

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION IN POST-DISASTER RECOVERY - POLICY BRIEF 7

Is Planned Relocation a Viable Solution to Climate Change Adaptation Policy in Fiji?

Climate change has had severe impacts on Fiji over the past ten years. In response to rising sea levels and large-scale climate events, Fiji plans to relocate at least 45 vulnerable villages in the next five to ten years. To what extent is planned relocation reducing the accountability of the world's main sources of carbon emissions? Where do 'global best practices', as defined in the UNHCR¹ Guidance on Planned Relocation (GPR), fall short when considering local context, culture, and the individual needs of each affected community?

Key Messages

- ❑ Over the past 30 years, 85% of Fiji's natural disasters have been tropical cyclones, with two occurring annually on average. Fiji is vulnerable to sea level rise which is resulting in coastal erosion and salination of arable land. This is worsened by the increasing frequency of natural disasters.
- ❑ The Fijian government has identified 45 communities requiring relocation over the next 5-10 years due to the effects of climate change. The rising intensity and frequency of disasters suggest this number will increase.
- ❑ Fiji's climate change response makes it the first country in the Pacific to action GPR policies to relocate communities.
- ❑ Planned relocation has been constructed as an adaptive solution to climate change which reduces the accountability of the major carbon emitters who are responsible for the global issue.
- ❑ Given the significance of Fijian cultural values, relocation -- even when voluntary and planned -- results in material, physical, spiritual, and cultural upheaval.
- ❑ Relocation needs to consider local knowledge, culture, and understanding of risk. In order for relocation to be voluntary, there must be meaningful choice and support to stay.

¹ United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

CONTEXT

In recent years, climate change induced displacement has become an increasingly prominent issue worldwide. Migration as a response to sudden-onset disasters as well as slow-onset environmental degradation is expected to place pressure on income sources, food security, and government-run social services. For these reasons, planning for the facilitation of relocation and development of adaptation strategies is being encouraged at a global level to accommodate climate change rather than challenge it.



Figure 1. A church destroyed by 2016 Cyclone Winston demonstrates the increasing severity of disaster events in Fiji (Photo: A. Neef)

As a small island nation, Fiji is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Consequences include sea-level rise and large-scale climatic events including tropical cyclones which lead to coastal erosion and salination of arable land. A report released by the Fiji Meteorological Service in 2011 recognised that there have been several significant changes in the nation's climate. Over the past 30 years, 85% of Fiji's disasters have primarily been tropical cyclones, with two occurring annually on average. These climatic shifts reveal that the combination of changes in weather

patterns alongside sea level rise will increase the impact and intensity of coastal flooding, storm surges, and cyclones.

In early 2016, category 5 Tropical Cyclone Winston hit Fiji. It was the most severe tropical cyclone recorded to have made landfall in Fiji. The effects were catastrophic with over 40,000 people requiring urgent assistance and widespread negative impacts on livelihood sources. The damage resulting from recent tropical cyclones exemplifies the significance of aforementioned climatic changes in Fiji and indicates the requirement for urgent action.

Given its high-risk status, Fiji has contributed a significant and highly relevant response to the current global conversation on planned relocation and climate change adaptation strategies. The Fijian government has conducted risk assessments and analysed the vulnerability of its communities to climate-related land degradation, releasing media statements that 45 communities in Fiji are anticipated to require relocation over the next 5-10 years. This relocation is largely expected to occur internally with a significant rural to urban flow placing pressure on infrastructure and resources in more densely populated regions.

Climate change disproportionately affects the vulnerable. Those living in low-lying areas and have been otherwise marginalised face the highest risks of cultural and physical loss. In Fiji, there is a fear held by many people that by relocating, even to a potentially safer area, they are severing cultural and ancestral ties. While relocation may capitalise on the seafaring,

adventurous ways of their ancestors, relocation affects people's connection to the land (referred to as *vanua*²) and their culture.

Box 1: Key Context

- 45 villages anticipated to warrant planned relocation in the next 5-10 years.
- An estimated 676 villages will be affected by climate change.
- 80% of Fijian land is under customary ownership.
- Indo-Fijians make up about 40% of the Fijian population.

