

Gardi Sugdub, Panama. 2018 © Michael Adams

Towards Dignified Climate Relocation

Community Perspectives from around the Globe

Introductory essay by guest editors Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower

CDCR
COALITION ON DIGNIFIED CLIMATE RELOCATION

Researching Internal Displacement

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Climate Relocations Around the Globe: Community Perspectives on Common Challenges and Solutions

This introductory article to the miniseries, Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe*, distils the experiences and lessons from planned relocations in Mexico, Panama, India and Malawi, as recounted in the community perspective articles of this series, co-produced by RID and the Coalition on Dignified Planned Relocation. The perspective pieces were authored by members of the Coalition, who accompanied or witnessed these relocations.*

This essay, by the series guest editors, highlights the importance of community leadership, the need for "all of community" consultation and engagement, the importance of cultural sensitivity and responding to experiences of loss and grief, and the need to monitor outcomes over time. Critically, planned relocation isn't just an infrastructure project; it is a multidimensional process of economic, social and cultural rebuilding.

Planned relocation is a unique form of climate mobility, and supporting the exchange of key insights from communities around the world is essential. That work is at the heart of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation's mission.

3 November 2026
Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower

Why Community Perspectives on Planned Relocation are Critical

Climate-related planned relocations of entire communities to safer locations are already happening around the world. There is a growing literature on this unique form of human mobility, showcasing the diversity and commonalities of communities undertaking planned relocation. However, much of the research published to date is by

external actors, researchers, civil society, and other advocates—often without the involvement of community members. We believe that community perspectives on planned relocation are essential because people with lived experience know the issues intimately and are best placed to enable solutions.

The Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation brings relocating community perspectives to the fore and invites community members and their supporters to share insights about what works—and what doesn't. This is vital information for governments, policymakers, and other actors to learn from past mistakes and ensure that future planned relocations are grounded in community experiences and protect people's rights. The RID-CDCR collection of articles in this series is part of that work.

What is Climate-Related Planned Relocation?

Planned relocation in the context of climate change is a planned, permanent movement of a group of people to safer ground, with the goal of maintaining community cohesion in the new site. This distinguishes it from more spontaneous types of movement such as migration, generally undertaken at individual or household level and involving multiple destination sites. Unlike evacuations, the intention in planned relocation is for the village or community to settle permanently and supported with opportunities to rebuild their lives and livelihoods in the new location. The goal is to identify relocation sites that do not expose communities to new hazards and ensure that the new places, at a minimum, have adequate housing, services, and transport.

The articles in this series show that planned relocations can happen in response to, or in anticipation of, a hazard event or climate impacts. They also demonstrate that planned relocation often occurs after disaster displacement or following evacuations, with communities sometimes living (and waiting) for years in transitional shelters.

Two key principles are repeated across all existing guidance. First, planned relocation should be seen as *a measure of last resort* and only undertaken when all adaptation options have reasonably been, or will

soon be, "exhausted in a timely manner". Second, affected communities need to be front-and-centre in planning and decision-making. Together, these principles mean that planned relocation should only be undertaken where there is no alternative, and that it is driven and designed by the persons whose lives are affected. These two principles are derived from international human rights law. Yet governance frameworks at the national and regional levels are still scarce, and many of the frameworks developed to date have critical shortcomings regarding the extent to which they are anchored in human rights principles and consult, involve, and put communities at the centre.

Main Themes Emerging from the Miniseries

Each 'community perspective' featured speaks to different aspects of planned relocation processes, enumerates key challenges and lessons learned, and may have relevance across contexts. These include:

1. Community leadership and government support

Many of the planned relocations featured in this series are initiated by community members themselves, such as the perspective from Guna Yala, Panama by Elliot Brown, while others are initiated by external actors including governments, such as in the piece on Kerala, India by Rahmath Beevi Kunnummal and Mohammed Firoz C. One of the more frequent and consequential findings from research on planned relocation to date is that processes led by communities, and with adequate support from local governments and other facilitating actors, have the greatest potential to produce results the affected people themselves regard as satisfactory.

Drawing on observations in Panama, Elliot Brown articulates this balancing act: "The Guna experience demonstrates that communities have the capacity to lead complex processes when they receive recognition, resources, and technical assistance. The state's responsibility should be to fulfill its role in guaranteeing rights, providing resources, and accompanying the process — not to complicate it or become an obstacle."

2. "All of community" consultation and engagement

Even when researchers and policy makers agree to the two overarching principles referred to above—the "last resort" principle and the need for community involvement—there are many questions on how to effectively carry out community engagement and make it meaningful. Communities are not homogeneous and do not hold consensus views, nor is every member equally affected by the planned relocation process.

The articles on India and Tabasco, Mexico show how older persons may be particularly affected. For instance, drawing on their work with communities in Odisha, India, Ranjan Panda and Sankalpa Satapathy make the case for why "elderly persons must be actively included in decisions concerning whether, when, where and how relocation takes place. They carry invaluable historical and ecological knowledge, including knowledge of local ecosystems, water sources, disaster coping mechanisms, cultural practices and community networks. Such knowledge should inform the design of the new settlement rather than being lost through relocation."

Throughout the series, authors shed light on the gendered impacts of planned relocations and the specific impacts on children and other ways in which specific groups may experience planned relocation processes differently. Therefore, consultation processes must be inclusive.

Drawing on the experiences in Tabasco, Silvia Cantú Bautista and co-authors further highlight how consultation has to be meaningful, engendering serious consequences when it is not: "Although the National Housing Commission held some working sessions before the relocation, these were not designed as genuine spaces for dialogue and co-creation: they generated false expectations about the houses' final appearance, barred community members from monitoring construction, and offered little accountability to residents' follow-up questions—fueling distrust, distraction, fear, and uncertainty that made community coordination around potential collective demands even more difficult."

Together, these community perspectives make the case for why residents should be engaged inclusively and meaningfully during decision making about relocation, with mechanisms to ensure grievances are addressed.

3. More than infrastructure: A multidimensional process of economic, social and cultural rebuilding

While nearly all authors in this miniseries argue that planned relocation processes are about "more than just houses", in practice, often very basic physical factors, such as decent-quality, culturally-appropriate housing and basic services and infrastructure, such as water, electricity, schools, health clinics, and public transport, prove difficult to obtain and maintain. Several articles, such as the pieces on Guna Yala, Panama, and Lower Shire Valley, Malawi, shine a spotlight on how even basic services such as potable water, electricity, and transport are often lacking in new sites, and how housing may be culturally inadequate, materially wanting or absent altogether. Regarding the Lower Shire Valley relocations in Malawi, Gift Richard Maloya and co-authors describe that "residents did not have houses in their new locations upon arrival and were responsible for construction themselves, continuing to use the tarps and other materials from the IDP camps as shelter in the new locations while they were building their more permanent housing."

Other articles, such as the one from Kerala, India, spotlight the challenges of inadequate gathering spaces and shared infrastructure for the whole community in planned relocation sites. Rahmath Beevi Kunnummal and Mohammed Firoz C argue that "shared infrastructure and basic services are essential for long-term functionality and sustainability of a relocated community. Such facilities should be planned, funded and delivered alongside housing with clear responsibility rather than treated as secondary or future additions."

4. Importance of monitoring outcomes over the long term

One of the most salient points made in all five community-perspective articles in this series is that a relocation is not finished when the new site and houses are handed over to the community. The aspiration is a permanent home, a restored livelihood, and cultural continuity for the next generation. That involves not only houses but also community centres and other infrastructure supporting economic, social and spiritual needs.

Several authors in the miniseries make the point that the outcomes of planned relocation processes can only be assessed many years later, such as in Kerala, India, or even generations later, as in Guna Yala, Panama. Rahmath Beevi Kunnummal and Mohammed Firoz C find that "housing conditions remain one of the most pressing issues five years after relocation" and go on to say that "five years after moving to HARSHAM, residents are still adapting to their settlement, finding ways to make it a viable habitat". And Elliot Brown from Panama reflects how "a truly successful planned relocation should … be evaluated over time and across generations."

5. Culture, grief and dimensions of loss

While planned relocations can make populations safer and benefit adaptation, the articles in this miniseries show how loss and damage is nearly always present. Besides the loss of physical housing and assets, loss is often profoundly cultural, with people feeling irrevocably removed from their ancestors, deities, and places of worship.

The cultural identity dimensions of a planned relocation are highlighted in the community perspectives of Guna Yala, Kerala and Odisha. The Guna Yala example is an interesting perspective on how planned relocation affects world views and belief systems but also self-governance arrangements of Indigenous communities. Gift Richard Maloya and co-authors report that in the Lower Shire Valley, "some community members continue to return to their previous villages on a daily or weekly basis to continue farming and collecting firewood." Elliot Brown reflects on the "translocality" of Guna Yala community members, who travel between origin and destination sites every day and consider both Gardi Sugdub and Isberyala their "home".

The health outcomes of planned relocation are another important dimension. Several authors refer expressly to its psychological impacts (e.g. in Tabasco, Mexico; Odisha, India and the Lower Shire Valley, Malawi). Ranjan Panda and Sankalpa Satapathy from Odisha describe the trauma of older populations as "solastalgia" – the acute distress and melancholia caused by the environmental degradation of one's home

environment. Relocated communities grieve for the homelands where their ancestors lived, where they were born, and where their identities were forged in relation to the sea."

6. The need for rules, governance frameworks and accountability mechanisms

A stark finding emerging from all five community perspectives is that almost every country and community facing planned relocation processes starts from scratch, piecing together available climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, (local) development, and social protection laws, policies, funds, and programmes, to find the most adequate mechanisms to orchestrate, fund, and monitor such complex processes. This series demonstrates how important it is to set up regulatory frameworks and partnerships, to define roles and responsibilities in advance, clarify timelines, and set up grievance mechanisms. Such governance frameworks should be anchored in human rights principles, including the right of affected communities to participate in all stages of decision-making, and Indigenous communities' right of self-determination. And these governance frameworks should be developed in an iterative and consultative way, with meaningful inputs from relocated communities.

The authors of the articles on Tabasco, Mexico, and Lower Shire Valley, Malawi, point to the importance of the development of laws, frameworks, policies, and guidance for planned relocation, and that those frameworks spell out how communities should be consulted and involved at all stages of the relocation process. Silvia Cantú Bautista and co-authors evoke the concept of climate justice and raise important questions on the selection, or exclusion, of community members in the process. Gift Richard Maloya and co-authors make the case for why planned relocations should be embedded in social protection frameworks.

The community perspectives of Guna Yala and Lower Shire Valley also highlight the role of national and district level authorities and, more generally, bureaucracies and administrations that are changing and can

support, or delay, processes. When laws, policies and jointly agreed plans and timelines are firmly in place, support for relocating communities can continue with fewer disruptions during changes in administrations. Based on his community's experience in Panama, Elliot Brown argues that "every planned relocation should have a public agreement clearly defining the responsibilities of institutions, available funding, timelines, services that must be operational, and channels for filing complaints. The community must be able to monitor progress and participate in evaluating the results".

7. Communication of communities' perspectives and the role of media

Community participation and accountability all rely on transparent communication and information provision. The articles in this miniseries have shown how important it is for relocating communities to share their perspectives, concerns and plans with their government and fellow citizens.

The articles from Kerala, India and Tabasco, Mexico in particular look at the importance of *communication* and *the role of media* before, during and after a planned relocation process in supporting relocating community leaders advocating for their preferred solutions.

In some cases, media attention has not helped. Rahmath Beevi Kunnummal and Mohammed Firoz C quote a community member in Kerala: "'Everyone is selling our stories. I am tired of repeating them over the years … being heard does not necessarily mean influencing what happens next."

By contrast, in Tabasco, Mexico, Silvia Cantú Bautista and co-authors highlight how "the media pressure resulting from the communications campaign carried out by the community and the three organisations…were crucial to enabling their relocation…. Due to the media attention the case received, the relocation process began...when former Mexican President...ordered during a press conference that the situation in El Bosque be addressed." The contrast in experiences shows that media attention can be a critical catalyst for support to relocating

communities but should be used wisely—as part of a coordinated campaign that centers community views and requests.

Looking Forward

Planned relocations of entire communities are already taking place around the world and will increase. We are extremely pleased that members of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation, including researchers, members, and supporters of communities from Mexico, Panama, Malawi, and India have shared their experiences, lessons, and recommendations in this miniseries.

This is one of many tools through which the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation seeks to support the understanding, exchange of experiences, and development of solutions to planned relocation challenges, with a spotlight on community perspectives and leadership. Going forward, there is a need for more knowledge sharing across geographical and cultural contexts so that communities, their supporters, and authorities preparing to relocate can benefit from the experiences of others—for example, in areas such as assessments and the formulation of guidance and protocols—rather than starting from zero.

These articles, whilst not a comprehensive sample, are revealing. Read together, they advance the discussion of how planned relocation is a distinct governance challenge and illustrate the disproportionate occurrence of planned relocations in coastal communities due to sea level rise. Many articles in this series describe the realities of poor rural populations who are disproportionately affected, such as farmers and fisherfolk, but it is important to note that planned relocations are also happening in high income contexts and are likely to increase in the years to come. For this reason, the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation advocates that all countries, starting with “every country with a coastline”, should develop and implement rights-respecting national policy frameworks on planned relocation.

