

Written evidence for the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons: a report on Planned Relocation

Planned Relocation for socially marginalised communities

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This written evidence comes from research conducted by the University of Exeter and partners since 2017 on planned relocation in the context of climate change. Findings from research projects referenced here have been funded by (i) the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) through UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), (ii) the University of Exeter, and (iii) IDRC. The evidence presented here draws from research on planned relocation in the context of climate and environmental change in Bangladesh and India – principally in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta regions in both countries.



Coastal erosion in Ghoramara Island, Indian Bengal delta. Photo by Stefancu Oana.

Migration, displacement and immobility are common responses everywhere populations are exposed to increasing environmental risks. There is long experience of development and environmentally driven planned relocations¹ and the demand is likely to grow because of populations being displaced due to increasing environmental risks.

Human rights are at risk in processes of people being exposed to harm as a result of climate change, and because of ill-conceived and implemented planned relocations. The most fundamental human rights relate to avoidance of harm to life and health, and the universal availability of food and shelter. These rights have been widely shown to be compromised by climate change impacts, especially to marginalised places and people². Further, it is argued that without adherence to human rights norms, the ability of people and communities to adapt to current and future risks are jeopardised³.



Dwelling on the coast area of Sagar Island (India) that has been damaged by floods and recurrent storms (left) and the coastal embankment (right). Photos by Stefancu Oana.

But there remains an imperative for climate change adaptations, such as planned relocation, to themselves not breach fundamental rights. Some research has emphasised that the actions of planned relocations around the world have in fact breached human rights through either denying rights to

¹ Barnett, J. and McMichael, C. (2018) The effects of climate change on the geography and timing of human mobility, *Population and Environment*, 39: 339– 356.

² Caney, S. (2008) Human rights, climate change, and discounting, *Environmental Politics*, 17:4, 536-555; Adger, W. N. (2004) The right to keep cold, *Environment and Planning A*, 36:1711-1715.

³ Bordner, A., Barnett, J. and Waters, E., 2023. The human right to climate adaptation. *Climate Action*, 2, 43; Byskov, M.F. The right to climate adaptation. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-024-10438-z>

shelter, or through coercion and lack of consultation⁴ and that giving voice to affected populations, especially previously marginalised communities is the overriding principle for climate justice in adaptation⁵. Planned relocation decisions will become more salient with projected climate changes in coastal and lowland regions. In this context, planned relocation can be seen as a measure of last resort to help adapt individuals to the effects of climate change⁶.

Our own research in Bangladesh and India, detailed below, shows that there are significant challenges around implementing planned relocation: political legitimacy, fairness and engagement with communities⁷; but also that there are instances where planned relocation leads to access to land and property and an improvement in livelihoods and wellbeing⁸.

Wider evidence has also shown that in the absence of government intervention, those with limited access to resources and networks may be unable to escape deteriorating environmental conditions, effectively becoming trapped in place, and reinforcing conditions of vulnerability⁹. This evidence submission focuses on examples that had a multidimensional positive impact of relocated people's lives. This evidence suggests that there are successful examples of planned relocation, and there is an imperative to listen to the voices of those whose lives improved as a consequence of planned relocation. In this way, successful practices can be replicated and improved upon, making planned relocation a practice that is funded on the restoration and improvement of human rights.

The evidence presented here is drawn from research undertaken over the past seven years in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta across the countries of India and Bangladesh. These results are of particular importance because, first, low-lying coastal areas have high exposure to environmental and climatic risks and where the need for government intervention is quickly growing; and

⁴ Bronen, R. (2011) Climate-induced community relocations: creating an adaptive governance framework based in human rights doctrine. *NYU Review of Law and Social Change*, 35: 357.

⁵ Bronen, R. and Cochran, P. (2021) Decolonize climate adaptation research. *Science*, 372: 1245-1245.

⁶ Hino, M., Field, C. B. and Mach, K. J. (2017) Managed retreat as a response to natural hazard risk, *Nature Climate Change*, 7(5): 364-370; Warner, K. (2010) Global environmental change and migration: Governance challenges, *Global Environmental Change*, 20(3): 402–413.

⁷ Mortreux, C., Safra de Campos, R., Adger, W. N., Ghosh, T., Das, S., Adams, H., & Hazra, S. (2018) Political economy of planned relocation: A model of action and inaction in government responses, *Global Environmental Change*, 50: 123–132.

⁸ Stefancu, O (2022) *Wellbeing and Justice dimensions of planned relocation under climate change for marginalised communities*. PhD University of Exeter

⁹ Black, R. and Collyer, M. (2014) Populations trapped at times of crisis. *Forced Migration Review*, 45: 52–56.

second, India and Bangladesh are countries with a long experience of enforcing planned relocation for multiple policy and political objectives.

