

**Rethinking Planned Relocation as Social Protection  
In an Era of Increasing Climate Change Risks**

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## **Abstract**

*As climate impacts intensify, planned relocation is increasingly deployed as an adaptation strategy, yet outcomes for relocated communities remain consistently adverse. This paper argues that these failures stem from the treatment of planned relocation as a short-term, projectized disaster response rather than as a long-term developmental intervention. Drawing on social protection theory, we reconceptualise planned relocation as a form of social assistance, capable of delivering durable solutions. We demonstrate that planned relocation inherently performs preventive, protective, promotive, and potentially transformative social protection functions by minimising future climate risks, providing non-contributory transfers such as land and housing, and enabling livelihood reconstruction. However, when implemented outside formal social protection systems, these functions may collapse, often resulting in impoverishment and protracted displacement.*

*Our paper outlines an exploratory framework for qualifying planned relocation within social protection policy and shows how reframing planned relocation as a social housing program can address institutional fragmentation and missed opportunities for climate finance. We propose a joint financing model in which international climate funds could support capital investments, while domestic social protection systems focus on service support and rebuilding livelihoods. Reconceptualising planned relocation in this way aligns climate adaptation with social justice objectives and offers a pragmatic pathway for achieving durable solutions for climate-displaced populations.*

## **Keywords**

climate change, planned relocation, social assistance, transformative, displacement

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## 1. Introduction

As climate impacts intensify, planned relocations (the deliberate, organised movement of communities away from unmanageable climate risk) will become an unavoidable adaptation strategy. In 2025, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that the 2024 displacement trends doubled the annual average number from the past decade. Weather-related hazards alone triggered 45.8 million new displacements (IDMC, 2025), with projections indicating that these numbers will continue rising as climate impacts intensify (Clement *et al.*, 2021; IDMC, 2025). Apart from triggering displacement, these climate risks are eroding fragile livelihoods and ecosystems, aggravating existing vulnerabilities, and undermining community resilience (Bilak & Kälin, 2022). In highly exposed areas, in-situ adaptation is becoming untenable, demonstrating limits to adaptation, making planned relocation a necessary and growing response (Chatiza, 2019; Ferris & Bower, 2023; Gini *et al.*, 2024; Goldfinch & Huckstep, 2025).

Despite their growing necessity, planned relocations often remain trapped in ad hoc, crisis-driven frameworks that consistently produce poor outcomes for displaced populations (Goldfinch & Huckstep, 2025), even though international guidance on the implementation exists.<sup>1</sup> We argue that poor outcomes recorded from planned relocations stem from their conceptualisation as once-off events rather than long-term development programs that require multidimensional support to rebuild lives (IOM, 2018; Ncube & Murray, 2025).

In this paper, we argue that planned relocation inherently performs social protection functions, by providing social assistance through social housing mechanisms. Planned relocation should be re-conceptualised to address three critical gaps that currently undermine effective responses to climate displacement: (i) institutional fragmentation across disaster management, climate adaptation, and social welfare domains (Rana *et al.*, 2022; Tenzing, 2020); (ii) inadequate long-term support for relocated populations whose needs extend far beyond the physical act of movement (Bower *et al.*, 2023; Ncube & Murray, 2025); and (iii) missed opportunities for leveraging climate finance through established social protection systems that already possess delivery mechanisms (Aleksandrova, 2021; Aleksandrova *et al.*, 2023; Anderson, 2021; Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2021; Huber & Murray, 2023), as well as social registries, beneficiary identification systems, and monitoring frameworks.

## 2. The shortcomings of planned relocation and the case for reconceptualization

The current approach for delivering planned relocation is embedded in the disaster response model, which is structurally incapable of delivering durable solutions because it prioritises short-term emergency outputs over long-term livelihood reconstruction and social integration (Gini *et al.*, 2024). This limitation becomes evident when examining three interrelated challenges that shape how planned relocation is currently framed. Firstly, the institutional silo challenge, whereby planned relocations typically fall under disaster management or land ministries, disconnected from social welfare systems. This creates a “conceptual gap” where resource transfers (land, housing) are separated from the lifecycle support systems (skills training, livelihood support, active labour market intervention) necessary to prevent impoverishment (Cernea, 2021). This limited institutional linkage to social welfare, labour, or

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<sup>1</sup> For example, IOM’s [Guidance on Protecting People from Disasters and Environmental Change through Planned Relocation](#); IFRC’s [Planned Relocation in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change: a guide for Asia Pacific National Societies](#); UNHCR & Georgetown University’s [Background document on Planned Relocation, Disasters and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future](#) etc..

development planning systems reflects the continued categorisation of relocation as an exceptional disaster response rather than a core and often inevitable component of social policy. As a result, relocation interventions may prioritise spatial reconfiguration (moving people out of hazardous areas) without embedding relocated populations within the lifecycle support systems required to sustain wellbeing over time.