Participation in the Coalition and Building the Evidence Base

People accompanying or experiencing a community-wide climate-related planned relocation and who would like to contribute a perspective on the theme 'Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe' may contact the editorial team at Researching Internal Displacement. To be part of this global movement for community-centered and dignified planned relocation, visit the CDCR at www.climaterelocation.org and join the Coalition!

Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower, co-facilitators of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation, are guest editors of this miniseries: Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe. The series brings together the experiences of relocating community leaders, researchers, advocates and practitioners from across the Coalition to examine diverse case studies and identify lessons about what rights-respecting, community-led relocation looks like in practice and how national policy should enable it.

The Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation was formed in 2025 to work towards two goals: foster knowledge and experience exchange across contexts, and advocate for countries to develop and implement rights-respecting policy frameworks on planned relocation that put communities at the center.

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More than Just Housing: Human-rights-based Planned Relocation Lessons from El Bosque, Mexico

This first article in RID's miniseries, Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe*, is a moving account of the challenges faced by community members of El Bosque, Tabasco, Mexico, who began to plan relocation in 2022 due to severe coastal erosion. Written by members of two organisations that have advocated for the community, the article recounts the successful legal and communications campaign that persuaded the Government of Mexico to support relocation, as well as the challenges faced during a planned relocation process that did not fully prioritise a participatory, rights-based approach.*

The article calls on the Mexican government to remedy the harms to the community while ensuring better future programming through policy changes. It also offers vital lessons for governments, communities and development actors around the globe on community participation, transparent and constant communication, focus on economic and non-economic loss and damage and the need for continuous access to livelihoods, education and health services.

1 October 2026

Silvia Cantú Bautista, María Maldonado Antillón, Daniela Chapuz Osorio, Juan Manuel Orozco Moreno

Introduction

This article focuses on the planned relocation process (2022-present) of the coastal community of El Bosque, Tabasco, the first community officially recognized in Mexico as displaced due to the effects of climate

change. Drawing on the experiences of the community and the accompanying team from Nuestro Futuro, A.C., a women-led Mexican nonprofit working at the intersection of climate justice, human rights, and nature protection, we explore the challenges faced before, during, and after the relocation process, including the loss of territory and housing, the transformation of livelihoods, and institutional barriers to community participation in pre-relocation decision-making. The relocation constitutes an achievement in community organizing, strategic communication, and legal accompaniment, as 51 families now have a new home provided by the Mexican Government outside the area experiencing coastal erosion. At the same time, El Bosque continues to undergo complex processes of adaptation and integration at their new location, which we propose can inform future plans, programs, and policies on planned relocation and loss and damage in Mexico and around the world.

The Community of El Bosque and Climate Change

El Bosque is a fishing community located next to the mouth of the Grijalva River in the municipality of Centla, in the State of Tabasco. While the community is currently made up of approximately 200 inhabitants, records from the past decade indicate a previous population of up to 300 inhabitants and more than 75 houses. Before the coastal erosion swallowed most of the territory, the community also had an elementary school with a dining hall, several paved streets, drainage services, drinking water, telephone service, and electricity. However, the community has now been devastated by accelerated coastal erosion and intensified storm surges associated with cold fronts ("*norte*"), mixed phenomena which scientists have attributed to climate change.

El Bosque is highly exposed to natural hydrometeorological events, given that the winds coming from the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific Ocean, and the Caribbean Sea converge in the coastal area of Tabasco. These phenomena are becoming increasingly stronger and more frequent due to climate change. Since 2019, a single *norte* has been enough to

completely flood their homes and erode up to 10 meters of coast in one night.

The consequences have been devastating: the sea took the first house in 2017; 18 more by February 2021; and 43 homes at the start of 2022. By the end of 2022, storm surges had destroyed the school's dining hall and swept away a fourth row of homes and part of the preschool — 18 additional houses in total. In all, these events destroyed three to four full rows of streets, the beach, the preschool and elementary school, community gathering spaces, and public services (water, electricity, telephone, drainage). As of today, only a few houses remain standing.

It is estimated that, from 2005 to the present, more than 500 meters of coastline have been lost. As each *norte* markedly intensified the flooding and the loss of coastline, 65 families struggled to leave their homes overnight, searching for a safe space to temporarily relocate.

Mexican Legislation and Public Policy on Climate Displacement

El Bosque is not the only community affected by climate-driven displacement in Mexico, but legislation on planned relocation in this context is virtually nonexistent, making it difficult for citizens and civil society to activate the few, limited mechanisms the law provides.

Article 4 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States recognizes every person's right to a healthy environment, which the UN Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment has linked the impacts of climate change on the rights to "life, health, water, food, housing, development and self-determination."

More recently, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' Advisory Opinion OC-32/2025, established that the climate crisis imposes enhanced obligations of prevention and protection for vulnerable persons and communities, it recognized the right to a healthy climate—linked to the right to a healthy environment—and called for the adoption of concrete adaptation measures, including adequate housing solutions,

effective participation by affected persons, and timely responses based on the best available scientific evidence.

The Advisory Opinion is relevant because the Inter-American Court recognized that disasters resulting from climate change "may directly generate involuntary migration and displacement, or may do so indirectly when combined with situations of vulnerability and pre-existing drivers of displacement, such as conflict, violence, poverty, food insecurity, or inequalities." Additionally, it expressly recognized that El Bosque was displaced due to sea-level rise caused by climate change.

In its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0, November 2025), a national climate action plan called for under the Paris Agreement designed to cut greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate impacts, the Mexican government established novel lines of action on adaptation and loss and damage and committed to developing a National Planned Relocation Program for communities and settlements in high-risk areas. Notably, it explicitly cited El Bosque as an example of how "the loss of habitable territories is irreversible in various coastal areas" in Mexico due to climate change. Furthermore, the General Climate Change Law recognizes that internal displacement is a consequence of climate change. In turn, it recognizes relocation as a measure to guarantee the human rights of affected persons. Additionally, both the General Climate Change Law and the General Civil Protection Law require authorities to map climate risk and fund the relocation of the most vulnerable settlements.

Despite these obligations and the fact that NDC 3.0 requires the creation of programs and strategies to address the problem of climate change displacement through planned relocation, none of these legal and public policy instruments are currently being implemented or enforced. While the proposal for a National Planned Relocation Program is mentioned in the NDC 3.0, the mechanism does not currently exist, and no budget has been allocated to it. Therefore, even though the laws recognize that climate change can displace communities like El Bosque, there is

currently no actual mechanism through which communities can request planned relocation support.

The Relocation Process – Challenges Faced

The community of El Bosque has faced many challenges over the past decade, from the loss of their houses and ways of living, to the bureaucratic hurdles of the relocation process and the challenges of adapting to a new location far away from the sea. All of this has occurred without a clear, comprehensive, inclusive, and effective response from the government. The challenges faced by the community before, during, and after the relocation process are detailed below, with the aim of documenting them so that they may inform future plans, programs, and policies on planned relocation and loss and damage in Mexico and around the world.

Challenges Faced Prior to Relocation

Before being relocated, the community of El Bosque suffered the consequences of climate change in different ways. The most important was the loss of their homes: losing their housing, belongings, important documents, and thousands of memories, now beneath the sea.

Aurea Sánchez, a woman from the community, recounts that she has lost three homes as a result of coastal erosion. In her testimony, given before the relocation had taken place, she stated:

> *In my case, I have already lost three homes as a result of coastal erosion. The sea has continued advancing and I have continued moving from place to place, but it seems as though the sea follows me. We are losing space in the community and in our own homes. There are seven members of my family, and today we are simply looking for somewhere to shelter from the rain. Although my last little house is still standing, the sea is already very close, and there is no longer any way to reach where my house is.*
>
> *Where we are staying now does not have a proper floor, the walls are made of sheet metal, and there are no partitions. I do not have a home that is adequate for my family. We no longer have water*

either, and because of the most recent cold front, we also lost electricity. Being left in the dark is a constant risk, because when the sea comes in, without electricity, it is much more complicated and terrifying to have to evacuate at night, in the darkness, just as it happened to us during the last evacuation.

Similarly, Yesenia Albino, a young woman from the community of El Bosque, has described what it has been like to lose their homes as a result of climate change:

Our right to adequate housing has been violated because today we no longer have a home of our own. The last time we were displaced because of the storm, the seven members of my family rented a house together, because we do not have the financial means for each of us to rent a larger place. It has been very exhausting to keep leaving and returning to your home, for us and for the children, waiting for someone to help us when bad weather comes. No longer having a house, a place to return to, is very sad for us and for our children. The children begin asking very sad questions that you cannot answer, such as, 'Mom, where are we going to live now?' or 'Mom, am I going to have a bed?' or 'Were we able to recover our things?' It is very sad and very frustrating to lose your home and have nowhere to go.

However, this is not the only impact suffered by the community. Yesenia recounts that the impacts on older persons have been even greater:

For older people who cannot walk, the impacts of climate change have been even greater. We have an uncle who cannot walk, and during the last evacuation we had to take him out of the community in a wheelbarrow. And it is also very difficult for older people; they are not properly cared for because they are forced to move in and out of the community. It is difficult and exhausting for them to have to move every time bad weather comes.

Finally, the children of the community were also severely affected by the climate crisis. Guadalupe Cobos, a woman from the community, describes how her children have suffered as a result of climate change:

> *How climate change affects our children is very complicated, because by not having a school, by having nothing, their rights have been violated, and their physical integrity has been put at risk; they have been in danger. For example, the night they took us out [to evacuate us on November 1, 2023]. They did not evacuate us in a timely and proper manner before the storm surge. Because of that, with the rain, the physical integrity of our children was put at risk; their lives were in danger. It was very difficult. […] Psychologically, the children have also been affected. The children are more worried, sadder; I have seen them cry. It is difficult for the children to continue living in this situation. It is very difficult and painful for them to continue watching the sea destroy their homes.*

As Yesenia describes, the children's right to education has been disproportionately affected:

> *My children have also been affected psychologically. Being shut in and not talking to anyone, not being able to go out. Also, for the children, it is very complicated not to be attending school; they only attend online [...] They need their classrooms, they need their school. Not learning directly from a professional, from a teacher, takes a heavy toll on the children, because we often do not understand or do not know how to teach them. The children's education becomes stagnant and does not progress.*

Aurea Sánchez also shares that:

> *The children have been greatly affected [by the climate crisis and the loss of their homes and educational facilities] because the sea has already destroyed the preschool and the secondary school. They no longer have anywhere to study, they do not have the necessary space, much less an adequate one, to receive classes, and this is greatly affecting their education*.

These are only some of the many impacts that the community has suffered because of climate change, and only a few of the many testimonies that members of the community have given. As can be seen, the community had an urgent need to be relocated in order to escape the danger posed by the sea entering their homes and taking everything away.

Initiating the Relocation

In 2022, three civil society organizations—Nuestro Futuro, A.C., Conexiones Climáticas, and Greenpeace México—began working with El Bosque, providing legal, community, and strategic communications support to the people living in El Bosque and requesting that the Mexican authorities carry out the planned, just, and dignified relocation of their community. A challenge stood out: how do you relocate a community when there are no plans, programs, or policies requiring the authorities to do so?

The media pressure resulting from the communications campaign carried out by the community and the three organizations, together with the formal activation of existing Federal Government mechanisms adapted to the particular circumstances of El Bosque, were crucial to enabling their relocation. The community collectively made its public request for action on this issue on November 7, 2022, when it held a press conference as a community of climate-displaced persons, calling on the Mexican Government to provide immediate relocation. Due to the media attention the case received, the relocation process began on February 6, 2023, when former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador ordered during a press conference that the situation in El Bosque be addressed.

After several months of researching different options, Nuestro Futuro found an existing social program that could be used to relocate the community: the Social Housing Program. The Social Housing Program is a program of the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development ("SEDATU"), implemented through the National Housing Commission, which provides housing subsidies to low-income populations that need

housing and do not have access to sufficient resources or financing to obtain adequate housing. The program is also intended to assist populations affected by disruptive natural phenomena and reduce the housing deficit through comprehensive housing measures.

Although the main objective of this program is not to address displacement caused by climate change, it is an existing mechanism with management programs, clear guidelines, and, most importantly, an allocated budget for its implementation. Having identified this alternative as the one provision in Mexican legislation that is closest to a relocation program, on April 14, 2023, 60 families from the community of El Bosque submitted applications to be incorporated into the 2023 Social Housing Program under the Housing Relocation modality.

Challenges faced during the relocation process

Once these relocation applications were submitted, dialogue began with the Mexican federal authorities, particularly the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development, so that the families could be relocated through the Social Housing Program. After extensive advocacy with the federal authorities and an ongoing communications campaign reporting on the relocation process, at the end of 2023 SEDATU established a registry of the families that would be relocated.

The community of El Bosque faced several challenges during this process. The first was the uncertainty of not knowing when or where they would be relocated. For those who had already lost their homes or were about to lose them, this wait represented an extremely difficult period of physical, psychological, and economic insecurity, because the government was not maintaining adequate communication with the community, leaving them without necessary updates for long periods of time. This is particularly important considering that approximately a year and a half passed between the submission of the relocation applications and the inauguration of their homes in the new community.

The community also faced a lack of consultation at every stage. Federal and state authorities selected a vacant property in the same municipality

where El Bosque was located which belonged to the State of Tabasco — chosen for being the most convenient and economical option — without consulting the community, even though most members would have preferred a location closer to the sea. Families were similarly unable to influence the design of their houses, either in terms of their appearance or the construction materials.

