



Planned Relocations and Durable Solutions: Learning from parallel conversations

This short article looks at two similar and overlapping practices addressing the needs of people displaced or facing displacement - planned relocations and durable solutions. Though generally taken up by two distinct practitioner and scholarly communities, they address a similar challenge: how to help people who can no longer live in their place of origin find lasting, comprehensive solutions. This piece looks at what planned relocation and durable solutions share in common, and what each practice can learn from the other. It calls for cross-pollination of approaches and for collaboration to address common gaps in knowledge and practice.

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In the last few years, international organizations and researchers working on internally displaced persons (IDP) issues have been challenged by the [High-Level Panel](#) on Internal Displacement and [Action Agenda](#) for Solutions to delve deeper into the issue of finding solutions for IDPs, including those displaced by disasters and climate change. Another largely separate group of researchers and international organizations is intensively exploring planned relocations as a policy option for people whose land has become uninhabitable due to disasters and climate change.¹ This raises several questions, including: In what ways are planned relocations a form of – or a solution to – internal displacement? And critically, what can these two parallel conversations learn from one another? In this short article, we look at how these two bodies of literature and practice intersect and suggest ways of increasing the synergies between those working in their separate silos on IDP durable solutions and planned relocations.

Understanding planned relocations and durable solutions

Given the fact that millions of people are displaced every year by disasters and that hundreds of millions are likely to move internally in the decades ahead ([Clement et al., 2021](#)), planned relocations will increasingly be seen as one solution for those affected by climate change ([Bradley and McAdam, 2012](#)). Indeed, scientists from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predict that "the need for planned relocations will increase" as the consequences of climate change on displacement and other forms of (im)mobility accelerate ([IPCC, 2022](#)). While terminology is wide-ranging, we understand *planned relocation* to be a planned, permanent movement of a group of people to a new destination site where people are provided with conditions to rebuild their lives. Understanding the relationship between planned relocations and durable solutions is thus important for policy-makers and practitioners.

Growing concern with the rising numbers of IDPs,² driven in large part by the fact that millions of IDPs have been displaced for years, has led to renewed interest in finding solutions for protracted displacement – for both those displaced by conflict and by environmental hazards. Since the [Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs](#) was adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee in 2010, there has been agreement that a *durable solution* is achieved when IDPs no longer have any displacement-related vulnerabilities and protection needs, and are able to enjoy their human rights without discrimination deriving from displacement. This paradigm applies regardless of whether the driver of displacement is conflict, disaster, or a combination of these and other factors. This is a high standard; people who physically return to their communities of origin often have needs related to their displacement for years. The Framework acknowledges that a durable solution is a process, not an endpoint. The three widely-acknowledged solutions available – at least theoretically – to IDPs are: return to their community of origin, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country. In a sense, this approach to solutions is based on an inherited paradigm ([Bower, 2016](#)), derived from solutions envisaged for refugees – voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement in a third country.

So where do *planned relocations related to climate change* fit in this trinity of solutions? Is planned relocation a new form of internal

displacement or does it fall within the third solution of settlement elsewhere in the country? Or, as is framed in the [Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda](#), is planned relocation an anticipatory solution to "manage disaster displacement risk" and proactively prevent displacement? Is it all of the above? Without going into the complex issue of whether planned relocations are forced or voluntary movements ([McAdam and Ferris, 2015](#); [Cantor, 2023](#)), they are generally initiated in association with one or more natural hazards, often one exacerbated by climate change, although it can occur in other contexts ([Cantor, 2023](#)). Planned relocations have been used extensively in the context of natural hazards ([Bower and Weerasinghe, 2021](#); [Moknacheva, 2022](#); [Ajibade et al., 2022](#); [Balanchandan, Olhansky and Johnson, 2021](#)) all regions of the world.

Planned relocations and durable solutions are generally discussed and addressed by two distinct scholarly and practitioner communities, yet both communities are working on the similar challenge: how to help people who can no longer live in their place of origin find lasting, holistic solutions somewhere new, as a planned, supported process.

Comparison of approaches

At the conceptual level, there are many similarities between the two approaches. Both are multi-faceted, considering not only physical movement and housing but a comprehensive suite of human needs and rights, including safety and access to education, livelihoods, and health care. Both are conceptualized as processes rather than binary endpoints. Both consider not only the needs and rights of people moving but also the impact of solutions or relocations on the receiving communities. Both look at solutions in terms of integration, including re-integration for IDP returns and integration of relocated IDPs into host communities.