Secondly, planned relocation contains an urgent but technocratic and projectized orientation. Relocation is currently framed as a technical fix for risk reduction, with success measured through tangible outputs such as the number of houses constructed, infrastructure installed, or households moved (Balachandran *et al.*, 2021; Palagi, 2020; Perry & Lindell, 2002). While these components are necessary, this projectized and infrastructure-led orientation tends to obscure the social, cultural, political, and distributive dimensions of relocation. Technocratic framings tend to depoliticise displacement by presenting relocation as a neutral engineering solution rather than a process that fundamentally reshapes rights, access to resources, and relations between citizens and the State (Bettini, 2013; Elliott & Wang, 2023; Oliver-Smith, 2009; Scott, 1998; Tubridy *et al.*, 2022). In the absence of a rights-based approach, relocated populations are treated as passive beneficiaries rather than rights holders entitled to long-term support, participation in decision-making, and accountability mechanisms (Bower *et al.*, 2023; IOM, 2024; Mortreux *et al.*, 2018; Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2024).

Thirdly, the temporal focus (relocation as an event versus a process) undermines long-term foresight. While disaster management operates on truncated, emergency timelines, the successful relocation of a community requires decades of sustained livelihood reconstruction. This discrepancy represents a gap where the physical act of moving bodies is conflated with the complex restoration of lives. The consequences of this short-termism, illustrated in the relocation of Cyclone Dineo survivors in Tsholotsho, are dire for resettled populations (Ncube & Murray, 2025). The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2018) observed that when planned relocation is reduced to a “one-time intervention”, it inevitably results in protracted displacement. This challenge could be understood from a lens of “institutional inertia” whereby defining relocation as an emergency response absolves a nation-state/government from obligations characteristic of social protection systems. Emergency responses position the displaced as subjects of a temporary crisis to be “managed”<sup>2</sup> rather than as citizens with enduring rights to resource access and economic security (Elliott & Wang, 2023; Murray, 2007).

By reframing relocation under a social protection framework, we argue that we can move from a projectized logic that views displacement as a temporary disruption to a programmatic approach. This frames displacement as a lifecycle shock, necessitating the need for ongoing State support for those on the margins of society, and aligns with ILO’s Social Security Conventions (No. 102),<sup>3</sup> which allows flexibility for member States in how they protect their citizens under social assistance schemes.

### **3. Reframing planned relocation within social protection as social assistance**

Social protection encompasses policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people’s exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to manage economic and social risks (ADB, 2003, p. 1). The ILO (2020) recognises that social protection

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<sup>2</sup> For example, sometimes planned relocation is termed “managed retreat”

<sup>3</sup> [The ILO Social Security \(Minimum Standards\) Convention, 1952 \(No. 102\) and Recommendation](#)

systems, including floors, play a key role in the reduction of poverty, homelessness and facilitating access to adequate housing. Planned relocation directly targets these outcomes, providing housing and preventing the potential for homelessness that would otherwise result from displacement. Anderson (2021, p. 8) argues that social protection can address climate-induced loss and damage through asset building, including provision of safer housing for vulnerable households facing climate risks.

When examined through Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004)’s transformative social protection framework, planned relocation performs: a *preventive* function that averts further deprivation; a *protective* act that provides relief from deprivation and reduces reliance on negative coping strategies; and a *promotive* role that enhances incomes and capabilities, allowing individuals to change their productive activities (e.g. from being fisher communities to being inland farmers). If conceived and managed through an equity-oriented lens, it may contribute to structural transformation (Chipenda & Adesina, 2025; Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, p. 11). In this sense, planned relocation can function as a *transformative* intervention that responds to social exclusion and addresses both procedural and distributive justice.

Thus, planned relocation may be understood as a social assistance measure insofar as it involves asset transfers that secure access to land and shelter to those at risk, including those who face long-standing poverty and limited access to assets. However, it requires institutional backing of formal social protection systems: otherwise, coherent functions collapse. The table below illustrates how planned relocation carries out key social assistance functions and why it should be framed as social protection. We subsequently discuss these functions further.

