

Why speak about planned relocation?

A keynote by Prof. Anthony Oliver-Smith, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, University of Florida, for the opening session of the 2023 [Climate Academy](#) "Supporting community choices in a changing climate - Learning from planned relocations"

Prof. Oliver-Smith's keynote was followed by a panel discussion on the place of planned relocation in international negotiations, policies, and processes. Panelists reflected on how the topic of planned relocation does not neatly sit in any global agenda, requiring work to make relevant connections with adaptation, disaster risk reduction, losses & damages, human rights, and other agendas.

Panelists

- Donna Lagdameo, Officer-in-charge, Vulnerability Subdivision, UNFCCC, Germany
- Koko Warner, Director of Global Data Institute (GDI), IOM, Germany
- Dr. David Durand-Delacre, Senior Researcher, UNU-EHS, Germany
- Rachel Harrington-Abrams, PhD Candidate, King's College London, United Kingdom

A recording of this session can be found [on YouTube](#).

First, I would like to thank the UNU-EHS and David Durand-Delacre for inviting me to speak today. My association between 2005 and 2010 with the UNU and the Munich Re Foundation has been one of the richest intellectual experiences of my professional life and personally the friends I made during my tenure as a Munich Re Foundation Chair on Social Vulnerability continue to be among my most valued.

Why speak about planned relocation?

There are at least two main reasons.

The first reason is that there are huge numbers of exposed and vulnerable people who are being displaced and those numbers are only going to grow. In that context, generally speaking, I think it's important to note that there has been *far more attention paid to displacement in the climate change community than to the resettlement process*. The sheer complexity of the issue is daunting.

The second reason is that the responsible agencies and organizations generally don't understand or handle relocation or resettlement very well. *It's an extraordinarily complex process involving the reconstitution of economic life, leadership and political structure, environmental relations, and the reinterpretation of social and cultural values and priorities. In short, the reconstitution of a community. That's not something that can be done by administrative fiat from the outside.* However, resettlement projects are largely seen as infrastructural projects that are produced by planners and construction companies. Social scientists may be called upon for input but, like affected people, only marginally consulted in final decisions.

So, let's talk briefly about the numbers first.

First, we have recognize that in the context of climate change, planned relocation won't happen in every case, but Climate Change effects combined with local vulnerabilities frequently lead to displacement that leads to relocation or resettlement. Pre-emptive, Planned or unplanned.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre asserts that 32.6 million people were displaced by disasters in 2022. Of those, 21.1 million were displaced by flooding and drought. These are record numbers. However, displacement is often a temporary condition. When it becomes resettlement or relocation it tends to be permanent. One of the reasons it may become permanent is that land may become unusable, either through desertification or submergence, making return impossible.

Hazards resulting from the increasing intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as abnormally heavy rainfall, prolonged droughts, desertification, environmental degradation, or sea-level rise and cyclones are already combining with local vulnerabilities, causing an average of more than 20 million people to leave their homes and move to other areas in their countries each year.

The second reason, as I said, is that generally responsible agencies and organizations don't understand or manage relocation very well. But we need to make an important distinction here first. Those of us who work in Latin America *distinguish between relocation and resettlement*. Relocation refers to movement, usually fairly short distances, often for moving people out of acute exposure to risk, from one place to another, and does not entail major shifts in economic, environmental, political social or cultural values, practices and priorities,

Resettlement actually involves the movement of individuals and communities that substantially threatens or actually changes economic, environmental, political, social and cultural values, practices and priorities that will challenge people in different ways according to age, gender, minority status, and any and all of all the axes along which communities organize and divide themselves. In effect, resettlement is much more than just a housing project, which it is often taken to be. Some people may use the terms interchangeably, but we do not.

I will therefore be using the term resettlement going forward. For most or all of these millions of people, every one of them will be facing a *huge set of challenges at both the individual and the community levels. And every one of these challenges and problems may entail significant losses and damages.*

So, what is lost in resettlement?

First, loss is inevitable in resettlement and *resettlement can't replace what is lost*. There are at least two kinds of losses and damages.

Loss of land, houses, jobs, access to resources, livelihoods. Essentially economic losses. Economic losses pertain to commodities which are both material, or tangible, (commonly known as *goods*) and non-material, or intangible (commonly known as *services*). All of these losses and damages can be rendered (quantified) in terms of economic value arrived at in market exchange although many of these losses also entail another kind of loss.

Namely *non-economic loss and damage that resists quantification (monetization) which continues to be problematical at levels of theory, policy and practice*. I would like to focus on the importance of non-economic loss and damage as they occur in the process of resettlement.

Non-economic losses are those material goods and non-material services lost through both direct and indirect pathways, but which are ignored in the practices of valuation generally described by formal economic methods and therefore are not apprehended by such methods and are therefore ignored when assistance or compensation are being debated and planned.

So, non-economic losses pertain to those losses which economic accounts ignore even though non-economic losses may also pertain to both goods (land and resources) and services (social networks, culturally significant symbols). Non-economic losses will also be both direct (e.g. disease impacts) and indirect, such as displacement and resettlement). While aspects of these losses may be quantified and/or monetized, those metrics don't come close to capturing the nature or gravity of the losses they cause. *This problem has been recognized by both the IPCC and the UNFCCC in the Warsaw Declaration of 20, but Non-economic losses and damages, particularly those associated with resettlement remain problematical, both theoretically and in policy formulation.*

Generally, displacement and resettlement produce physiological stress, resulting in increased morbidity and mortality; psychological stress, producing feelings of trauma, guilt, anxiety and grief, and sociocultural stress resulting from economic, political and cultural effects (Scudder and Colson 1982).

