



# *The ethics of climate-induced community displacement and resettlement*

Article

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## The Ethics of Climate Induced Community Resettlement and Displacement

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## **The Ethics of Climate Induced Community Displacement and Resettlement**

### **Abstract**

Climate-induced resettlement programmes are happening right now in places around the world where populations face high risks from climatic impacts. Burgeoning literatures are considering the ethical implications of climate change more broadly, and the ethics of migration, but the nexus between the two issues has not been given enough attention by moral and political theorists, especially with respect to climate induced community resettlement. Here, we sketch the key nodes in a debate we think should take place, which will be made even more urgent in the coming decades as climate change impacts on communities least resilient to it.

For Peer Review

**Focus Article**

**The Ethics of Climate-Induced Community Displacement and Resettlement**

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For Peer Review

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6 Climate-induced resettlement programmes are happening right now in places around the world  
7 where populations face high risks from climatic impacts, including in the Carteret Islands  
8 (Connell, 2016), Alaskan communities (Bronen and Chapin, 2013; Shearer, 2012), the Mekong  
9 Delta in Vietnam (Dun, 2013), and beyond. These resettlement projects are diverse in their  
10 causes - which include rising sea levels and increased flooding - but are unified in how they  
11 attempt to relocate groups of people from climate-related impacts, even if they are not always  
12 explicitly framed in terms of climate impacts. Such resettlement programmes should be  
13 understood as a subset of broader adaptation efforts which may be implemented when *in situ*  
14 adaptation is not a feasible option (UNFCCC, 2010).  
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17 Despite a burgeoning literature considering the ethical implications of climate change more  
18 broadly (e.g. Gardiner et al., 2010; Vanderheiden, 2009; Shue, 2014; Moellendorf, 2014;  
19 Gardiner, 2011; Jamieson, 2014; Arnold, 2011; McKinnon, 2012), and the ethics of migration  
20 (e.g. Carens, 2014; Cole and Wellman, 2011; Fine and Ypi, 2016; Miller, 2016), the nexus  
21 between the two issues has not been given enough attention by political theorists. Here, we  
22 sketch the key nodes in a debate we think should take place, and which will be made even more  
23 urgent in the coming decades as climate change impacts on communities least resilient to it.  
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25 Literature in normative political theory that has engaged with climate change and migration  
26 mostly has focused either on what states owe to an idealised 'climate migrant' originating in  
27 another state (Biermann and Boas, 2010; Bell, 2004; Eckersley, 2015; Byravan and Rajan, 2010),  
28 or on the distinctive questions raised by the possible disappearance of small-island states (Nine,  
29 2010; Risse, 2009; Kolers, 2012; Ödalen, 2014; Dietrich and Wündisch, 2015; Vaha, 2015). More  
30 empirical literatures emphasise that migration in relation to climate change is a complex, multi-  
31 causal phenomenon: an adaptive response to climate change which takes place within a  
32 constellation of interrelated economic, social and political factors (Black et al., 2011a; Black et  
33 al., 2011b; McLeman and Hunter, 2010; McLeman and Smit, 2006).  
34

35 Concerns about the fit between idealised visions of climate migrants, and the empirical realities,  
36 are justified (Black, 2001; Wood, 2001; Hulme, 2008). A further important reason for concern –  
37 which is not often registered – is that the focus on an idealised international climate migrant has  
38 made the ethics of climate-induced *community-level* resettlement less visible than it should be.  
39 Here, we map out some important ethical issues raised by community-level resettlement  
40 programmes by considering the values relevant to three aspects of these programmes. These  
41 are: the *framing* of resettlement programmes and their objectives; the *procedures* used in the  
42 management of resettlement; and the ideal or intended *outcomes* of resettlement programmes.  
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#### 45 *Framing*

46 We are interested in how values of justice and ethics implicit in debates about resettlement  
47 provide framings for these debates, which sit alongside other framings, such as those focused on  
48 security or humanitarianism (e.g. Boas, 2015; Mayer, 2016).  
49

