

# Priorities for consent-based and well-supported climate relocations

Erica Bower, David Durand-Delacre, Annah Piggott-McKellar, Giovanna Gini & Rachel Harrington-Abrams



Climate-related planned relocations are happening globally yet vary significantly. Drawing on diverse case studies, we present a framework to showcase these differences and identify advocacy priorities and research needs across contexts to ensure more consensual and well-supported relocation practices.

The planned, coordinated, and collective movement of people to new, safer sites, in anticipation or response to natural hazards, is often called planned relocation. These relocation processes are conceptually distinct from uncoordinated displacement and migration, which typically involve individual or household-level decision-making<sup>1,2</sup>. Unlike evacuations, relocations are also intended to be permanent. Although some rare relocations are carried out autonomously by communities drawing on their own resources, the state typically plays an important role in securing land and covering costs. Climate-related planned relocations of communities from hazard-exposed areas are already occurring globally<sup>2</sup>.

Planned relocations can be an important adaptation strategy, benefiting people by reducing climate-related risk while minimizing disruptions to community and social cohesion. However, past relocations have often resulted in negative outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Examples abound of poorly planned relocations that have led to increased risk exposure, livelihood loss, declining living conditions, and social, cultural and emotional damage<sup>3</sup>, involving often severe human rights violations<sup>4</sup>. Although exposure to climate risk does not automatically lead to mobility<sup>4,5</sup>, more relocations may be likely as intensifying climatic impacts raise reasonable concerns about the long-term habitability of many areas. Projected annual flood levels for 2050, for example, could affect 340 million people globally<sup>6</sup>. Yet the window of opportunity to learn from these past mistakes is rapidly closing.

Issuing general recommendations for planned relocations is difficult, as no two relocations are the same, even within one country<sup>7</sup>. Indeed they are complex multi-stakeholder processes that require iterative risk and vulnerability assessments, consultative decision-making, planning, implementation, and long-term monitoring, all of which are culturally, geographically and politically context-dependent<sup>8</sup>. As a result, the term “planned relocation” is applied to situations marked by very different community needs, capacities and preferences, and across national contexts with wide-ranging institutional, economic, and political capacity. But using this term broadly and universalizing across contexts can be problematic.

To navigate differences across contexts, conceptual frameworks comparing and categorising relocation cases are essential<sup>9,10</sup>. They

help stakeholders involved in relocation decision-making identify broadly applicable lessons without overgeneralizing and obscuring context-specific needs. Here we develop a framework for researchers, communities and their advocates to identify priorities for advocacy to relevant government authorities, and ultimately ensure more consensual and well-supported relocation practice.

## Two key questions: consent and support

Two critical questions that community advocates and researchers should ask first of any relocation process to understand the type of relocation case and consequent advocacy priorities are:

1. Does the community consent to the relocation?
2. Does the community receive the support that it needs from external actors?

For the first question, a community consents to relocation when it collectively decides on or agrees to a relocation decision and plan. For consent to be authentic and legitimate, it must be freely given in advance (without threat or manipulation), based on a clear understanding of the decision’s likely consequences<sup>4</sup>. These consent criteria are codified by international lawyers in the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent framework which is originally tied to Indigenous status and sovereignty<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, advocates sometimes extend this framework to non-indigenous communities as a tool for good practice<sup>12</sup>. Undertaking research to assess the level of consent in a planned relocation case is essential because it helps advocates determine whether the move was forced by authorities, and consequently whether certain advocacy principles apply. A relocation may be forced by any combination of three key reasons<sup>13</sup>: push factors (e.g. a flood), the nature of the relocation process (e.g. absence of consent, evictions and coercion to move by authorities), or because there is residual risk in origin (e.g., return is not possible). The first and third reasons are nearly always present in climate-related planned relocation, creating conceptual confusion about when planned relocation is forced or not. Here we argue that the concept of consent between a community and an authority is a more generative starting point to understand the different types of relocation cases and consequent advocacy priorities.

The second question addresses the role of external support, including the involvement of actors from outside the community, such as local or national government administrations, national and international organisations, public and private sector service providers, and landowners. These different actors may provide funds, materials, land, labour, social support and technical expertise at various relocation stages. More of this external support is not always positive; all support should be culturally appropriate, collaborative in design, and adequate in that it meets peoples’ diverse needs and respects their rights<sup>4</sup>. Research is crucial to identify the context-specific factors that enable or obstruct effective support to meet community members’

intersectional needs. Depending on the context, inadequate support may be caused by insufficient government resources and capacity - e.g. in fragile states - but also be the result of vested interests, discrimination, or any number of other socio-political factors<sup>14</sup>. Understanding this is vital because it can help advocates identify who and where to target advocacy priorities.

