

# Mapping of planned relocation cases: a foundation for evidence-based policy and practice

Erica Bower, Sanjula Weerasinghe and Daria Mokhnacheva

**A recent global mapping exercise on planned relocation offers opportunities to build insights essential for guiding policy and practice.**

Planned relocation – the permanent movement of whole communities to destination sites out of harm’s way – is recognised as a measure to reduce exposure to floods, sea level rise and other hazards, including those intensified by climate change. Over the last decade, international policy development has recognised the importance of planned relocation; these include the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change’s 2010 Cancun Adaptation Framework, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the Nansen Initiative’s 2015 Protection Agenda, and the 2018 Global Compact for Migration.

However, relocations have serious repercussions for peoples’ livelihoods, cultures and security, and are therefore usually considered to be a measure of last resort. Knowing how planned relocation cases have been undertaken in the past, including their adverse outcomes, is essential in order for policymakers, practitioners and communities to be able to develop future approaches that mitigate harms and promote pathways to dignified and durable solutions.

Until recently, however, understanding of the scale, location and characteristics of planned relocation cases related to natural hazards was limited or piecemeal. Insights were often drawn from comparisons with development-related resettlement, which may differ, and lessons were often generalised from a small number of well-documented cases, such as Vunidogoloa in Fiji, the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, and Alaskan Native villages in the United States of America. But where else have planned relocations been initiated, and what can we learn from global comparison?

## Mapping exercise: key findings

The Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the German Development Agency (GIZ) have recently collaborated on a global mapping exercise. This resulted in two reports, *Leaving Place, Restoring Home I and II*, a database of over 400 planned relocation cases, and additional snapshot and case-study reports.<sup>1</sup> This mapping highlighted key insights about where, why, when and how planned relocation has been undertaken, with implications that may be of interest to practitioners.

Planned relocation is a global phenomenon, with cases identified in 78 countries and across all inhabited continents. Approximately 40% of all cases identified were in Asia, followed by 38% in the Americas. Around 10% of cases were in Africa, 9% were in the Pacific, and only a few identified in Europe and the Middle East. Once each continent’s total population is considered, however, the Pacific emerges as the region with highest relative numbers of cases. This geographic distribution of planned relocation cases roughly parallels the regional breakdown of disaster displacement estimates,<sup>2</sup> underscoring how planned relocation can be a strategy either to avert or to respond to displacement. Importantly, the distribution also aligns with hazard hotspots, including hazards made more intense and frequent by climate change. It is critical, therefore, for vulnerable countries and communities to better understand disaster risks, consider diverse *in situ* adaptation options, and begin to plan for relocation in advance if necessary.

March 2022

[www.fmreview.org/climate-crisis](http://www.fmreview.org/climate-crisis)

While cases were identified across the globe, there was considerable regional variation in how planned relocations were carried out.<sup>3</sup> For instance, a snapshot of relocation cases in the Pacific highlighted the role of customary norms around land tenure underpinning relocation of indigenous communities, and the role of non-State supporting actors in this region. In Asia, a larger proportion of cases were initiated after disaster displacement occurred in urban rather than in rural areas, and were more often initiated by government actors.

Across contexts, flooding was the most common hazard driving planned relocation decisions. Other hazards included tsunamis, storms, erosion, earthquakes, landslides, droughts and sea level rise. However, most planned relocation cases occur in circumstances where multiple hazards overlap simultaneously or sequentially. For example, although the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami immediately precipitated the relocation of displaced persons from Kandholhudoo to Dhuvaafaru Island in the Maldives, the community had already experienced floods and land degradation prior to the tsunami and had anticipated that these hazards would intensify in the context of sea level rise.<sup>4</sup>

It is rarely a single event that triggers a decision to relocate but rather multiple hazard impacts and risks across time. Typically, relocations are classified as either 'proactive' in anticipation of a future risk or 'reactive' in response to a past or present impact, but in practice most cases fall somewhere along this continuum. In addition, planned relocation can take place before or after disaster displacement, with varying possibilities for return to place of origin in the interim. For policymakers and practitioners, this underscores the importance of multi-hazard risk assessment, consideration of where disaster displacement has occurred as a potential indicator for where relocation may be necessary in the future, and scrutiny of potential for return and interim transitional arrangements when planning a relocation.

Decisions to undertake planned relocation are often affected by other political, social,

economic or demographic drivers. Members of the Gardi Sugdub community in Panama, for example, initiated planned relocation to a mainland site due to demographic challenges of overcrowding on the small island, alongside their desire for less exposure to sea level rise.<sup>5</sup> Scrutinising decision making and implementation processes can help both to better understand the non-environmental drivers influencing decisions, and to guard against misuse of the risk reduction or climate adaptation narrative to greenwash other covert motives, such as 'land grabs'.

In some cases, relocation involves multiple sites of origin or destination, and this may have important implications for practitioners; for instance, planned relocation cases with multiple origin sites require consideration of complex integration dynamics and inclusive participatory mechanisms, while cases with multiple destination sites may require consideration of community disintegration and loss of collective identity.<sup>6</sup>

Many relocations with single origin and destination sites involve relatively small populations, take place in rural areas, and span surprisingly short distances, often less than two kilometres. While some cases take less than a year between initiation and the physical move, others take decades. A range of actors initiated and supported these processes, including community members themselves, government agencies, and national and international organisations. Diverse challenges were identified across cases, including limited inclusivity of participation mechanisms, lack of livelihoods opportunities and ongoing hazard exposure in destination sites, poor quality of housing and infrastructure, limited access to services, and loss of community cohesion and cultural heritage. Information about long-term community needs and outcomes is often lacking, underscoring the importance of strengthened longitudinal monitoring and evaluation in relocation processes.

