Preparing for planned relocation

Governments will increasingly need to consider relocating communities in order to protect them from the adverse effects of climate change, exercising the state’s duty to move populations out of harm’s way in the face of foreseeable hazards. Planning for relocation is essential and requires the creation of an enabling environment, including a legal basis for undertaking planned relocation, capacity building and a whole-of-government approach. It involves risk assessments and consultation with, and the active participation of, affected communities – those to be relocated, those left behind and host communities. Focusing on the human dimensions includes systematic efforts to allow people to maintain their identity, ties, and connections to land and traditional ways of life.

Relocating communities is a complex and difficult undertaking and there is a need for cross-pollination of expertise, ideas and action among a variety of experts and institutions, including development, humanitarian assistance, human rights, disaster risk management, environment and climate change, and urban and regional planning. Lessons, experience and existing guidance from existing guidelines and experiences in other contexts could usefully be extrapolated to planned relocation in the context of disasters and climate change. Especially needed now are practical tools and action plans to assist national and local authorities and those who support them in undertaking planned relocation.

Finally, independent, short- and long-term, quantitative and qualitative monitoring and evaluation systems should be created to assess the impacts and outcomes of planned relocation, and mechanisms should be established to ensure accountability and to provide remedies to affected populations.

For preliminary guidance and further information, see Planned Relocation, Disasters and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future, report from expert consultation in Sanremo, Italy, 12-14 March 2014 www.unhcr.org/54082cc69.html

Lessons from planned relocation and resettlement in the past

Jane McAdam

Placing contemporary deliberations about relocation within a longer historical and intellectual framework reveals unexpected connections and salutary lessons.

Planned relocation\(^1\) has recently gained prominence as a strategy to reduce vulnerable communities’ exposure to the impacts of climate change and disasters. Among scholars and policymakers, there have been two widespread assumptions about historical relocations of communities: first, that they have occurred almost exclusively within countries, not across international borders; and secondly, that most have resulted from large-scale development projects. Indeed, the only comparable examples of cross-border relocation in this context are three historical cases from the Pacific from the mid-20th century, thought to be isolated instances. These were the relocation of the Banabans from present-day Kiribati to Fiji in 1945; the partial relocation of the Vaitupuans from present-day Tuvalu to Fiji, beginning in 1947; and the relocation of Gilbertese to Gizo and Wagina in the Solomon Islands between 1955 and 1964.\(^2\)

But from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, population redistribution was regarded as a legitimate means of addressing problems of overcrowding, resource scarcity and, in turn, conflict.\(^3\) Relocation was understood both as a pre-emptive solution to anticipated overpopulation and resource scarcity, and as an answer to existing displacement. Throughout this period, scholars and statesmen alike were busy concocting schemes to address concerns about global population. Many genuinely believed that migration, population