

Environmental Justice and Urban Reintegration: Protecting Climate-Displaced Persons from Resettlement in High-Risk Zones

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This first volume in our series on ‘Internal Displacement and (Re)Integration’ explores the environmental justice dimensions of urban reintegration for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), arguing that reintegration policies must actively prevent secondary displacement by ensuring resettlement in safe, climate-resilient zones. Drawing on examples like Fiji, it advocates for rights-based urban planning that integrates disaster risk reduction and community participation. Additionally, it advocates for more support from developed countries as a matter of international environmental justice.

This paper is part of Researching Internal Displacement’s mini-series on ‘Internal Displacement and (Re)Integration’, convened and guest-edited by Bríd Ní Ghráinne. The three volumes in this series draw on research by experts at the [Internal Displacement Research Programme](#) of the RLI, working collaboratively with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in relation to her 2025 [call for inputs](#) on this theme.

Introduction

As climate change accelerates, the frequency and severity of disasters are displacing millions of people within national borders. IDPs increasingly seek refuge in urban areas, often in informal or environmentally hazardous zones. While cities may offer opportunity, urban reintegration that overlooks environmental vulnerability risks creating cycles of

displacement and rights violations. This paper explores the environmental justice dimensions of urban reintegration for IDPs, arguing that reintegration policies must actively prevent secondary displacement by ensuring resettlement in safe, climate-resilient zones. Drawing on examples like Fiji, it advocates for rights-based urban planning that integrates disaster risk reduction and community participation. Additionally, it advocates for more support from developed countries as a matter of international environmental justice.

Urbanization, Environmental Risk, and Displacement

Urban areas are often desirable destinations for IDPs due to perceived opportunities for [employment, services, and anonymity](#). However, IDPs often settle in peripheral zones – floodplains, steep slopes, or former industrial sites – where formal infrastructure is absent and [environmental risks are high](#). These areas are not just environmentally unsafe; they are [socio-politically marginalized](#), often without secure tenure or public investment. As such, displaced persons in these settings face heightened vulnerability to direct environmental impacts while lacking the preparedness and response capacity of communities enjoying robust resiliency infrastructure.

Environmental Justice and Human Rights

[Environmental justice](#) refers to the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens and the processes that ensure displaced persons play a proactive role in shaping the outcomes of their relocation. In the context of internal displacement, environmental injustice arises when IDPs – already vulnerable – are disproportionately exposed to environmental harm. This exposure infringes on several internationally recognized human rights: [the right to adequate housing](#), the right to health, and even the right to life. Reintegration in hazard-prone areas amounts to indirect discrimination and reflects structural inequality in access to safe environments. Further, socio-political marginalisation reflects the injustice of excluding affected communities from decision-making processes.

Case Study: Fiji

Fiji offers a compelling case of environmentally linked internal displacement, environmental justice, and resettlement in high-risk zones. Rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion have made many coastal and [low-lying villages uninhabitable](#). The Fijian government has identified over 40 communities requiring eventual relocation, with [six already moved](#). As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), Fiji faces spatial constraints – many relocated communities move to peri-urban or urban zones like Suva, often without long-term planning or [infrastructure support](#).

In Fiji, urban reintegration has revealed several environmental justice concerns:

- [Lack of Land Security](#): Displaced coastal communities often relocate onto marginal public or customary lands without clear tenure, leading to contested ownership and insecurity.
- [Environmental Risk Transfer](#): Some resettled areas are on floodplains or deforested slopes, exposing new communities to cyclonic flooding and landslides.
- [Loss of Livelihoods](#): Traditional fishing and farming practices are disrupted, leading to urban precarity and overreliance on informal labor.

While Fiji has established a [Planned Relocation Taskforce](#), its operationalization is challenged by limited resources, land tenure complexity, and the need for cross-ministerial coordination. Building resiliency and reducing vulnerability, both to direct environmental threats and to socio-political marginalization, is a matter of environmental justice. Without explicit integration of environmental risk assessments into urban reintegration planning and improved inclusion of affected communities in decision-making, IDPs face the threat of secondary displacement.