While this inquiry did not systematically review national planned relocation policies, it did help to identify examples of national normative developments and legislation to guide relocation processes. The Government

of Fiji, for instance, has finalised National Guidelines on Planned Relocation, while the Government of Vanuatu's National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement includes substantive sections on addressing planned relocations.<sup>7</sup> This mapping further illustrated how, even if few countries appear to have comprehensive frameworks to guide planned relocation, relevant provisions may exist under other national sectoral policies and legislation. Further research could help identify such provisions and domestic policy gaps.

### Future opportunities

As these initial insights demonstrate, a database on hazard-related planned relocation cases offers opportunities to build insights essential for guiding policy and practice. While every case is unique and context specific, comparing characteristics across a subset of cases can uncover insights to inform local, national or regional governance of planned relocation. For instance, research focused only on cases initiated in the context of a common hazard such as floods might find that such cases are more typically initiated after – as opposed to before – disaster displacement and in circumstances where options for return to a site of origin while waiting for new site development are limited, thus requiring transitional housing and services.

Further research may draw on cases identified in this database for assessment of outcomes, which was largely beyond the scope of these descriptive mapping exercises. Critically, a lot of data points are needed before one can draw any definitive associations, let alone causal relationships, between decisions made during the relocation process and more positive outcomes for relocated persons.

In addition to generating comparative insights for governance at national or regional scales, such a database may be helpful for community members or supporting actors currently engaged in an intended relocation. They may, for instance, search for cases initiated on a similar timeline, located in a similar region, or facing a

similar combination of hazards – and then reach out to build partnerships and share challenges and lessons learned. Ensuring that affected populations, local governments and local civil society organisations are meaningfully engaged in monitoring and evaluating the relocation process, and sharing lessons learned with other communities, is essential. Creating opportunities for such exchange of insights between relocating communities may be an important role for national or regional practitioners.

This research underscores how important insights can be gained from a global comparative approach, for instance how most relocation cases a) fall on a continuum between proactive and reactive extremes, b) occur in the context of multiple hazards and socioeconomic and political motivations, and c) follow complex spatial patterns with many origins or destination sites. Each of these observations challenges the conventional wisdom and dominant assumptions in the field of planned relocation and may be useful to shape future action of practitioners and policymakers, and ultimately ensure relocations minimise risk and protect people from harm.

### Erica Bower

[ebower@stanford.edu](mailto:ebower@stanford.edu) @EricaRBower

PhD Researcher, Stanford University; Centre Affiliate, Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, University of New South Wales

### Sanjula Weerasinghe

[ssw33@georgetown.edu](mailto:ssw33@georgetown.edu) @SanjulaSW

Centre Affiliate, Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, University of New South Wales; Fellow, Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University

### Daria Mokhnacheva

[dasha.mokhnacheva@gmail.com](mailto:dasha.mokhnacheva@gmail.com)

Thematic specialist

1. See [bit.ly/Kaldor-relocation-dataset](https://bit.ly/Kaldor-relocation-dataset); Bower E and Weerasinghe S (2021) 'Leaving Place, Restoring Home', Platform on Disaster Displacement and Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law [bit.ly/PDD-Leaving-Place-2021](https://bit.ly/PDD-Leaving-Place-2021); IOM (2022) *Leaving Place, Restoring Home II: A Review of French, Spanish and Portuguese Literature on Planned Relocation in the Context of Hazards, Disasters, and Climate Change*

March 2022

[www.fmreview.org/climate-crisis](http://www.fmreview.org/climate-crisis)

2. IDMC (2021) 'Global Report on Internal Displacement'  
[bit.ly/IDMC-GRID-2021](https://bit.ly/IDMC-GRID-2021)

3. Bower E and Weerasinghe S (2021) *Planned Relocation in Asia: A Regional Snapshot*, GIZ [bit.ly/PDD-Asia-regional-snapshot-2021](https://bit.ly/PDD-Asia-regional-snapshot-2021);  
Bower E and Weerasinghe S (2021) *Planned Relocation in the Pacific: A Regional Snapshot*, GIZ  
[bit.ly/PDD-Pacific-regional-snapshot-2021](https://bit.ly/PDD-Pacific-regional-snapshot-2021)

4. Simonelli A (2016) 'Good Fishing in Rising Seas: Kandholhudhoo, Dhuvaafaru, and the Need for a Development-Based Migration Policy in the Maldives', *Migration, Risk*

*Management and Climate Change: Evidence and Policy Responses* (pp131-148) [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42922-9\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42922-9_7)

5. Displacement Solutions (2016) *An Overview on the Relocation of Guna Indigenous Communities in Gunayala, Panama*  
[bit.ly/Gunayala-planned-relocation-2017](https://bit.ly/Gunayala-planned-relocation-2017)

6. Weerasinghe S and Bower E (2021) *Unpacking Spatial Complexity: Case Studies of Planned Relocation with Multiple Origin and Destination Sites*, GIZ [bit.ly/PDD-spatial-complexity-2021](https://bit.ly/PDD-spatial-complexity-2021)

7. See article by Liam Moore in this issue.

