The management of climate displacement

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Many of those who have fought against displacement now find themselves being advocates for resettlement and relocation. Knowing that displacements will occur as a result of climate change, the humanitarian community will need to work pre-emptively with communities identified as likely to be threatened on the land-based solutions that may be available to them.

Place matters. And as understanding of the centrality of one's place and the tragedy inherent in forcing people from their homes has become increasingly – albeit belatedly – recognised, a movement has steadily grown focusing on measures to actively prevent people losing their homes and lands.

In recent years we have seen increasingly refined rules designed to prohibit forced displacement and evictions by states, new UN mechanisms to address these practices, engagement of NGOs in preventing displacement, a growing recognition of the imperative of ensuring enforceable security of tenure rights to dwellers, and a growing body of jurisprudence at all levels condemning forced displacement (and demanding its remedy). In short, place matters within the broader rights to which all are entitled.

But those concerned with protecting the rights of the displaced are beginning to encounter new and somewhat startling challenges as a result of the displacement caused by climate change. In the search for safety from the scourges of severe or permanent environmental change and for where people's rights – particularly their housing, land and property rights – can best be secured, we are now in the rather awkward position of actively supporting their relocation.

In many instances, humanitarians will need to help find viable land resources, engage with potential host communities and identify the livelihood and residential options required to secure for the world's climate-displaced groups the chance to re-establish a life worth living. In this manner, humanitarians can prevent open-ended and 'rights-less' displacement.

Tuvalu

Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati and Tuvalu
The NGO Displacement Solutions has been working with local groups in several locations to address the displacement implications of climate change. Estimates of future climate displacement all indicate that few countries are likely to face the same scale of displacement as Bangladesh. According to some climate advocacy groups, more than six million people are already unable to return to homes that have been lost to encroaching seas and perpetual inundation. Most public statements on the issue focus more on expanding international migration options for Bangladeshis, with far less attention given to the measures required to find internal rights-based solutions for the significant number of people already displaced due to structural environmental changes. Efforts are currently underway to identify sites that would be suitable for the establishment of new settlements for at least a proportion of them, and then, once found, to acquire the sites and transform whatever title exists on the land into clear trust structures for the community. The latter are essential in order to keep the land out of the speculative frenzy which can so often accompany resettlement measures, and to ensure that communities that wish to resettle together can do so.

Most or all of the atoll dwellers from the Carteret islands of Papua New Guinea will eventually need to resettle. An offer, facilitated by an independent body, to sell some 2,800 hectares of private land to the Autonomous Government of Bougainville – on the condition that the land would be allocated to the islanders – sadly attracted neither local nor national government funds. The plot was sold to a foreign developer, who plans to use the land for tourism and possibly agriculture, for considerably less than the funds allocated within the national budget to resettle the Carteret Islanders. That land could have easily housed the entire population of the Carterets at a fraction of the price it will now take to acquire the land needed to do so. An ideal opportunity for securing land for some of the world's first climate change displaced persons was lost.

Very few such options are available to the residents of Kiribati and Tuvalu in the Pacific. Current levels of adaptation financing acquired by these countries remain miniscule in relation to need, and an increase in available financing does not seem likely. While we believe that the long-term habitation of Micronesian Kiribati and Polynesian Tuvalu remains possible if the resources can be found for the potential technological solutions, thus avoiding displacement, we nevertheless believe that the time for prudent pragmatism has arrived.

The questions thus become: If flight from both countries is inevitable, how should this be managed, where should the citizens go and how would their status be determined in their new countries? Should the population be entitled to move en masse to another island and, if so, move where? Or should an individualist approach be promoted, with the risk that some be afforded the best migration outcomes while others are left behind to fend for themselves? Or should wealthier nations in the region be encouraged to find room to accommodate this new class of migrant?

As these four very brief examples reveal, climate change has forced those who care about displacement into the unfamiliar position of seeking solutions before displacement occurs: in effect, becoming land seekers for future displaced communities and active advocates for resettlement when remaining in place fails to be a viable option.

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