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Post-disaster resettlement in urban Bolivia

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Post-disaster resettlement programmes can be unsuitable and ineffective, often exacerbating the vulnerability of people to the effects of climate change.

Following climate-related disasters in cities of the Global South, resettlement is often the ‘intervention of choice’ for urban authorities. However, research in Cochabamba reveals several reasons why resettlement programmes can be ineffective at encouraging people to migrate and how these programmes can leave people living in uncomfortable and precarious living conditions which increase their vulnerability.

In 2008 a landslide severely affected 85 households in a densely populated and low-income community of Cochabamba city. Many residents commented that this was heavily linked to increased rainfall, which many – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion or occupation – believed to be linked to climate change. Climate change is part of the lexicon not only of professionals but also of ordinary people in Bolivia, not altogether surprising given that the Bolivia is one of the countries most affected by climate change.

After the landslide, the municipality of Cochabamba created a risk map of the area that indicated ‘high-risk’ and ‘low-risk’ zones. Problematically, this map framed landslides as natural phenomena, obscuring any political or social questions about why this population is more vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and ultimately implied that ‘escape’ from the area was the only viable solution.

The risk map was distributed to residents as a tool to encourage people living in ‘high-risk’ zones to resettle in a rural area 35km away. US\$5,000 was offered to each house-owner as an incentive (US\$320 being

the average monthly household income) and residents were told that no support would be given to rebuild their house, that they may not sell their house, nor reconstruct it above one storey in height.

Many households refused the US\$5,000 and did not relocate. The fundamental reason why the resettlement programme was largely ineffective is because it was informed by an assumption that there is a direct causal relationship between risk information, risk perceptions and responses. However, this is a caricature of human behaviour that does not account for the social, economic, political and cultural processes that may encourage people to live in a ‘risky’ area.

Perceived benefits of living with risk

People are often willing to live in ‘risky’ urban areas if there are greater income-earning opportunities and access to services, and food is often less expensive. However, investigations in Cochabamba also show that ‘place attachment’ – which relates to an individual’s sense of identity and belonging – heavily discourages people from relocating.



Post-landslide risk map of the Cochabamba area.

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Walls propped up, post-landslide, Cochabamba.

"I made this house, how could I sell it? ... My mother does not want to sell either because of the memories, because we grew up here, they brought us up here, they don't want to move." (Resident)

"I like this house, I like that I grew up since being a little girl here. Lots of adventures have happened here, lots of things here, so I have a good memory of this house." (Resident)

Problematically, however, the effectiveness of resettlement programmes is not always determined by people making cost-benefit analyses about leaving or staying. Some residents wanted to leave but were unable to because of the negative impacts of the resettlement programme, which reduces their ability to move away from the area.

Trapped in limbo

Residents living in the 'high-risk' zones did not want to resettle because they would

lose significant investments that they had made in their house. Furthermore, the \$5,000 that was offered by the municipality was significantly less than their house and land were worth.

Three years after the landslide, residents who refused to resettle have done little more than prop up their walls and roofs with wooden poles and/or cover up the damage with sheeting. People perceive reconstruction as futile because they believe landslides will happen again and that no amount of reconstruction can prevent damage.

"Why invest when it could happen again, and it probably will. It's the red zone here. It's a pointless investment ... We were thinking about selling [the house], but they will not let us sell either..." (Resident)

Accordingly, residents often remain living in uncomfortable and precarious living conditions, which increases their vulnerability to the effects of climate change and puts them at greater risk of future disasters.

The problem lies in a reductive understanding of human behaviour that underpins the resettlement programme. It does not account for the many reasons why people choose to live in 'risky' areas, nor does it account for the indirect and detrimental effects that resettlement can have on people who choose to stay put. Any post-disaster intervention would benefit from a better understanding of the many things that people value so that these can be incorporated, rather than treated as largely irrelevant or obstructive.

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