In both approaches, national governments have sovereign responsibility and local authorities play important roles in implementation of the solution or relocation ([Cantor, 2023](#)). But in both cases, financial resources are limited, government capacity may be inadequate, and international organizations may be called upon to support affected populations ([Alverio et al., 2021](#)). International guidance for both IDP durable solutions ([IASC, 2010](#)) and planned relocations ([Brookings et al., 2015](#); [Georgetown, 2017](#); [IFRC, 2022](#)) are based on human rights

principles. Both sets of guidance emphasize the agency of affected populations, meaning relocating and displaced persons have a right to self-determination and can decide when, where and how to move; however, in practice, sometimes governments or other supporting actors make these decisions in both settings.

Neither approach comprehensively incorporates onward, continuous mobility into solutions or relocations. What happens to those who aren't satisfied with the solution or relocation they have found and decide to move on? What about those who choose not to return or to be relocated? Secondary movements seem to be viewed as a failure of either the solution or the relocation rather than a part of the process.

But there are also notable differences. Although it was recognized from the beginning that disasters cause internal displacement, the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) were intended, and initially used, for those displaced by conflict. Thus, solutions for disaster-displaced persons do not always fit easily into this framework. For example, when a landslide destroys a village, return is usually no longer a possible solution for the displaced.³ Planned relocations have more in common with displacement and resettlement in the context of development projects ([Wilmsen and Webber, 2015](#)) than with solutions for conflict-affected internally displaced populations.

The two approaches also vary in terms of measurement of outcomes, scale of mobility, focus on future risk, and role of vacated land. Approaches to durable solutions usually assume that return to the community of origin is the best solution. However, planned relocations are considered when home communities are at risk of becoming inhabitable. Moreover, when done well (which is unfortunately rarely the case), planned relocation is usually much more costly for governments than other durable solutions for disaster-displaced IDPs. We argue here that these two disparate approaches have much to learn from one another.

What the community of actors working on planned relocation can learn from durable solutions

Most efforts to implement durable solutions for IDPs are based on the [IASC Framework for Durable Solutions](#) and refer not only to the definition of a durable solution for IDPs but to the eight criteria set out in the *Framework*: safety, security and freedom of movement; adequate

standard of living; access to employment and livelihoods; access to effective mechanisms to restore housing, land and property; replacement of documentation; family reunification; participation in public life; and effective remedies to displacement-related violations. In an effort to measure whether IDPs have attained durable solutions, indicators have been developed for each of these criteria (e.g., [JIPS Indicator Library](#) and [Analysis Guide](#)). Interestingly, the eight factors do not include social integration, acceptance by a host community, or any reference to social cohesion. Although the eight criteria don't specifically address these issues, nevertheless, in practice, the durable solutions community often considers these dimensions.

Efforts to measure the extent to which solutions have been or are being realized by IDPs have been guided by the important work of the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics ([EGRISS](#)), which suggests that IDPs can be considered to have found a solution when they no longer have vulnerabilities related to their displacement and there is no difference between their vulnerabilities and the national population. Thus, to measure progress in attaining solutions requires comparing vulnerabilities on the criteria in the IASC Framework between IDPs and national populations. EGRISS focuses on the first four of these criteria and is currently working to operationalize this standard. The Periodic Reports on the State of Solutions for IDPs ([PROGRESS, 2024](#)), a joint initiative of the International Organization for Migration and Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration, seeks to measure progress toward solutions by IDPs by measuring the extent to which IDPs are on 'pathways to solutions,' including measures of self-reliance.

While these efforts to measure the extent to which IDPs have found solutions are still in the initial stages, it might be helpful for those working on planned relocations to consider the eight criteria, or even the first four – as EGRISS does – in assessing outcomes of planned relocations. The planned relocation community can also learn from discussions about when displacement ends ([Mooney, 2003](#)) and incorporate some of the durable solutions indicators into their assessments.

In terms of security, Planned Relocation initiatives are fairly focused on assessing environmental risk factors in the relocation site, given that the intention of planned relocations is to move people to areas where they

are safer. But less attention has been given to the impact of planned relocations on social cohesion and the potential for intra-community conflict with the receiving community. Planned relocation initiatives could be strengthened by giving more attention to host or receiving communities as many durable solutions efforts do.

Planned relocation actors have prioritized access to services and livelihoods. But there is still the thorny issue of how to deal with property claims, particularly land left behind. The planned relocation community could learn from the expansive work of durable solutions actors on housing land and property rights (HLP), especially around land tenure. In particular, it could be critical to provide legal assistance for relocated persons to reclaim land and receive adequate compensation for their losses.

