

**Should they stay or should they go?
Clashing policy perspectives on climate change and resettlement**

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François Gemenne, Research Fellow Climate and Migrations,
Institut du développement durable et des relations internationales (IDDRI), 75006 Paris,
Email: francois.gemenne at iddri.org

***Abstract:** This contribution presents some personal reflections on the policy directions that should be taken by the resettlement processes that will be associated with climate change. It argues in particular that resettlements should be envisioned in a different way: they should be addressed globally, and not just by each country, and should span over two or three generations. The contribution makes the case that resettlements don't have to be brutal processes imposed upon people, but can be incremental transformations decided by the people themselves, provided they are given the opportunity to do so.*

Introduction: The Rebels of Vendée

In March 2010, a violent storm hit the region of Vendée, in France. The death toll of the disaster surprised most observers: 53 people perished, most of them in the flooding of two small coastal towns, La-Faute-sur-Mer and L’Aiguillon-sur-Mer. Shortly after the disaster, the French government established so-called ‘black zones’ in the region, which were deemed no longer suitable for inhabitation, and decided to resettle the people currently living in these ‘black zones’ - including large parts of La-Faute-sur-Mer and L’Aiguillon-sur-Mer. Under the resettlement scheme, the people could choose where to relocate, and would receive as a compensation the actual market value of their house – before the floods. The decision was met with approbation from most risk assessment experts, but with outrage from the communities of the two small towns. The people protested, demonstrated and rebelled, supported by their local authorities who refused to implement the government’s decisions, widely seen as bureaucrats’ lunacies, with no consideration of the people’s feelings. The government was forced to move backwards, and the resettlement scheme was abandoned.

What is particular about this aborted resettlement is that many people would have made a considerable financial benefit if they had agreed to the scheme. Their house would have been repaid in the full, at the market price before the flood, even though some of the houses had been completely destroyed and the real estate market had plummeted after the disaster. But despite these highly favourable financial conditions, most refused to go. Another particularity is that most of the houses targeted by the resettlement scheme were not primary residences, but holiday homes. One could hardly speak of a community: 45% of the houses in La-Faute-sur-Mer and a staggering 86% in L’Aiguillon-sur-Mer were secondary residences that people used to spend some of their week-ends and holidays. And yet, despite all of this, the people were so attached to the place that they refused, preferring to stay in places that are, by all accounts, likely to be flooded again, resulting in more deaths and devastation.

In developing countries, many regions are much more exposed to the impacts of climate change than Vendée. These regions are also much more populated, with people forming communities that have sometimes inhabited there for centuries. They are not holiday towns made up of secondary homes. Most

likely, their governments will not be able to afford to compensate for houses or land at full market price. And yet resettlement will need to be on the agenda, at a point or another.

Why we need to have this conversation

Though I still would like to believe that we will manage to keep global average temperature increase below 2°C by the end of the century – as most of you would, I guess – there is now compelling evidence that we will not manage to cut global greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2050. That's in 39 years, and reduction by half is what we would need to do if we want to stand a decent chance (50-50%) of limiting global average temperature increase to 2°C by 2100. In the (unlikely) event that governments would respect their current (and non-binding) pledges of emission reductions, the global average temperature increase would amount to about 3.5°C. Actually, in 2010 we broke the world record of greenhouse gas emissions, with a 5% jump from 2008. That was the year just after the Copenhagen summit, where world leaders pledged to take urgent action to reduce carbon emissions. Notwithstanding the economic crisis and the Greek government, I am confident that we will set a new world record in 2011.

Of course, we need to do everything we can to prevent this from happening. But at the same time, we need to face reality and accept that a +4°C world is no longer an improbable, doom-and-gloom scenario. Such a temperature increase would result in major environmental changes, affecting widely populated regions: too many people live in regions that are highly exposed to the impacts of climate change. For the better or the worse, governments will thus consider the issue of resettlement. In a number of cases, it is already considered, and sometimes already under-way.

A matter of rights and responsibilities

Before we come to the issue of resettlement, we need to ask ourselves the question: Why do so many people live in regions that are so dangerous? The answer to this question will often be different in the North and in the South. In developing countries, it is often because that was the only land that was available, or affordable, to poor and/or marginalized communities. Or because this is where the work opportunities were located. In both cases, it pertains to the responsibility of government. Governments can influence where people settle – after all, it's all about the economy, stupid! Governments have a responsibility to make sure that people settle in safe areas, and this means, as was suggested by Cecilia Tacoli, that they should take more responsibility for the spatial planning of the economy.

When resettlement is considered, as many have pointed out, the human rights of the resettled populations should be paramount. I will not elaborate on this point, which has already been discussed at length, but the rights pertaining to housing, land and property appear as particularly important, and are also the key condition of a smooth integration with the host community. Electoral rights are often neglected, and yet the political participation and representation of resettled communities need to be guaranteed.

Finally, it seems to me that people should also have the right to stay, i.e. the right not to be resettled. If resettlement is conducted in the right way, with proper consultation, compensation and improvement of livelihoods, it should appear as an attractive option for those living in vulnerable areas. But we need to recognize the right of those who want to stay to do so – even if the resettlement is conducted in a proper way, even if the majority of the community agrees to be resettled. Because there might be cultural, family or personal circumstances that make resettlement an unattractive option, or because people simply don't always act rationally. Not only should these people have the right to stay, but the government has a responsibility to protect them, which includes a duty to assist them when the environmental change – possibly a disaster – occurs. Those who decide to stay should not be abandoned by governments.

Do not let governments play alone

I am a political scientist. If there is one thing that my studies have taught me, it is that governments should not be trusted. This is not to say that governments are evil, simply that they have different and conflicting agendas – elections coming up, economic interests, etc. – amongst which the interest of vulnerable communities are unlikely to come first.

First, environmental hazards might come as a handy excuse for governments seeking to displace population for political reasons. Such reasons can include the dislocation of ethnic minority groups, gerrymandering, or economic planning. Thus resettlement processes need to be carefully monitored.

Second, and probably more importantly, developing countries should not be the only ones supporting the costly burden of resettlement. They bear very little responsibility for climate impacts, and need to be assisted by developed countries. This assistance needs to be financial at first, but could also take the form of the provision of migration opportunities. Though resettlement processes have been almost exclusively intra-national so far, international migration routes could also be expanded, which would allow for the possibility of international resettlement.

Overall, my point is that resettlement associated with climate change should not be addressed only on a national level, but needs to be considered globally. Because it is matter of justice, but also because it could offer new opportunities. And in the long-term, this discussion should not just be about governments resettling some communities, but about the geographical distribution of population in a +4°C, 9 billion-people world.

Finally, consider the next generations

A key reason for the failure of previous resettlement processes – including the one attempted in Vendée – is that they were imposed on people and conducted over relatively short periods of time. In other words, they were brutal processes rather than incremental transformations. This doesn't have to be the case with climate change.

A great injustice of climate change is that future generations will suffer because of the carbon emissions of their parents and grandparents. Our chance, however, is that these generations are not born yet, which gives us a bit of time to plan ahead. Resettlement could indeed span over two or three generations: people don't have to be uprooted; instead they could be encouraged to settle in safer areas from the start. Providing new job opportunities and new places to settle would allow for relocation to be chosen by the people themselves as the rational course of action. Resettlement would no longer be an imposed decision, but rather a choice made by the people themselves, in order to secure more sustainable livelihoods.

Progress has often been defined as the certainty that our children would live a better life than we do. Climate change has been a key factor that has called this certainty into question. Spanning resettlement processes over several generations could restore the hope that some children could lead a better life than their parents.