Briefing

**Urban, policy and planning**

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# Rethinking post-disaster relocation in urban India

## Policy pointers

**Forced evictions in** response to disasters must stop. They are counterproductive and undermine people's agency and trust, and exacerbate inequality.

**Humanitarian and** development practitioners, including government officials planning relocations, must work with the disaster-affected communities from the outset, allowing time to manage the physical, economic and psychological impacts.

**Local and state** government should help communities and local NGOs do preventative assessments before disasters strike, and help communities learn about risk reduction and disaster management. Both government and nongovernmental organisations should make shared learning part of their institutional structure, to avoid creating or exacerbating risk.

**All state and local** government departments must start risk-proofing their development agenda. Disaster management and risk reduction cannot be done reactively.

After natural disasters, governments often relocate vulnerable urban communities in the name of humanitarian relief. But urban communities rarely welcome such relocation, since it frequently exacerbates their daily challenges or creates new risks. Indeed, resettlement after a disaster is often another form of eviction. This briefing discusses the situation in Chennai, where state and local authorities have been building resettlement tenements on inland marsh areas using centrally sponsored schemes for affordable housing. These have been used as a 'quick fix' after disasters, but without addressing communities' underlying needs and inequalities. Their siting has also increased flood risk across the urban area, creating new risks. Instead, India should develop participatory and risk-reducing plans and policies for relocation, and also help vulnerable communities address the risks where they currently live. This briefing is part of the project '*Long-term implications of humanitarian responses: a case of Chennai*'. The research was conducted in 2016 by the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) and Madras Institute for Development Studies (MIDS).[1]

## Poor development is disaster prone

Everyone lives with a certain amount of risk in their daily lives, but inequitable urbanisation processes exacerbate some people's vulnerabilities and often leave many with very limited access to resources needed to cope with, and adapt to, challenging conditions (such as land, housing, basic services, viable job opportunities, and education and health facilities).

It is these vulnerable communities who end up living in otherwise undesirable risk-prone informal settlements and slums. Living in such areas, where daily risks such as disease exposure already make residents more vulnerable, can have far-reaching implications and be disastrous for poor communities when a natural hazard strikes. Unplanned growth in environmentally fragile locations leads to further inequalities and poor development outcomes, and worsens the risks of disasters in urban areas.

## Relocation as a response and not long-term recovery

In India, the humanitarian response immediately after a disaster often also involves moving people away from risk-prone settlements by local development authorities. Rehabilitation must be undertaken as part of a long-term recovery process following detailed socio-economic and risk assessments with relevant monitoring frameworks in place. But undertaking resettlement within a short time after the disaster

is unable to address the underlying inequalities or vulnerabilities that may have caused the losses. Rather, relocation after disasters, especially if residents are rushed and put under pressure, can make things worse.

*Better assessments could help build risk-proof and viable housing*

Humanitarian responses by many other actors, including NGOs and international agencies, is limited to distribution of aid, food and other emergency and temporary shelters following the disasters. These actors have limited power to intervene in relocation decisions and provide aid to communities only until they are moved. It is observed that once relocated, communities are ignored in the future by humanitarian actors as well.

## Relocation: eviction by another name

People who have developed communities in risk-prone areas often want to continue living there so they can maintain their access to livelihood options, to social and physical infrastructure, to environmental resources, and also so they can exercise their political 'agency' and make their collective voice heard. But while such people resist relocation before any disaster has happened, they often give in to moving after one.

This is sometimes because they better appreciate the risks they live with, but often also because they have no alternate choice during the crisis. Moving people soon after a disaster, when they have no choice over where to live, is often against their clearly established will and is another form of eviction.

## No legal framework

India has legal frameworks and compensation mechanisms covering people who have to relocate because their land has been acquired for development. But there are no such frameworks in place for those who are displaced after or by a disaster. Often, these people have no legal title or security of tenure over their land. Where state governments provide compensation, it is because of a sense of moral responsibility rather than any legal requirement and the amounts vary widely across the country. When government provides housing in such circumstances, it generally considers it is occupying the 'moral high ground'. There is no recognition that relocation can have many detrimental outcomes for disaster-affected communities.

Often, government agencies identify 'slums' as 'untenable'[2] because of their hazardous locations. An 'untenable slum' could be around a major storm water drain (or other major drain); along railway lines or in areas where government wants to align major transport hubs or links; along river banks or water bodies (or within stream beds); or they may have other hazards, such as high-tension electricity lines close by. If an agency decides a slum is 'untenable', that can be considered enough justification to force people to relocate. Again, these vulnerable and disadvantaged communities are usually given very limited options for their risk reduction. The decision-making processes for identifying 'untenable slums' does not involve the identified communities, does not usually recognise their capacities to cope with everyday risks, and alternative locations are rarely assessed or even made available.

## Prior development agenda

State and local government departments take many decisions on relocation (including decisions on location, size and quality of housing, provision of physical and other infrastructure, and so on). These are made in line with existing development agendas or planning visions prior to any occurrence of a disaster, and tend to ignore exposure to environmental and hazard risks. Communities often contest and resist these wider plans, but disasters skew the power dynamics and give government authorities an opportunity to push ahead. Forcing the issue when people have limited power to resist may be at one with developmental aims, but may increase everyday socio-economic risks for the people and therefore not reduce the risks communities face.

