

Planned relocation in Asia and the Pacific

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Promising policy developments are underway in Asia and the Pacific to address climate and disaster-related displacement, yet the deeper governance structures required to embed protection are not yet in place, especially for planned relocation. There needs to be greater emphasis on assisting governments to set up inter-ministerial structures equipped to deal with the complex cross-cutting issues that planned relocation involves.

Environmental processes, including climate change and disasters, combine with other pressures to increase displacement risks for vulnerable communities in Asia and the Pacific. Displacement is occurring as a result of frequent sudden-onset disasters (such as cyclones, floods and non-climatic hazards) and slow-onset processes (such as sea-level rise). Although relocation is considered an option of last resort, spontaneous community-led migration and government-supported 'planned' relocations are taking place in both rural and urban areas, as populations look for safer, more productive land and alternative livelihoods.

The complex process of relocation involves intersecting political, environmental, legal and social issues, including difficult negotiations between authorities, displaced and host communities about land, housing

and property. It also requires protections to be established to minimise the often harmful impacts of relocation.¹

Historically, there has been inadequate community consultation (particularly engagement with women and marginalised groups) in government-led relocation schemes, which also often have limited complaint mechanisms, poor site selection and minimal recovery support. Communities seeking to relocate often receive only limited guidance from national and local authorities about the procedure for relocation, how to access services in new locations and how to negotiate new land arrangements. This results in multiple challenges in new locations, including difficulties re-establishing livelihoods, problems accessing basic services, conflicts with host communities and disruption to education and health care. Loss

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of connection to land, cultural identity and indigenous knowledge is also a reality for people moving away from ancestral lands.

Emerging policy responses

In order to ensure that relocation can be a viable durable solution, Pacific Island governments are developing policy instruments to address relocation challenges. Fiji is finalising its National Relocation Guidelines to assist communities affected by sudden and slow-onset processes, led by the Climate Change Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Vanuatu's Ministry of Climate Change Adaptation has prepared a National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement, which includes sections addressing the challenges of implementing planned relocations.

Varied responses to address migration and displacement challenges related to climate change and disasters are also emerging in Asia. In Nepal, the Ministry of Population and Environment has coordinated a consultative process to finalise a Climate Change and Migration Strategy which includes a strategic intervention on 'dignified' relocation. In the Maldives, population relocation has occurred under the Safe Islands project in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, though without commitment to develop an explicit policy framework. In Vietnam, under the Living with Floods programme, communities have been relocated away from unsafe residential areas of the Mekong Delta.

Establishing institutional structures

While positive developments are taking place, many initiatives fall short of establishing the necessary protections required to ensure planned relocation does not have a negative impact on affected communities. An immediate challenge relates to developing appropriate inter-ministerial coordination structures which can address complex issues relating to land, livelihoods, shelter, infrastructure, water, sanitation, transport, culture, health and education raised by climate and disaster-related displacement.

Planned relocation requires designated institutional leadership with active

participation from many different ministries to coordinate multi-sectoral planning. However, a major barrier to moving beyond the creation of draft policies towards embedding protection initiatives is identifying which government entity should be responsible. Lack of an integrated approach can also lead to the development of parallel policy processes. In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief has produced a National Strategy on the Management of Disaster and Climate-Induced Internal Displacement while the Ministry of Environment and Forests has supported the development of a model plan of action on the Management of Migration Induced by Climate Change and Environmental Degradation.

As advocated in guidance and tools developed for governments,² planned relocation policies should be implemented through inter-ministerial bodies and coordination mechanisms to ensure that expertise is utilised and linked to longer-term development planning. Implementation should ideally occur through existing institutional mechanisms, although this may necessitate establishment of a specialised inter-ministerial taskforce.