Although the National Housing Commission held some working sessions before the relocation, these were not designed as genuine spaces for dialogue and co-creation: they generated false expectations about the houses' final appearance, barred community members from monitoring construction, and offered little accountability to residents' follow-up questions — fueling distrust, distraction, fear, and uncertainty that made community coordination around potential collective demands even more difficult. While the sessions served to present updates on the project in general, they were not intentionally designed as spaces for open dialogue and consultation with clear and accessible instructions, thereby preventing the co-creation of the housing project. Together with the issues mentioned above, this represented a key institutional barrier to community participation in decision-making prior to the relocation.

On November 20, 2024, the Mexican authorities carried out the physical relocation of 51 families from the community of El Bosque to the property located in Frontera, municipality of Centla, Tabasco, where they were provided with their new houses. The new locality is called *El Nuevo Bosque* (The New El Bosque).

Current Challenges Facing the Community After Relocation

After many years of waiting for a response from the government, the community had finally received their new houses. Once the families began inhabiting the houses, new challenges arose. The first and most important challenge was the transformation of their livelihoods and the loss of artisanal fishing as a source of income. In El Bosque, the community was located in a privileged area for fishing; its territory lay between the Grijalva River and the Gulf of Mexico. However, when they were relocated, they were moved away from the river and the sea and,

therefore, from their primary source of income. This new distance demands a very difficult process of adaptation for the families in the community, as most of them still choose to travel to El Bosque to continue their fishing activities.

Second, the community recognizes that interpersonal relationships have been seriously affected. An important factor is the housing model, as the houses are very small and located very close together, leading to emergent tensions and conflicts. Amid these neighborhood conflicts, community gathering spaces have been lost, and the dynamics of organization and decision-making have eroded over time.

The community is also grieving the loss of their territory and their homes, involving a series of profound economic and non-economic losses and damages. Most of the families that were relocated had lived in El Bosque for more than 25 years, and they report that grieving the loss of the home they inhabited for many years has been difficult. Since the relocation, Nuestro Futuro has continued working with the community to promote group and individual therapy activities to help them name and work through the grief caused by the loss of their territory and livelihoods as part of their adaptation process.

Recently, the community benefited from the construction of a park that allows children, adolescents, and young people to engage in recreational and sports activities. During the first year of adaptation, they faced the stress of living in a completely new place, confined indoors, without places to play and without activities to occupy their time. Children and adolescents describe how difficult it has been going from playing on the breezy seashore to playing on the hot pavement.

In addition, children's access to education was also markedly affected by the loss of their homes and the relocation process. Unlike El Bosque, where there was a local school that children attended, there is currently only a temporary mobile school in Nuevo Bosque. This has prevented children from receiving a complete education in adequate and permanent facilities, with schools that are not single-teacher schools, to guarantee educational quality. In terms of insecurity, children face the

risk of living on the urban periphery, where they frequently witness criminal activity and are exposed to the use of psychoactive substances.

Finally, another major challenge currently faced by some members of the community is that at least eleven families were excluded from the relocation process, without any explanation from the federal authorities. This means that eleven families that form part of the community still do not have a home in which to live. In response to this serious problem, Nuestro Futuro is actively representing these families in legal proceedings to demand that the State relocate them, as they are also climate-displaced persons recognized as such by the Mexican Government itself.

The National Adaptation Policy – Next Steps in Mexico

National Adaptation Plans or Policies (NAPs) are instruments submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by developing countries. These instruments allow countries to identify their medium- and long-term adaptation needs and develop and implement strategies and programs to address them. Mexico is currently preparing its first NAP, though the process has fallen behind schedule and publication is now expected in 2027. In May 2025, Mexico's National Institute of Ecology and Climate Change (INECC) began this work with US$2.8 million from the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and technical support from the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI). Mexico intends to share substantial progress on the NAP design at COP 31 in Turkey. Nuestro Futuro has participated in the NAP's diagnostic and gender workshops together with two women from El Bosque.

We consider that Mexico's NAP can build significantly on the lines of action previously set out in the Adaptation and Loss and Damage components of NDC 3.0, providing greater detail regarding their specific scope and the competent authorities responsible for implementing and overseeing each proposed action, while incorporating territorial perspectives and more detailed regional assessments updated to 2026–2027. The NAP represents a unique opportunity for the Mexican Government to reaffirm its commitment to improving approaches to planned relocation, moving from commitments on paper that lack

specific allocations of authority to detailed implementation plans involving all three levels of government.

Nuestro Futuro and the community of El Bosque will be at the forefront of the effort to create and implement a National Planned Relocation Program based on territorial evidence and a human rights perspective. We understand that a dignified and planned relocation is not simply a matter of physically moving housing, but rather of co-governance in planned relocation and new housing construction, the restoration of livelihoods and intangible cultural heritage, and reparations when and to the extent possible.

Conclusion

The planned relocation of El Bosque has had an important impact on the relocated community's struggle for climate justice. On the one hand, 51 families recognized as climate displaced now have new housing guaranteed by the Mexican Government, something that had never previously been achieved in the country. This constitutes a major collective achievement by the community and the civil society organizations that have organized over the past four years. In addition, this case is now being used as an example for the creation of plans, programs, and policies on planned relocation and loss and damage in Mexico.

Despite the above, Mexico still lacks the legal, budgetary, and institutional mechanisms necessary to address the displacement crisis that climate change is causing and that will become increasingly severe unless urgent and adequate action is taken from a human rights perspective. In addition, El Bosque continues to undergo complex processes of adaptation and integration, and there are still families that have not been relocated. The Mexican Government and other governments around the world can learn a lot from the case of El Bosque, what was done well and what must be done better, to develop a planned relocation policy that can be implemented jointly with the affected communities.

In summary, the case of El Bosque highlights key components to a dignified planned relocation: community participation during all stages of a relocation project, transparent and constant communication between affected communities and governmental institutions, coordinated efforts for the preservation of means of living and prior economic activities, the guarantee of a right to education and access to health services before, during, and after relocation, integration programs involving host communities, and the adequate documentation of losses and damages, both economic and non-economic. These components and recommendations will be further developed in a series of reports on El Bosque, which Nuestro Futuro will publish throughout 2027.

Silvia Cantú Bautista (Public Policy and Advocacy Lead), María Maldonado Antillón (Head of Litigation), and Daniela Chapuz Osorio (Community Organizer) are part of the team at Nuestro Futuro A.C., a women-led Mexican nonprofit working at the intersection of climate justice, human rights, and nature protection. Through strategic litigation, community accompaniment, public policy advocacy, and powerful public narratives, they work alongside the communities and ecosystems most affected by the climate crisis. Since 2022, Nuestro Futuro has supported El Bosque's relocation case and, to this day, continues to provide legal support and community accompaniment, documenting the community's experiences and needs with regards to the relocation process.

Juan Manuel Orozco Moreno is a community organizer and projects officer at Conexiones Climáticas, an organization working at the intersection of climate communication and grassroots territorial resistance, combining digital campaigns, community education, and direct advocacy to defend local ecosystems and address the climate crisis. Together with Nuestro Futuro and Greenpeace México, Conexiones Climáticas supported El Bosque in its relocation case.

Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower, co-facilitators of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation, are guest editors of this miniseries: ***Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe.*** *The series brings together the experiences of relocating community leaders, researchers, advocates and practitioners from across the Coalition to examine diverse case studies and identify lessons about what rights-respecting, community-led relocation looks like in practice and how national policy should enable it.*

The Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation was formed in 2025 to work towards two goals: foster knowledge and experience exchange across contexts, and advocate for countries to develop and implement rights-respecting policy frameworks on planned relocation that put communities at the center.

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More Than a Roof: Promises, Practices, and the Realities of Project HARSHAM in Wayanad, India

This second article in RID's miniseries, Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe*, is an insightful analysis of the challenges faced by community members involved in a planned relocation initiated after the Puthumala landslide of 2019 in Wayanad, Kerala, India. Written by researchers who have worked with this community, the article details the challenges the community faced both during relocation and five years after moving to their new site, including promises made, implementation problems and the difficult realities of everyday life after relocation. Through the account, the authors spotlight important lessons for governments, non-governmental actors, and communities themselves about prioritising a community's shared infrastructure during development, livelihoods and access to employment, and access to grievance and feedback mechanisms. Above all, this article shows that planned relocation processes do not end when a new house is constructed; they require long-term support and monitoring for many years to come.*

The series is published in collaboration with the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation.

8 October 2026

Rahmath Beevi Kunnummal and Mohammed Firoz C

This article focuses on Project HARSHAM (Happiness and Resilience Shared Across Meppadi), the planned relocation initiative established after the Puthumala landslide of 2019 in the Wayanad district of Kerala, India. This article provides an overview of the experiences of relocated

community members five years after relocation. It focuses on the relationship between the promises made, the practices implemented, and the reality of everyday life experienced by the residents. While Project HARSHAM provides permanent housing and a sense of security for many households, residents experience various challenges around housing quality, livelihood, community life and the absence of promised infrastructure. By centring community voices, this work seeks to draw lessons on how planned relocation processes can support relocated communities in the long term.

After losing their homes in the 2019 landslide, the families of Puthumala spent years in rental accommodation. For them, relocating into a permanent house in HARSHAM brought an end to a long period of uncertainty, offering relief and a renewed sense of security. However, the ground reality is rather more complicated: HARSHAM remains a reminder of what was lost, what was promised, and what remains unfinished.

Puthumala is no longer a village that its former residents remember. At around 4:30 p.m. on 8 August 2019, a debris-flow landslide swept through Puthumala village of Wayanad district, Kerala, India, destroying homes, livelihoods and much of the physical landscape in which everyday life was rooted. The disaster claimed 17 lives; 56 people were injured, and livestock was lost.

The area had experienced intense rainfall in the preceding days, with minor landslides reported before the major debris flow prompted residents to evacuate their homes and labour settlements (paddies). According to the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA), the debris flow buried places of worship, paddies, community infrastructure, and 58 houses, while another 22 houses were damaged. In total, 105 households were affected, and approximately 170 acres of land were damaged. Once a vibrant, lush green village, Puthumala is now, for many of its former residents, only a memory.

The survivors trying to return to Puthumala realised that this was not merely a matter of rebuilding a house. The landslide had made the entire landscape unrecognisable. The government subsequently declared the

village uninhabitable, since basic services and infrastructure were not restored and returning to Puthumala was not an option. This compelled the affected families to move to temporary shelters.

43 households from Puthumala received rupees 10 lakhs to seek shelter in places of their choice (1 lakh = 894 euros). The remaining displaced households expressed their desire to relocate together to one location, preserving community ties. Responding to this desire, project HARSHAM (Happiness and Resilience Shared Across Meppadi) was presented as a holistic rehabilitation program under the Rebuild Kerala Initiative (RKI) aiming to help residents rebuild their lives as a community and create a 'new Puthumala". The name HARSHAM, meaning “happiness” in Malayalam, reflected this vision. The project was planned as a model township with shared spaces and facilities intended to support community living and nurture a sense of belonging.

Five years later, at the time of writing, HARSHAM presents a more complicated picture. The houses have been built, but some of the wider infrastructure envisioned for the township remains unrealised.

The planned relocation extended far beyond moving into new houses. The relocated community had to rebuild livelihoods, adapt to the spaces available to them, navigate gaps in everyday infrastructure and, over time, recreate the sense of community they once had in Puthumala. What unfolded between the envisioned township and the lived reality is the story of HARSHAM.

This article draws on fieldwork conducted in HARSHAM in May 2023 and through a series of field visits between July and August of 2026, including interviews, extended conversations with relocated residents, and field observations. The authors approached HARSHAM as researchers examining landslide-induced planned relocation and were not involved in the planning or implementation of the relocation. The two periods of field engagement provide an opportunity to reflect on how residents' experiences and the HARSHAM have evolved over time.

From Puthumala to HARSHAM: the promise of a new beginning and practices

Soon after the landslide, several proposals emerged for the rehabilitation of households displaced by the Puthumala landslide. The initial site identified by the Kerala government for the relocation was Vazhakkala Estate at Kalladi, close to Puthumala, with the aim of rehabilitating 103 households. The plan envisaged an eco-friendly township spreading across 11.4 acres, incorporating solar power and rainwater harvesting. The Meppadi local self-government also proposed building a memorial garden with bamboo groves in Puthumala, and the committee formed to coordinate rehabilitation secured sponsorships for many houses. However, the proposed township did not proceed because of disputes over estate land ownership and issues concerning the reclassification of estate land.

The relocation proposal subsequently shifted to Poothakolli, Mukkilpeedika, Meppadi, approximately 12 km away from Puthumala. The Mathrubhumi Charitable Trust purchased seven acres of tea plantation at the site, named it 'Snehabhoomi', meaning "land of love", and donated it to the government for the relocation of 52 households. The site was subsequently cleared for township development after the land was reclassified in the revenue records from plantation to settlement.

The Government of Kerala officially launched project HARSHAM in December 2019. The project was presented as a model township, aiming to provide permanent housing, livelihood support, and other assistance to the affected families. Implementation of the project was undertaken by the Wayanad district administration, with the support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and other agencies. At its core was the construction of 52 houses, each measuring 650 square feet in seven-cent plots across seven acres of land donated by the Mathrubhumi Charitable Trust.