Summary points

This evidence submission sheds light on the experiences of people relocated and their views on how the enjoyment of full human rights can be ensured in the context of planned relocation processes and outcomes. Specifically, the evidence on livelihoods, access to land and property, wellbeing and perceptions of justice presented shows that planned relocation, when sensitively implemented, results in increased human security in both economic and social dimensions. In those circumstances, it is absence of planned relocation that constitutes the greatest risk to human rights of entitlement to shelter and food.

These results differ in some dimensions from the dominant narrative that planned relocation has an overall negative impact on the life of relocated persons. They do so, we argue, because of the circumstances of these relocation interventions. Namely, communities that are dependent on agriculture and direct access to land, and who have lost that land or being severely impacted by reduced productivity, are likely to have more secure livelihoods, and perceive an improvement in their social and economic circumstances through being relocated. It is in such circumstances that the absence of planned relocation options constitutes a breach of human rights.

Human rights impacts of planned relocations

Please describe through concrete examples the critical challenges and human rights impacts of ongoing or already implemented planned relocation processes in the context of disasters and climate change in your country or your geographical area of interest.

Research on the consequences of planned relocation in West Bengal shows that those communities who have not been relocated are often in a worse position than those who have been relocated¹⁰. In effect the rights of people not being able to access planned relocation are often more at risk. This evidence comes from a comparative study of communities in Sagar Island in

¹⁰ Stefancu, O. (2021) Voices of Ghoramara Island, India. The case for planned relocation. In: Ajibade, I. J. and Siders, A. R. *Global views on climate relocation and social justice*. New York: Routledge, 152-162; Stefancu, O (2022) *Wellbeing and Justice dimensions of planned relocation under climate change for marginalised communities*. PhD University of Exeter

coastal West Bengal (India), designed to examine both those who moved and those trapped without recourse to government support.



Images of relocated persons in Sagar Island, India. Photo by Stefancu Oana.

Based on survey and other qualitative primary data, relocated communities were asked to assess their wellbeing in terms of their material circumstances. Material circumstances are self-defined by communities in relation to their housing conditions, tenure of agricultural land and livelihoods. Relocated communities reported an improvement in dwelling tenure and conditions compared to their housing conditions prior to the planned relocation. 86% of 70 respondents report that they were squatting on Lohachara Island and Ghoramara Island (India) prior to the planned relocation. Binay, a 45-year-old man describes how he lost his dwelling and agricultural lands due to coastal erosion and found himself living with his family on the streets of Ghoramara Island: *“The road is where we used to live.”* 99% of 70 respondents report that they own their dwelling on Sagar Island (India) ever since they relocated in early 1980s. Similar results emerged from research on planned relocation in different areas of Bangladesh: those relocated became homeless in the place of origin due to slow- and rapid- environmental changes and became home owners due to the planned relocation.

When speaking about material circumstances, many respondents also explain their traditional reliance on subsistence agriculture and speak of agricultural land tenure as an issue of utmost importance. They discuss at length the negative repercussions of their exposure to environmental risks, such as coastal erosion and salinity intrusion, on the size and quality of agricultural lands. Issues related to decreased land availability and productivity are often discussed in conjunction with a lack of livelihood diversification opportunities and framed as a major source of economic and food insecurity. Our results

from India (Sagar Island) and new not-yet-published findings from Bangladesh (Satkhira and Noakhali) show, in some cases, an improvement in material circumstances in terms of agricultural land tenure due to the planned relocation. Some relocated households receive alongside the dwelling, a small plot of land or garden.

Please provide information on successful practices and examples of collaboration with affected communities to identify and address the impacts of planned relocations on livelihoods, housing, education, access to public services, food and water, physical and mental health as well as the communal impacts of loss of land, social cohesion, local knowledge and culture.

Before the loss of agricultural land in the location of origin, relocated respondents report relying on traditional agricultural practices. However, during the year before the planned relocation, no respondents report being crop farmers and only three of 70 respondents flag livestock farming as their secondary or tertiary livelihood. The most commonly reported form of livelihood at that time is labour work. As part of the planned relocation, some households in India and Bangladesh received small plots of agricultural land or small gardens adjacent to their new dwelling. These households report improvements in their material wellbeing that have increased over time. Some households in Sagar Island (India) are now able to produce their yearly supply of rice whilst others in villages around the district of Satkhira (Bangladesh) use their gardens to grow fruit and vegetables and rear chickens, goats and cattle. However, households that have been relocated at a later time in Sagar Island (India) have not been given land due to the decreased availability of agricultural land on the island; similarly, households that have been relocated in the early 1980s in Bangladesh have only received small dwellings with no gardens. These households report lower levels of food and economic security.

