

REDUCING RELOCATION RISK IN URBAN AREAS

Disaster & Hazard-Induced Urban Resettlement in Latin America

Allan Lavell, Omar Darío Cardona, Ángel Chávez,
Elizabeth Mansilla, Tony Oliver Smith and Pilar Pérez

Introduction

Rapid urban growth, much fuelled by the migration of rural poor to the city, accompanied by a lack of sufficient access to safe land, poor urban land use planning and high levels of informality, marginality and exclusion have led to large, if not fully counted numbers of people living in hazard-prone areas in the cities of Latin America. Many of these live in areas subject to hydro-meteorological threats such as flooding, subsidence and landslides. Climate change will most probably increase the number and extent of such hazards, according to many observers.

Relocation and resettlement have been increasingly enacted to reduce disaster risk for hazard-prone populations. This has mostly been employed in post-impact circumstances, after a disaster. Relatively few preventative schemes can be found where a population is resettled prior to major impacts, damage and loss. Difficulties in adequately evaluating the real risk faced by populations, lack of finance, bureaucratic inefficiency and resistance to resettlement from the population are

important factors in explaining the lack of preventative schemes.

Many resettlements fail, a lot of them miserably. This is particularly true with post-impact resettlement. The findings of the research project 'Reducing Relocation Risk in Urban Areas' support prior conclusions as to the influence of the lack of beneficiary participation; lack of adequate finance; development at inadequate sites distant from work opportunities; over-concentration on physical infrastructure and service provision as opposed to livelihood sustenance options, in such failures. However, the significant repetition of similar 'errors' in different contexts and cases suggests that the problem is more structural than contextual. This research, which focused on decision making and implementation at multiple sites in three Latin American countries, suggests the problem relates more to the ways resettlement is constructed as a problem and the associated sector mind-sets, than to specific, individual causes. The latter are, rather, a product of the former.

Recommendations

Avoiding the need for resettlement:

1. Resettlement of populations should be the **last possible management option and solely contemplated for extreme cases**. Before deciding on resettlement of already exposed populations, all other possible options for reducing risk should be closely considered and costed. Participation of affected populations in such analysis is fundamental, and analysis should consider both disaster and everyday risk reduction needs, many of which are associated with poverty.
2. Avoidance of the need for post-event resettlement requires a vast improvement in **land use planning, investment decision-making and urban governance**. Availability of safe land through an increase in **publically owned urban land** is imperative if safe location is to be ensured.
3. Environmental degradation through such processes as deforestation, mining of urban slopes for building materials and filtering of wastewaters into surface strata must be controlled in order to **prevent originally safe sites being converted into hazard-prone locations**.

Decision-making and implementation of resettlement

A. Baselines and legality

1. Resettlement, where deemed indispensable, does not have to be governed by a specific law, although this option may be contemplated under determined national and local conditions. Laws

or norms that directly or indirectly impinge on resettlement should clearly establish the holistic and integral nature of this process, and the roles, types and levels of coordination and collaboration that must exist among relevant national and local government agencies that deal with disaster and everyday risk concerns and urban planning stipulations.

2. **Typologies** of resettlement, according to type and size of urban area and type and size of resettlement, should be established and **procedures adapted to accommodate the differences.**

B. On participation

1. Participation of the population must **stop being seen by policymakers as demagogic and unnecessary.** Decision makers often view the participation of society as a mechanism that hinders or delays processes due to the large number of interest groups that have to be taken into account. However, participation is the only way of ensuring appropriation and rationalization of costs and benefits among different interest groups.

C. On the scientific and information basis for resettlement

1. A **rigorous and objective scientific assessment** of the actual risk conditions of the population and the need for relocation must be available. This should be **comprehensive and participatory.** It must include not only a consideration of physical hazards (magnitude, intensity, recurrence, etc.) and the levels and types of exposure and vulnerability to these, but also **the social needs of the population, the range of risk contexts they face and their overall attitudes and perceptions of risk and its different manifestations.**
2. The national and local government institutions responsible for disaster risk management must **monitor areas of high un-mitigable risk** in order to avoid further urban occupation and densification and increased progression of risk in such areas.