The housing component was financed through the government's LIFE Mission (Livelihood, Inclusion and Financial Empowerment), which

provided rupees 4 lakh per house, while sponsors covered the remaining costs, bringing the estimated cost of each house to approximately rupees 9–10 lakh.

Alongside the houses, the plan included a library, health centre, Anganwadi (nursery school), playground, and community centre for the elderly population, which can also be utilised as a shelter during emergencies in monsoon seasons. The Kozhikode chapter of the Architect Association designed the houses, providing a uniform design for all houses at the time of handover: a tiled roof over the living room, kitchen and sit-out, and concrete slabs over the two bedrooms.

The COVID pandemic restrictions had delayed the construction of 'HARSHAM', and COVID-19- inflicted financial losses led to the loss of some sponsors. The construction was inaugurated in June 2020 and completed in October 2021, with some households moving into HARSHAM that month, most in 2022, and one family in 2023. Although 52 plots were demarcated, sponsorship was secured for only 50 houses, and ultimately 49 houses were constructed.

For the families, the period between displacement and relocation to the new site involved living in rental accommodation, where the difficulties extended beyond the financial burden of rent. Loss of income, limited space and privacy, poor maintenance, accessibility issues, and concerns about security added to the challenges. Many families faced multiple displacements and had to find new rental accommodations because of evictions, rental hikes, or safety concerns. The planned relocation to HARSHAM carried particular significance for these reasons. HARSHAM offered a permanent house and a greater sense of control over domestic life, something that temporary rental accommodations never offered them.

One resident shared her thoughts: "I am grateful to God for sparing us from the landslide, and to the government that gave us this house. I feel relieved that I can call it mine despite having some flaws. Most importantly, my family feels relieved that we don't have to live in a rental house anymore."

The collaboration between government, NGOs, charity organisations, and individual sponsors was a major highlight of project HARSHAM. This arrangement allowed the project to secure resources beyond the state and enabled the construction of houses within a relatively short time.

The government specified a uniform design for the houses, reducing the scope for individual households to modify the structure according to their needs during the construction. Residents recall that the demands for modification were not accommodated. For instance, one of the families wanted a concrete roof instead of a roof with sloped tiles in the design. But they were informed that altering the approved design could affect the allocation of a house number and the electricity connection. The standard two-bedroom layout also seemed difficult for some large families.

The uniformity of the houses maintained during construction gradually gave way to the different financial capacities of the families. Those who could afford it started modifying houses soon after moving in. Some extended the house, converted the kitchen into a bedroom, sometimes adding an attached bathroom and building a smaller kitchen. Some installed interlocking tiles in their front yards, while others built compound walls for privacy. For families with greater financial resources, adaptation could mean making permanent improvements to their homes. For others, it meant improvisation. Some households continued to use makeshift kitchens covered with tarpaulin sheets. Others covered leaking roofs with tarpaulin rather than undertaking more expensive repairs.

The differences between houses also reflect what happened during and after the organisations completed their work. One organisation responsible for five houses experienced financial difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic and failed to complete all the work initially committed. The affected households were left to finish the unfinished components themselves. What had initially appeared to be a collectively supported housing intervention therefore became, for the household concerned, an additional financial burden.

Another challenge is that most organisations did not maintain a continuing relationship with households after handover. Residents described difficulty contacting some of the organisations after construction, particularly when problems emerged later. People Foundation, which constructed ten houses, was a notable exception: they remained in contact with residents and recently provided financial assistance of up to rupees 1 lakh for repairs or modifications. Households had to cover the remaining expenses required out of pocket. In this sense, the collaborative model that had enabled the houses to be built did not necessarily translate into a shared system of responsibility after the physical move.

Residents themselves became active participants in making the new settlement viable. They sought to create a sense of familiarity within an environment that was physically and socially different from Puthumala. Planting vegetation around their houses was an expression of this process through which residents reinterpret and negotiate the spaces provided to them. In doing so, they have gradually transformed a planned relocation site into a lived environment. HARSHAM, therefore, has two histories: the history of how it was planned and constructed, and the history of how its residents have subsequently inhabited, adapted, and made it work.

The Realities: Living in HARSHAM

HARSHAM was planned with an Anganwadi, health centre, library, playground,34 and community centre, but none of these facilities has been completed, even after 5 years. Residents themselves have also attempted to fill some of the gaps, pooling money to construct a small structure intended as a library, though it remains incomplete. This demonstrates residents' willingness to invest in HARSHAM but also highlights the extent to which responsibility for completing shared infrastructure has gradually shifted towards the community

This situation has been further complicated by the subsequent allocation of plots to 21 extremely poor families in HARSHAM that had originally been designated for this promised shared infrastructure. For residents,

this also means additional pressure on limited water resources and waste management services, while outstanding service gaps remain unresolved.

Housing conditions remain one of the most pressing issues five years after relocation. Residents across the HARSHAM reported leaking roofs, while some shared issues regarding structural weaknesses, electrical problems, and other construction defects. The problems weren't necessarily attributed to the uniform design of the houses alone. Many attributed it to shortcomings in construction, pointing to the quality of materials, workmanship, and not following proper construction procedures.

One resident said: "The planning is faulty. They promised that the plan would be best for us, but it turned out like this. At the same time, we weren't in a position to note it then; we were eagerly waiting to relocate to HARSHAM, and happy to be saved from rent burden and to have a permanent shelter".

At the same time, these criticisms coexist with recognition that HARSHAM provided a permanent place to live. Another resident said, "We are grateful to god that we were saved from the landslide; we would have been happy, even if we were to get a house anywhere; HARSHAM is a blessing for us".

These accounts illustrate a recurring ambivalence in residents' assessments of HARSHAM. Criticism of the planning and construction did not necessarily negate appreciation for the security of having a permanent home. For some, the HARSHAM is a flawed but meaningful recovery; for others, persistent housing problems remain a source of anxiety, mainly during the monsoon. The WhatsApp group of HARSHAM residents becomes active during the monsoon as many residents share photographs and videos of leaking roofs and filled buckets. The sound of heavy rain hitting the tiles and sheets still inflicts fear of landslides in many residents, and leaking roofs aggravate this anxiety.

For some residents, the meaning of home ownership remains incomplete. The ownership of all houses in HARSHAM is vested with the District Collector and will be transferred to families only after 25 years, limiting the option to sell or take equity loans. As one resident explained: “We were left with nothing after the landslide. We thought we could take a loan on the house and start some business. This mandate of 25 years prevents us from doing that. We have young children. If we want to do something for them, we need something in our hands.”

Livelihood and employment opportunities

Livelihood and employment opportunities remain relatively limited in HARSHAM. Before the landslide, many households owned agricultural land and relied on multiple sources of income, including the cultivation of coffee, cardamom, pepper, livestock rearing, poultry, estate work, and other daily wage work. One way or the other, they were able to generate income from their surroundings. Households that had previously depended on multiple sources of income now rely on fewer sources. The planned relocation has therefore not only altered where people live but also narrowed the economic opportunities through which households sustain themselves.

One female resident described the change in everyday terms: “We only had to purchase rice, fish, sugar and salt. Almost everything else came from our farm. We had some coffee and pepper, more cardamom plants, a few cows, goats and chickens. Here, even if we want to, it is not possible. There is no space for all of that, and eventually there could be neighbourhood conflicts, even if I were to raise just a few chickens.”

The loss of access to land therefore affected more than agricultural income. It also reduced households' ability to produce food for themselves and maintain the combination of small-scale activities that had previously supported everyday lives. Nonetheless, some households have also attempted small-scale cultivation, including cardamom, within the limited space available around their homes.

Another consequence of the planned relocation to HARSHAM is that many families now require multiple breadwinners to remain financially afloat. Many women who were previously homemakers have taken up daily-wage jobs, as have older residents who continue to work despite their age. Many residents continue to travel regularly to Puthumala to maintain their agricultural land or to work in tea and cardamom estates.

The continued employment of older residents and the entry of women into wage labour also illustrate how the economic burden of recovery can be distributed across generations and household members long after relocation has taken place.

A 73-year-old male resident explained: “Our house and some area of agricultural land in Puthumala is almost intact. So, every day I travel to Puthumala to take care of my cardamom plantation. I have installed a small solar panel as there is no electricity supply in the area. It’s enough to light two bulbs and to run a motor pump for watering.”

But maintaining these connections with Puthumala comes with additional costs. The same resident continued: “Our expenses are rising here; we have to pay 200 rupees for water, 300 rupees to the mosque committee; daily commuting by bus to Puthumala and back is getting expensive and time-consuming as well. And, during monsoon season, if it rains heavily, we avoid going back to Puthumala as it is risky. We are left with no choice but to work. Anyways, being active at this age is good for my health too”.

For some, maintaining their previous livelihoods was not an option, and they had to seek new employment near HARSHAM. The economic consequences have extended well beyond the loss of houses. Relocation to HARSHAM has changed the spatial conditions within which livelihoods had previously been organised, requiring households to reconstruct their economic lives with different combinations of land, employment, and skills.

Community, Belonging and Collective Action

For many of HARSHAM residents, living close to the families from Puthumala provides a sense of continuity. Even if they weren't necessarily immediate neighbours before the landslide, the familiarity within the wider community has helped to ease the social uncertainty of relocation. At the same time, residents described political affiliations as an occasional barrier to expressing collective concerns such as leaking roofs, particularly when it could be perceived as criticism of the political leadership associated with the HARSHAM project.

Despite these differences, residents have demonstrated a capacity for collective action. They jointly addressed concerns that arose from anti-social activities by some members of the local population in vacant areas of HARSHAM. Recently, when soil excavation began on land allocated for 21 additional houses, residents succeeded in stopping the work temporarily through protest. On 8th of August, 2026, the seventh memorial day of the Puthumala landslide, HARSHAM residents protested against the unfulfilled promises and leaking roofs, compelled by the continued apathy from the relevant authorities.

The Burden of Repeatedly Telling the Story

One of the most striking accounts from HARSHAM was the exhaustion from repeatedly voicing the same grievances without seeing meaningful change. One resident said: "We are tired to the bone. There isn't any door we haven't knocked on. Media comes often, covers everything, and goes. Then some other channels come. Everyone comes, hears everything, promises change, then… the same." She said that the mere sight of cameras makes her angry these days, believing that their experiences were repeatedly being documented by media houses without being translated into action.

"Everyone is selling our stories. I am tired of repeating them over the years," she said. Her account reveals that being heard does not necessarily mean influencing what happens next. Residents have raised concerns with officials, the sponsors, organisations, and media repeatedly for the past 5 years. But when these attempts result in little

to no changes, participation itself can become a source of fatigue. It turns this repeated act of telling their stories into another burden of relocation.

From HARSHAM to Mundakkai - Chooralmala township and beyond: Lessons for future relocations

The experience of HARSHAM is therefore neither simply a model to be replicated elsewhere, nor is it a story of what went wrong. Its significance lies in what we can learn by following planned relocation beyond the point at which houses are handed over. Five years after moving to HARSHAM, residents are still adapting to their settlement, finding ways to make it a viable habitat, and have become an important source of knowledge for communities undergoing relocations in the future.

When plans for the township for survivors of the 2024 Mundakkai–Chooralmala landslide in Wayanad, India were announced, HARSHAM residents came forward to share their experiences of planned relocation. Having lived with leaking roofs, construction defects, the limitations of standardised housing designs, and the lack of promised community infrastructure, they urged that families moving to the new township should receive structurally sound houses. They specifically called for concrete roofs rather than tiled roofs, which had become one of the recurring problems at HARSHAM.

Their concerns extended beyond HARSHAM; they did not want another community to experience the same difficulties. Their experiences point to several lessons for future planned relocations.

- The collaboration between government, NGOs, charitable organisations and individual sponsors was a major strength of HARSHAM in mobilising resources beyond the state and was constructed within a relatively short period. However, such collaboration should not end at handover. Continued institutional and partner engagement is needed for post-relocation support, including addressing grievances and resolving emerging problems
- Quality assurance must continue through and beyond construction. The urgency of housing after disaster shouldn't come at the expense

of construction quality. Problems reported by residents, including leaking roofs, dampness, and other construction-related deficiencies, highlight the need for quality-control mechanisms during construction, continued inspections, and an accessible system for addressing defects after handover.

- Shared infrastructure and basic services are essential for long-term functionality and sustainability of a relocated community. Such facilities should be planned, funded and delivered alongside housing with clear responsibility rather than treated as secondary or future additions.
- Responsibility for shared infrastructure should remain with implementing institutions. The attempt of HARSHAM residents to pool their own resources to construct a library reveals the limits of relying on community resources to compensate for incomplete infrastructure. Relocating communities shouldn't be left to assume responsibility for delivering facilities that were part of the original relocation plan.
- Relocation should support social and livelihood continuity of relocated communities. There should be opportunities to sustain livelihoods, rebuild their social and economic lives, and access employment, markets, and transport alongside the provision of housing.
- Grievance and feedback mechanisms should be present, accessible, continuous, and responsive to relocated communities. HARSHAM shows the need for having an accessible grievance platform for relocated communities to raise their concerns and issues to be addressed promptly, rather than being burdened by repeatedly voicing the same concerns and experiences without receiving a meaningful response.
- Recognising planned relocation as a ongoing process is important. The HARSHAM experience shows that relocation does not end when houses are handed over. Housing conditions, infrastructure, services, livelihoods, and residents' needs continue to evolve. Relocation

therefore should be understood and assessed as a long-term process of settlement and community adaptation rather than a one-time transfer of households to a safer location. Future relocations therefore need mechanisms for sustained monitoring, engagement. and adaptation over time.

