Alaskan communities’ rights and resilience

Robin Bronen

Forced migration due to climate change will severely challenge the resilience of communities forced to migrate as well as the capacities of local and national governments.

In Alaska, climate change is evident. Temperatures across the state have increased by between 2 and 3.5 degrees Celsius since 1974, arctic sea ice is decreasing in extent and thickness, wildfires are increasing in size and extent, and permafrost is thawing. These ecological phenomena are creating a humanitarian crisis for the indigenous communities that have inhabited the arctic and boreal forest for millennia. Four Alaskan indigenous communities must relocate immediately and dozens of others are at risk; meanwhile, government agencies are struggling to meet the enormous new needs of these communities.

The communities of Shishmaref, Kivalina, Shaktoolik and Newtok on the west coast of Alaska must relocate. The disappearance of sea-ice and sea-level rise are creating stronger storm surges that are eroding the land on which they are situated. These villages have active subsistence lifestyles and have existed on the coast of Alaska for thousands of years. Environmental studies indicate, however, that a catastrophic climatic event could submerge all communities within the next 15 years. There is no sustainable future for these communities in their present locations – and there is no higher ground to which they can move. Their only alternative is migration but, despite the consensus that these communities must relocate, no government funding has been specifically allocated to begin this process.

Each community is involved in an ad hoc process with state and federal government agencies that are struggling to provide protection to the communities while they grapple with the need to work out a relocation process. Government agencies have responded through their traditional methods of erosion control and flooding prevention but these adaptation strategies have proved ineffective in protecting the communities from a rapidly deteriorating environmental habitat.

The 2006 Alaska Village Erosion Technical Assistance Program – established by the US Congress – evaluated the different costs associated with erosion control versus relocation. It also identified a number of critical governance issues that need to be addressed if relocation occurs, noting that there is currently:

- no government agency with authority to relocate communities

Forced migration due to climate change will severely challenge the resilience of communities forced to migrate as well as the capacities of local and national governments.
no funding specifically designated for relocation

no criteria for choosing relocation sites

no governmental organisation that can address the strategic planning needs of relocation and the logistics of decommissioning the original community location, including hazardous waste clean-up and preservation of cultural sites.

In 2007, the Governor of Alaska created the Alaska Climate Change Sub-Cabinet to implement a climate change strategy for the state. An Immediate Action Workgroup – an advisory group to the Sub-Cabinet – was tasked with identifying the short-term emergency steps that state government needs to take to prevent loss of life and property due to climate change in the communities that must relocate. Both state and federal government representatives co-chair the Workgroup; the multi-level governance structure is unique.

In April 2008, the Workgroup issued its recommendations, in which erosion control and community evacuation plans are central. The Workgroup also recommended that funding be allocated to communities to begin a relocation planning process. In recognition of the complex governance issues identified in the 2006 Alaska Village Erosion Technical Assistance Program report, the Workgroup recommended that one state agency lead the relocation effort and act as the coordinating agency with responsibility of maintaining federal, state and tribal partnerships. The report, however, does not detail the governance structure or jurisdictional authority that will allow the agencies to work together.

Newtok is the most advanced in its relocation efforts, having identified a relocation site and acquired the land through an act of Congress. The state planner facilitating the Workgroup is coordinating the work of the dozens of agencies involved with Newtok's relocation. She has no jurisdiction to require other agencies to join in her relocation efforts but federal and state agencies are working with the Newtok Traditional Council and willingly engaging in the relocation process. However, none of these agencies has a funded mandate to relocate communities endangered by climate change; there is no lead agency to create and coordinate a relocation strategy; and several of the agencies are bound by legal guidelines that throw up serious obstacles. For example, the Alaska Department of Transportation designated with the task of building airstrips and the Alaska Department of Education designated with building schools are unable to move forward with these projects at the relocation sites because regulations require that an existing community with a minimum population be at the site before any infrastructure is built.