**Table 1: Qualifying planned relocations within the social protection spectrum**

General functions of social protection	Planned relocations for achieving social protection goals
<p><i>Preventative social protection</i> averts deprivation, improves risk management and promotes people’s ability to cope with shocks.</p>	<p>By relocating communities from areas exposed to climate hazards (coastal zones facing sea-level rise, flood-prone regions, or drought-affected areas), planned relocation can prevent future losses and damages (Anderson, 2021). This preventive function constitutes an investment in averting future humanitarian crises and their associated costs. Unlike reactive approaches that respond to displacement after disasters occur, anticipatory planned relocation reduces exposure before catastrophic losses materialise, aligning with emerging adaptive social protection frameworks that prioritise early action and forward-looking vulnerability assessments (Bharadwaj <i>et al.</i>, 2023; Easton-Calabria <i>et al.</i>, 2022; FAO, 2023; UNDRR, 2023).</p>
	<p>During and after relocation, robust support systems are essential to prevent displaced people from falling into poverty or experiencing severe</p>

<p><b><i>Protective social protection</i></b> provides relief from deprivation and reduces the potential for negative coping strategies. In climate contexts, negative coping strategies may include unsustainable in-situ adaptation attempts, distress migration, or asset selling leading to asset depletion.</p>	<p>hardship. Beyond housing and resettlement, this includes income support, food security programs, and healthcare access in destination areas. Planned relocation involves the organised movement of communities in response to (or in anticipation of) risks and impacts so severe that they cannot be addressed through in-situ adaptation within existing constraints (Burson, 2021; Goldfinch &amp; Huckstep, 2025). Its protective function lies in ensuring that the process of relocation itself does not impoverish affected populations.</p>
<p><b><i>Promotive social protection</i></b> enhances real incomes and capabilities, allowing individuals to upscale or change their productive activities.</p>	<p>When well-designed, relocations can promote and strengthen livelihoods and well-being by improving access to public services, education, and economic opportunities in safer areas, reducing vulnerability (Burson, 2021).</p>
<p><b><i>Transformative social protection</i></b> interventions aim to address social inequity and exclusion and contribute to inclusive structural transformation.</p>	<p>Planned relocation responds to environmental risks that impact all populations but disproportionately affect marginalised groups. When designed to enhance the agency of affected communities, with secure housing, financial support, and adequate infrastructure, relocation can address social inequality and the exclusion of previously marginalised populations by reducing disparities and expanding access to opportunities, while enabling longer-term economic and social transformation.</p>

**Source:** Authors' elaboration, adapted from (Anderson, 2021; Burson, 2021; Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Ferris & Weerasinghe, 2020; Goldfinch & Huckstep, 2025)

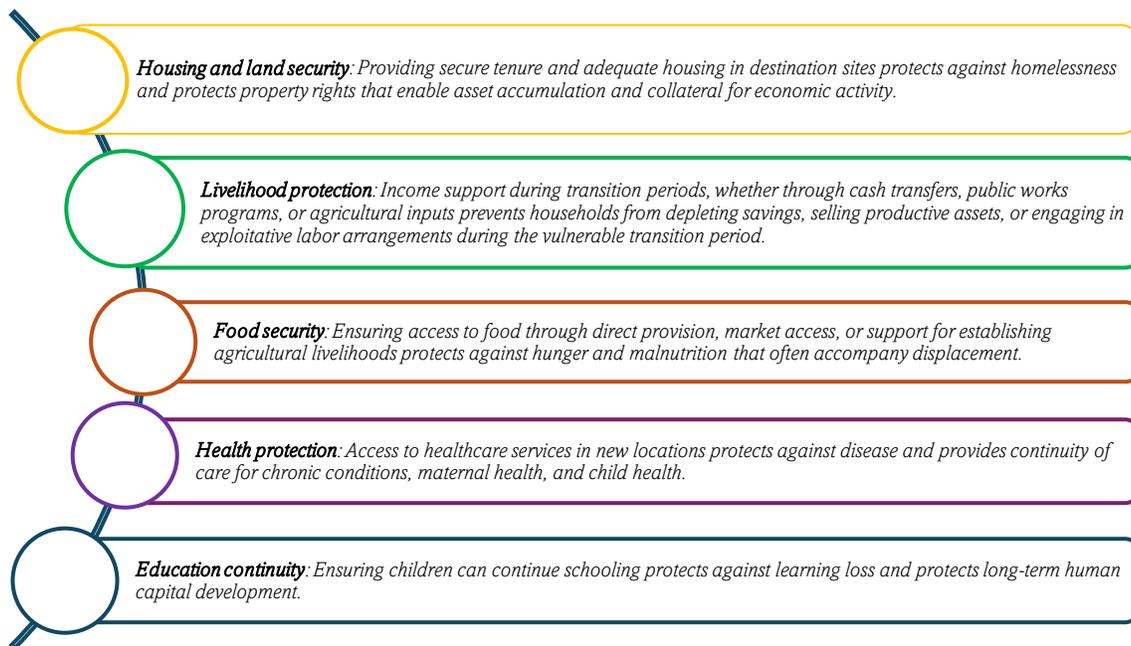
#### 4. Preventative function: Anticipatory protection against climate risks