50 Justice framings of climate-induced resettlement are diagnostic: they provide a normative lens  
51 through which issues arising in this context come into view, and can be dissected. This  
52 diagnostic work can begin by considering the nature of the damage that is likely to be faced by  
53 those being resettled in the context of climate change. In broader debates in political theory  
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3 about distributive justice, this question refers to understanding the *currency* of justice.<sup>1</sup> For  
4 example, we might conceptualise this damage in terms of overall welfare, or opportunity for  
5 welfare. Or we might focus instead on fungible or non-fungible resource losses. A different  
6 approach to these questions has been in terms of capabilities to function. For example, De Shalit  
7 (2011) has argued that in the case of permanent climatic displacement, we ought to think of the  
8 loss of a sense of place in terms of the loss of an essential functioning (in Sen's terms) because of  
9 its critical role in the formation of identity. Barnett et al. (2016) have recently called for a  
10 'science of loss' in order to better understand what it is that people value when what they care  
11 about is imperilled by climate change.  
12

13 Is there is something distinctive about relocation at a *community* level that puts relational goods  
14 at stake? It seems that if we were to take each individual's losses as a result of relocation and  
15 aggregate them, we would still have an inadequate understanding of the loss overall, since some  
16 goods only emerge at the community level. In tribal communities facing relocation in Alaska and  
17 Louisiana, for example, socio-cultural institutions and tribal relationships have been identified  
18 as being of central importance, and as having this distinctive character (Maldonado et al., 2013,  
19 p. 611). It is important for political theorists to be able to account for the nature of these goods.  
20 Are these relational goods reducible to individual welfare, or other individual losses? Or are  
21 they properly thought of as belonging to the community itself? (And if so, what could this  
22 mean?). This may impact on what is owed to relocated people as a matter of justice: if  
23 community losses are reducible to individual losses then it may be easier to compensate for  
24 these losses than if community losses have ethical standing independent of, and/or in addition  
25 to, individual losses.  
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28 Another issue of framing concerns the *kind* of justice that is envisaged. For example, if historical  
29 emissions which have caused climate change have significant moral weight then resettlement  
30 could become a matter of *corrective* justice, as typified in the idea of the 'polluter pays principle'  
31 which states that those who brought about a harm ought to remedy it.<sup>2</sup> Concerns have been  
32 raised with taking a historical approach to climate justice, such as the problem of emitters being  
33 excusably ignorant before a certain point, and of emitters of the more distant past no longer  
34 being alive (e.g. Caney 2005; Gosseries, 2004; Shue, 1999; Gardiner, 2010).  
35

36 How we think about historic emissions matters for framing resettlement in terms of justice. For  
37 example, in a corrective justice frame, parties liable for the displacing effects of climate change  
38 could offer just resettlement as compensation for the displacement; such parties might be  
39 countries, or even fossil fuel corporations. A compelling first thought is that liable parties ought  
40 to make resettled people as well off as they would have otherwise been, but it will never be the  
41 case that the new location will perfectly replace the home lost. We must then consider if the  
42 kind of compensation being offered is supposed to be *means replacing* compensation, which is  
43 compensation that allows people to pursue the same ends as before, or *ends-displacing*  
44 compensation, which helps those affected to pursue different ends, but which leaves them  
45 subjectively as well off as before (Goodin, 1989; Wolff, 2002).  
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48 A different way to think about relocation starts with a commitment to making those affected  
49 *better off* than before. On this approach, our thinking about justice derives from a broader  
50 understanding about what is owed to those affected as a matter of *distributive* justice. Those  
51 affected by the impacts of climate change are often the most vulnerable people in societies,  
52 living in places that are least resilient to climate impacts, and we might think that what they are  
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55 <sup>1</sup> See the discussion in Wolff (2015). Some important texts in this debate include Arneson (1989), Cohen  
56 (1989), Sen (1987), Daniels (1990) and Scheffler (2003).

57 <sup>2</sup> For succinct expressions of this principle, see Singer (2010, p. 190).  
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owed is part of a broader account of what we owe to the worst-off people in societies in general. A 'holist' account holds that entitlements in this specific case cannot be determined without reference to a broader scheme of entitlements and obligations. The holist account has it that the baseline which is appealed to in accounts of corrective justice – that is, the state of affairs affected communities would have been in had they not been affected by climate change – is itself open for assessment as a matter of justice.<sup>3</sup> In the case of small-island states, political theorists have made arguments concerning access to territory or relocation which derive this entitlement not from theories of compensation, but from broader accounts of access to territory (and sometimes sovereignty) found in the work of John Locke (e.g. Nine, 2010; Kolers, 2012) and Hugo Grotius (e.g. Risse, 2009). In the context of climate-induced resettlement, we might think here of frameworks which pursue both adaptation and development objectives in tandem (Sherman et al., 2016). In their practical application, the objectives of both practices may well overlap, but if there are trade-offs to be made it is important to have an account of the relationship between issues of *climate* justice and broader issues of distributive justice.

