

Putting principles into practice: lessons from Fiji on planned relocations

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Fiji's Relocation Guidelines draw on the country's experience in planning relocations, and offer guidance to other States facing similar challenges.

In November 2020, Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama officially opened the newly relocated village of Narikoso on the island of Ono, Fiji. The project saw seven households moved to storm-resilient housing on higher ground to avoid recurrent inundation from rising sea levels and storm surges. Narikoso is just one of 48 villages that the government has identified as requiring partial or full relocation due to climate-related circumstances, and there are over 800 other communities likely to be at risk of future harm or displacement.

Fiji's experience in physically relocating communities has informed the development of two new sets of guidelines – on planned relocations (2018)¹ and displacement in the context of climate change and disasters (2019)². With many States around the world looking to develop similar policies, it is important to learn from early adopters like Fiji to see what should be replicated and the issues that need addressing. While relocations are framed as an option of last resort, the process of identifying at-risk communities and engaging with them can be an important part of mitigating risk factors, allowing communities to stay where they are for longer, or to find more durable solutions after they move.

These two guidelines now shape the governance of relocations and climate mobilities throughout Fiji. The goal of these documents was not to set out

standard operating procedures, which are provided in a separate document, but to establish overarching principles to guide key actors in the relocation process. Fiji has drawn on existing international frameworks to develop these. An early draft of the relocation guidelines showed the intent to provide guidance consistent with the 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.³ The final version removes direct reference to the Guiding Principles but retains their meaning. The importance of principles contained within the Sustainable Development Goals, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and multiple human rights conventions are also noted.

Importantly, Fiji's guidelines were designed as living documents that encourage an iterative learning process, where improvements are constantly made to the relocation process. Learning from and adapting practices to be context-specific will be important for any actor engaging with communities who may need to move. To achieve durable solutions, planning for potential relocations needs to take into account the needs of affected communities, as well as the capacity of governing actors and the specifics of the local context.

It must be noted that without the political will to pursue and implement policies around



Fiji Red Cross Society / Vainava Tito

Volunteers from the Fiji Red Cross work in local communities in Ra province after Cyclone Winston hit Fiji in February 2016.

climate mobilities, nothing is likely to happen. This is not just the will to do something, but the will to draw on existing laws, principles and norms to follow emerging standards of best practice. While the ideas in Fiji's guidelines are not unique, the way in which they weave together existing laws, norms, standards and principles and apply them to this emerging issue area is unique. This is what other actors will be able to look to as they model their own responses.

Learning from Fiji's experience

Three key factors feature prominently in Fiji's relocations to date: having somewhere to move to; having the active participation of those affected; and being willing and able to fund these projects.

Firstly, the durability of solutions is likely to depend on having a suitable relocation site. That suitability may in turn depend on issues such as: whether traditional owners are able to maintain connections to their ancestral lands by moving short distances; if communities can stay together in new locations; whether residents can afford to move; and whether host communities are willing to receive those who move. In the

Narikoso relocation, the community had to be separated. Only seven households fit on the new site, with the rest of the community slated to move to an adjacent site in the future.⁴ Such separations of close-knit communities make it less likely that truly durable solutions will be found.

The second point is the importance of active participation. For relocations to have the best chance of success, people need to have control over the decision-making processes that affect them.⁵ Fiji's completed relocations have reported varying levels of engagement and satisfaction with the outcomes. While the Vunidogoloa relocation process was originally promoted as participatory, community members subsequently raised concerns that decisions were often made between contractors and the government without consulting them. The relocation of Narikoso began before the new Relocation Guidelines were introduced, and experienced similar issues initially. Communication between officials and the community reportedly improved as the project progressed; whether this reaches the threshold of full participation, however, remains to be seen.

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A recurring issue within these processes is the exclusion of women from discussions. In Vunidogoloa, the finished houses did not include kitchens. In post-relocation interviews, women in the community noted that they had not been consulted and had to go along with what the men had agreed to. Consent and active participation need to fully reflect the community in question, including vulnerable, marginalised and other overlooked voices.

Planning for and deciding when particularly vulnerable areas may become uninhabitable is extremely difficult for both communities and authorities. In each case of relocation, the tension between the State's obligation to protect and prevent citizens from coming to harm, and the people's right to choose when and how they leave their homes must be navigated. Effective early engagement that includes preventive measures is likely to prevent communities from being displaced before all options to stay have been exhausted.

The third challenge is that ambitious policies like these are expensive. The Narikoso relocation was only able to be completed after European Union funding, funnelled through the German Development Fund, was acquired, providing €700,000 of the estimated €808,750 required for the relocation. Although the final figures remain unclear, the government is known to have spent around three times more on the project than was initially budgeted, while the community also had to significantly increase its own contribution to ensure the relocation was completed.⁶ In response to the funding problem, Fiji instituted a Climate Relocation and Displaced Peoples Trust Fund in 2019, financed partly through their Environment and Climate Adaptation Levy and partly through voluntary contributions from donor States, like New Zealand. Whether this model is able to fund the large volume of relocations and preventive works the government has identified remains to be seen.

The trust fund approach seems to be getting more support internationally than alternative plans, such as those proposed by Vanuatu. Vanuatu favours using processes

like the UNFCCC's Warsaw Loss and Damage mechanism, which focuses on polluters paying reparations for damage caused. However, Vanuatu has faced international resistance to this, particularly because States with higher historical emissions would have to admit fault for driving the climate crisis. Setting aside which model is more appropriate, if funds like Fiji's can enable relocations to commence now and ensure the protection of communities into the future, then it will demonstrate a solution that other States may copy.

Even if all three of these factors are addressed, each relocation will need to be tailored to the community in question, with long-term, post-relocation support included. In short, people need to be given every opportunity to make the own choices about whether, where and when they move. Government actors also need to be willing and able to plan, fund and complete these projects in line with guiding principles. Ensuring relocations meet these ambitious standards is not easy; however, if they are not met, there is every likelihood that people will not find durable solutions and will face recurrent or protracted forms of displacement.

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