The Newtok Traditional Council is a small local tribal government that has only limited capacity to coordinate the relocation work of dozens of federal and state agencies and administer and obtain funding needed for the relocation process.

The humanitarian crisis in Alaska clearly demonstrates the need to create clear principles and guidelines based in human rights doctrine that can serve as a model for other regions. These would help ensure that the social, economic and cultural human rights of individuals and the communities forced to migrate are protected during displacement as well as during resettlement. State and federal governments should be obliged to:

- allow the affected community to be a key player in the relocation process
- ensure culturally and linguistically appropriate mechanisms for participation and consultation
- ensure families and tribes remain together during relocation
- keep socio-cultural institutions intact
- protect subsistence rights and customary communal rights to resources
- implement sustainable development opportunities as part of the relocation process (and thereby enhance community resilience).

**Definition**

An accurate definition of this displacement category is essential in order to ensure that the permanent relocation of communities only occurs when there are no other durable solutions. ‘Climigration’ has been coined as a word to describe this type of displacement. Climigration occurs when a community is no longer sustainable exclusively because of climate-related events and permanent relocation is required to protect people. The critical elements are that climatic events are ongoing and repeatedly impact public infrastructure and threaten people’s safety so that loss of life is possible.

A definition is also critical so that the design and implementation of institutional frameworks of humanitarian response are appropriate. Agencies that have traditionally provided ‘disaster relief’ and erosion control, for example, will continue to engage in these activities until it is determined that relocation must occur in order to protect the life and well-being of the community. At this point, the community, along with tribal, state and federal
Health challenges

Manuel Carballo, Chelsea B Smith and Karen Pettersson

There are no easy solutions to the emerging implications for health of climate change-related migration.

Among the obvious diseases that will plague health planners, health care workers and policymakers in an era of climate change-related migration, some of the most likely diseases are mosquito-borne. Malaria and dengue have always moved with people, and in some countries the circular labour movement of people between the countryside and cities has given birth to new urban reservoirs of both these diseases. Dengue fever in Rio de Janeiro has been linked to rural-urban migration as well as to urban environmental degradation. Even temperate regions – where one would not normally expect to find malaria and dengue – have seen a growing number of cases linked both to tourist travel and to the migration of people from countries where these diseases are prevalent.

Chikungunya fever, which was reported in Italy for the first time in 2007, is now expected to become more frequent elsewhere too. Some of the regions of South-East Asia and Central and South America likely to be most affected by rising sea levels or by more freshwater flooding are areas where malaria, dengue and chikungunya fever are endemic. Population movements from these areas to other parts of the same countries or across borders, where higher temperatures and more humidity might favour mosquitoes, could lead to a significant spread of these diseases.

Changing water distribution patterns in the wake of repeated flooding, together with an increase in temperature and the forced mass movement of people, could also have far-reaching implications for water-related diseases such as schistosomiasis. This already affects an estimated 200 million people around the world and causes high rates of morbidity and mortality. Water development projects in a number of countries have amply demonstrated how easily schistosomiasis can be spread by population movement. Other less obvious means of spread could occur too; in Brazil schistosome-carrying snails have been unwittingly moved from rural to urban communities on fishermen’s nets.

Although many of the health implications of climate change-related displacement will probably be felt in ‘the South’, they will not be unique to developing countries. North America and Europe could well experience further growth in the number of new migrants and refugees and, if so, could see new or more pronounced public health challenges. Most parts of Western Europe have already seen the pattern of new cases of tuberculosis change with increased migration from Eastern Europe and other areas where the prevalence of TB has remained high or even grown with the AIDS epidemic.

The movement of people from poorer parts of Europe and developing countries has similarly increased the prevalence of hepatitis A and B in other European countries where it had become far less problematic. In many parts of Europe, moreover, new cases of HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections are more and more concentrated in and around newcomers from countries where prevention of HIV has been less successful than in most western EU countries. In North America migration has similarly been associated with changing health profiles and challenges. The seasonal movement of