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The Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation was formed in 2025 to work towards two goals: foster knowledge and experience exchange across contexts, and advocate for countries to develop and implement rights-respecting policy frameworks on planned relocation that put communities at the center.

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From Our Home in Gardi Sugdub and Isberyala: A Community Perspective on Planned Relocation in Panama

This third article in the miniseries, Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe*, highlights the complexities of the planned relocation of the Guna island community in Panama, as they moved from their island of Gardi Sugdub to the mainland site of Isberyala. The author, an Indigenous leader, community member and trained biologist, played an important role in bridging government assessments and requirements with the Indigenous community's distinctive worldview, spirituality, and ancestral knowledge—dimensions impossible to capture through externally conducted technical studies.*

The Guna experience demonstrates that communities have the capacity to lead complex processes when they receive recognition, resources, and technical assistance. However, a truly successful planned relocation should not be measured by the completion or delivery of houses but by families' ability to adapt and live dignified and sustainable lives in their new homes. Outcomes at the new site must be evaluated over time and across generations.

The series is published in collaboration with the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation.

15 October 2026
Elliot Brown Rivera
Translated from Spanish by Sarah Koeltzow

The planned relocation of my island community of Gardi Sugdub to the mainland, specifically to the coast of the Gardi sector in Guna Yala, which our elders named Isberyala, represents the vision of great thinkers within the community. The process began to take shape in 2010, although it had

emerged much earlier: our leaders anticipated social changes (including overcrowding and a lack of space caused by population growth on the island) as well as environmental changes, including changes in wind patterns and climate more broadly.

The vision and planning of our elders offer a very important lesson for the Guna Yala region, and for Panama, since it is a *comarca*, an Indigenous territory with its own system of self-government. As our experience demonstrates, planned relocation is not simply about moving families from one place to another. From the perspective of those who agreed to relocate, I understand the move represented an opportunity to gain access to infrastructure that had previously been unavailable to them. At the same time, however, it involved changes that brought cultural, economic, social, and environmental challenges.

For this reason, planned relocation cannot be understood merely as the construction of *negas* (houses), much less as simply drafting a project's terms of reference from institutional offices. Planned relocation processes must allow families to have a voice in decision-making so that their customs and cultures can be preserved. In my own case, as a biologist from the community, I became involved in 2018 in order to serve as a mediator between the technical issues involved, and our community's worldview.

To better understand this experience, it is necessary to know the context of Guna Yala. The *comarca*, our autonomous Guna Indigenous territory, is located in northeastern Panama and consists of 51 communities, 39 of which are low-lying islands, distributed across an area of 2,538.2 km^2. Gardi Sugdub Island is located at the western end of the *comarca*. According to information from the local health center, in 2018 the island had a population of more than 1,500 inhabitants.

Like most communities in Guna Yala, Gardi Sugdub faced a lack of space for further house construction due to population growth. This resulted in overcrowding on the island, as well as coastal erosion associated with rising sea levels. Against this backdrop, our leaders began organizing and discussing the possibility of moving to the mainland. In 2010, the

community began pursuing this option more vigorously. It is important to emphasize that the idea originated with our own leaders, who subsequently influenced the wider community.

From the *Onmmaggedd Nega* (Congress House), and with the support of the women of the community, a commission was established. That commission then led the search for communal land on the mainland. Initially, another site had been selected, but it was not large enough for the entire community, so they opted for the land we now know as Isberyala.

Over the years, the commission became more consolidated, incorporating Guna professionals from the community so that the dream of planned relocation to the mainland could become a reality. In June 2024, the community finally moved to the new site, Isberyala.

This community leadership provides the first important lesson: communities have every right to be the central driving force behind a relocation process, and their knowledge should not be marginalized. Ultimately, communities are the ones who best understand their needs and the problems affecting their surroundings. This is particularly true for Indigenous peoples, because they possess a distinctive worldview, spirituality, and ancestral knowledge—dimensions that are difficult to replace with externally conducted technical studies.

In Gardi Sugdub, the patience and organizational practices of the Guna people greatly contributed to the idea of planned relocation and enabled the process to be sustained for more than a decade. Based on our community's experience, we learned that local government institutions, protocols, and legal instruments needed to engage with traditional governance systems and, first and foremost, to recognize the community's autonomy and identity and strengthen its decision-making capacity.

At the same time, this experience demonstrated that participation must be genuine, continuous, and inclusive of all sectors of a community or population. However, Human Rights Watch found that, despite the

community's important role during the planning phase, the community commission was not included in the design of the Isberyala project. In addition, some community members viewed certain consultations associated with the environmental impact assessment as compliance-oriented and informational sessions rather than as genuine participatory processes. These forms of participation did not always provide fair and equitable representation of people who were not members of the committee.

Therefore, for future relocations, both in Guna Yala and around the world, it is essential first to map all stakeholders and families in order to ensure free, prior, and informed consent. This process should incorporate the different sectors of society. In the particular case of the Guna people, these include traditional authorities — namely the *Sahilas* (the highest authority at the community level), *Argar* (the advisor and interpreter of the Sahila), and *Suaribed* (the community spokesperson and guardian) — as well as women, youth, schools, vulnerable households, fishers, farmers, traditional medicine specialists, and other sectors that may be affected or benefit in one way or another.

The project inspired by the government's program *Techos de Esperanza*, initially known as Isberyala, began in 2019 and was completed in May 2024. The first families received their homes during the first week of June 2024. The relocation of the first families was carried out through an interinstitutional operation known as *Dulub,* which combined water and land transportation and involved local government authorities, the highest authority of the Guna General Congress, and Panama's civil protection agencies.

This institutional coordination represents a very valuable lesson that should be replicated, improved upon, and consolidated into a planned relocation protocol. A relocation requires the involvement of many areas beyond the construction of houses. It requires well-organized cooperation among local government institutions including the Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Government, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Security, and

civil protection authorities, among others, as well as local institutions and community commissions.

The Isberyala planned relocation project also offers lessons from institutions that operated in a fragmented manner. Specifically, in this case, there was insufficient follow-up during the construction phase, including by the Ministry of Health through its Guna Yala regional health office, among others.

Another lesson from Isberyala is that a planned relocation is not complete by constructing housing alone. Before moving families from one place to another, basic services must be guaranteed, including the most essential service, water.

In the particular case of Isberyala, when families moved, the community still lacked electricity and had only a partial water solution, which operated through four wells. Human Rights Watch emphasized that the new settlement required not only roofs over people's heads, but also adequate services, viable livelihoods, and conditions that would facilitate the preservation of cultural heritage and customs.

There is a basic principle here: the new site of a planned relocation must be properly prepared before families move there. At a minimum, it should provide access to drinking water, sanitation, electricity, educational facilities, a health center, connectivity, and a solid-waste management system. There should also be a follow-up program to guarantee the maintenance of infrastructure and compliance with relevant warranties.

Relocation involves families, identity, culture, and traditions, and adapting to a new environment takes time.

Another important element in the relocation of Indigenous peoples is the continuity of customs and traditions, which are part of culture. For the Guna people, the connection to territory represents a dimension of historical and symbolic identity that goes far beyond physical land.

For this reason, in 2015 the committee tirelessly negotiated for the inclusion and construction of the *Onmagged Negga* (local learning house)

and the *Inna* house (a house used for rituals marking a girl's transition into puberty) in Isberyala, using locally sourced materials and architecture consistent with traditional Guna design. This type of infrastructure demonstrates the value of integrating the value of cultural identity into planning from the beginning, rather than adding it as a decorative afterthought, as occurred with Isberyala.

The period following the planned relocation teaches us that adaptation is a constant and ongoing process that continues long after the physical move. A recent presentation indicates that the relocation from Gardi Sugdub to the mainland has brought transformations in identity, ways of life, sources of income, and community governance. It also highlights the emergence of a translocal dynamic, as some people regularly travel between Isberyala and the island, where certain services and activities continue to operate. Some families have even chosen to remain in Gardi Sugdub.

All of this should be understood as a lesson rather than necessarily as a failure. A relocation does not always entail an immediate break with the place of origin. It may be more realistic to accept that, for an extended period, both settlements can coexist.

For this reason, planned relocation policy should anticipate a transition phase, guaranteeing transportation, services, and community ties between the two locations for as long as necessary.

Another lesson from the planned relocation of Gardi Sugdub concerns livelihoods, which must likewise be incorporated into the planning of housing projects. It is understood that all families have a right to adequate housing. However, if access to their normal economic activities is not possible in the new settlement, they may be exposed to a new, and potentially greater, form of vulnerability.

Therefore, planned relocation must incorporate productive activities, commerce, fishing, tourism, and other sources of community income before families move and continue supporting them afterward.

Another important issue is transparency and respect for agreed commitments. The relocation of Gardi Sugdub was not exempt from these challenges. Beneficiary families have not had access to warranties covering their homes or the basic services constructed as part of the project. The five-year project period was marked by a lack of information and participation in monitoring the works.

These factors, together with the three successive governments with which the community had to negotiate, weakened the confidence of the Gardi Sugdub community in the government in office during the 2018–2024 period. This led Gardi Sugdub and its committee to recognize the need to establish realistic deadlines and clear budgets before the National Assembly of Panama, as well as accountability mechanisms through the creation of a tripartite body consisting of a government representative, a representative of the selected construction company, and a community representative.

This experience points to a practice that should become a standard: every planned relocation should have a public agreement clearly defining the responsibilities of institutions, available funding, timelines, services that must be operational, and channels for filing complaints. The community must be able to monitor progress and participate in evaluating the results.

It is important to note that Panama still has not finalized its National Planned Relocation Protocol. At present, it is undergoing public consultation under the leadership of the Ministry of Environment. The protocol incorporates principles including respect for human rights and Indigenous peoples, effective citizen participation, gender inclusion and intersectionality, and transparency, among others. It also covers the process from the planning phase and identification of communities at risk through to monitoring.

However, in Guna Yala, the consultation process did not encompass the entire *comarca*, nor was sufficient time provided for discussion with the different stakeholders mentioned earlier in this article.

The main lesson from Gardi Sugdub and Isberyala is therefore that planned relocation must begin long before the physical move and continue long after the keys have been handed over to relocated families.

The initial phase should identify the risk profile of the original site and assess whether leaving that site is truly necessary. This should be followed by a participatory analysis of potential relocation sites, considering safety, services, culture, the environment, and economic opportunities.

Homes and common spaces should then be designed with community involvement. Before relocation, basic services must be secured. After relocation, families should receive social, economic, and cultural support.

Based on this experience, the following aspects should be taken into account in future relocations in Panama and elsewhere in the world:

1. Community participation throughout the entire process.
2. Recognition of the autonomy and collective rights of Indigenous peoples.
3. Selection of the new territory through participatory processes and sound technical criteria.
4. Culturally appropriate housing adapted to the climate and to families' needs.
5. Essential services operational before relocation.
6. Protection and restoration of productive activities and livelihoods.
7. Safeguarding cultural identity and community institutions.
8. Continuous support for several years after relocation.
9. Clear mechanisms for monitoring, complaints, and oversight.
10. Periodic evaluation to address difficulties that emerge throughout the process.

In summary, the world can learn important lessons from the experience of the Guna people of Gardi Sugdub.

The deepest lesson that should be considered when updating and improving planned-relocation policies is not simply that a community can move from a vulnerable island or coastal location to safer land. Rather,

physical safety must be accompanied by social, economic, cultural, and political security.

A truly successful planned relocation should not be measured by the completion or delivery of houses, nor by the number of families moved, but by families' ability to adapt and live a dignified and sustainable life in their new home. Outcomes at the new site must also be evaluated over time and across generations.

The Guna experience demonstrates that communities have the capacity to lead complex processes when they receive recognition, resources, and technical assistance. The state's responsibility should be to fulfill its role in guaranteeing rights, providing resources, and accompanying the process — not to complicate it or become an obstacle.

In this way, Gardi Sugdub can transcend its status as a relocation site and become a pedagogical reference that contributes to shaping a Panamanian model of planned relocation that is participatory, respectful of culture, climate-resilient, and centered on people.

The challenge for future relocations in Panama and elsewhere will be to learn from what has happened: listen before deciding, plan before relocating, guarantee services before handing over homes, and accompany communities after the move.

These are among the most effective pathways for preventing a response to climate risk from generating new forms of vulnerability, and for ensuring that planned relocation becomes a genuine opportunity for adaptation, dignity, and community strengthening.

Elliot Brown Rivera is a biologist, indigenous leader and member of the community that relocated from Gardi Sugdub to Isberyala, in Guna Yala, Panama.

Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower, co-facilitators of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation, are guest editors of this miniseries: Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe. The series brings together the experiences of relocating community leaders, researchers, advocates and practitioners from across the Coalition to examine diverse case studies and identify lessons about what rights-respecting, community-led relocation looks like in practice and how national policy should enable it.

