Resettlement in the twenty-first century

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Deficiencies in planning, preparation and implementation of involuntary resettlement and relocation projects have produced far more failures than successes. Indeed, it is questionable whether resettlement as currently practised could be categorised as a form of protection.

Anticipating that there will be an increase in involuntary population displacements in this century, some have called for greater attention to organised resettlement or planned relocation as possible responses. On the positive side, relocation potentially represents an important protection for vulnerable communities that would otherwise receive no assistance or support. On the negative side, the track record of resettlement associated with large infrastructure and development projects has been poor. The fact, however, that results for disaster-induced displacement and resettlement have been marginally better suggests that there is hope.

There appear to be two broad explanations for why resettlement so often goes wrong. The first is a lack of appropriate inputs such as legal frameworks and policies, funding and care in implementation. The other is that the resettlement process emerges out of the complex interaction of many cultural, social, environmental, economic, institutional and political factors in ways that are not predictable and that are not amenable to a rational planning approach. This in fact may create a space for resettlers to take greater control over the process.[1]

Formal development-forced displacement and resettlement (DFDR) projects require adequate material inputs up front and, since adjustment to resettlement transpires through multiple stages and over extended periods of time, eventually resettled communities themselves must also mobilise social and cultural resources in their efforts to re-establish viable social groups and communities and to restore adequate levels of material and cultural life.

Resettlement has actually been employed by responsible authorities in disaster recovery for centuries. In some cases, disasters and other environmental disruptions will force people to migrate as individuals and families, similarly to political refugees, with little community-based resettlement efforts on their behalf. However, in other cases community-based resettlement has been undertaken for disaster-affected people in projects that involved planning processes – but usually only when no risk mitigation was possible. However, such efforts have rarely met with success.

Post-disaster resettled populations often abandon the new settlements and return to previous home sites for a wide variety of environmental, economic, social and psychological motives. Part of the blame for these failures has been due to failures in design, construction, implementation and delivery of the resettlement project itself, and these problems generally derive from a lack of consultation with, and participation by, the affected people. This lack is generally due to a disparagement of local knowledge and culture on the part of policymakers and planners.

Understanding the role of social institutional processes, such as governance or social networks, in resettlers' adaptive strategies is crucial for identifying the socio-culturally specific nature of the impoverishment risks, thus helping to explain why displacement and resettlement so often result in greater impoverishment of affected households. People who move to escape persecution or death, or who are displaced by disasters or by development projects, share many similar challenges and may generate similar responses over the long term in affected peoples.

Gender, age, class and ethnicity have been clearly identified as key markers of vulnerability. Systemic forms of vulnerability and exposure and their tragic outcomes are

frequently linked to unresolved problems of development. Since resettlement should focus on durable solutions, to ensure successful resettlement outcomes resettlement projects must be configured as development projects.

Existing and emerging guidelines

In recent years the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters[2], and the *World Bank's Populations at Risk of Disaster: A Resettlement Guide and Preventive Resettlement of Populations at Risk of Disaster: Experiences from Latin America*[3] have attempted to address the issue of disaster-related resettlement in terms of human rights and good practice guidelines.

The IASC Guidelines adopt a human rights-based approach to help protect populations threatened or afflicted by disasters and are intended to complement existing guidelines on humanitarian standards in disasters. The guidelines are organised by thematic grouping through the time phases of the disaster: protection of life; protection of rights related to food, health, etc.; protection of rights related to housing and livelihoods; and protection of rights related to freedom of movement and religion. The Guidelines also highlight areas where these rights are threatened by the resettlement process. However, they do not provide a set of measures, guidelines or good practices in resettlement to ensure that these rights are safeguarded in and by the resettlement process, where, in fact, they are frequently violated. While not formally recognised as guidelines *per se*, the World Bank volumes, together with its *Involuntary Resettlement Sourcebook*[4],

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Haitians wade through the flooded streets of Gonaives after Hurricane Hanna caused severe flooding, 2008.

constitute a major source of knowledge on the implementation of resettlement.