Other developing states face similar challenges. In Nigeria, [desertification](#) has pushed rural farmers into cities like [Abuja](#), where IDPs often reside in informal settlements near polluted rivers or industrial zones. The lack of potable water and exposure to urban heat exacerbate health vulnerabilities. In Bangladesh, flood- and cyclone-displaced persons move into [Dhaka's low-lying slums](#), which flood regularly during monsoon

seasons, leading to cycles of displacement and [disease outbreaks](#). These cases mirror Fiji's experience: IDPs move to urban areas expecting safety and support but instead confront new environmental risks, often in politically marginalized spaces.

Legal and Policy Gaps

While frameworks like the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) and the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) recognize the environmental dimensions of displacement, implementation at the urban level remains weak. Few countries have national legislation explicitly integrating environmental risk reduction into urban reintegration planning for IDPs. In the absence of risk-sensitive land use policy, municipalities often push IDPs to “available” land – typically marginal and unsafe – under the guise of reintegration. Additionally, while urban planning laws may exist, they are often uncoordinated with disaster risk reduction (DRR) or housing policies. This policy fragmentation undermines efforts to create inclusive and resilient urban environments for IDPs.

However, placing the onus on developing states and their municipalities ignores the obligations owed by developed states. Broadly, there is the overarching issue of the states most responsible for contributing to climate change failing to meet mitigation requirements. More specifically, there are numerous international agreements obliging the most developed states to provide support for adaptations and funding for loss and damage. The UNFCCC, along with the [Kyoto Protocol](#) and the [Paris Agreement](#), calls for [financial assistance](#) from Parties with more financial resources to those that are less endowed and more vulnerable. Article 9 of the Paris Agreement makes binding the 2009 [Copenhagen Accord](#) commitment of developed countries to mobilize \$100 billion per year by 2020 to support climate action in developing countries, and to continue this mobilisation through 2025. However these commitments have not been met, and much of the funding that has been made available is in the form of [loans rather than grants](#). In addition, [at COP27](#), a breakthrough agreement was reached to provide ‘loss and damage’ funding for vulnerable countries hit hard by climate disasters. While progress is being made on operationalising this fund, commitments remain far below what

is needed, and the withdrawal of the United States is likely to exacerbate the inadequacy of both funds and political will. These shortcomings are illustrative of the environmental injustice at the level of State actors and how that leads to injustice at the local level.

Towards Rights-Based, Climate-Resilient Urban Reintegration

To ensure durable solutions that do not create new risks, urban reintegration must be guided by:

- *Participatory Planning:* IDPs must be meaningfully involved in decisions regarding relocation sites, housing design, and community infrastructure. At the international level, this translates into affected States being meaningfully involved in the control of climate finance mechanisms.
- *Environmental Risk Assessments:* Urban resettlement programmes must include hazard mapping, hydrological studies, and climate projections to avoid placing IDPs in high-risk zones. States with the technical and financial capacity to support these assessments must do so.
- *Secure Tenure:* Legal mechanisms should protect the land and housing rights of IDPs, especially where customary land tenure systems exist, as in Fiji.
- *Integrated Governance:* Ministries responsible for environment, housing, disaster response, and urban planning must coordinate to ensure coherent reintegration policy.
- *Access to Livelihoods:* Environmental sustainability must be coupled with economic opportunity – green jobs, access to public transport, and food security options must be considered in planning.

Conclusion

As climate change and environmental degradation continue to drive internal displacement, urban reintegration must not become an afterthought. When IDPs are resettled in hazard-prone areas, governments risk violating their rights and exacerbating vulnerability. Fiji and other cases illustrate the dangers of reactive, ad hoc urban integration. A just durable solution requires forward-looking, inclusive urban planning that safeguards both the physical environment and the

dignity of those displaced. Only then can reintegration be truly resilient and rights-affirming.

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