We use several case studies to illustrate four relocation “types” (Fig. 1a), concluding that relocations are most likely to lead to positive outcomes when they are consensual and well-supported. Critically, we also show that levels of consent and support are dynamic, meaning cases can change types as relocation plans and projects progress (Fig. 1b) and underscoring how consent and support must be continuously re-affirmed. Finally, we show that the distinctions between relocation cases highlighted by questions of consent and support offer critical insights into the set of action and advocacy priorities required in different types of planned relocation (Fig. 1c).

## Four relocation types

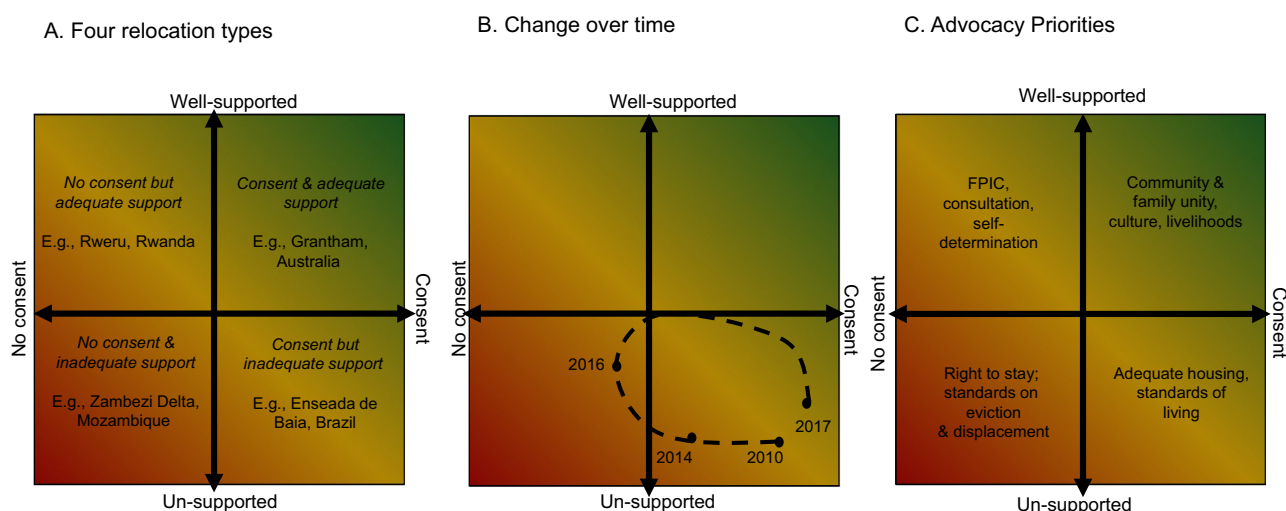
Asking questions about consent and support helps identify four relocation types defined by the intersection of two continuums: from unsupported to supported and from non-consensual to consensual (Fig. 1a).

**No consent and inadequate support.** Such relocations are often implemented following climate-related disasters, with governments declaring affected areas unsafe for habitation. Implementation is ad hoc and poorly planned, leading to unequivocally negative financial, physical, and emotional impacts and human rights violations. For instance, in the Zambezi Delta, Mozambique, the government only began building permanent housing four years after the initial displacement, with minimal community consultation and consent<sup>15</sup>. Inadequate consent and support during relocation leaves communities to fend for themselves, exacerbates community disen-

franchisement and often leads to protracted displacement<sup>15</sup>. Motivations for such inadequately-supported and coercive relocations should be scrutinised, to safeguard against misuse of the climate adaptation narrative to justify other political relocation motivations<sup>14</sup>.

**Consent but inadequate support.** These cases are undertaken autonomously, often poorly resourced and outside formal frameworks. In Enseada da Baleia, Brazil, the community rejected government offers to relocate to the nearest city, finding them inadequate and destructive to their tight-knit fishing community<sup>16</sup>. Instead, they asserted their right to self-determination and relocated independently to a preferred site. While the community achieved its goals of staying together and maintaining fishing as a primary cultural and economic activity, the relocation took nearly seven years and involved significant emotional burdens<sup>16</sup>. Prioritising this self-determination and full community consent, in this instance, also meant losing government support and resources. For a number of Alaska Native tribes that have spent decades pursuing relocation<sup>17</sup>, administrative barriers<sup>18</sup> and lack of government support even in a high-resource governance context have prevented communities from implementing relocation processes they have planned and advocated for. The possibility of autonomous relocation should not absolve governments and external actors of their responsibilities toward vulnerable communities. Equally, this external support, including from the government, can be important for providing the financial and administrative means to make relocation possible when people have decided to move.