D. On the siting of resettled communities and the use given to abandoned land

1. Location is fundamental for the success of resettlement. Location is often a surrogate or indicator of employment and income opportunities, costs of transport services to and from work or for recreational purposes, access to service provision, as well as certain health-related and other social concerns. **Maximum attention must be given to siting in light of these factors and circumstances.**
2. Relocation or resettlement of urban populations is closely related to **urban land use and planning issues** and the spatial development of urban areas. **The review and updating of existing legal frameworks relating to urban development planning and land use** is urgently required in many countries, and should explicitly consider resettlement and its role in urban development.
3. Although it is normally considered that a community should be moved as a whole, **this idea should not**

always dominate. Consideration should always be given to other options involving the **separation or segregation of an existing community with its relocation to different parts of a city.** This may more adequately serve the interests and needs of the population in terms of work, income, social relations and costs.

4. Abandoned land should never be used for new housing or made available to other population groups through invasion or illegal occupation.

E. On settlement pattern and housing for relocated populations

1. Resettlement in urban areas should include all those services necessary for a new generation of safe and healthy urban spaces. This requires **participation and coordination of sector and territorial development institutions** in order to achieve the goal of safeguarding the physical and livelihood integrity of the population at risk.
2. Cultural diversity is the basis of **numerous lifestyles in cities.** These merit close consideration in the design of resettlement schemes in order to avoid traumatic changes in the target population. New houses should be **functional and appropriate to the geographical conditions and needs of the population, as well as being consistent with their customs.**
3. Given the diversity of climates and customs that can prevail in a country, **standardization in the style, size and layout of housing for relocated populations should be avoided.** The use of local materials and techniques and the 'local' design of houses have a clear rationale, and knowledge is required as to autochthonous or local styles in order to achieve improved results. **Socially and culturally sensitive architects and builders must be employed,** many from the areas where relocation is enacted.
4. The practice of granting free housing **is not sustainable in general** and must be avoided.

F. On financing of resettlement

1. Finance and technical expertise must be ensured and legislated **beyond particular periods of government.** Full financing for an integrated approach to resettlement must be guaranteed from the outset.
2. The economic benefits generated by activities on abandoned land (income, employment, production etc.) can or should be **shared with the relocated population,** thus respecting and maintaining past ties to land, ensuring an additional incentive for accepting relocation and guaranteeing employment and income for the resettled population, or a part of it.

References and further reading

- Cernea, M. M. (1999). The economics of involuntary resettlement. Questions and challenges. World Bank.
- Correa, E. (2011). Populations at Risk of Disaster: A Resettlement Guide. With Fernando Ramírez and Haris Sanahuja, Washington, DC: The World Bank: GFDRR.
- Ferris, E. (2014). Planned Relocations - Disasters and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future. UNHCR Brookings.

Author details and contact

Allan Lavell has a doctorate in Geography coordinates the Program for the Support to Social Study of Disaster Risk and Adaptation to Climate Change at the Latin American Social Science Faculty in San Jose Costa Rica and is also a free-lance consultant. He can be contacted at allanmlavell@gmail.com.

Omar Dario Cardona is civil engineer, he has a doctorate in earthquake engineering is a disaster risk specialist and professor at the National University of Colombia, Manizales. He heads a risk analysis-consulting firm (Ingeniar Ltd.) located in Bogota, Colombia. He can be contacted at odcardona@unal.edu.co.

Angel Chavez is a sociologist, heads a Peruvian NGO on disaster risk management and is a freelance consultant. He can be contacted at awchavez@pucp.pe.

Elizabeth Mansilla is an economist with a doctorate in Urban Planning, is lecturer at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a free-lance consultant on risk management and other issues. She can be contacted at elisa.mansilla@gmail.com.

Tony Oliver-Smith has a doctorate in Anthropology, is Emeritus Professor at the University of Florida, Gainesville and a free-lance consultant. He is a world expert on resettlement.

Pilar Perez is a civil engineer, has a Masters in sustainable development, has held various high level posts in disaster risk management in Manizales and is at present head of planning for the municipality of Manizales. She can be contacted at pilarperez@yahoo.com

About the project

The research project “Reducing Relocation Risks in Urban Areas” examines the various social and economic implications of climate-risk related resettlement and relocation policies in cities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Policy briefs are available for each region, and there is a cross-regional policy brief. The project was carried out by and the Latin American Social Science Faculty (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales) (FLACSO), The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU) at University College London, Makerere University, Uganda, and The Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), and funded by the Climate and Development Knowledge Network. More information and project publications can be found at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/reducing-relocation-risk-urban-areas>



Credits: Angel Wilson Chavez Eslava. Iquitos, Peru.

**REDUCING
RELOCATION
RISK**
IN URBAN AREAS

iihsTM
INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS



dpu
Development
Planning Unit



FLACSO