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Research Report

Social cohesion and climate-driven planned relocation in urban settlements: Evidence from Suva, Fiji

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Social Cohesion and Climate-Driven Planned Relocation in Urban Settlements

Evidence from Suva, Fiji

Charles Martin-Shields, Anawaite Matadradra, Sevanaia Sakai, Unaisa Raileqe & Timothy Fadgen

Summary

Planned relocation, the process of moving a community from one area of residence to a new one in response to an environmental risk or threat, is an important option for climate change adaptation. Given the acute climate and environmental risks facing them, small island developing states (SIDS) have taken a leading role in developing policies and processes for planned relocation in response to these risks. This policy brief will look at how planned relocation works as an adaptation strategy in informal urban settlements and will examine the role of social cohesion in planned relocation processes.

Fiji has become a regional leader in planned relocation policy, with the Human Mobility in Climate Change Contexts (HMCCC) project serving as a magnifier of Fiji's existing expertise in planned relocation. Since 2017, the Fijian government and civil society in cooperation with the German and New Zealand governments have developed planned relocation standard operating procedures (SOPs) for helping villages in high-risk areas navigate the physical, cultural, social and economic costs of relocating to higher ground or a safer location. These SOPs have become a "gold standard" for other countries to learn from and emulate in their own planned relocation policies.

The next step that the government is starting to undertake involves adapting the SOPs to informal urban settlements that are facing climate and environmental risks. Fiji's informal urban settlements have faced a number of social, political and economic challenges over the years. These include serious issues with crime, land insecurity and historical political exclusion. Thus, along with the threats that come with climate change, particularly sea-level rise and flooding, any planned relocation policy for informal urban settlements has to simultaneously address trust in institutions, cooperation for the common good, and inclusive identity. The historical case of the Bainiose being relocated from central Suva to a suburb of Suva in the late 1990s offers guidance on how this can be done.

Key policy messages

- Planned relocation for communities in urban settings requires long-term planning for services such as new public transportation connections, schools, secure land tenure and health facilities.
- Measures should be taken to build institutional trust with urban communities, who may lack the traditional mechanisms of chiefly or customary representation that is present in rural settings.
- Community identity is often strong and can be a starting point for policy-makers and communities to identify sustainable options for relocation.

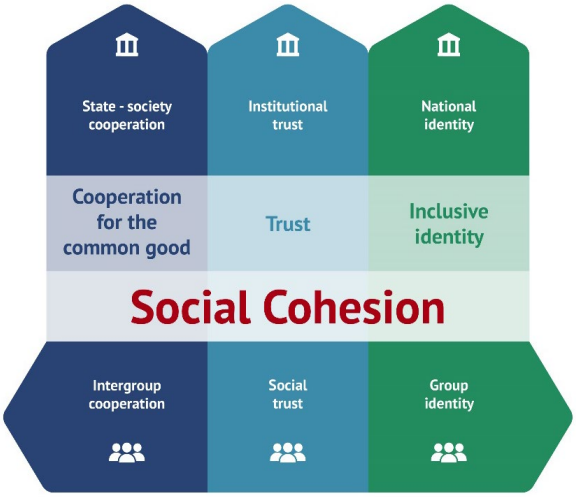
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Introduction: urban climate displacement and planned relocation

In the coming decades, climate change and environmental risks will increasingly play a role in how and why people and communities choose to migrate or relocate. Climate mobility as an umbrella topic includes planned relocation, in other words the process by which the government uses policy to move a community from one place to another, ostensibly where the physical conditions are safer from a climate perspective.

This policy brief will focus on informal urban settlements, explaining why social cohesion is a critical component of planned relocation processes. Supporting the pillars of social cohesion outlined by Burchi et al. (2026), we examine why trust in institutions, cooperation for the common good, and inclusive identity are crucial in informal urban settlements where residents face a number of social, political and economic challenges that are not as acute in rural settings.

Figure 1: IDOS' concept of social cohesion



Source: Burchi et al. (n.d.)

To understand how this works in practice, the brief will discuss Fiji's planned relocation policy, including the Human Mobility in Climate Change Contexts (HMCCC) project funded by the German government. Since there are no current examples of the HMCCC procedures being used in informal urban settlements, the paper will use the experience of the Bainiose community, who were relocated from Laucala Bay in central Suva to the inland suburb of Nausori between 1999 and 2001. The experience of relocation in this case was broadly positive and can inform future relocation processes in response to climate risks.

