps the most frequent shortcoming in plans for relocation is inadequate attention to livelihoods. Fisherfolk, for example, who are relocated away from coasts lose their traditional livelihoods and need alternatives or else they will move back to the area in spite of the environmental risk as in Mozambique. Little attention has been paid to the relocation of businesses which has implications for livelihoods. A policy, normative or institutional framework is essential to enable good outcomes and, ultimately, a durable solution.

Determining who is eligible to be relocated and to receive assistance can be problematic. In the case of Ile de Jean Charles (Louisiana, US), for example, some members of the community had moved away after a 2012 hurricane and argued that they should also be allowed new housing in the relocated site. And a crucial issue is what happens to those who choose to remain where they are and what happens to the remaining community. Often the authorities decide not to provide services to the community from which people are being moved – for example, to support a school in the new location but not the former one or to not provide law enforcement to a community from which most people have left.

It is also important to think carefully about the timing of the relocation and what happens in that often long period between the time a decision is made to relocate a community and the relocation actually occurs – a period that can last years. Will authorities continue to invest in infrastructure, for example, in an area destined to be relocated?

Finances

It is expensive to move a whole community – to buy the land, to provide the necessary infrastructure and structures and communities – particularly small Indigenous communities – rarely have the means to finance relocations. In fact, lack of finances is one of the major impediments to relocations. Only Fiji has a dedicated funding source, the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund. A recent study on financing planned relocations found that governments usually provide most of the funding for relocations in the global north while international actors provide most of the funding for communities in the global south. For example, the International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies provided most of the funding for the relocation of a village in Sri Lanka following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The study identified the most common sources of funding: grants, loans, community contributions, NGOs. While the World Bank has supported planned relocations in some countries, there are possibilities for greater engagement of multilateral development banks.

In assessing outcomes of planned relocations, guidance needs to be developed on what constitutes a 'successful' relocation. Is it 'successful' if people face less environmental risk even when they lose their livelihoods or acquire debt? How to account for the non-economic losses – ties to the land, community cohesion? Most reports on outcomes (where they exist) look at communities a year after the relocation but the consequences can last far longer and longitudinal research is needed. Against this backdrop, the evolving international climate policy framework provides an opportunity to secure support and coherence for relocation efforts.

Effective, rights-based planned relocations must be embedded within national legal frameworks, adaptation strategies, and development planning systems to ensure they are not reactive or ad-hoc, but rather transparent, participatory, and guided by public policy. When integrated into instruments like National Adaptation Plans, disaster risk legislation, land-use systems, and human rights commitments, relocations gain legitimacy and unlock access to sustained financing—from the Loss and Damage Fund to development banks. This institutional foundation enables three key pillars: community leadership and participation as a rights obligation; inclusive, multi-sector planning that addresses housing, land, services, and livelihoods; and predictable, long-term financing aligned across climate and development systems.

Planned relocations should be part of a coherent national and international policy architecture that protects rights and dignity. The UNFCCC has progressively recognized their importance—from the Cancun Adaptation Framework to the Paris Agreement and the establishment of the Santiago Network. Recent COP decisions

have confirmed that planned relocations fall within the scope of the Loss and Damage Fund, with COP30 set to launch the first call for proposals. This is a pivotal moment to prioritize relocations as a strategic investment area. With political will and targeted financing, relocations can be community-driven and rights-respecting, rather than imposed or under-resourced. The difference between protection and harm lies in the frameworks we build today—principled, well-financed, and grounded in human rights.

In the lead-up to COP30, **Parties should commit to explicitly integrating planned relocations into national adaptation planning and development strategies, making them eligible for sustained financial support**. The Loss and Damage Fund's first call for proposals under the Barbados Implementation Plan offers a concrete opportunity: to design funding windows for community-led relocation initiatives; to operationalize access to technical assistance through the Santiago Network; and to work with regional development banks and fiscal authorities to secure long-term investments in land, housing, services, cultural continuity, and livelihoods. Communities are already relocating. The real question is whether the international community will ensure these movements are dignified, just, and grounded in rights—or leave them to unfold through crisis.

**The views expressed are those of the individual experts. November 2025*

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Cover photo

South Sudan. Flooding threatens livelihoods of the internally displaced in Mangalla
Kuot once farmed in his village in Bor South, but recurring floods in South Sudan forced him to flee to Mangalla, a displacement site near Juba. Though he tried to keep farming, even brief heavy rain threatens to submerge his new garden.
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Photo (page 2)

Honduras. Rising seas are forcing families to flee Cedeño
Edwin Cruz, 37, is a fisherman from Cedeño, a small town in Honduras' Marcovia Municipality, who believes climate change has completely altered his life. "The hardships we face to make a living caused my wife and daughter to leave. I haven't heard from them since they left, and I don't know if they are safe or if something happened to them," he said. Rising sea levels, storm surges, heavy rainfall and pollution from nearby shrimp farms have decimated fishing, swallowed homesand, destroyed local mangrove forests along Cedeño's coast.
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Photo (page 5)

Fiji. Relocating communities to safer locations
In 2014, the village of Vunidogoloa was relocated to safer ground due to the effects of climate change.
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