### *Procedures*

An account of justice in climate-induced community resettlement requires us to consider the ways in which those affected by relocation ought to be treated in the process. There are at least two stages to consider: decision-making, and implementation. In terms of decision-making, an essential element is the participation of those facing relocation (Hugo, 2011). The specific requirements of participation in decision-making, however, are less clear.

There are a number of reasons to value participation in decision-making, one of which is that failing to recognise the communities affected as being distinctive groups with their own concerns of the kind identified earlier might generate failures of resettlement processes. Given this, are cultural needs satisfied in resettlement only if certain kinds of participatory processes are adopted (Schlosberg, 2012)? This question has bite given that many of those groups affected by relocation have histories of being marginalised and excluded as groups. In the case of Alaska, for example, many have become vulnerable as part of historic colonial 'civilising' programmes (Marino, 2012). At a basic level, effective participation may be desirable if we want resettlement programmes to 'stick'. However, this rationale rarely presents the complete picture; we often think that there are principled rather than merely practical reasons for encouraging the participation of those affected by resettlement programmes.

Such principled reasons might appeal to values intrinsic to the participatory process; for example, respect for the autonomy of those facing relocation. Resettlement will require collective decisions to be taken, and respect for autonomy can be seen to be 'basic' in the sense that it requires us to consider what kinds of decisions and decision-making procedures are consistent with taking those displaced to be self-directing agents with sovereignty over themselves. This kind of rationale focuses attention on the relevant standards for legitimate decision-making in the case of climate-induced resettlement, which will vary in their demandingness. At the most demanding end of the spectrum, we might insist that the consent of all people facing resettlement must be sought on all key aspects of the proposed resettlement. In contrast, a less demanding standard would require only a consultative approach. In order to develop standards of participation which are both theoretically defensible and practically implementable, we can refer to literatures in different domains which engage with similar questions, such as the literature concerning displacement by development (e.g. Penz, Drydyk and Bose, 2011; Drydyk, 2013). There are structural similarities between cases of climate-

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Caney's "integrationist" account in Caney (2012). See also the discussion in Scheffler (2001, p. 165–70).



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3 induced community resettlement and displacement by development. For example, in both cases  
4 the least powerful people in society are more likely to be affected than those with more  
5 resources, and more resilience. Genuinely participatory approaches which stress human agency,  
6 rather than technocratic or managerial solutions, have been identified as critically important in  
7 development-forced displacement relocation projects, and are of similar importance – we think  
8 – in cases of climate displacement (Wilmsen and Webber, 2015).  
9

10 A further dimension of procedural legitimacy concerns justification and public reason.  
11 Philosophical treatments of these concepts generally address the justification of broader rules  
12 or principles to do with the basic design of society, but there is scope to apply ideas from this  
13 domain to procedures for resettlement. Here, we might think that in order for relocation  
14 decisions to be legitimate under circumstances characterised by disagreement, these decisions  
15 must be justified to those who are affected, in terms they could not reasonably reject. How this  
16 standard is elaborated will vary according to the understanding of public reason we adopt, but  
17 since these approaches seek to find standards of legitimacy under disagreement, they may be  
18 useful theoretical tools.<sup>4</sup>  
19

20 The case of climate-induced community displacement requires us to take account of its  
21 distinctive features, such as urgency or unavoidability. This concern brings to the fore questions  
22 about how to mediate disagreements about resettlement, and other ethical constraints that  
23 might be put upon decisions. For example, if a community prefers a site for resettlement which  
24 is much less likely to satisfy their material needs than another site, how should programme  
25 administrators proceed? Should we use ethical standards external to communities to scrutinise  
26 the decision-making procedures they use, and the ways in which community representatives  
27 are chosen? Here, we need to think about the kinds of knowledge that are considered to be  
28 authoritative in constructing and implementing resettlement programmes (Adger et al., 2011).  
29 Moreover, particular attention might need to be paid to social dynamics which affect both the  
30 perceived need for relocation, and its success. For example, gendered divisions of labour may  
31 mediate the ways in which the impacts of climate change are experienced, or affect the decision-  
32 making capital of women in particular communities (Alston, 2013).  
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35 Programme implementation raises questions about what is owed to those being resettled in the  
36 process. Many rights-based accounts set out the goods, resources, and forms of treatment  
37 people are entitled to as a minimum (and beyond) in any society. How might these often-  
38 abstract accounts translate into practical guidelines in the diverse and demanding  
39 circumstances of resettlement? More richly textured accounts of human well-being that go  
40 beyond rights might deliver more practical guidelines. For example, Johnson (2012, p. 317-8)  
41 points towards Nussbaum's account of the functioning of affiliation, which could yield  
42 obligations to keep families and social groups together in the relocation process.  
43