Additionally, there are other groups to take into consideration, such as Fijians of Indian descent who make up about 40 percent of Fiji's population. When their ancestors were brought over from India between 1879-1884 as indentured workers, they were prohibited from purchasing land which was reserved for indigenous iTaukei³ ownership. Hence, much land occupied by Fijians of Indian origin is leased. There are currently no clear plans for the relocation of Fijian communities of Indian descent. Government relocation support is reserved for iTaukei communities despite the fact that these groups are equally vulnerable to the consequences of climate change.

GUIDANCE ON PLANNED RELOCATION (GPR): "GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES"

Relocation (as defined in Box 2) has become a form of adaptation to and a method of protection against climate change. In 2015, the UNHCR published the GPR to assist nations to facilitate climate-induced relocation associated and encourage resilience in communities.

Box 2: GPR Definition of Planned Relocation

A planned process in which persons or groups of persons move or are assisted to move away from their homes or places of temporary residence, are settled in a new location, and provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives. Planned relocation is carried out under the authority of the State, takes place within national borders, and is undertaken to protect people from risks and impacts related to disasters and environmental change, including the effects of climate change. Such planned relocation may be carried out at the individual, household, and/or community levels.

The GPR sought to establish a consensus regarding the planning and implementation of community relocations. In summary, the guideline stresses that risk should be measured, timing should be considered, and affected groups should be consulted thoroughly and empowered to participate in the decision-making process.

² Vanua can be understood as the foundation of Fijian identity and values. It is a strong connection between people and their environment which can be seen as an extension of themselves.

³ Indigenous Fijian population.

The GPR presents a Western concept of risk. It includes a list of factors that determine risk thresholds that, if surpassed, indicate vulnerability and a need for relocation. The pieces of evidence required for a risk assessment can be found in the box below (Box 3). Risk reduction is considered the best protective strategy against the dangers posed by climate change; however, it is stressed to remain a last resort. Relocation should be avoided, and all other alternatives exhausted prior to this.



Figure 2. Coastal community in eastern Viti Levu destroyed by Cyclone Winston (Photo: A. Neef)

The GPR also highlights the importance of including local voices and consideration of community context through the practices of consultation and participation: listening to the opinions of impacted populations and inclusion of locals in decision making. This is an essential part of the GPR as it is vital to engage the affected community, ensuring that they are fully informed, and that cooperation is maximised.

Box 3: GPR Evidence for Risk Thresholds

- a. Imminent danger to the community;
- b. Repetitive loss of homes and infrastructure and past evacuations (that raise concerns about the utility of rebuilding or making heavy investments in the same location);
- c. Lack of adaptation options;
- d. Percentage of homes destroyed or damaged;
- e. Rate, profiles, and typology of movement out of risk-prone areas;
- f. Socio-economic indicators pointing to impoverishment owing to growing inability to survive with traditional livelihoods;
- g. Scientific information regarding predicted sea-level rise, erosion, and flooding;
- h. Degradation of access to basic needs, (i.e. water, energy, food);
- i. Disrupted access to services (i.e. education, health care)

(UNHCR, 2014a, p. 21).

The subsequent recommendations from the 2015 Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility (AGCCHM) focused on the way planned relocation can build resilience. The aim of the AGCCHM is to reduce forced displacement of communities by encouraging states to act and come up with their own solutions to accommodate climate change. This makes people who have to relocate appear 'adaptable' and 'resilient' which is viewed positively and promoted as a display of empowerment. However, it hides those truly responsible for the changes in climate that have led to the consideration of relocation as a necessary response.

LABELLING THE PROBLEM

Interviews with several Fijian development practitioners explored the ways in which planned relocation is explained and rationalised in practice. They shared a difficulty in identifying planned relocation as adaptation. Defining it as such shifts responsibility to adapt to a problem they did not cause. Further, this language of planned relocation as an adaptation method, led by the EU and other major donors, reduces the accountability of major emitters in contributing to the effects of climate change. Interviews also questioned the way planned relocation has been proposed as a rational solution when it can actually cause more problems than it solves.

Labeling planned relocation as a form of “adaptation” conceals the underlying accountability of the climate change impacts of rich, high emitting countries.