There are still no globally binding agreements or treaties that guarantee the rights of people who have been uprooted by causes such as climate change, environmental disruption, disasters or development projects. And while there are advocates for the construction of a new global governance architecture for the protection and voluntary resettlement of people displaced by sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment by sea-level rise, extreme weather events and drought and water scarcity, they generally do not address resettlement with any specificity.

The general lessons from DFDR studies are that resettlement should always be considered a last resort; should always be adequately funded, well-planned ahead of time, with trained staff operating under clear lines of authority; should include income-generating activities and land provision and adequate housing; and should consider the rights of affected communities.[5] Based on these principles, Elizabeth Ferris further recommends that a consultative process be established to develop specific protection principles and concrete guidelines that will be useful to all stakeholders, including affected peoples, development and humanitarian actors, and governments who may be obliged to consider resettlement as an adaptation to climate change.[6]

There is no agreement as yet on guidelines for anticipatory or preventive resettlement (that is, resettlement in advance of significant impacts), or indeed by what criteria such resettlement might be deemed necessary. The lack of a clear internationally accepted definition of uninhabitability of a place and the likelihood

that such conditions would be due to multiple factors make it difficult to determine both causality and responsibility. Furthermore, it is unclear whether residents of a risk-prone area should be moved in advance of potential impacts, given uncertainties concerning timing and magnitude or the success of potential adaptation mechanisms, or whether it is best to wait until after a major disaster occurs. In such cases, there is a need to reconcile the ethics of policies that remove people from high-risk areas with the potential that they will undermine historical freedoms and longstanding cultural patterns of settlement, mobility and livelihood.

The risk that vacated lands might be appropriated for financial gain or that resettlement might be used as a tool against politically marginalised peoples suggests that criteria and guidelines are needed, lest anticipatory resettlement lead to an unforeseen number of unwanted outcomes. Yet even in the best of circumstances, it may be difficult to muster the necessary political will or resources in the absence of a major disaster, and indeed residents may be very reluctant to leave an area even if the probability of a disaster occurring is high.

Conclusions

It cannot be expected that traditional refugee-receiving countries will open their arms to potentially large numbers of environmentally displaced peoples or so-called climate refugees.[7] Given anticipated levels of climate-related displacement, the question of adequate available land for resettlement will become crucial in both urban and rural contexts. Procedures for establishing ownership and clear legal title, both traditional and formal, must be established, and legal instruments and procedures must be developed.

Financing also becomes a central issue. The normative frameworks for protecting human lives while also guaranteeing human rights are the gold standard, yet the governments of most developing countries, where significant climate impacts are projected to occur, may have the fewest resources to prepare and implement them. Developed countries will be reluctant to assume the costs of resettlement, even given responsibility for past emissions, although a discussion on 'loss and damage' has started within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, opening the door for discussions of compensation for damages from climate change owing to developed country emissions, which may include national or international resettlement.

A key element to improvement in resettlement practice will be the recognition that the displaced must be seen as active social agents with their own views on rights and entitlements, which have to be considered in any displacement and in the planning and implementation of resettlement projects. Resettlement is a complex social process; at its best it should support and nourish the coping and adaptation processes that enable a population to regain the functionality and coherence of a viable community, resilient enough to deal with social and environmental stressors. Central to these tasks are the issues of rights, poverty, vulnerability and other forms of social marginality that are intrinsically linked to displacement. Yet planners have often perceived the culture of uprooted people as an obstacle to success, rather than as a resource.

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2. www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IDPersons/OperationalGuidelines_IDP.pdf.

3. http://tinyurl.com/WB-PreventiveResettlement

4. http://tinyurl.com/Involuntary-Resettlement-WB

5. www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/08/protection-climate-change-ferris and de Sherbinin, A, Castro, M, Gemenne, F, Cernea, M M, *et al.* 2011. 'Preparing for Resettlement Associated with Climate Change', *Science*, 28 October 2011, Vol. 334: 456-457 www.sciencemag.org/content/334/6055/456.citation

6. Ferris, E (2012) 'Protection and Planned Relocations in the Context of Climate Change', UNHCR Legal and Protection Policy Research Series. www.refworld.org/docid/5023774e2.html

7. The authors do not endorse the use of the term 'climate refugee' but recognise that it has become part of the climate change discourse.