When communities are relocated from coastal areas facing sea-level rise, from regions experiencing irreversible desertification, or from zones subject to intensifying cyclones, the intervention prevents future catastrophic losses. Several Pacific Island nations have exemplified this preventive approach. Their response and actions are likely motivated by the catastrophic and immediate visible impacts of sea-level rise. Fiji has developed national relocation guidelines recognising that some communities face climate risks that cannot be managed through in-situ measures, necessitating relocation as a planned adaptation strategy rather than an emergency response (Fiji Government, 2018; Piggott-Mckellar *et al.*, 2019). The preventive function becomes particularly evident when we consider the alternatives. Without planned relocation, highly exposed populations face several scenarios: (i) continue living in increasingly hazardous conditions until disaster forces sudden displacement; (ii) engage in unsustainable in-situ adaptation that depletes resources without ultimately reducing risk and may 'trap' populations in their geographical location; or (iii) undertake unplanned, spontaneous migration without support (sometimes moving later following another disaster), often to informal settlements where new vulnerabilities emerge (Ncube *et al.*,

2024). All above options are more likely to produce worse outcomes characterised by loss of life and assets, deeper impoverishment, and social disarticulation when compared to well-executed pre-emptive planned relocations.

## 5. The protective function: Resource transfers

When governments relocate communities, they necessarily provide (or should provide) land in safer areas, construct or subsidise housing, develop infrastructure – enabling service provision and income support during transition periods (Bower et al., 2023; Ferris & Weerasinghe, 2020; Goldfinch & Huckstep, 2025; IOM, 2024; Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2024). These are fundamentally non-contributory transfers of resources from the State to vulnerable populations, which are the defining characteristic of social assistance within social protection systems. The protective function extends across multiple dimensions of security that are encapsulated in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2010)’s Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs.



**Figure 1:** Additional functions of social assistance for achieving durable solutions for IDPs in the context of displacements and relocation. **Source:** Authors, adapted from (Cernea, 2021; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2010)

Our research in Zimbabwe (in Tsholotsho and Chimanimani districts) revealed what happens when these protective functions are inadequate or absent. Rather than protecting households from vulnerability, poorly implemented relocations created new forms of insecurity, particularly when access to services declined rather than improved. The ad-hoc nature of implementation, treating relocation as a one-time logistical exercise rather than an ongoing social protection program, produced these adverse outcomes (IOM, 2018; Ncube & Murray, 2025; Nyoni *et al.*, 2019). If relocations are implemented outside long-term commitment, systematic support, and rights-based approaches that characterise effective social

protection, they fail to protect and may actually increase vulnerability (Bower & Ferris, 2024).<sup>4</sup> The example in Box 1 illustrates that the protective function of planned relocations is not automatic but depends on adequate design and sustained implementation that social protection programming can offer.

**Box 1: Protective failure of planned relocation in Zimbabwe**

In Tsholotsho, cyclone survivors who were relocated to new sites faced a “dual-location burden”. Due to inadequate agricultural land and insufficient livelihood support (a failure of the *protective* function), families fragmented their labour between safe new zones and unsafe original lands. Rather than reducing vulnerability, the intervention created new forms of insecurity and social disarticulation. This failure occurred because the relocation was treated as a one-off logistical event rather than an ongoing protective transfer. *Source:* (Ncube & Murray 2025; IOM, 2018)