**No consent but adequate support.** These relocations are relatively well-resourced, top-down government initiatives, conceived and carried out without community input. For example, the Rwandan government relocated people from Mazane and Sharita Islands to Rweru Model Green Village as a climate adaptation and poverty alleviation strategy<sup>19</sup>. This relocation, while mandatory, provided populations



**Fig. 1 | Advocacy priorities vary across planned relocation type and over time.** **A** Conceptual framework to understand climate-related planned relocation cases, comparing across axes of consent and support, with one example case study listed in each quadrant. **B** As illustrated by the trajectory of the Enseada de Baleia

relocation between 2010 and 2017, levels of consent and support can vary over time and require continuous re-affirmation and prioritization<sup>16</sup>. **C** Principles advocates should prioritise to support cases in each quadrant, including FPIC (Free, Prior and Informed Consent).

with new housing, and improved access to social services and transportation, opening opportunities for improved health and reducing climatic risks. The compounding goals behind this relocation process (including a broader villagization and reforestation effort by the government) provided greater resources and support for the relocation process. However, it also created food insecurity and intra-community animosity related to perceived uneven resource distribution<sup>19</sup>. Even when governments invest in relocation, lack of consent sets a dangerous precedent and can lead to negative outcomes and magnify program limitations that could have been overcome with greater community input and buy-in. Increased resources, including administrative, financial and institutional capacities will not make up for underlying justice or equity concerns in the relocation process if consent is not also part of the framework of relocation support.

**Consensual and adequate support.** Such cases effectively remove communities from risk areas while respecting their rights and preferences, providing adequate support throughout the process. In these cases, community members actively participate in decision-making and their needs and preferences are prioritised. In the post-flood planned relocation of Grantham, Australia, for example, the local government authority regularly involved the community in decision-making through focus groups and visioning exercises. At the same time, there was strong leadership from the local council and meaningful coordination of support across local, state and federal government<sup>20</sup>. Resource availability is not the main decisive factor for success in this instance, but rather political, administrative, and economic capacity to coordinate within and across levels, and to actively integrate people into decision-making beyond obtaining initial consent<sup>21</sup>. This case illustrates that planned relocations with high consent and adequate external support are possible and while they should not be defined categorically as a 'success' owing to these factors, will often have better outcomes.

### Continually re-affirm consent and support

Relocation should be seen as a process that requires ongoing consultation and established protocols to address disputes and conflicts. Mechanisms need to therefore be in place to validate community decisions and settle disagreements. For instance, Fiji's Standard Operating Procedures require 90% approval from current residents to initiate a Comprehensive Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, but when approving relocation plans, require 60% approval among village members including non-residents. Appropriate constituencies and thresholds for the expression of collective consent vary depending on the type of decision and relocation stage, and there needs to be grievance mechanisms to meaningfully respond to dissenting views. Differing levels of consent about whether or how to relocate often exist between generations or members of a household, requiring conflict resolution and support.

Relocations typically span several years, so consent cannot be a one-time blanket permission; it can be withdrawn or re-negotiated, as new risks emerge, new stakeholders get involved, relocation plans are detailed, or community leadership changes. In Enseada da Baleia, for example, consent to government plans evolved when the community leader who had been negotiating passed away in the midst of disagreements about the proposed relocation sites (Fig. 1b)<sup>16</sup>. Even with relocations where consent is fully and consistently obtained, such as in Grantham, people still raised concerns and consented only after sustained discussions; in these situations some people may still exercise

their right to stay<sup>20</sup>. External actors should not just obtain consent but also integrate community into all decision-making processes<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, communities are not homogenous entities; assessing consent requires careful consultation of all including those marginalised by intersectional identities to prevent exacerbating vulnerabilities<sup>21</sup>.

Similarly, the intensity and effectiveness of relocation support varies over time. In Vunidogoloa, Fiji, the first phase of the relocation was well-supported, but a second phase when pathways and drainage were to be built, was not completed due to lack of funding<sup>22</sup>. Failure to engage with relocation as a process of sustained, long-term investment means even initially well-supported, highly-consensual relocations can lead to negative consequences, frustration, and further marginalisation of affected communities. This also demonstrates the importance of sustained political and economic support beyond the initial decision and implementation processes. Therefore, relocations should not be initiated unless financial and administrative support can be secured with flexibility to last throughout the implementation process.

Consent and adequate and appropriate support are required before, during, and after the move. The dynamic nature of consent and support requires continuous dialogue and collaboration, flexibility, and responsiveness to communities' evolving needs and circumstances.

### Advocacy priorities

Based on insights from this framework, we identify advocacy principles that rights advocates may prioritise in their advocacy to authorities depending on the relocation type (Fig. 1c).

