

Alaskan communities' rights and resilience

CASE STUDY

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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



Tony A Weyouanna Sr, a resident of Shishmaref

- 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

We and our grandfathers have noticed that the water level has been rising, the seasons getting shorter, thinner ice, warmer winters, summers and shorter springs. The loss of land through erosive action and increasing risk to property and lives have caused a dangerous situation for the community of Shishmaref and the culture of its people. The only viable solution is to relocate the community off the island to a nearby mainland location that is accessible to the sea, suitable for the continued subsistence lifestyle of the community, and to preserve the culture and integrity of the community. The constant anxiety caused by the erosion is an excessive burden carried by all members of the community. The 'no action' option for Shishmaref is the annihilation of our community.

Tony A Weyiouanna Sr,
resident, Shishmaref

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
- safeguard rights to safe and sanitary housing, potable water, education and other basic amenities
- 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 on-going 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

governments, will shift their focus to create a relocation process.

Failure to recognise the signals of ecosystem changes will critically impede a community's capacity to adapt and may lead to social and economic collapse. Government agencies will also be hampered if they are unable to identify the early ecological warning signals requiring a community to relocate. Early indicators of community vulnerability may include: repetitive loss of community infrastructure; imminent danger; no ability for community expansion; number of evacuation incidents; number of people evacuated; predicted rates of environmental change; repeated failure of disaster mitigation

measures; and viability of access to transportation, potable water, communication systems, power and waste disposal. The sooner a community and governmental agencies recognise that relocation must occur, the sooner all-important funding can be diverted from disaster relief to relocation.

In 2006, the Army Corps of Engineers built a new seawall to protect the community of Kivalina. The day after the dedication ceremony, a storm ruined a critical component of the seawall, leaving the community vulnerable and exposed. In 2007, the community was forced to evacuate when a storm threatened the lives of community members.

Strategies to temporarily evacuate the villages, rebuild public infrastructure and erosion control structures and then return the population to original locations no longer afford adequate protection. Permanent relocation is the only durable solution for Kivalina, as for other Alaskan indigenous communities. The experiences of these communities should be used to guide the creation both of principles that secure their human rights and an institutional response that ensures their safety.

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