

Develop Policies Targeting Environmentally Induced Displacement in the United States

A policy action to Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment

Issue

Evidence-based policies for responding to population displacement during emergencies and disasters are well established. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act is a key example. However, the impact on communities of slow onset processes, such as sea level rise, has received much less attention in research, practice, and policy.¹ The experiences of communities in Alaska and Louisiana demonstrate that federal policy efforts are needed to align support for policy reforms at local, state, tribal, and federal levels as well as for community relocations in the context of environmental change in the United States.²

Action

Amend the Stafford Act to charge the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) with the responsibility for guiding and facilitating planned relocations in the United States, and allocate funding for this purpose. In order to develop this amendment and expand FEMA's mandate, the following actions should be prioritized:

- A. Work with leading experts within and outside the discipline of social work; relevant public and private research and policy institutes, such as the Georgetown University Institute for the Study of International Migration and the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement; and implementation partners such as the Army Corps of Engineers. All of those collaborators should be engaged in the development of the amendment's content as well as the structure and scope of FEMA's expanded mandate. Members of Congress who have supported previous amendments to the Stafford Act, including Senator Jon Tester (D-Montana) and Representative Lou Barletta (R-Pennsylvania), will also be critical in drafting and proposing the amendment.
- B. Detail a governance structure for planned relocation assistance at the federal level and for coordination with state, tribal, and local entities. Draw this policy from and align it with existing recommendations for amending the Stafford Act, such as the recommendations detailed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors Stafford Act Task Force.³
- C. Task FEMA with development of evidence-based practice standards and criteria for determining what locations are at most risk, who might need to move, how soon, and where.
- D. Create community advisory boards at local, state, and national levels to participate in successful planning and implementation of relocation. Such boards could be instrumental in obtaining perspectives of both those who require relocation and those in host communities.
- E. Fund scientific research that assists in the identification of at-risk communities and communities suitable for relocation; that documents the range of experiences with various stages of planning and implementation for relocation; and that evaluates current relocation efforts in various domains, including the economic, cultural, social, psychological, and physical health of individuals, groups, and communities.

Evidence

The need for focused governance in the area of planned relocation is evidenced by the experiences of communities currently living in unsustainable locations. Evidence of the need also comes from such sources as the 2006 Alaska Village Erosion Technical Assistance Program established by Congress. The program noted significant gaps in policy on, funding for, and administration of planned relocation.⁴

Although this sort of relocation is unprecedented in the United States, evidence on successful and unsuccessful policy strategies comes from similar forms of planned relocation and from historical examples.⁵ Among these lessons is the insight that relocation should be a last resort chosen only when other responses to environmental changes are unlikely to be successful.⁶

Current scholarship emphasizes the importance of comprehensive approaches that recognize the social, economic, and political factors shaping both the proposals for and the outcomes of planned movement.⁷ Also emphasized is the importance of full commitment to participatory and rights-based responses.⁸ Mounting evidence suggests that, without careful and participatory relocation planning, families lose access to cultural and livelihood resources and communities become less cohesive.⁹ However, policies that attempt to prevent or force movement may have negative long-term consequences and undermine rights to agency and self-determination. Such policies should be avoided.¹⁰ The evidence informs several frameworks that may guide this work, including the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,¹¹ the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,¹² the Nansen Principles,¹³ the Peninsula Principles,¹⁴ and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.¹⁵

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End Notes

1. International Organization for Migration (2009); McAdam (2012); Obokato, Veronis, and McLeman (2014); Roberts and Andrei (2015).
2. Bronen (2008); Maldonado et al. (2013); Marino (2012); McAdam (2012); Shearer (2011).
3. U.S. Conference of Mayors (2010).
4. Bronen (2008); Maldonado, Shearer, Bronen, Peterson, and Lazrus (2013); Oliver-Smith and De Sherbinin (2014); Roberts and Andrei (2015).
5. Correa (2011); Doberstein and Tadgell (2015); Ferris (2012); Maldonado et al. (2013); McAdam (2012); McDowell (2013); Petz (2015).
6. Barnett and Webber (2010); Ferris (2012); Oliver-Smith and De Sherbinin (2014).
7. Barnett and Webber (2010); Doberstein and Tadgell (2015); Kothari (2014).
8. Bronen (2008); Drolet (2013); Farbotko and Lazrus (2012); Maldonado et al. (2013); McAdam (2012).
9. McDowell (2013).
10. Bardsley and Hugo (2010); Black et al. (2011); Castles et al. (2014); Drolet (2013); Hammond (2011); Oliver-Smith and De Sherbinin (2014).
11. McNamara (1998).
12. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).
13. Kälén (2012).
14. Displacement Solutions (2013).
15. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

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About this policy action

This policy action statement was developed by members of the network engaged in the Grand Challenge to Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment. The Grand Challenges initiative’s policy action statements present proposals emerging from Social Innovation for America’s Renewal, a policy conference organized by the Center for Social Development at Washington University in collaboration with the [American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare](#), which is leading the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative to champion social progress through a national agenda powered by science.

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