- *No consent and inadequate support.* Community advocates should argue that the (poorly) planned relocation is essentially forced eviction or internal displacement and that the community has a right to stay<sup>23</sup>. Cases in this quadrant might have little or no adaptation benefits, exacerbating harms that could be avoided and minimised.
- *Consent but inadequate support.* Advocates should argue that the community has a right to move with dignity and requires adequate support in the process and destination site due to the foreseeability of climate harm. Here the potential long-term benefits to adaptation capacity are undermined by the lack of support.
- *No consent but adequate support.* Community advocates should point out that the community needs to be meaningfully and inclusively consulted and have a right to self-determination in the process of moving and site development<sup>17</sup>. There can be adaptive benefits from such relocations, but preventable rights violations can occur due to the relocation's non-consensual nature.
- *Consensual and adequate support.* Advocates should argue for continued support over time at the new site, and for national policies to ensure that this model is replicated for other communities that initiate and seek support to relocate. Cases in this quadrant can provide the highest benefits, enhancing long-term adaptation capacity and minimising losses and damages.

These principles matter because a relocation that begins as non-consensual and/or unsupported may, through community-led advocacy to authorities, evolve into a more consensual process with adequate support. As one illustrative example, thanks to the advocacy of community leaders and their allies, the Guna Indigenous community of Gardi Sugdub in Panama shifted from a case with high consent and inadequate support to high consent and increased support, with authorities following through on promises to complete housing and build cultural centers in the new site<sup>24</sup>.

## Universalizing across contexts hinders research and advocacy

Climate-related planned relocation is emerging as a growing climate policy and human rights concern, as the topic of a dedicated Special Rapporteur report<sup>4</sup> and a feature of loss and damage debates<sup>25</sup>. Some Governments are even creating laws, guidelines, funding arrangements, and operating procedures for planned relocation. International organisations are increasingly getting involved, often in an ad hoc and siloed manner<sup>26</sup>. As more policy processes, governments, and international organizations focus on these issues, it is imperative for researchers and community advocates to recognize that planned relocations vary widely.

The diversity of case contexts requires researchers and advocates to, at minimum, ask: is there consent, and is there adequate support? Communities and advocates can tailor their strategies based on answers to these two key questions. These questions can also frame future research to support understanding, for example, of the social, cultural, institutional, political and economic barriers to achieving well-supported and consensual relocations and pathways forward across contexts.

Not all planned relocations are the same, and universalizing across contexts can result in serious consequences. A planned relocation with high consent but no support in Alaska<sup>17</sup> will require a fundamentally different set of principles and advocacy approaches than a government-led case where community members have not consented to move in Mozambique<sup>15</sup>. While both these cases are climate-related planned relocations, this shared label hides considerable differences, requiring the additional concepts of support and consent to properly understand different communities' perspectives on relocation and their relationships to external actors. Conceptualizing these cases as the same through the combined label of climate-related planned relocation can be problematic when what community members want diverges dramatically (to move or to stay); different community desires require different advocacy approaches. Institutional and economic capacities across these cases also vary significantly and may ultimately determine how consent is obtained and these processes are implemented, over local needs or desires. Advocacy claims and strategies will vary depending on the possibilities afforded by the economic, political and institutional context: they will not be the same in a high-resource environment with established representational channels, compared to fragile or conflict state contexts<sup>27</sup>. The most vulnerable are often in places with lowest levels of consent and capacity to support. Across contexts, policies and practices that create conditions required for the ideal type—where relocations are consensual and well-supported over time—can help ensure better, more rights-respecting outcomes for affected communities.

Erica Bower <sup>1</sup>, David Durand-Delacré <sup>2</sup>, Annah Piggott-McKellar <sup>3,4</sup>, Giovanna Gini <sup>5,6</sup> & Rachel Harrington-Abrams <sup>5,7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. <sup>2</sup>United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, Bonn, Germany. <sup>3</sup>School of Architecture and Built Environment, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD, Australia. <sup>4</sup>QUT Resilience Centre, Brisbane, QLD, Australia. <sup>5</sup>Department of Geography, King's College London, London, UK. <sup>6</sup>South American Network for Environmental Migrations (RESAMA), São Paulo, Brazil. <sup>7</sup>Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change, the London School of Economics, London, UK.

 e-mail: [ebower@stanford.edu](mailto:ebower@stanford.edu)

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## Author contributions

E.B., D.D.-D. and A.P.-M. conceptualised and wrote a first version of the paper. E.B. D.D.-D., A.P.-M., G.G., and R.H.-A. revised and complemented subsequent versions, all reading and agreeing to the final manuscript.

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# Comment

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## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Additional information

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to Erica Bower.

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