Planned relocation in response to climate change: challenges for social cohesion

As a policy, planned relocation is understudied in comparison to other kinds of human mobility. This is in part because it simply is not as common as other forms of human mobility, such as labour migration or conflict-driven forced displacement, so there are very few studies of how communities have been affected by planned relocation processes (Ferris & Bower, 2023). The process of relocation is not simple either and goes beyond simply finding a new plot of land, building houses and infrastructure, and moving people into their new homes. People have social and emotional connections to land and space, and their trust in politicians and public administration significantly shapes their willingness to move.

We do know some basics about what makes a relocation process away from environmental hazards successful. Having a process be community driven, whether it is initiated by the community or the community has the legal right to opt out of or withdraw consent from a government-led process, is a leading indicator of whether a relocation process will be successful (Bower et al., 2023). However, government involvement is also important. Communities may initiate a relocation process, but without the support of government agencies it may be impossible to rebuild public goods such as schools, health systems and physical infrastructure. Fiji offers a useful national case study of how planned relocation can be done in a sustainable, human-centric way, with lessons for relocation in urban settings.

From rural to urban contexts: Fiji's planned relocation policy

Fiji has become a global leader in the development and implementation of planned relocation in response to climate change and environmental hazards (UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change], 2023). While the current policy and standard operating procedures (SOPs) are an outcome of the HMCCC cooperation project between Fiji, Germany and New Zealand (GIZ [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit], 2023), Fiji has a breadth of experience with planned relocation going back decades. The Fijian experience with relocation combined with the cooperation resources for the HMCCC project created the foundations for developing a human-centred planned relocation policy.

The guidelines that have emerged out of the HMCCC project cover a full range of issues. The four most innovative policy tools in Fiji's relocation policy are (a) the SOPs as a whole, (b) the risk and vulnerability assessment methodology component of the SOPs in particular, (c) the monitoring, evaluation, reporting and learning (MERL) framework and (d) the Climate Relocation of Communities (CROC) Trust Fund. These components add up to a planned relocation policy that focuses on communities, maintains long time horizons, and makes the process of relocation relational. At each step in the SOPs, there is an informed consent procedure and the community has the right to opt out of the process at any time. While the government of Fiji is involved in the relocation process, it does not lead it.

Built into this, we see necessary elements of social cohesion that are critical in a sustainable, people-centred process for planned relocation. Trust in institutions is built at each stage of informed consent and is fostered by the right to opt out of the process. Cooperation for the common good is supported through the provision of government resources so that the community is not simply relocating, but is also supported with infrastructure, health and social services in their new settlement. Finally, inclusive identity can be nurtured by having the community shape the relocation process, including site identification, timelines and modes of compensation. It is a complex process, but the engagement between communities and government is what makes it sustainable (Bower et al., 2023).

With the processes developed from the HMCCC project in place, the Fijian government and cooperation partners have started looking at how to apply these in informal urban settlements that are facing acute climate and environmental hazards. Thus far, the focus of the policies has been on rural communities where land is governed through the customary *iTaukei* system. Urban settings in Fiji, and other countries, present a different set of social and political challenges for planned relocation. Fiji's informal urban settlements are located on Crown land and freehold land and fall outside the *iTaukei* system, so customary governance and land tenure is either limited or non-existent. This means that many of the village-level processes for managing conflicts, allocating community resources and dealing with state authorities do not exist. Thus, the SOPs are currently being adapted to address these gaps, offering the chance to bring new evidence to bear in supporting this process.

Doing urban planned relocation right: the case of the Bainiose community

Many of the lessons learned from undertaking planned relocation in rural settings can also inform planned relocation in informal urban settlements. However, these are not one-to-one examples – very often land ownership and land tenure are either unclear in urban settlements, or urban displaced people are squatting and do not have any official legal right to reside on the land. For urban displaced people living in informal settlements, the structures they have built, their belongings and the cash they have on hand are the resources they have available. Unlike a rural community that relocates to a different plot on

land it already owns, as is often the case in Fiji, people in an informal urban settlement do not have any more land to relocate to, nor do they have equity in the land they reside on to purchase new land elsewhere. How do a community and government implement community-centred planned relocation under these conditions?