What the community of actors working on IDP durable solutions can learn from planned relocation

Guidance and effective practice for planned relocation processes, including decisions on whether and how to plan, are consolidated in a few key documents. Brookings, Georgetown University and UNHCR compiled human rights based principles in [Guidance on Protecting People from Disasters and Environmental Change through Planned Relocation](#) in 2015. Together with IOM and in close cooperation with the World Bank and UN University, Georgetown and UNHCR also developed a [complementary toolbox](#) with practical suggestions for states and other actors contemplating or planning to relocate people to protect them from disasters and environmental change. The [World Bank GFDRR Guide](#) on disaster resettlement provides complementary guidance from the development perspective. A Guide by [IFRC on planned relocation in the Asia Pacific region](#) provides guidance for local adaptation actors in that geographic context. From these planned relocation guidance documents and others, key lessons emerge that might benefit conversations on durable solutions, including regarding future climate risk, considerations for vacated land, and planning at the community scale. There are also helpful suggestions on engaging with affected communities in the process of planning relocations, which could be useful in the context of durable solutions for IDPs.

The community of actors working on durable solutions for IDPs generally does not explicitly focus on future climate change risk. The IASC Framework for durable solutions considers "safety and security" as the

first of its eight criteria. However, in practice and in the Framework itself, this criterion is less about natural hazard and disaster risk exposure than other dimensions of physical safety, such as "attacks, harassment, intimidation, persecution," including interactions with a potential host community. In contrast, it is standard practice in the community of actors focused on planned relocations to prioritize risk-informed decision making; this group more explicitly conducts future risk assessments of sea level rise and other hazards at potential destination sites to determine site suitability – not just in the present but also in the future. Actors working on durable solutions for disaster IDPs could learn from the planned relocation community in adopting a more future risk-informed mindset. This would ensure that any solution does not involve exposure to either the same threats that led to displacement or new threats. Given the reality that climate-related threats are likely to increase in the coming years, this would not only be a prudent but a necessary factor to consider. While some durable solution actors already consider environmental risk factors, environmental risks should be explicitly and automatically communicated to IDPs considering alternative solutions.

Another way that the IDP durable solutions community could learn from current conversations on planned relocation is with regard to ecological considerations around vacated land. Some actors working in the planned relocation space, particularly those with climate adaptation or engineering backgrounds (who often refer to this practice as managed retreat), are often very concerned about what to do with the abandoned land after it is vacated. In some cases, there are concerted efforts to remove homes and restore the ecosystem to marshland, which in turn strengthens defense against a future storm or flood as a "natural disaster risk reduction strategy" and can prevent future displacement. For actors working towards durable solutions for disaster IDPs in local integration or third location settings, this concern about how best to utilize vacated land for society at large, including for restoration purposes, may be relevant.

Finally, actors working on IDP durable solutions may be inspired by some of the ways that the planned relocation community thinks about planned relocation not just of individuals but of entire "communities" or groups of people. This reflects fundamental differences in how these phenomena are conceptualized: in most planned relocation initiatives, the land for resettlement is legally acquired and given to a whole group,

whereas for IDP durable solutions, it is often negotiated by individuals. As a consequence, the planned relocation literature focuses on what happens at a new destination site for matters that transcend the individual or household, such as social cohesion, cultural heritage and the importance of rebuilding sacred sites (such as "Casa de Chicha" ceremony house for Guna people moving from Gardi Sugdub to Iper Yala, or moving burial grounds for Vunidogoloa in Fiji). Planned relocation actors also focus on moving businesses and social services infrastructure such as schools, health clinics and community centers. Durable solutions actors too may benefit from thinking about what needs to happen for a solution to be durable at a community scale, including to foster social cohesion, ensure continuity of cultural traditions, and build infrastructure for businesses and social services – all of which are important priorities in the planned relocation space. The durable solutions literature is very cognizant of the importance of the IDP-host community relationship, but perhaps less so of the importance of maintaining a "community" of displaced people, even while recognizing that a "community" is rarely homogeneous.

