
Integrated assessments : operationalizing human rights protections for climate-induced relocations

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Abstract

This paper examines the threats and concerns about climate-induced community relocation that challenges populations, governments and governance structures. Little attention has been paid to the need to adapt to climate change, partly because of the hesitation to advocate for climate adaptation out of concern that this would reduce efforts to seriously mitigate climate change. Consequently, concerted efforts to adapt to climate change began only in the last 5-10 years, and guidelines for designing and assessing climate-change adaptation are only beginning to emerge.

In Alaska, the combination of repeated extreme weather events coupled with accelerating slow onset biophysical change threatens the lives, livelihood, homes, health, and basic subsistence of human populations that have inhabited Alaska for millennia. The need to relocate entire communities as a result of climate-induced environmental change is an extreme form of adaptation. Severe economic, social, and environmental consequences can occur in the relocation process. Government-mandated relocation can unravel the fabric of a community, weaken community institutions and social networks, disrupt subsistence and economic systems, and impact the cultural identity and traditional kinship ties within a community. Further, the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery has determined that the failure to fully consider the welfare of the population and empower people of a community to make decisions regarding critical elements of a relocation, including site selection and community lay-out, are the principal reasons that relocations have been unsuccessful.

Integrated social ecological assessments are a critical tool that can provide community residents, as well as government agencies, with the information they need to make informed decisions about the most appropriate adaptation strategy that provides a continuum of responses including protection in place and community relocation. This paper will outline the components of an integrated social and ecological assessment that can be used by communities and government and non-government agencies to understand climate change impacts, assess community habitability and determine when relocation is the only adaptation strategy to protect community residents. These assessments will foster community empowerment, can promote human rights protections and can encourage transparent decision-making processes. These assessments can also be the tool that can determine whether and when a relocation needs to occur. Unlike government-mandated resettlement programs where the government makes all the decisions regarding the resettlement and the construction of a development project or geopolitical motive provides the impetus for the community resettlement, climate-induced relocations require a dynamic process closely connected with changes

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in the environment that affect the health and well-being of community residents.

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