The Bainiose community in Suva, Fiji, was relocated from a central location in the city on Laucala Bay to higher ground inland in the suburb of Nausori between 1999 and 2001, thus offering a useful example. Their experience highlights how different government, civil society and community actors worked together to initiate and implement a relocation process that was human-centred and sustainable in the long term. Firstly, it is important to note that not everything worked perfectly; there are still criticisms from the community regarding the agreement that governed relocation, and tensions exist within the community over how plots of land were acquired in the new settlement. Overall, however, the process was successful, in part because the elements of social cohesion were maintained and supported through the process. The first element was institutional trust. The original area inhabited by the Bainiose was situated in the centre of Suva on coastal land now owned by the University of the South Pacific (USP). Initially, the relocation was initiated by USP in order to expand its campus, but during the relocation process the location was categorised as high risk for water incursion and tsunamis. Community members noted that while the relocation was challenging, in hindsight they have benefited from the move, especially as climate risks have evolved.

While USP initiated the move, the government and community leaders all played a cooperative role in setting the terms of relocation. The community had to build institutional trust with both the university, which offered generous relocation allowances for the community to move, and the Ministry of Housing, which gave community members first choice of plots in the new development in Nausori. These institutional guarantees made moving financially and practically feasible. Institutional involvement in the move also made access to common goods possible in ways a single community could never organise. For example, since the Ministry of Housing was involved in the relocation and the land had been pre-identified by city planners for resettlement, city infrastructure and public transport were available even though, at the time, Nausori had not been integrated into greater Suva.

Moving a community has multi-generational impacts, and building community identity was key to mitigating these. USP offered an innovative approach to this; the university set up a scholarship programme for the children and grandchildren of community members who relocated. Since then, many children and grandchildren in the community have benefited from these scholarships, and the success of these children, the “Bainiose Scholars”, has become a central part of the community’s identity. The university offered this on its own accord, and it is one example of how well-designed, human-centred relocation has to be future oriented beyond basic issues of space and immediate cost.

In interviews, members of the Bainiose community said that the move was hard but that in the past 30 years there have also been opportunities that later generations of community members would not have had if they had stayed in central Suva. In addition, the psychological benefit of home ownership among relocated residents inspired individual families to navigate urban livelihood strategies aimed at achieving a sustainable future. However, over time, transfers of property titles between family members have led to financial conflicts, so there are still challenges that affect social cohesion in relocated communities even under optimal conditions. For an urban relocation plan to be sustainable, policy-makers and community members have to create a multi-generational vision of opportunity and have the public resources in place to make that happen.

Recommendations for policy-makers: translating planned relocation policy from rural to urban settings

While Fiji's planned relocation policy has up to now been more geared towards rural communities where land tenure is well established and governed by the customary *iTaukei* system, there are plenty of lessons that can be transferred to planned relocation of informal urban settlements. These contexts are not exactly the same though, so policy transfer to urban settings has to account for a wider range of land tenure, social and political challenges, and community resource constraints. Policy-makers and programme implementers should bear the following in mind:

- Informal urban settlements will lack the clarity around land tenure and ownership that often exists in rural settings. Because of this, governments should plan to take on the upfront costs of acquiring land for a community to relocate to.
- Under the best of circumstances, planned relocation is difficult – social and economic factors in urban settlements magnify this. Governments and funders should include provisions for aspects such as social services, especially connected with addiction and domestic violence, and should allocate time for building trust between the community and government representatives.
- There needs to be diversity among the stakeholders, as well as the right mix of stakeholders. Educational institutions, police, customary leaders and the private sector can all play roles in ensuring that relocation is sustainable and safe and offer multiple entry points for communities to engage with different actors to shape the relocation process.
- Plans should be made for a multi-generational process. Relocated children will become adults with life histories shaped by the process of relocating. There are risks in this that need to be managed, but also opportunities that can be unlocked if governments, funders and communities think cooperatively about both the good and bad sides of relocation over decades.
- Where appropriate, relocated property, especially land and houses, may be registered under joint ownership arrangements to recognise multiple beneficiaries and reduce the likelihood of dispute.

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