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Natural Hazards and the Normative Significance of Expectations in Protecting Alpine Communities

Florian Ortner (1,2), Thomas Pölzler (3), Lukas H. Meyer (2,3), Oliver Sass (1,2)

(1) University of Graz, Department of Geography and Regional Science, Graz, Austria (florian.ortner@uni-graz.at), (2) University of Graz, FWF-DK Climate Change, Graz, Austria, (3) University of Graz, Institute of Philosophy, Graz, Austria

Protecting alpine communities from natural hazard events is costly. As climate change has led and will increasingly lead to a higher frequency and intensity of such events, at some point in the future states may consider planned relocations of some of these communities.
In this study we investigate the theoretical option of relocations with regard to three alpine areas in Austria that have experienced natural hazard events in the past: the Sölk valleys, the Johnsbach valley, and the St. Lorenzen/Schwarzenbach valleys. More specifically, we focus on residents' expectations about being protected from such events: (1) What do these expectations look like? (2) Are these expectations relevant in determining whether and how the option of relocations ought to be implemented; and if yes, in which sense?
First, we report approx. 300 questionnaire surveys and 17 qualitative interviews. These surveys and interviews suggest that residents of the Sölk valleys, the Johnsbach valley and the St. Lorenzen/Schwarzenbach valleys widely share the following expectation, henceforth referred to as "E": "In the foreseeable future the state of Austria will provide us with a level of protection from natural hazards that allows us to continue to live in these valleys".
Second, we investigate E's normative significance, i.e. whether and if yes, in which sense it should count in making decisions about relocations. Based on Meyer and Sanklecha (2011, 2014) we propose several general conditions for the normative significance of expectations. Then we argue that E fulfills these conditions to a significant extent.
E is highly epistemically legitimate because, among others, residents have so far received a high level of state protection from natural hazards, even in the face of increasing costs; had permission to build their houses in the areas in which they built them, and have not been properly informed about the state's possible inability to provide sufficient protection in the future.
E is somewhat morally legitimate because, among others, it was mostly formed on the basis of impartial considerations, is mostly compatible with residents' views about distributive justice, and has to some extent been generated by the state.
The findings that residents in the Sölk valleys, the Johnsbach valley, and the St. Lorenzen/Schwarzenbach valleys share E and that E is normatively significant mean that the option of relocation may be more difficult to justify than previously thought; and that if the implementation of this option frustrates residents' legitimate expectations, they should be owed more compensation. In addition, we draw lessons for potential planned relocations of other alpine communities and point to important legal and political implications.

References:
Meyer, Lukas; Sanklecha, Pranay (2011): Individual Expectations and Climate Change. Analyse & Kritik 32 (2): 449-471.
Meyer, Lukas; Sanklecha, Pranay (2014): How Legitimate Expectations Matter in Climate Justice. Politics, Philosophy & Economics 13 (3): 369-393.