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Age and Justice Considerations: Insights from Planned Relocation in Odisha, India

This fourth article in RID's miniseries, Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe*, shines a light on the hardships faced by older people following planned relocation in the Indian coastal state of Odisha. The authors, researchers who have worked with these erosion-affected communities through the India-based network "Water Initiatives", describe how older adults experience challenges to their cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems following planned relocation, including the fracturing of their relationship with nature, loss of sacred spaces, and 'solastalgia' – the acute distress and melancholia caused by the environmental degradation of one's home environment.*

The paper also highlights the lessons learned from the lived realities of older persons undergoing planned relocation, including the need to pay more attention to the social, cultural, psychological, and care-related dimensions of climate vulnerability and, vitally, why approaches to planned relocations must be inclusive and age-sensitive.

The series is published in collaboration with the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation.

22 October 2026
Ranjan Panda and Dr. Sankalpa Satapathy

As extreme weather events grow in frequency and intensity, and as coastal ecosystems collapse, local geographies reach adaptation limits – both soft and hard – and human populations are being forced to move. Mobility in the context of climate change is not experienced equally across geographies and communities or subsets of communities. This article shines a light on how an aging global population is impacted by

accelerating climate hazards in one unique form of climate mobility – the planned relocation of entire communities out of harm's way.

In the Bay of Bengal, particularly in the Indian coastal state of Odisha, where the authors have been working with impacted communities for more than three and a half decades, the climate crisis and its impacts on the elderly are acutely visible. Our experience as leaders of the network Water Initiatives has made us see firsthand how marginalized farming and fishing communities are experiencing the destruction of their livelihoods, homes, and cultural identities. During planned relocations, they are forced to leave their homes, geographies where sea-level rise has already put hundreds of thousands of poor people under tremendous pressure. By examining the lived realities of the elderly during planned relocations in Odisha, we can understand the immense economic, physical, and psychosocial tolls of climate displacement.

The Bay of Bengal's Disappearing Coastlines

The coastal state of Odisha sits on the frontlines of climate change and is highly vulnerable to sea-level rise, cyclones, floods, and related disasters. The scale of the threat is immense. Nearly 30% of Odisha's coastline is affected by erosion. For these communities, whose lives and livelihoods are intricately and historically linked to local natural resources, this environmental degradation translates directly to existential peril. Seawater has already entirely submerged 16 villages in the region, while another 247 villages may need to be relocated due to rising seas.

Villages such as Podampeta and Satabhaya have already seen their entire populations relocated to resettlement areas like New Podampeta and Bagapatia. Meanwhile, villages like Tandahar and Chhenua are severely impacted by relentless coastal erosion but have not yet been relocated. The villagers have been demanding to be relocated to safer sites for several years now. The following table gives a brief overview of the two relocation sites that have been covered under this article. The two cases reveal very different models of climate-related planned relocation.

Table: A snapshot comparison between two relocation sites in the state of Odisha

	Satabhaya → Bagapatia	Podampeta → New Podampeta/other sites
District	Kendrapara	Ganjam
Main livelihood	Farming + fishing + livestock	Primarily fishing
First relocation decision	1992	Mainly 2010–11
Main relocation process	From 2008	From 2011
Major trigger	Long-term coastal erosion/sea ingress	Rapid erosion + high tides + Cyclone Phailin
Main destination	Bagapatia, ~12 km inland	Multiple sites ~3–6 km away
Main institutional framework	Odisha R&R Policy	Odisha Disaster Recovery Project/ODRP
Main relocation phase	2017–18	2011–2015/18, in stages
Approx. number of families	571	~463, with different counts in different records
Relocation model	Relatively consolidated	Fragmented
Livelihood consequence	Severe loss of agricultural/pastoral/fishing access	Continued dependence on fishing but increased travel
Cultural issue	Panchubarahi temple/deities relocated	Community fragmented across settlements
Relocation completed?	No — even in 2025 some families remained/awaited relocation	Largely yes, but residual households and fragmented families remained
New vulnerabilities	Waterlogging, poor services, livelihood loss	Water, roads, livelihood distance, social fragmentation

Importantly, as can be seen from the table, neither relocation was a single event but can rather be described as processes. And in both cases, the physical movement of houses happened much faster than the reconstruction of other aspects of people's lives in the new site.

The impact of the inundations by the once friendly ocean has different meanings for different parts of the population now faced with planned relocation. For the elderly population of these villages, climate change is not an abstract scientific concept anymore; it is an immediate, daily struggle. They possess a keen awareness of *jalabayu paribartana* (climate change), though they often interpret it through its devastating symptoms rather than its atmospheric causes. For them, climate change is the untimely weather, the oppressive heat, the incessant rains, and an ocean

that has crept inland to swallow their ancestral homes whole. This understanding has implications for relocation planning because the elderly, even though they would like to stay in their ancestral homes because of their strong place attachment, feel helpless as they are relocated due to an invading sea. Relocation is the last resort, they understand, and want a much better future for the younger generations. They want a permanent solution to the problem so that they do not have to move again.

The Economic Upheaval and Loss of Livelihoods

The affected communities of coastal Odisha are traditionally dependent on a mix of agriculture and fishing. These sectors are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. As sea level rise expands the impacts of coastal erosion and tidal inundation, people face a systematic reduction in the available land for farming and destruction of existing crops. The fisherfolk also face numerous challenges including loss of their traditional rights to fishing in known territories, forcing them to fend for a good catch in unknown and uncertain water zones.

In the face of threat of inundation from the sea, when communities like Podampeta and Satabhaya can no longer be protected by temporary evacuations or building barriers, planned relocation becomes unavoidable as a measure of last resort. This process essentially involves rebuilding housing, public infrastructure, basic services, and local livelihoods at a new destination.

The degradation of arable lands due to saltwater intrusion along with extreme weather events such as heat and rain spells, leads to complete disruption of agricultural activities and decaying livelihoods. Similarly, changes in the coastal ecosystem are decimating the fishing economy. These changes affect men and women differently. Women are intricately engaged with the agriculture and fishing activities, yet their labour largely goes unrecognized by state actors and policy makers, leading to their exclusion from welfare and compensation schemes. Relocation processes barely address these issues, meaning that people can no longer access the ecosystems they used to, in their original homes.

Given its main objective of bringing people to new places where they can settle safely and sustainably when adaptation limits have been reached in their village, planned relocation is fraught with challenges. Communities often struggle to re-establish jobs, food sources, and economic stability in the new locations. But the loss of ancestral lands and activities not only affects economic viability, it also leads to severed cultural ties and impacts social cohesion. Land rights in new locations in Odisha are not easy to secure, thus pushing communities towards economic instability and poverty. All these difficulties are compounded in case of women; gendered vulnerabilities are a stark reality both before and after relocation to new sites.

The same is true for the elderly population. For older people, lack of secure land rights can turn relocation from a physical move into a prolonged condition of insecurity. International guidance on climate-related planned relocation specifically calls for secure tenure at relocation sites and attention to the particular needs of older people and other vulnerable groups. For an elderly person, land is not merely an economic asset; it is often the family's only long-term security. If the new house is not accompanied by a legally recognised title (*patta)*, there can be continuing fear of eviction, dispute or exclusion from future entitlements.

Planned Relocation and Unsuitable Infrastructure

When coastal lands become completely uninhabitable, governments often initiate planned relocations. However, these tend to have a narrow focus on physical infrastructure, neglecting the specific physiological and cultural needs of the elderly.

In Odisha, communities in Satabhaya had to move twelve kilometres away, to Bagapatia, and those of Old Podampeta were moved three kilometres away. Both of these communities faced different challenges and were covered under different schemes. Their local governments have

been trying to help them with better facilities; however, challenges remain.

Access to basic amenities such as drinking water remains problematic, even though a lot of progress has been made. The communities at Bagapatia face severe waterlogging during storms and heavy rainfall events. The villagers of Tandahar, who have not moved out yet, despite a rapid sea-ingress, face groundwater contamination because of sea-level rise. Cyclonic storms also affect their surface waters. The challenge gets tougher for older residents who do not have younger people at their homes. The government supplies tanker water from time to time but fetching it becomes a challenge for them. Buying potable water is a huge burden on their family finances and not a sustainable solution either.

The lack of clean water is not just a health hazard; it causes deep psychosocial distress. The inability to offer fresh water to guests damages social standing, and the infamy of the village's water situation even deters marriage prospects for the youth. Women from nearby villages, according to villagers who spoke with us, are unwilling to marry into the families of this particular village since they will most likely be burdened with collecting and managing household water at great cost to their health, education, safety, and economic independence.

'Solastalgia' and Non-Economic Loss and Damage (NELD)

While agriculture and livelihood losses are visible, and mostly impact the younger generations, the invisible losses are more pronounced yet go unrecognised for the elder generation during planned relocation. All segments of the population face Non-Economic Losses and Damages (NELD), which refers to the intangible losses that cannot be quantified in financial terms: the loss of cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, social cohesion, and the profound psychological grief of losing one's homeland. This is perhaps the most devastating, yet least measured, impact of climate related planned relocations on the elderly and their families.

For the aging populations in coastal Odisha, this trauma is profound. They are experiencing 'solastalgia — the acute distress and melancholia caused by the environmental degradation of one's home environment. Relocated communities grieve for the homelands where their ancestors lived, where they were born, and where their identities were forged in relation to the sea.

The Erasure of Cultural Identity and Sacred Spaces

The ever-invasive sea takes away sacred and ancestral geography. What people see through their own eyes is the erasure of homes and crop fields, but what the people actually lose is their long-standing relationship with the nature with which they lived for ages. Older people are usually more affected by this. In Satabhaya, a centuries-old temple that served as a vital cultural and religious anchor for the community was swallowed by the sea, becoming a source of immense ongoing distress for the elderly. A new temple was constructed and the deities were moved, but the relationship was deeply rooted with the old geography. Time may heal this, and even more so for the younger generations, but for the older ones, the loss is going to stay in their memory as long as they live.

Relocation sites often lack adequate cultural infrastructure. In New Podampeta, the absence of a proper cremation ground has meant that families have had to conduct last rites near the sea, a practice that conflicts with deeply rooted cultural norms and values. For older people, such losses can be particularly profound. The cremation ground is not merely a physical space for disposing of the dead; it is part of the community's cultural landscape, where generations have performed rituals, mourned their loved ones and maintained their relationship with ancestors.

When such spaces disappear after relocation, older people can experience a profound sense of cultural dislocation. They carry memories of how funerals were conducted, where ancestors were cremated, which rituals were followed and how the community came together during death and mourning. When these practices can no longer be performed in familiar and culturally appropriate ways, they may feel that they are

not merely losing a place but losing a part of the social and cultural world they helped create.

Loss of Traditional Knowledge Systems

Traditional knowledge systems are lived experiences formed into knowledge over centuries and more. When the elderly are separated from their native environments through planned relocation, their vast repositories of traditional ecological knowledge not only become obsolete but also fade over time. What the elders fear is the erosion of these knowledge systems because intergenerational knowledge transfer does not happen when they are relocated to a new site and the younger generations migrate for jobs as local ecosystems reach adaptation limits. In Odisha, the older generation possesses an intimate understanding of the sea, the seasonal availability of fish, the precise netting required for specific catches, and the complex processes of weaving and mending nets. Similarly, older farmers hold generational knowledge about soil types, crop suitability in different microclimates, and seed storage. Relocation can cause a breakdown in the transfer of this knowledge critical for survival and cultural techniques, creating a deep generational rift and a severe loss of community identity.

Health Impacts and the Erosion of Social Support Networks

Elderly people face more physical vulnerabilities to environmental stressors before and during planned relocation processes than others. Their ability to cope and recover from climate hazards is limited compared to others. When they do not get policy and programme support tailored to their needs, things get further problematic for them. In coastal Odisha, communities report a stark increase in health problems following relocation. During our interactions with the communities from many villages, people have made complaints of suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure due to local environmental degradation, stress and water contamination. Some people have faced sudden paralytic attacks, and there has not been any study so far to understand the reason. Some local medics suggest that this could be due to excessive saline water and some local dietary habits, including the consumption of

‘salty fish.’ There have been cases of severe skin irritation and dermatological issues caused by bathing in highly saline water.

Compounding these physical ailments is the collapse of traditional social support systems in the new sites. The loss of local livelihoods drives young people to migrate away in search of jobs. The elderly are left behind in impoverished conditions in the relocation sites, unable to travel for economic opportunities, and highly dependent on erratic government welfare schemes or remittances.

The fact that the young generation are leaving both the traditional villages and the relocation sites increases the physical and psychological burden on people who are left behind. Older people are left in the relocation sites to manage the household, deal with complex bureaucratic hurdles for food entitlements and pensions, and fend for themselves during extreme weather events like cyclones and torrential rains. The diminishing support system strains a population already overwhelmed by age, chronic illness, acute climatic changes, and the sheer exhaustion of having to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar conditions. The strain of limited resources constantly threatens the solidarity of the community, and psychosocial issues like increased alcoholism among men have been reported post-relocation.

Moving Toward an Inclusive, Age-Sensitive Relocation

When climate change makes it increasingly difficult and unsafe to stay, planned relocation of communities happens at the initiative of the communities themselves in some cases and the government in others. Planned relocation and adaptation frameworks still have a major bias towards infrastructure, technology, and quantifiable economic recovery. They pay insufficient attention to the social, cultural, psychological, and care-related dimensions of climate vulnerability.