Ministries of environment and climate change and/or national emergency and disaster management offices tend to lead policy discussions in this area (as is the case in Vanuatu, Bangladesh and Nepal). However, while they may serve as champions, because of their closely defined mandates they are not necessarily the ideal actors to lead implementation and oversee taskforces, which may limit the building of broad-based support among government actors. In situations where communities cannot return to their homes for prolonged periods, disaster management offices – which are responsible for emergency evacuations – are confronted with the planning challenges of identifying durable solutions, although this is not necessarily within their area of expertise and they may not have budgets to support implementation.

Similarly, while ministries of environment and climate change are equipped to identify natural hazards and develop environmental policies, they do not

specialise in issues relating to relocation, land or rural and urban planning, especially their human development dimensions.

Ministries of land have minimal involvement, although they have an important role to play in identifying suitable land and ensuring the legal compliance of new arrangements so that these are more than just 'goodwill' agreements between communities. Similarly, ministries who have expertise in provision of social services, preservation of culture and traditional knowledge are usually not closely involved in policy discussions about climate change, disasters and displacement.

Coordination mechanisms between national, provincial and local authorities are also needed to support decentralised implementation, along with adequate financial and technical resources at the local level. The departments that need to be involved may also differ, depending on whether relocation is taking place in rural or urban areas. Strategic and financial support is also required at the highest level of government so that taskforces have the necessary political influence. Given the number of actors involved, the temptation to frame these as 'whole-of-government' initiatives is strong but this runs the risk of having no ministry taking clear ownership.

Several governments recognise this challenge. In Vanuatu, planned relocation in response to the risks posed by the Ambae volcano is initially the responsibility of the National Disaster Management Office and is then transferred to the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination, under the Office of the Prime Minister. While this capitalises on expertise from different ministries, such approaches may lead to confusion about which entity is responsible for planned relocation, which in turn has practical implications for affected communities.

Questions of responsibility and protection

Where communities are also exposed to evictions and planned relocation for purposes of development and public infrastructure creation, more questions arise. Should government institutions be responsible for

providing planned relocation assistance to all communities irrespective of the reason for displacement? Or should planned relocation related to development be handled by a distinct political entity? In Vanuatu, some communities affected by evictions have sought humanitarian assistance from its National Disaster Management Office, raising difficult questions about the office's responsibilities, especially in light of the new draft displacement policy. And should communities who have been relocated for development-related reasons receive the same assistance and protection as those who need to move for climate and environmental reasons? These questions become increasingly complicated when the reasons for planned relocation are multiple, such as for people living in informal settlements with insecure land tenure in hazard-prone areas.

In Fiji, the emerging policy response has been to manage climate change-related planned relocation separately from planned relocation that is related to other drivers. Those who are unable to adapt where they are initially displaced are assisted by the National Relocation Taskforce Committee, while in cases where development pressures are identified as a reason for planned relocation, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development assumes responsibility for the well-being of affected communities. Under its new draft policy Vanuatu will offer the same protection to people regardless of the cause of their displacement, although the precise implementation mechanism is yet to be established.

There is a clear need for innovative planned relocation governance models – that are well-resourced and supported by adequate technical expertise – which promote responsibility sharing between different government actors at national and local levels.³ The institutional structures most fitted to responding to climate and disaster-related displacement will of course be different in each location. Their effectiveness will depend very much on the history and culture of specific government departments, the presence of champions with knowledge of relocation, and the extent to

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which government focal points can overcome sectoral and decentralisation challenges to implement protection at the local level.

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1. Georgetown University, UNHCR, IOM and United Nations University (2015) *Guidance on protecting people from disasters and environmental change through planned relocation* bit.ly/Brookings-planned-relocation-2015; see also Georgetown University, UNHCR and IOM (2017) *A Toolbox: Planning Relocations to Protect People from Disasters and Environmental Change* bit.ly/GU-UNHCR-IOM-planned-relocation-toolbox-2017
2. See for example the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change bit.ly/Nansen-Initiative-Agenda
3. Many other complex issues relating to planned relocation, land, human rights and protection are not covered in this article. See The Nansen Initiative resources on 'Planned Relocation': www.nanseninitiative.org/portfolio-category/planned/