**Ready-made post-disaster relocation sites.** Governments also often respond to disasters by allocating housing that has already been built under development programmes. Much of it has been built using national or state housing programme funds designed to fill the gaps in affordable housing supply. In principle, having a government that is prepared with housing (and other provisions) could help disaster-affected communities in their time of crisis. But since the beneficiaries are only identified much after the housing is built, there are always gaps between people's specific needs and what the housing provides. For example, urban fishers making their living from the coast cannot easily move inland. Crucially, local governments don't do enough to assess vulnerability, risks and needs before disasters strike. Better assessments could help build risk-proof and viable housing, whether at the original location or at a suitable alternative that is acceptable to the affected communities.

**Resettled but still marginalised.** Housing provided for relocated communities is usually far

from the city centre, because that's where affordable vacant land is available for development. Such sites may have significant developmental shortcomings. For example, they may lack sufficient physical and social infrastructure (such as public transport and schools) or they may be far from people's normal jobs and also lack other livelihood opportunities. But once people are sheltered in new housing, the disaster is considered to be 'dealt with' and other needs are met irregularly, slowly or not at all.

Resettlement sites are also frequently ignored when government agencies consider further disaster preparedness planning or distribute disaster relief. Yet their residents face greater everyday life challenges. Unless resettled people are given formal tenure within housing policies, relocation programmes leave the poor at continuing risk of evictions.

**City-level environmental issues.** Both post-disaster and development housing programmes often ignore environmental problems at new resettlement locations. As discussed in Box 1, affordable housing is primarily built on otherwise unusable land and this can have long-term environmental implications for cities. Housing programmes in India do not follow any monitoring and evaluation frameworks that could reveal the long-term implications of such choices for people and their communities.

## Box 1. Resettlement sites in Chennai are creating long-term environmental risks

Since 2000, the Government of Tamil Nadu (GoTN) has built over 50,000 resettlement tenements in the southern outskirts of Chennai alone. Although the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission's (JNNURM's) policy guidelines advocated in situ slum upgrading as the preferred approach, GoTN has spent almost 80 per cent of funds received under the JNNURM Basic Services for the Urban Poor programme on building resettlement tenements on urban peripheries, mostly on lands reclaimed from marshlands and floodplains.[3]

The resettlement tenements include many built in Kannagi Nagar, Perumbakkam and Semmencherry. These sites are located on a very low-lying Pallikaranai marshland (see Figure 1). By late 2015, many of these housing units were lying vacant, awaiting eviction of slum dwellers from the city. This forms the backdrop for the resettlement drives that have routinely followed disasters in Chennai, including post-tsunami in 2005 and post-floods in 2015.

Kannagi Nagar is built on the Pallikaranai marsh along the outlet at Okkiyam Maduvu (a narrow drainage channel that connects the marsh with the Buckingham Canal, from where it goes into the sea). Semmencherry and Perumbakkam are built on low-lying marsh that plays a very important environmental role and provides natural drainage.[4] It takes surface water runoff not just for the city, but also the larger region. These settlements, along with the other development in the marshland, have increased its imperviousness, raised surface runoff volumes and affected the local drainage network. The tenements built on the low-lying areas and wetlands suffer frequent flooding. The Chennai master plan also identifies that other built-up areas in the watershed region get flooded during monsoons.[5]

Over the past 50 years, nearly 90 per cent of the Pallikaranai Marsh has been lost, and areas such as Thoraipakkam, Pallikaranai and Perungudi have been converted into residential areas. Roads, infrastructure, municipal landfills, sewage treatment facilities and so on have also taken their toll on the overall natural drainage pattern.[4] It is these building activities that have led to the frequent flooding in and around the marshland and across many now built-up areas.[6]

## Recommendations

**Local governments should avoid creating or exacerbating risk by learning from past interventions.** It is crucial that both state and local government departments develop flexible and multi-stakeholder processes to monitor and evaluate past interventions (both post-disaster and development-related programmes) to avoid repeating past mistakes.

**Both government and nongovernmental organisations should make shared learning on past relocation programmes a part of their institutional structure.** This would facilitate learning from one project to the next, help share and embed best practices, and leverage the strengths of both kinds of organisation.

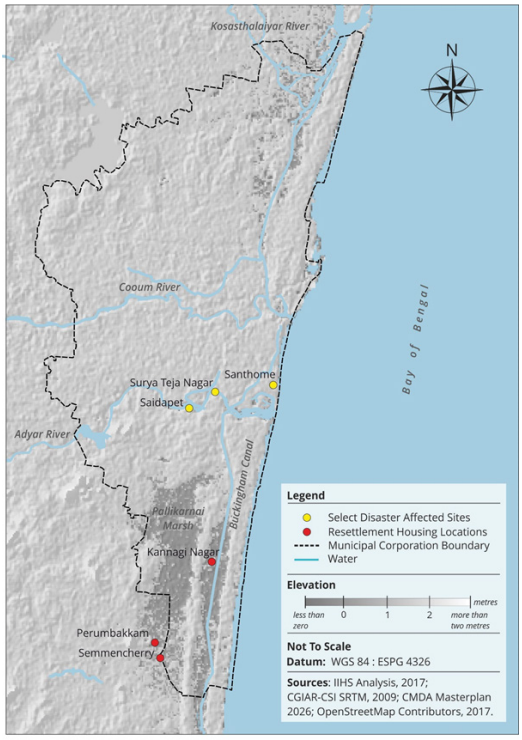
**Development authorities and humanitarian workers planning relocation or rehabilitation programmes must work with the communities affected.** Community-led assessments are needed, in partnership with local NGOs. This helps recognise the real risks faced by communities and stop relocation programmes that accumulate, or create new, risks.