What we learn from the lived experiences of the elderly in coastal Odisha and across the globe gives rise to the need for a serious debate on relocation and adaptation strategies, including those related to the health and well-being of the aged population globally. But research

remains limited to a few pockets and has not reached mainstream research or relevant policy discussions. The severe geographic research imbalance, which often neglects low- and middle-income settings in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, has led to policies that are entirely disconnected from grassroots realities. Care has to be taken to not only rebuild livelihoods but also human relationships and a sense of belonging within the context of the new place. Opportunities to maintain culture and traditions help communities develop a sense of belonging and rebuild and thrive in the new place.

What the world actually needs, if it is to protect its aging and vulnerable populations, is climate resilience planning that adopts a rights-based, age-sensitive approach. When deciding whether to stay or relocate to new sites, the elderly should also have a say.

Lessons for Future Planned Relocations in India and Globally

An inclusive relocation strategy should go beyond providing house-building assistance to include secure access to land, livelihood opportunities, essential amenities, rights to natural resources and social and cultural infrastructure. Governments must formulate integrated rehabilitation schemes because existing policy measures often fail to adequately address the losses of people whose history, geography, livelihoods and cultural identities have been systematically eroded by the sea or gradually disrupted through the relocation process.

Effective rehabilitation policy therefore requires learning from the experiences of planned relocations in Odisha and ensuring that the new settlement becomes a viable and dignified place to live, rather than merely a site where houses are constructed. This requires attention to the following, among other themes:

Secure Land and Resource Rights: Relocation planning must begin with the identification of safe and suitable land, with adequate space for housing as well as livelihoods and community needs. Where possible, the new location should retain important geographical and ecological features of the original settlement. Mechanisms such as decentralised

land banks could help identify and reserve suitable land in advance while ensuring clear and legally secure land and property rights for relocated families.

Climate-Resilient, Age-Appropriate Housing: Homes should be designed with the specific needs of elderly people in mind, including thermal comfort, ventilation, accessibility and safety. Relocation sites must also provide reliable access to potable water, sanitation, healthcare, and other essential services, particularly in the context of increasing heat and climate extremes.

Inclusive Decision-Making: Elderly persons must be actively included in decisions concerning whether, when, where and how relocation takes place. They carry invaluable historical and ecological knowledge, including knowledge of local ecosystems, water sources, disaster coping mechanisms, cultural practices and community networks. Such knowledge should inform the design of the new settlement rather than being lost through relocation.

Livelihood and Social Support: Rehabilitation must address the economic and social consequences of displacement. This should include robust social protection, healthcare facilities, old-age pensions and livelihood opportunities that do not depend on intense physical labour, particularly under conditions of increasing heat. Equally important are community spaces and social networks that can reduce isolation and help older people maintain their dignity, relationships and sense of belonging.

Ultimately, rehabilitation should be judged not by the number of houses constructed or families physically relocated, but by whether people – particularly older and vulnerable residents – are able to rebuild secure, dignified and meaningful lives in their new location.

Conclusion

Almost 138 million people over the age of 60 are currently exposed to significant climate risks globally. These people face unique vulnerabilities due to age-related physical limitations, chronic illnesses, social isolation, and a high dependence on local ecosystems and community networks. In

the context of planned relocation, these vulnerabilities can become even more pronounced. Relocation should not be seen merely as the physical movement of people from a high-risk area to a safer site; the wellbeing and dignity of older people must be protected both before relocation and after they are settled in new locations.

Our work and observations from the coastal districts of Odisha and elsewhere in coastal Bay of Bengal show that planned relocation, while intended to reduce exposure to sea-level rise, heat stress and other climate risks, can create new and interconnected vulnerabilities for older people when their needs and attachments to place are overlooked. They endure not only the economic losses associated with failing agriculture and decimated fishing grounds, but also the profound, often silent trauma of solastalgia. For many, relocation means leaving behind ancestral lands, homes, sacred sites, traditional livelihoods, and the ecosystems that sustained their lives and knowledge for generations. When resettlement sites are located away from these familiar landscapes and community networks, older people can find themselves socially isolated and physically disconnected from the places that gave meaning to their lives, while their children may migrate away, leaving them in isolated and often unsuitable concrete resettlement colonies.

Governments and international bodies must recognize that elderly populations need more than just physical relocation. Planned relocation initiatives must consider connecting environmental protection with sustainable livelihoods, robust public health infrastructure, and fierce cultural preservation.

The Government of Odisha has just proposed ARISE (Adaptive Resilience Investment in Coastal Systems on Economics), a project aimed at promulgating a comprehensive and long-term strategy for protecting Odisha's coastline, enhancing climate resilience and promoting sustainable economic development in coastal Odisha. Protecting coastal ecosystems can reduce disaster risks, but we must go beyond economic interventions and infrastructural resilience; the state and others must equally prioritise the dignified preservation of the human ecosystems

that rely upon them. As the tides continue to rise across the Bay of Bengal and the world, acknowledging, respecting, and addressing the nuanced lived experiences of the elderly is not just a policy recommendation – it is a moral imperative for building a humane, equitable, and resilient future. Planned relocation initiatives must take note.

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Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower, co-facilitators of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation, are guest editors of this miniseries: Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe. The series brings together the experiences of relocating community leaders, researchers, advocates and practitioners from across the Coalition to examine diverse case studies and identify lessons about what rights-respecting, community-led relocation looks like in practice and how national policy should enable it.

The Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation [climaterelocation.org] was formed in 2025 to work towards two goals: foster knowledge and experience exchange across contexts, and advocate for countries to develop and implement rights-respecting policy frameworks on planned relocation that put communities at the center.

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Cash Assistance and Social Protection: Considerations for More Dignified Planned Relocation in Malawi

This fifth article in RID's miniseries, Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe*, examines the challenges of planned relocation in Malawi's Lower Shire Valley after Cyclone Freddy (2023). Authored by researchers from the Malawi-based Initiative for Climate Action and Development (ICAD) and Refugees International, the article recounts the planned relocation experiences of three affected communities in that region, spotlighting the importance of social protection and the role of cash assistance in ensuring a dignified and sustainable relocation.*

The authors identify challenges for climate-related planned relocations, including the absence of appropriate infrastructure in new locations, relationship dynamics with host communities, and access to sustainable economic opportunities for communities dependent on place-based livelihoods. They also offer recommendations on how to support communities in Malawi and elsewhere as they rebuild lives and livelihoods in places out of harm's way.

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Introduction

Malawi faces significant adverse impacts from climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation, internally displacing tens of thousands

of Malawians each year. In response to this displacement, dozens of communities have undergone planned relocation to date. Yet these relocations remain largely ad-hoc, under-resourced, and disconnected from social protection systems, worsening some communities' well-being after their relocation.

Most of Malawi's relocated communities live in the country's southern Lower Shire Valley, through which the Shire and Ruo Rivers run. Malawian communities living along their banks have long depended on the rivers for their livelihoods and experienced the consequences of seasonal flooding. However, with less predictable weather, stronger storms, and increased riverine flooding due to climate change, many of these communities have now been permanently displaced. For dozens of communities, Cyclone Freddy served as an inflection point in March 2023. In its wake, many communities chose to relocate to new sites, with governmental and non-governmental support, including social protection and cash assistance.

This article is a collaboration between The Initiative for Climate Action and Development (ICAD), a Malawi-based civil society organisation led by Malawian researchers, and Refugees International, a US-based, nonprofit research and advocacy organisation. We conducted stakeholder meetings and semi-structured focus group discussions with 123 participants across three relocated communities, including community leaders, civil society organisations, and District Council members in Malawi's two southernmost districts, Chikwawa and Nsanje. One community is in Matsukambiya, near Nchalo, Chikwawa District (hereafter referred to as the Chikwawa community). Two are in Nsanje District: one community relocated from Kalonga to Milton, in the Shire River's West Bank, and another relocated from Kaimfa, Makhanga, to Makwalo, in the East Bank (hereafter referred to as the Milton and Makwalo communities, respectively).

Malawian team members with established relationships in Chikwawa and Nsanje led fieldwork alongside Refugees International. The authors are at the same time insider researchers with proximity to affected

communities and district structures, and external analysts interpreting findings for national and international policy audiences. We engaged community participants as experts on their own relocation experiences, with informed consent and anonymisation.

We find that while communities demonstrated agency in deciding to relocate to new sites after living in IDP camps, they now face protracted challenges: loss of productive land and income, homes built with only two-to-three-year lifespans, and increased distances to schools and health clinics. Crucially, social protection systems failed to follow people during and after their displacement, deepening vulnerability for women, children, people with disabilities, and older adults. And whilst several of the communities have been touted as success stories for unrestricted cash transfers to support planned relocations, up to 75 percent of households reported being excluded from cash transfer lists due to their staggered movement from the IDP camps.

For planned relocations to be carried out with dignity, they must be rights-based and anticipatory—integrating continuity of cash assistance, expansion of services for both relocated and, where applicable, host communities, as well as district-level planning and budgeting. The experiences of these communities can provide lessons to improve Malawi's national and local capacity to support relocations and inform planned relocations in other countries.

Climate impacts in the Lower Shire Valley and Cyclone Freddy

Malawi's Lower Shire Valley comprises the Shire River's low-lying river basin—which has a history of extensive and long-duration floods—and the Shire's many tributaries, which are dry for much of the year and then may change course and overflow their banks during the rainy season. These recurrent floods have displaced communities before, but in our interviews, residents shared that this seasonal flooding rarely reached much higher than knee-height and generally abated quickly. Tropical cyclones have been more frequent and brought greater rainfall in Malawi since the 2000s, worsened by the impacts of anthropogenic climate change.

Climate change has also brought less predictable growing seasons and severe drought. These have worsened livelihoods for communities which are largely dependent on subsistence farming—85 percent of Malawians engage in farming. Thus, relocating communities are starting with few to no assets, with limited economic opportunities when moving to less productive—though safer—land outside the floodplains.

In March 2023, Cyclone Freddy made landfall in Malawi. In just four days, its rainfall surpassed annual averages in some parts of the country, with flooding and attendant impacts damaging or destroying more than 260,000 homes and displacing at least 659,000 people.

In the communities we visited, Cyclone Freddy brought swift-moving flood waters as the river breached its banks in the middle of the night, waking people up and forcing immediate evacuation. Those with limited strength or mobility, including children and wheelchair users, could not easily move to higher ground and sometimes tied themselves onto taller trees until the floods receded so that they would not be washed away. Many were stuck for days without food until they could be rescued. Several children were killed, swept away by flood waters.

Due to the recurrent displacement in previous years, the District Councils in Chikwawa and Nsanje had raised the issue of planned relocation with some communities for the safety of the residents, to reduce the need for humanitarian assistance following near-annual flooding in the regions, and to limit the costs of repeatedly rehabilitating infrastructure and development projects. Most community members, though, shared that the prospect of relocation was not appealing, as they felt the flooding was not severe enough to affect them long-term—until the landfall of Cyclone Freddy.

Cyclone Freddy displaced communities across Malawi, forcing them to move to temporary shelters in nearby camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). The severity of the cyclone's flooding washed away whole villages, including the original homes of those interviewed for this article. Months later, water remained high in many places, prompting

communities to consider permanent relocation. Even today, water remains in some of these areas.

Planned relocation processes post-disaster

After living three-to-six months in the IDP camps, several communities decided to request to permanently relocate to new sites, as the water still had not receded from their original communities. In total, Malawi's Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) reported that 8,643 households relocated in Chikwawa and Nsanje following Cyclone Freddy.

These figures included the community in Chikwawa, which had left their original village following flooding in 2021 exacerbated by Tropical Storm Ana in 2022. They were severely affected by Cyclone Freddy while still living in an IDP camp in 2023, and moved to their current location in November 2023. Both Nsanje communities left their original villages following Cyclone Freddy in March 2023 and their permanent relocations began three-to-six months after the initial displacement, with most residents relocating by December 2023. In all cases, community members lived in temporary IDP camps before deciding on permanent relocation.

"The decision to relocate came from us," was a common refrain shared by community members. When the District Councils had approached them before Cyclone Freddy due to recurrent seasonal flooding, residents had rejected the proposals to relocate to higher ground. However, as detailed above, Cyclone Freddy's severe impacts were too consequential. When they realised that it would not be possible to return, communities first agreed among themselves to relocate and then village leaders approached the District Councils with their requests.

Upon receiving the requests, District Councils and the Ministry of Lands then supported finding—and in some cases, purchasing—land in a new location. Members of the District Councils consulted the Traditional Authority in the new locations, receiving their agreement. In at least one site, the village chief in the new area gave the land to the government for the new residents rather than selling it. Once the sites were agreed upon,

traditional authorities from both the relocating community and the host community met, facilitated by the District Council and local extension officers, to finalise the land-sharing agreements and discuss resource sharing—including access to water, firewood, grazing land, and farmland—to try to prevent future conflict and ensure community cohesion. The District Councils supported development of the new sites, such as plot demarcation and basic infrastructure, with technical input from the Ministry of Lands.

Once land was secured, residents were responsible for organising the actual move from IDP camps to the new sites, which led to staggered movement over several months. Residents moved independently from the IDP camps to the new villages; most of them walked, carrying their remaining items with them. They recounted that the journey took anywhere from eight-to-twelve hours, traveling up to 30 kilometres from the IDP camps to the new locations. In most cases, residents did not have houses in their new locations upon arrival and were responsible for construction themselves, continuing to use the tarps and other materials from the IDP camps as shelter in the new locations while they were building their more permanent housing.