44 To sum up: in elaborating procedural requirements for just climate-induced community-  
45 relocation, theorists will need to account for the standards of participation required, and the  
46 reasons that participation might be important. Moreover, they will need to account for the  
47 context-specific concerns that arise in the case of climate change, and for the substantive  
48 requirements of treatment during implementation.  
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### 50 *Outcomes*

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55 <sup>4</sup> Different approaches to the idea of justification and public reason will have significantly different  
56 results. For an overview of how the concept has been used, see Quong (2013). Prominent accounts of  
57 public reason include Rawls (2005), Gaus (2010), and Habermas (1998).  
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3 An account of the ideal outcomes of climate-induced community-level relocation programmes is  
4 likely to appeal to the nature of the damage involved in the case of climatic displacement  
5 described above, as well as to norms about participation and autonomy in procedural justice.  
6 For example, Paavola and Adger (2006) set out four principles for the ethical requirements of  
7 fair adaptation that could be transposed into this context. And Zellentin (2010) argues for an  
8 understanding of participation which takes seriously the substantive requirements of cultural  
9 differences in the case of migration in response to climate change. Although comprehensive  
10 accounts of the ethical requirements of climate-induced community-level relocation  
11 programmes are yet to be elaborated, we can gain insight from these accounts in their nascent  
12 form when thinking about the substantive requirements on outcomes that might be set out in  
13 this context.  
14

15 An under-appreciated aspect of the intended outcomes of any climate-induced community-level  
16 relocation programme will be the relations between those relocated and the new host  
17 communities with which they interact. The relation between an individual sense of identity and  
18 place has been highlighted in the context of climate change (e.g. Fresque-Baxter and Armitage,  
19 2012; Campbell, 2010) but community-level relocation brings with it a need to reconceptualise  
20 relations to place. Political theorists have set out to reconceptualise general relationships  
21 between identity and place in the light of the changing structure of the global order (e.g. Maier,  
22 2007; Benhabib, 2007), but in the case of community relocation in the face of climate change it  
23 will be important not to obscure the perspective of those most affected (in both displaced and  
24 host communities) by using the case of climate-induced displacement as a 'test case' for  
25 cosmopolitan hopes (Farbotko, 2010). The relations between those relocated and those they are  
26 brought into contact with will also need to be elaborated. What burdens can host communities  
27 be reasonably expected to bear? And how might both local and wider communities be brought  
28 into relations of solidarity with those being relocated? Here, it will be important to understand  
29 being relocated as agents, rather than merely as passive recipients of the beneficence of others.  
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32 In elaborating the ideal outcomes of community-level resettlement programmes it may well be  
33 important to set out the minimal requirements of justice in terms of, for example, resources or  
34 well-being. It should be clear, however, that *only* elaborating these standards would fail to take  
35 seriously the requirements of procedural justice in this domain, and risks treating those affected  
36 as passive recipients of benefits. Rather, participation and the self-understanding of those  
37 affected will be essential to achieving just outcomes.  
38

### 39 *Conclusion*

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41 Philosophers and political theorists have not yet substantially engaged with the diverse ethical  
42 and political issues arising in the context of community-level climate-induced resettlement,  
43 despite the increased interest in both climate ethics and the ethics of migration and  
44 displacement. Engaging with these questions will require paying particular attention to the  
45 distinctive contexts and circumstances in which these kinds of resettlement programmes occur,  
46 and to their similarities and differences with other kinds of cases which have been more  
47 thoroughly theorised. This will require scholars to engage with those working in other  
48 disciplines, particularly those working qualitatively with people most affected by the impacts of  
49 climate-induced resettlement.  
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51 We have raised questions here pertaining to the values relevant to the framing, procedures and  
52 outcomes of community-level climate-induced resettlement. There are undoubtedly many more  
53 questions which will emerge as climate-induced resettlement becomes a more pressing  
54 concern. It is our hope that this article will serve to start a broader conversation about the  
55 requirements of justice in this domain.  
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