- **Planned relocation shifts and conceals responsibility for adapting to climate change from major carbon emitters to those relocating.** Climate change is largely caused by major emitters in wealthy countries, and the effects are largely experienced in poorer countries.
- **Planned relocation is viewed as a development opportunity which obscures its many challenges.** It obscures the challenges of relocation in diverse contexts and the potential for harm even when relocation is “voluntary.”
- **The voluntary nature of planned relocation is complex.** In order for relocation to be voluntary, there must be meaningful choice and support to stay. The risk of not relocating is defined by the Western scientific standards which are presented as objective fact without considering local knowledge, culture, and understanding of risk.

FIJI-SPECIFIC PROBLEMS WITH PLANNED RELOCATION

The GPR is not tailored to the realities of climate change in Fiji. Since relocation as a solution to the effects of climate change is relatively new, the Fijian government has an opportunity to fine-tune the global best practices to the realities on the ground and to lead the international community.

Similar to the GPR, Fiji’s National Adaptation Plan Framework explains that planned relocation is a last resort. Given the social, cultural, and land challenges of relocating villages, other adaptation strategies are prioritised. It is, however, important to raise questions about the ways in which risk is defined and participatory processes are involved in these decisions.

Planned relocation poses severe challenges and potential harms unique to each cultural, social, historical, and geographical context in Fiji. Without participation and meaningful choice, relocation can be a pretext for economic exploitation via land grabbing, social conflict, urbanisation, and overcrowding among other harmful outcomes.

Box 4: Unintended Side-Effects of Relocation in Fiji: The Cases of Vunidogoloa and Etatoko

In January 2014, Vunidogoloa village, located on Vanua Levu, became the first village to relocate, moving 2 kilometres inland due to the effects of climate change. The relocation took place within the *mataqali*, which circumvented the problems of land availability and ownership. Yet, a year after relocation the village's traditional healers had returned to the original site, because moving to the new site meant they lost their healing powers. This action demonstrates how the success of relocation depends not only on the ability to protect people from environmental hazards, but also on the ability to protect what is valued socially, culturally, and historically. Even in the midst of the great climate-related challenges, there was unwillingness to leave their homes which they have held for generations, land where their ancestors are buried.



Figures 3 & 4. Etatoko resettlement community in Ba district (Photos: A. Neef)

The community of Etatoko in Ba district, Viti Levu, was established after the small riverside village of Wavuwavu was entirely destroyed through severe riverbank erosion, with 17 homes lost during the 2012 floods. The lease on the land to a Fijian of Indian descent was cut short to accommodate the community at the new site. Seventeen houses were constructed, one for each home lost. The construction cost of FJD\$30,000 for each timber-framed, metal-clad and metal-roofed house was entirely provided through external aid. Etatoko residents now live at a site that is physically safer, but they miss their old location and retain a strong connection to Wavuwavu. The new site is seen as hot, shadeless and infertile, with difficult conditions for growing crops and home gardens. Other challenges are dislocation from where livelihoods are still derived, the burden of travel, and exposure to new hazards such as drought and cyclones (Neef et al., 2018).

Instead of viewing planned relocation as either positive or negative, it must be viewed through the lens of Fijian identity, belonging, and mobility. The 2009 Moana Declaration took a step in this direction by grounding climate change in faith and cultural values. It called for climate change work to explore alternative economic models with the faith-based values of justice, sustainability, and equity. With the rising need for planned relocation, it is essential to frame decision-making with Fijian values.

The GPR suggests that the social and cultural risks must be acknowledged throughout the process of planned relocations, but that can actually legitimise them as unavoidable consequences of physical protection. When there is no real alternative to relocating, the social and cultural risks are made out to be consequences that must be accepted. Instead, these social and cultural risks should be mitigated in policy and implementation. Given the potential impact of planned relocations, there is a greater need for critical questions than there is for guidelines for practitioners.