## 6. The promotive and transformative function: Moving beyond restoration to resilience building

Climate risks increase the vulnerability of communities, with disproportionate impacts on marginalised populations who often have the least adaptive capacity (IPCC, 2022, 2023). Many economically disadvantaged communities face barriers to employing migration as a safe adaptation strategy, resulting in populations becoming trapped or forced into distress migration (Gilmore *et al.*, 2024; Ncube *et al.*, 2024). Beyond preventing future losses and protecting against immediate deprivation, well-designed planned relocations can fulfil promotive and transformative functions by creating new livelihood options and opportunities – not merely restoring previous living standards but enhancing them (Bower & Weerasinghe, 2021; Nalau & Handmer, 2018). This represents the aspirational role of social protection, where programs are not only designed to manage risks and alleviate poverty but enable people to improve their circumstances and participate more fully in economic and social life (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2013; Samson, 2015).

Drawing on a legal conceptualisation of relocation, Cantor (2023, p. 11) argues, based on a review of international instruments, that it is difficult to define relocation by reference to whether affected populations are ‘provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives’, as this conflates the definitional question of what constitutes relocation with the normative question of obligations of States or implementing authorities. This raises the important question of what actions the State should take and what responsibility it holds regarding climate risk reduction, adaptation, and climate-related mobility, where planned relocation is typically pursued only once communities face irreversible losses and damages. The separation between definition and obligation has significant justice implications, particularly for people living on the margins without any means to relocate. Thus, programmatic considerations cannot be separated from the lived realities of climate injustice that ultimately drive relocation. As Bower and Ferris (2024) note, planned relocation may constitute a form of forced displacement, and carries inherent impoverishment risks (including those outlined by Cernea (2021)).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In this case, planned relocation can be considered a form of forced displacement especially when not voluntary, not well planned or financed, and when communities’ needs are not centred (such as when a government initiates and drives the process without meaningful consultation).

<sup>5</sup> Cernea’s ten impoverishment risks include: landlessness; joblessness; homelessness; marginalization; increased morbidity and mortality; food insecurity; loss of access to common property; social disarticulation; Loss of community-owned assets; loss of access to public services. *See:* Cernea, M.M. (2021). ‘The Risks and Reconstruction Model for Resettling Displaced

Acknowledging these risks implies a need to situate relocation within broader climate-justice debates that shape how it is contested, governed and experienced in practice. For many climate-affected communities who are already living in poverty and who did little to contribute to climate change, relocation is not merely a physical movement but holds potential for advancing procedural and social justice (Holland, 2017; Sultana, 2022). In this regard, the promotive dimension of social protection becomes salient where relocation connects communities to improved livelihoods, infrastructure, and access to public/basic services.

Correspondingly, a transformative dimension operates when relocations address underlying inequalities and power imbalances rather than simply reproducing existing social hierarchies in new locations. We acknowledge that this is aspirational and depends on how much those leading and engaged in the process (duty bearers) recognise and promote the agency and dignity of those being relocated (rights holders). This transformative potential depends critically on how relocations are governed. When implemented through top-down, technocratic processes that treat affected populations as passive beneficiaries to be moved and managed, relocations tend to reproduce or deepen existing inequalities (Cernea, 2021). Powerful actors (government officials, developers, destination area residents) make decisions that serve their interests while agency is denied to marginalised relocated populations. However, when relocations embrace rights-based, participatory approaches ensuring free, prior, and informed consent; involve affected communities in all stages of planning and implementation; guarantee procedural justice through grievance mechanisms; and recognise relocatees as rights-holders with entitlements (Bower et al., 2023; Fiji Government, 2018; Harrington-Abrams, 2022; Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2024), they can enable empowerment processes that expand capabilities and choices.

Evidence from the humanitarian sector demonstrates that significant attention must also be directed towards host populations through area-based approaches. While attention to host populations is critical (Davies, 2012; Mabiso *et al.*, 2014; McTough *et al.*, 2024), we do not address this here, but it warrants substantial analytical attention.

## **7. Framing relocation as social housing under climate-responsive social protection**

Many countries already operate social housing programs that provide affordable housing to populations excluded from the housing market. Unlike time-bound disaster projects, social housing programs operate on a programmatic logic with ongoing budget allocations and maintenance. These programs require sustained funding, with recurrent expenditures beyond initial construction (Rolnik, 2014), which align closely with the long-term demands of planned relocation. Social housing should be viewed not in the narrow sense of physical shelter alone, but as an institutional entry point through which a broader package of social protection measures, including livelihood support, services, and socio-cultural considerations can be delivered.