**All government departments, especially for housing, land and disaster management, must build multi-stakeholder engagement into development decision making.** This is crucial to managing the many growing, and often conflicting, demands in urban areas. Key stakeholders such as real estate developers and the private sector need to be especially included.

**Government should support participatory platforms that can conduct preventative assessments before disasters strike.** Vulnerability and impact assessments are crucial to managing disaster risk and must be done before crises arise. Good vulnerability and impact assessments will guide actions to build resilience for short-, medium- and long-term time frames. The assessments must:

- Explore how risk changes with geographical scales and over time
- Assess the social, psychological, economic and political impacts people are likely to suffer

**Figure 1. Locations of resettlement sites in low-lying areas of the city. These sites are also over 30 kilometres away from the original settlement locations.**




from disasters, as well as the likely damage to the systems they rely on — for example, access to institutions and infrastructure

- Consider the city more broadly, for example assess environmental risks and explore how risks affect communities differently (the equity implications)
- Go beyond developing a technical understanding of vulnerability and actually develop goals for sustainability (socio-economic and ecological) and equity (across different urban communities).

**Local government and other humanitarian actors should fund and promote ways to help communities learn about risk reduction and disaster management.** This is central to building local capacities and capabilities that will make communities more resilient and make relief efforts more effective.

**State government must start actively risk-proofing their development agenda.** Disaster management and risk reduction cannot be done reactively. For long-term resilience, the state government must develop a roadmap and build capacity that will help 'risk-proof' the development agenda, and move away from ad-hoc rehabilitation and the vulnerability it brings. A risk-proofing mindset focuses on making climate compatibility a mainstream part of ongoing development initiatives, for example building climate-sensitive housing as standard or disincentivising encroachment into urban green spaces that could have long-term environmental implications for the city and region.

**Forced evictions in response to disasters must stop.** Our final, and perhaps strongest, recommendation is that forced evictions of residents from informal settlements should be banned. They are counterproductive because they undermine people's ability to act for themselves (undermining their 'agency'), they erode trust and exacerbate inequality. If preventive and participatory vulnerability assessments are undertaken as routine government processes, these can identify settlements to be relocated and give residents enough notice to manage the physical, economic and psychological impacts. Thus, relocation can be done as part of a long-term recovery process in a dignified, mutually agreed and risk-reducing way rather than as a crude reaction to disasters.

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## Notes

[1] Jain, G *et al.* (forthcoming) Long-term implications of humanitarian responses: a case of Chennai. IIED, London. / [2] Ministry of Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India (2011) Rajiv Awaas Yojna (RAY) Guidelines for Preparation of Slum Free City Plan of Action (2013-2022). http://mhupa.gov.in/writereaddata/RAYGuidelinesSFCP.pdf / [3] Transparent Chennai (2013) THE JnNURM IN CHENNAI from 2005 - 2012: An assessment with a focus on the urban poor. www.transparentchennai.com/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/10/THE%20JNNURM%20IN%20CHENNAI%20v7.pdf; quoted in Venkat, T, Subadevan, M and Kamath, L (2015). Implementation of JNNURM -BSUP : A Case Study of the Housing Sector in Chennai. Centre for Urban Policy and Governance, School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Impact of Infrastructure and Governance Transformations on Small, Medium and Big Cities in India. / [4] Vencatesan, J *et al.* (2014) Comprehensive Management Plan for Pallikaranai Marsh 2014-2019. Care Earth Trust. www.pallikaranaimarsh.tn.gov.in/userfiles/files/Pallikaranai%20Management%20Plan%202014.pdf / [5] Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (2008) Macro Drainage System in CMA. In: Volume 3, Second Master Plan for Chennai Metropolitan Area, 2026 (pp. 94–99). Retrieved from: www.cmdachennai.gov.in/Volume3_English_PDF/Vol3_Chapter10_MacroDrainage.pdf / [6] Drescher, A *et al.* (2007) Risk assessment of extreme precipitation in the coastal areas of Chennai as an element of catastrophe prevention. *Forum DKKV/CEDIM: disaster reduction in climate change* 15:16.10.2007.

## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

The Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) is committed to the equitable and sustainable transformation of Indian settlements. Its interdisciplinary orientation brings together theory and praxis in South Asia and engages with knowledge across the globe.

The Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) is a National Institute that works on development issues, agro-rural aspects of Tamil Nadu, and the socioeconomically backward population in India.

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