CHALLENGES OF RELOCATION IN FIJI

- **Recognising the value of *vanua*, culture and identity.** Successful relocation in Fiji will largely depend on understanding how Fijians value their land, the relationships and identities associated with the *vanua*. The land is seen as an extension of Fijians; thus, relocation constitutes material, physical, spiritual, and cultural upheaval. Although relocation can save lives, it can come at the cost of degradation of culture and identity.
- **Lack of knowledge on climate change.** Local communities often lack accurate information about the risks, adverse impacts and vulnerabilities associated with climate change. Many people utilise faith-based rationale to make sense of observed climatic shifts and their impacts as they are typically unaware of science-based knowledge on climate change.
- **Land-based tensions surrounding relocation.** There are concerns regarding the availability of suitable land for relocation and that community relocation might contribute further tensions over land ownership in Fiji. With an increasing number of communities being identified to require relocation, the issue of land and its accessibility will raise questions around who will be able to relocate and how relocation might be negotiated between communities and *mataqalis*⁴ in a way that both safeguards indigenous rights and prevents further conflicts over land ownership.
- **The threat of forced displacement for Indo-Fijian communities.** Planned relocation of iTaukei communities away from the coast to inland areas may create additional insecurities for Indo-Fijian settlements who rely on leasing of indigenous land for their livelihood. As the demand for relocation and resettlement of coastal iTaukei communities grows and land leases begin to expire, Indo-Fijian groups may face more difficulties in securing legal land use rights and releasing of land from the iTaukei Land Trust Board. The planned relocation of iTaukei communities, in an effort to prevent their forced displacement, may lead to an increased threat of forced displacement among Indo-Fijian communities.
- **Relocation pathways for Indo-Fijian settlements.** Although Fijian communities of Indian descent are just as likely to be affected by climate change, they currently do not have access to the same pathways to request relocation as iTaukei communities do. The creation of a nationalistic Fijian identity may somewhat help to resolve the race-related dimension of land-based tensions in Fiji and could enable iTaukei communities to freely move between the land of different *mataqalis*. This is, however, unlikely to have the same effect for the Fijian population of Indian descent.
- **Environmental and social urban pressures.** Climate-induced migration is also leading to increasing pressure on limited urban resources and infrastructure. Urban squatter settlements have expanded as rural and coastal families move to urban centres to seek alternative livelihoods due to arable land degradation and climate change resultant displacement.

⁴ A Fijian clan or landowning unit.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- ❑ **Fiji has an opportunity and a responsibility to be a leader on the world stage of climate change debate.** Climate change is impacting upon the lives of Fijians and as the first country in the Pacific to undertake planned relocation, Fiji has an opportunity to call out the lack of action taken by major carbon emitters.
- ❑ **The GPR lays out global best practices for planned relocations that are not context-specific.** The best practice guidelines are not entirely applicable to the unique context of Fijian values. Rather, Fiji should consider the conventional GPR a guide for situating the problem and a starting point for discussion.
- ❑ **Dissemination of knowledge on climate change.** Communities continue to require support to understand the risks and impacts of climate change. Risk knowledge transfer is necessary at the national level to allow communities to understand the realities of climate change. It also reframes relocation as a conscious decision made by informed individuals rather than the forced displacement of passive victims.
- ❑ **The process of planned relocations should be voluntary and participatory.** Voluntary planned relocations are intended to be participatory and conducted with thorough consultation. Planned relocations need to be a last resort, voluntary in nature and are compromised if there is only one option: to relocate.
- ❑ **Settlements of Fijian of Indian origin need to be considered in planned relocation policy.** Given existing land rights and restrictions to customary land ownership laws, there must also be pathways for Indo-Fijian communities that choose to relocate. Also, appropriate planning is needed to address the inland movement of *iTaukei* communities that may displace Fijians living on leased land.
- ❑ **The contentious nature of planned relocations means that communication and openness of decision-making are essential.** Transparent dissemination of the Government's relocation plans and more information on identified vulnerable communities are required to dispel controversies surrounding political interests, compensation and land-based tensions.

This policy brief has been prepared by Alexandra Brookbanks, Archana Chand and Erin Thomas, The University of Auckland, New Zealand. It is based on the following material:

Benge, L. (2017). *Governing Mobility Across Messy Policy Space: Planned Relocation as a Strategy of Climate Change Adaptation from UNHCR to Fiji*. (Masters Research Thesis, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand).

Neef, A., Benge, L., Boruff, B., Pauli, N., Weber, E., & Varea, R. (2018). Climate adaptation strategies in Fiji: The role of social norms and cultural values. *World Development*, 107, 125–137.

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