Social protection offers a solution to the planned relocation projectization challenge, by reframing it in a way that aligns with existing state delivery mechanisms. Framing relocation as “climate-responsive social protection” could integrate displaced populations into established national registries, utilising existing beneficiary identification systems and delivery mechanisms (e.g., cash transfers, public works) to mainstream sustained support to relocated population. This creates a pathway for systematisation rather

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Populations’. In: Koch-Weser, M., Guggenheim, S. (eds) *Social Development in the World Bank*, Cham: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57426-0\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57426-0_16).

than ad hoc responses and it positions social housing as a mechanism for delivering planned relocation in ways that align with programmatic approaches.

This operationalisation also addresses a critical gap in the current climate finance architecture. Climate funds have typically not reached those most affected (Browne, 2023; Garschagen & Doshi, 2022). Yet climate finance represents a potential source of additional resources for governments to expand social protection to address climate-related vulnerabilities. Emerging literature strongly advocates for the channelling of climate finance through social protection systems (Aleksandrova *et al.*, 2024; Anderson, 2021; Huber & Murray, 2023).

Yet evidence indicates that climate change adaptation finance remains highly projectized and technocratic, often failing to align with the strategic integration required for development planning and investment (Costella *et al.*, 2021; Mikulewicz *et al.*, 2025; Steckel *et al.*, 2017; Treichel *et al.*, 2024). For example, some argue that large-scale programs are privileged in climate finance, equating scale with value for money, and disadvantaging Pacific Island countries and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) (Owens *et al.*, 2025; Treichel *et al.*, 2024). As Treichel *et al.* (2024) argue, this bias compounds climate injustice for SIDS. If planned relocations are conceptualised as climate-driven social housing programs, they can fit within social protection frameworks and climate finance programmatic structures.

Goldfinch and Huckstep (2025, p. 29) highlight that planned relocation is not an explicit measure or approach outlined in the strategic documents of the global climate funds, but where it can be presented as part of efforts to adapt to climate change, there are entry points for it to be financed. Thus, it is worth exploring the rules and regulations of Climate Finance funds to investigate whether they can provide upfront capital for relocation housing and infrastructure through accredited entities, and if not, when are the next opportunities to influence the criteria of climate finance access. The argument would be that funding for large-scale resettlement aligns with the delivery of measurable adaptation outcomes (households moved from high-risk to low-risk areas). Simultaneously, social protection budgets, augmented by climate finance allocated to programmatic support, could be aligned to cover initially recurrent costs of income support, service provision, and ongoing assistance. This joint-finance approach would respect both climate finance's project orientation and social protection's programmatic nature. Politically, "climate-responsive social housing" programs may be easier to sustain than planned relocation, as social housing may enjoy broader political constituencies in some contexts in comparison to broader displacement scenarios. However, stronger advocacy coalitions are required for moving such an agenda forward, along with stable political support.

Reconceptualising planned relocations as social housing for those at the risk of climate-related housing loss aligns with Anderson (2021)'s equity-based case for directing climate finance to the furthest behind. Anderson argues that social protection channels can address a range of human rights infringements related to loss and damage, including livelihood loss, displacement and the economic insecurity of women and families left behind by migration (Anderson, 2021, p. 4).

Integration of relocation within social housing sections of government is theoretically a better option than standalone relocation programs. However, if planned relocations are to be channelled through social housing mechanisms, safeguards are essential to ensure that non-housing social protection needs including livelihoods, cultural continuity, and gendered vulnerabilities are fully addressed.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper sought to demonstrate that planned relocation should not be viewed as a technical or logistical fix but a form of social assistance under a broader social protection framework. We showed that at its core, planned relocation performs the aspirational roles of social protection in the context of a changing climate. By moving communities from zones of unmanageable climate risk, planned relocation performs a preventive function, averting future catastrophic losses. Through providing essential non-contributory transfers like housing and land, it can play a protective function. However, in current discourse and practice, these goals are often not explicitly addressed hence remain as spillover/unplanned consequences. We have argued that a reconceptualization of planned relocation from a projectized logic to a programmatic approach is thus required, through framing planned relocation as a form of social protection or *climate-responsive social housing*. This reframing allows for the integration of displaced populations into national welfare registries and facilitates a funding model that could be used for channelling climate finance, through international climate funds that cover capital costs as grants, concessional loans, blended finance or other forms of finance. In parallel, domestic social protection budgets could secure the necessary, recurrent packages of livelihood support as per the relevant national social protection frameworks or policy.

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