What neither Planned Relocation nor IDP Durable Solutions actors are currently focused on, but both could benefit from considering

Both approaches seem to assume that people are fixed in time and space. Once a relocation or a "durable solution" has been initiated, and people have moved physically to a new location or returned home, there is an assumption that they will remain in that place. However, in reality, people are often on the move before, during and after a "solution" or "planned relocation." They are not "fixed in time and space" but rather exercise everyday agency to go back and forth between many places for livelihood, family or cultural reasons, a concept that some researchers refer to as "translocal" lifestyles ([Sakdapolrak et al., 2024](#); [Sakdapolrak et al., 2023](#); [McMichael et al., 2021](#)). Actors supporting both planned relocations and the pursuit of durable solutions for IDPs should think about people's ongoing, regular, small scale local mobilities in their planning processes and ensure that wherever people live, translocal lifestyles are possible. They should also consider how best to support those who choose not to return or be relocated.

In both cases, there is a clear need for more follow-up monitoring to determine the extent to which planned relocation, or one of the three durable solutions for IDPs, is sustainable. There is some evidence about

how long IDP returnees remain in their communities of return ([PROGRESS, 2024, ch. 7](#)), but more longitudinal research is needed for all three durable solutions. Similarly, there are few surveys of how satisfied Planned Relocation participants are with their new location, although there is growing interest in this space ([IOM, 2017](#); [Bergmann, 2021](#); [Yun et al., 2020](#); [Sina et al., 2019](#)). More approaches to systematically measure outcomes of both planned relocations and durable solutions are needed.

Conclusion

Internal displacement and planned relocation intersect in multiple ways. Empirical case study evidence demonstrates how planned relocations are often, but not always, initiated after a population has been displaced by a disaster ([Bower and Weerasinghe, 2021](#)).⁴ Sometimes planned relocation can be an example of the third durable solution, where a displaced community waits in interim housing until a new site is ready. In other cases, planned relocation is initiated in anticipation of future climate risk, and can be an anticipatory strategy that in effect prevents future displacement. Finally, planned relocation can be a form of forced displacement when it is not voluntary, not well planned or financed, and when communities' needs are not centered (such as when a government initiates and drives the process without meaningful consultation). At the end of the day, for the fisherfolk living in a "relocation site" in the mountains outside of Tacloban because their former home was in a "no build zone" declared after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines nearly ten years ago, how important is it to affix the label of "planned relocation" or "durable solution"?

As explored here, planned relocation and durable solutions for IDPs have a lot in common – conceptually but also for peoples' lived realities. Because of this, we believe there should be more opportunities for cross-pollination across bodies of scholarship and practice. But cross-pollination of lessons learned can be challenging and isn't universal, particularly given that both internal displacement and planned relocation are being carried out in communities in both the global North and South, in contexts with vastly different governance and geographic contexts. Both planned relocations and IDP durable solutions should be tailored to specific, place-based needs of a moving community and government counterpart.

The cross-pollination of ideas will be fruitful for both actors working on planned relocation and internal displacement. For instance, planned relocation actors can learn from the IDP durable solutions actors' 1) advances on how to assess "when displacement ends" and measure progress towards outcomes (including by adapting the eight criteria of the IASC Durable Solutions Framework), 2) consideration of relations with host or receiving communities, and 3) focus on legal assistance for housing land and property losses. Conversely, durable solutions actors can learn from planned relocation actors regarding 1) future-risk informed planning, 2) how to repurpose vacated land, and 3) community-scale planning for cultural continuity, businesses, and social services in new sites. Comparison of these siloed conversations on IDP durable solutions and planned relocation also highlights that both sets of actors need to better recognize and plan for onward mobility of displaced/relocated people, and the importance of longitudinal studies to monitor outcomes over time.

These insights are far from the only lessons that may emerge when bringing these communities of research and practice together. We believe that further cross-pollination among actors working on IDP durable solutions and climate-related planned relocation is needed to identify additional synergies. Ultimately, as climate change accelerates, such lessons may become even more essential to help ensure people on the move are supported to holistically and sustainably rebuild their lives.

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¹ Although, as argued by Cantor ([2023](#)), “relocation” can occur in other non-climate or disaster related contexts.

² IDPs are now estimated to number 71.1 million – a steep increase from the 33.3 million IDPs in 2013 ([IDMC 2023](#)) and around twice the number of refugees ([UNHCR 2023](#)).

³ Perhaps the most dramatic example was the 1995 volcanic eruption in [Montserrat](#) which led to the destruction of the capital city, Plymouth and the displacement of 2/3 of the country’s population, including half who left the country.

⁴ In one global mapping, eighteen of the 34 cases analyzed were carried out after community members were already displaced from their homes following a hazard event. Fourteen planned relocation cases did not occur after community members were displaced, and instead were initiated in anticipation of risks. The circumstances were unclear for two cases.