These latter results are consistent with a lot of the literature on livelihoods in planned relocation. Often relocated persons and communities are moved away from areas where they practice agriculture or finishing to areas that are away from the coast, or are isolated due to poor infrastructure and distance from city centres¹¹. However, our results also show positive impacts of planned relocation on the right to land when persons that were homeless and landless receive suitable dwellings and access to land.

¹¹ Arnall, A., Thomas D. S G, Twyman C and Liverman, D. (2013) Flooding, resettlement, and change in livelihoods: evidence from rural Mozambique. *Disasters*, 37(3): 468-488; Badri, S. A., Asgary, A., Eftekhari, A. R. and Levy J. (2006) Post-disaster resettlement, development and change: a case study of the 1990 Manjil earthquake in Iran. *Disasters*, 30(4): 451-468; Oliver-Smith, A. (2009) Climate change and population displacement: Disasters and Diasporas in the twenty-first century. In: Crate, S. and Nuttal, M. (eds.), *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Action*. California: Left Coast Press Inc., pp. 116-136.

When speaking about their material circumstances, respondents do not speak only in objective terms but also in terms of their own perceived wellbeing. They often relate their material conditions to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with different aspects of life. For example, respondents reflect on how satisfied or unsatisfied they are with the natural environment, housing conditions, economic security and food security among other aspects. Our research in relocated communities in Sagar Island (India) shows that there has been an improvement in respondents' subjective wellbeing in terms of 'happiness' and five out of ten 'life satisfaction' indicators when comparing their present circumstances (2020) to their circumstances one year before the planned relocation. The planned relocation elicited an improvement in happiness in 70% (out of 70) survey participants. Regarding differences in life satisfaction before and after the planned relocation, respondents' satisfaction with the natural environment and housing conditions has improved the most. The exposure to environmental risks that respondents were facing prior to the planned relocation is reported as the main source of concern with regards to both their safety as well as food and economic security. In fact, 73% (out of 70) of respondents report an increased level of satisfaction with economic security, and 69% of respondents report an increased level of satisfaction with food security. Roopleena, a 55-year-old women that has been relocated to Sagar Island, explains the extent of the lack of food security prior to the planned relocation: *"I had a son then [...] He was crying so much. He was hungry. I was helpless! Then it was difficult to get three square meals a day."* The analysis of these recounts shows how material and subjective aspects of wellbeing come together in an intricate way when reflecting on life satisfaction.

Overall, relocated respondents speak about their lives and wellbeing in collective rather than individual terms, positioning themselves as relational selves, and thus highlighting the importance of relational wellbeing. This seems to be an integral part of the social fabric of the communities under study. Relocated respondents appear to make sense of their circumstances not as individuals but as part of a community with its members facing the same difficulties¹². For example, Arusha, a 72-year-old woman from Ghoramara Island (India) says: *"We were one island which was gradually vanishing."* She speaks of the group of people living on the coastal areas of Ghoramara Island exposed to environmental risks as 'we'. She also describes the community on the island as the same entity by saying 'we were one island'. She equates the process of 'vanishing' of the island to that of its inhabitants. Similarly, Hem, a 45-year-old respondent from Lohachara Island (India), says: *"Yes, Lohachara Island is gone, all the people of Lohachara are destroyed."* Relocated respondents speak of their social lives on Lohachara Island and Ghoramara

¹² Stefancu, O. (2021) Voices of Ghoramara Island, India. The case for planned relocation. In: Ajibade, I. J. and Siders, A. R. *Global views on climate relocation and social justice*. New York: Routledge, pp. 152-162.

Island extensively. The attachment to the islands where the inhabitants used to live prior to the planned relocation was primarily due to communal living and practical support that members of the community would offer one another. Respondents compare this to their current circumstances and conclude that the ability to rely on other community members has lessened. A break in the social networks of persons and households relocating led to negative impacts on relational wellbeing in the aftermath of the planned relocation, but this has improved in the years following the relocation.

Relocated respondents assess their wellbeing in terms of material, subjective and relational aspects. The respondents speak of these aspects in a way that demonstrates the importance and influence of one upon the other. These results are consistent with the social science literature that frames wellbeing as a multidimensional construct and highlights the interrelatedness of these three dimensions¹³. Therefore, it is important when analysing the impacts of planned relocation or designing and preparing planned relocations to account not only for material wellbeing, which seems to be the disproportionate focus of much of the literature and practice on development-induced planned relocation, but also on subjective and relational aspects.



Coastal area of Ghoramara Island, West Bengal, India. Photo by Oana Stefancu.

¹³ Boarini, R., Kolev, A. and McGregor, J. A. (2014) Measuring well-being and progress in countries at different stages of development: towards a more universal conceptual framework. *OECD Development Center Working Papers*, 325: 1–59; White, S. C. (2010) Analysing wellbeing: a framework for development practice. *Development in Practice*, 20: 158–172.