Floods and migration in the Czech Republic

Robert Stojanov, Ilan Kelman and Barbora Duží

Residents’ strategies are generally aimed at either protection from or adaptation to flooding. Large-scale migration from the floodplains of rivers has not been seriously considered, even in high-risk zones.

The Czech Republic is of particular interest in the European context due to several recent flooding disasters which were national emergencies, including in 1997, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2013. Weather extremes and climate variability are not the sole causes of floods in Central Europe. Other causal factors include housing, industrial buildings, transport and other infrastructure, river engineering, and agriculture in flood-prone zones near riverbeds.

Our research focused on households living in 22 smaller municipalities mainly in the Bečva River basin located in the northeastern part of the Czech Republic. Our analyses based on data from households show an increasing intensity and frequency of the impacts of floods over the last two decades, often attributed (rightly or wrongly) to climate change. We found various household-level coping and adaptation strategies there, both inside and outside houses (such as terraces, elevated ground floor construction and water barriers).

After flood damage, insurance companies tended not to be willing to reimburse more than 50-60% of losses and some houses were not eligible for insurance compensation; this meant that many affected people had very limited opportunities for resettlement due to lack of funds, even if they wished to relocate. Furthermore, groups of people who moved away tended to consist of more active and more educated people and their departure (and abandonment of their houses) has been detrimental to community development.

One house is located at the confluence of two small streams. In recent years, almost every spring or summer the streams have overflowed and flooded the property; the couple who live there state that when the house was built flooding did not occur so frequently. “We would like to move from our house”, the wife told us, “but the house is unsaleable and no insurance company will insure it. We have to stay here. We can’t do anything else.”

Because the house is unsaleable and the owners are retired, they do not have sufficient income to repair it. They cannot get a bank loan to buy a new property elsewhere, while renting would be difficult to afford as well. The couple are left with no option but to remain and live with the floods. Their daughter lives with her family on the highest hill in the village, so the parents go there to shelter from the floods.

As another example, in 1997, two parents and their daughter with her husband lost their house by a creek when the biggest Czech floods so far damaged it beyond repair. The municipal government offered them social housing in small dwellings for a limited time. Within three years, partly with money from insurance, along with savings, loans and the help of their friends, they built a new house on a hill with less risk of flooding. This is an example of successful cooperation between the municipality and the local residents, where all parties are satisfied. The village did not lose its residents (and thus its taxes and state subsidies) while the family did not lose their friends or their base and remained part of the community.

Mainly because people are reluctant to move due to the costs and the loss of home, households have a tendency to repair damage rather than to implement costly adaptation measures. There is a range of migration responses, from those who gain by moving, using the flood as an impetus, to those who
would wish to move but cannot leave. So far, there is no support (e.g. subsidies or tax breaks) in the Czech Republic for policies that would support these households. In the future, an increasing need will be seen for more comprehensive and integrated adaptation solutions along with communication and consultation with those affected.

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‘One Safe Future’ in the Philippines

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The Philippine government’s ‘One Safe Future’ programme relocated disaster-affected poor families in areas where structures enabling opportunities are lacking.

In 2013 Typhoon Yolanda (internationally named ‘Haiyan’) put the Philippines on the television screens of the entire world when it drove the country to its knees, with a toll in lives in the thousands and damage to property in the tens of billions of dollars. Typhoon Yolanda had found its place in human history as the strongest typhoon ever formed and had notoriously become the evil face of climate change.

The world is dealing with the reality that it had never been as vulnerable to calamity as it is now, due to climate change. As for the Philippines, whether one calls it an act of nature or climate change, experiences of disasters have imposed the need on the government and its policymakers to prepare in terms of laws and policies (either enforcing those that exist or creating new ones) to prepare the country. Changes can now be seen in the strengthening of disaster risk reduction programmes, the formulation of preventive action plans from the upper to lower tier of the leadership, and the establishment of coordinating councils to facilitate the fast dissemination of information.

Left and right, national and local, there have been initiatives and efforts to fix the defect in the country’s shield against disaster by re-thinking its urban and rural land use. This renewal entails the uprooting of families from one place and transplanting them to government-prepared relocation sites. In the national capital region of Metro Manila, for instance, where the population has grown in part due to economic migrations of families from distant rural parts of the country, the administration launched a five-year housing programme (2011-16) to relocate families living in danger, from high-risk areas that are not suitable for housing to safer ground.

The programme, called ‘One Safe Future’, is commendable as it aims to rescue families living alongside or on stilts in waterways. In fact, the families did not take much convincing, partly because there is an allotted budget but mainly because the families themselves had had enough. They were quite willing to move out for their own safety, especially after the experience of Typhoon Ondoy in 2009 which flooded Metro Manila to a depth of 20-30 feet. This willingness of the families who historically have been adamant about continuing to live in their dangerous dwellings is a development that the government

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