Once permanent relocation was decided, the government, UN agencies, as well as national and international NGOs provided cash assistance in varying amounts to communities to help them settle in and construct their new homes. GiveDirectly provided large cash transfers to residents of several Nsanje communities, including two referred to in this article. To determine the recipients of these transfers, the District Council provided information to GiveDirectly about which villages had relocated, while village chiefs compiled a list of residents who had moved and provided it to organisations that were providing services or cash transfers in the new sites. However, this process occurred before all of the residents had moved from the IDP camps, leaving significant gaps in the list of recipients—up to 75 percent in some communities.

Challenges for relocated communities in their new homes and lessons for the future

In our research, we found that relocated communities face challenges in establishing sustainable sources of income due to limited employment opportunities and productive land in the new sites. Households depend on irregular, unreliable and low-income activities, which impedes their ability to recover economically and increases vulnerability. Irregular and reduced income also affects every other aspect of residents' lives, from securing housing and regular food supply to affording healthcare, clothing, and school fees for their children.

We also found that the failure to invest in essential services prior to the relocations created new challenges, replacing the risk from flooding in the original sites with service inaccessibility in the new sites. This risk transfer affects groups differently. In some cases, relocation has increased demand for existing services in host communities, while in others, communities have been moved to areas geographically distant from services, creating additional accessibility barriers.

Housing

Many residents shared that they do not have the capacity to construct adequate housing, something we witnessed firsthand walking through the villages. Some houses in the new sites were still nothing more than tarps draped over poles or constructed with straw and mud bricks—both easily destroyed during storms—while more sturdy houses were built fully out of burnt bricks or iron sheeting. In Chikwawa, a nonprofit organisation and a nearby private company had supported construction of some of the new houses for residents. However, these homes were built with low-quality materials and intended only to last two-to-three years, after which community members planned to build their own permanent homes. Many of the homes' roof supports had been destroyed by termites, which often resulted in the roofs being blown off or incurring other damage during storms.

In Nsanje, some residents received cash assistance to support their relocation, and many used this to begin constructing their homes but shared that they did not have sufficient resources to finish building them. Residents and representatives of international organisations operating in

Malawi shared that this was partly due to inflation of prices in the local market for bricks and roofing materials and transport of construction materials, caused in part by the large injection of cash into the local economy from the direct cash transfers. This local inflationary pressure happened alongside a period of high inflation for Malawi's economy generally, with a devaluation of the Malawian kwacha in November 2023, the same time that many of the communities relocated. Consequently, the supportive impact of cash assistance was limited.

For actors supporting relocations, ensuring adequate housing ahead of a move—whether through government assistance or construction, private sector support, cash assistance, or other means—is critical, as safety is paramount for the mental and physical health of those who have lived through disasters that already destroyed their homes. A lack of investment in homes at the start can lead to higher costs for residents and those supporting the relocation over time, as evidenced by the damage to the low-quality or only partially completed housing that we observed in these communities. This can be a particular concern when relocation occurs after an initial disaster displacement, whereby communities are living in temporary housing, such as IDP camps.

Livelihoods and land tenure

"Before, we lived in the land of milk and honey. Now, we have nothing." Residents in all three relocated communities shared that they had minimal access to livelihood opportunities in their new locations. "We used to grow crops in our gardens. Now, we don't have gardens, we lost our livelihoods, our livestock."

As the former village sites were located along a river valley and frequently flooded, the soil was fertile and fishing was abundant. In contrast, the relocated villages were all located on higher ground, providing safety for communities but on land that residents described as "a desert."

The relocated villages we visited were anywhere from 10 to 30 kilometres away from communities' previous locations. Yet some community members continue to return to their previous villages on a daily or weekly

basis to continue farming and collecting firewood. For those in Makwalo, that includes a dangerous river crossing: residents shared that they must pay to take two boats each way across the river to access their previous village. The swift current often causes boats to capsize, and crocodiles haunt the river. Yet the new location provides few options for feeding their families otherwise.

Relocated residents also shared that though they retained land rights to their former communities, they were concerned others might encroach on their land and visited frequently to protect against unauthorised use. One nongovernmental organisation shared that large corporations are also attempting to induce relocation among communities along the fertile riverbanks to use the land for large-scale, industrial agriculture.

Where agriculture is not sustainable in these new areas, residents requested government support to learn alternate trades and start-up funds to invest in new small businesses. To support relocated communities' livelihoods, relocation planning should also be integrated into national and district-level development planning and budgets.

Relocated communities must also receive assurance of their land tenure rights upon moving, particularly if they plan to continue accessing the land for farming and other livelihood activities. Confirmed legal assurance of these rights, while difficult in many contexts given communal land ownership or other barriers, may be an essential step to convincing wary communities of their continued land access even after moving.

Essential services

Across all three relocated communities, residents shared that they are finding it more difficult to access essential services, including education and healthcare. The planned relocations of Nsanje communities were undertaken in areas where host communities were already living. The increased demand on existing local health centres, schools, and water points without the provision of additional resources to support the relocated families has led to overcrowding and longer wait times, affecting both hosts and relocated residents.

On education, residents expressed concern as to how long it takes their children to travel to school. For example, children in Milton now have to walk six kilometres to reach the upper junior primary school and ten kilometres to reach the closest secondary school. Residents shared that children are susceptible to road traffic accidents, violence, harassment, exploitation, and gender-based violence while traveling so far. During the rainy season, small tributaries flood, and children are unable to cross them or risk being swept away by the fast-moving water. Children with disabilities are also less likely to continue attending school, as the schools are not accessible for them.

Community members also emphasized their difficulties in accessing health services after relocation. In Chikwawa, three years after the communities' relocation, the health centre was still under construction and not yet open. Residents continue traveling to the private clinic in Nchalo that they had used before relocating, now even further away. In Nsanje, residents travel over 15 kilometres to the nearest health centre. Likewise, they must walk long distances to reach boreholes to fetch water.

Relations with host communities

Residents of relocated communities shared that they had generally good relationships with the residents of the host communities in the two locations where there was a large existing population; the Chikwawa community had moved to a site without previous residents.

In one case, tensions had initially arisen because the District Councils consulted with traditional authorities to secure the land access but had not consulted with all residents of the host community nor compensated them for the land. Village chiefs and traditional authorities mediated whenever challenges or tensions arose between community members over land or other resource disputes, such as access to water.

In the villages where relocated residents received large amounts of direct cash assistance, host community members often resented that they were

not included in the cash payments as well. As prices rose, the host communities' residents found it more difficult to buy essential goods.

However, in Milton, host community members highlighted that they felt that the relocations had brought positive change as well. Due to the relocation, new boreholes had been constructed, improving water access for everyone, and the new community was bringing in businesses. For example, residents shared that they were pleased that an out-of-business maize mill had been restored because of increased usage from the new residents.

These challenges underscore why relocation planners should consider minimising distance to essential services, such as health clinics and schools in selecting locations for relocating communities, and the need for investment in these services in newly relocated communities. By providing or expanding services that support both host communities and new residents equally, investments can ease tensions that might otherwise arise due to the relocation and its pressure on limited resources. For planned relocations to be sustainable and prevent resource-related tensions, district plans must expand services to support both communities.

When relocations happen in the aftermath of disasters, there is often pressure for communities to move quickly away from unsustainable and inhospitable temporary conditions, such as IDP camps. To ensure that this pressure does not impede the availability of sufficient communal infrastructure, governments should pre-identify sites for future relocations and invest in their infrastructure even before a relocation. In choosing locations for sites, planners must consider whether a region can support additional residents without straining its natural resources or local infrastructure.

The intersection of planned relocations, social protection, and the role of cash

Planned relocations intersect directly with social protection systems, as relocated households often lose access to the safety nets that previously

supported them. In Chikwawa and Nsanje, relocated community members reported disruptions to Social Cash Transfer payments, school feeding programs, and access to health services during and after relocation, with new settlement sites frequently falling outside existing program catchment areas. For women, children, people with disabilities, and older adults, these gaps deepen existing vulnerabilities, particularly when relocation occurs without prior mapping of beneficiaries or coordination with the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. Governments must ensure that social cash transfers, a form of social security payment to the most vulnerable within communities, are able to move with recipients, to ensure continuity of support. For relocations that follow disasters, emergency cash transfers and other forms of humanitarian support should be coordinated with longer-term livelihood support and development planning, at both national and district levels.

Cash assistance can play a critical role in supporting dignity and choice during planned relocations, and to address many of the challenges identified above. In Chikwawa and Nsanje, households that received humanitarian cash or Social Cash Transfer payments were better able to meet immediate needs for food, shelter materials, and transport to new sites.

Several organisations distributed smaller amounts of cash in the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Freddy, which were often used for immediate needs such as food, cooking utensils, clothing, and soap. Once residents began relocating, larger cash transfers allowed families to build new homes, invest in livestock or other business assets, and pay for ongoing needs such as healthcare and school costs.

Yet the delivery of cash assistance in these relocations was inconsistent and fragmented and often did not meet the full needs of relocated communities. Many relocated families experienced delays or exclusion from beneficiary lists. The cash programs in these communities used a list of residents developed by village chiefs based on the first set of community members to relocate. However, many residents moved in

subsequent waves, and so did not receive any payments. In our focus group discussions, this was up to 75 percent of respondents. GiveDirectly acknowledged this as ongoing "fluidity in the community," meaning not all of the residents had relocated from IDP camps yet when cash transfers were delivered.

Many of the cash transfer programs provided unconditional cash transfers that residents could use freely. Interviewees widely praised this model and the timing of the transfers. However, the cash transfers did cause an increase in prices for basic goods and services—such as the purchase and delivery of bricks to build homes. And when residents tried to withdraw funds from their mobile money accounts at local shops, they were often coerced into making non-essential purchases, as the merchants knew that they had received a cash transfer.

For relocation to be dignified, cash must be predictable, portable, and coordinated across humanitarian actors and government systems. This means pre-registering at-risk households, ensuring transfers follow people to new districts, and linking short-term emergency cash with longer-term livelihood and social protection support so families can rebuild rather than just cope. Mitigating tensions between those who received the funds and those who did not, particularly host communities, is important to foster social cohesion and positive relationships. And cash assistance is far from a silver bullet; recipients could not cover all of the costs of their relocation including constructing new homes, even those who received quite large payments. Livelihood development is essential to long-term stability and well-being, as is the provision of infrastructure and essential services, including roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and access to clean water.

Recommendations for planned relocations in Malawi and other contexts

"But here we can stay forever, as flooding can't reach us here." Overall, communities shared with us that they would make the choice to relocate again, as their safety and that of their children outweighed any other challenges they were facing. But for planned relocations to be dignified,

safe, and sustainable, governments must move from ad-hoc responses to proactive, rights-based planning. To do so, the government of Malawi and relevant District Councils must invest in infrastructure, the development of livelihood opportunities, and basic services for relocated communities to ensure they can thrive in their new environments.

To avoid some of the challenges these communities faced, local and national governments should plan for relocations ahead of disasters so that decisions and preparation of infrastructure are not rushed and communities have access to all necessary services upon their arrival. These efforts should be part of both national and local development planning processes rather than siloed within disaster management agencies. Concurrently, social welfare programs must follow community members without gaps in delivery, to ensure the most vulnerable among those relocating are not left worse off than before the relocation.

Following international best practices for social cohesion in refugee and IDP settlements, governments should expand infrastructure and social services for both relocated and host populations to minimise competition over scarce resources. When resources are provided solely to relocating residents, the reasons for this (such as their need to construct new houses) should be made clear to all recipients and non-recipients of the support. When cash assistance is provided, organisations should try to mitigate inflationary pressures. For staggered relocations, organisations and government officials must endeavour to include all residents, not just those who move first. Many relocated residents also requested ongoing training and livelihood development programs, such as small business loans, such that they could build their own enterprises in their new locations.

We also recommend strengthening national policies and legal frameworks, such as the draft National Relocation Guidelines in Malawi, ensuring that they clearly define roles, standards for safety, land allocation, and protection of vulnerable groups. National governments must invest in national and local data systems, to prepare for future climate and environmental risks. Site selection should also involve

extensive consultation with all relocating and host community members, to ensure it reflects all community needs and priorities. Governments must also invest in processes at the community level to mediate land-sharing agreements and access to resources between host and relocated communities.

Relocations can support an improvement in the quality of life for all residents, if accompanied by planning, timely construction, sufficient resources, and responsible site selection. While these lessons are informed by the experiences of three communities in Malawi, many may apply to support people considering planned relocation around the world.

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Sarah Koeltzow and Erica Bower, co-facilitators of the Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation, are guest editors of this miniseries: Towards Dignified Climate Relocation: Community Perspectives from around the Globe. The series brings together the experiences of relocating community leaders, researchers, advocates and practitioners from across the Coalition to examine diverse case studies and identify lessons about what rights-respecting, community-led relocation looks like in practice and how national policy should enable it.

The Coalition on Dignified Climate Relocation was formed in 2025 to work towards two goals: foster knowledge and experience exchange across contexts, and advocate for countries to develop and implement rights-respecting policy frameworks on planned relocation that put communities at the center.

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