At stake in such circumstances is not *only the loss of physical context, and associated knowledge, materials and practices, but the potential loss of cultural and symbolic meaning embodied in those features that lie at the core of ways of understanding the world.*" I'm drawing on the work of Ted Downing and Carmen Garcia-Downing here. These elements are the basis for pre-displacement culture," "which imparts a degree of order, stability security and predictability in daily life, a sense of health and well-being

Losses of these cultural features, such as *the loss of place (environment, land, terrain), home (family, house, property) and past (lived experience, history, tradition)* that encompass a host of meanings, may evoke deep feelings of sadness and grief, which are expressions of *affect*. It hardly needs mentioning that the pain and anguish of these losses are as intimately connected to one another as are the domains that are mourned and that evocation of one may fold into the others. Thus while, displacement and resettlement destabilize pre-displacement culture, emerging in its place is, according to Downing and Garcia Downing (2009), is a *"dissonant culture" which undermines the organizational principles of the routine culture and overwhelms the capacity to respond effectively to the new challenges, creating even greater stress.*

Unfortunately, such expressions of affect, despite being widely documented, have gained less attention than merited in resettlement planning which has focused primarily on material aspects such as infrastructure and service delivery (Barrios 2017). *Although representing serious risk of project failure, the affective dimension of losses and their ensuing anguish have proved challenging for the policy world to address, despite the fact that many cultural losses are embedded in and expressed through relations to the material world.* Moreover, differences in priorities and needs perception between outside authorities and impacted people frequently impair resettlement implementation.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there are resources that people can call upon to reconstitute their community, many of them drawn from the history and culture of the community itself (Oliver-Smith 2005).

What can be done to address these losses?

Resettlement, however, can help people to address these losses, but most often it simply compounds and impedes the adjustment to loss, by ignoring non-material losses and damages, and thereby adds to the problem.

Moreover, *resettlement projects often undermine the very components of culture that people need to retain both for societal integration and a sense of cultural and social identity and meaning*. Resettlement planners and affected people need to work out a system in which they can materially sustain themselves while the people themselves undertake the process of reconstituting a new routine culture.

The methods for taking the risks of cultural loss into account in planning require adopting qualitative assessments of the role of different institutions and practices in the maintenance of cultural identity and societal integration (Espelund 1998). For example, consider the case of land and its valuable role in identity formation. Land, particularly in indigenous societies, is often held under traditional non-market forms of tenure, commonly associated with kin, clan, tribal identity, or ethnicity (Kirsch 2001). *Understanding how identity is constructed and reproduced through land use therefore is crucial for understanding its role in mitigating cultural loss and ensuing forms of loss and grief*.

When loss concerns the grounding elements of culture, it can be devastating because it renders those basic aspects that gave life meaning now meaningless. Even the planning of a resettlement project can threaten the sense of security the routine culture provides by throwing into question the validity and durability of trusted beliefs and assumptions. *In that context, people grieve for their communities, for lost homes, social and environmental contexts and culturally significant places and structures, in ways similar to mourning for the loss of a valued person* (Fried 1965).

Transitioning through the grieving process can be enhanced by the commemoration of loss. The re-enactment of rituals such as the celebration of secular and sacred holidays keeps alive the social existence of place and home. The evocation of symbolically important environmental features, objects, places, or people that provided anchors to community identity in the past can be reconstructed and may also play an important role in social reconstitution, though they will most likely be reinterpreted and perhaps reformulated in different ways to fit present circumstances. *Planners at the very least should be aware enough of important sacred and secular symbols and rituals so as not to undermine the grieving process by the destruction of crucial cultural resources*. So, planners should depend on affected people to include in the resettlement plan adequate resources for the transition of the important sacred and secular structures, symbols and rituals into the new community.

While resettlement planners can do little to diminish the immediate impacts of displacement, *people and planners together can take care to preserve and enhance those cultural resources necessary to reduce the amount of cognitive restructuring and recreate the cultural precepts on which the security formerly provided by familiar structures, institutions and symbols can be based in the new context*. Foregrounding the decision making and active participation of affected people actively in displacement and resettlement decisions also enhances socio-cultural and psychological innovations that directly address the constitution of a new routine culture (Downing and Garcia Downing 2009: 237).

Key in this process will be *establishing a continuity between the pre-displacement culture and a new culture by addressing those fundamental institutions that restore the sense of security and predictability of the prior system*. As much as possible, the familiar structures in which the cultural values about previous human environment relations, social relations, economic and other subsistence practices, and spiritual and ritual sites and practices are based can be reinterpreted to be applied and practiced in the

new context. This strategy would include approximating former house types, production and distribution practices, and resettling people in social units of their own choice, including extended groups, residential units within communities and entire communities as well as networks of communities linked by marriage, ritual and other ties (Downing and Garcia Downing 2009).

All the losses experienced in displacement and resettlement, loss of place, loss of home and loss of past all fold into what can be the most devastating loss of all: the loss of meaning. The loss of a sense that one is significant in the world and within that, that there is a certain logic in one's existence.

Until we truly understand what is at stake for affected people and factor that understanding into the way we can work with and support affected people in the process of reconstituting community and culture after displacement by climate change effects, the process of resettlement will continue to impoverish people in a myriad of ways.

Anthony Oliver-Smith
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