**Assessing Contrasting Approaches to Planning for Climate Change Induced Resettlement: Case Studies in China and the USA**[1]

Panel contribution to the Population-Environment Research Network Cyberseminar, "Preparing for Population Displacement and Resettlement Associated with Climate Change and Large Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Projects" (November 2011), http://www.populationenvironmentresearch.org/seminars.jsp

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***Abstract:*** *Climate change induced displacement and resettlement is clearly emerging as an issue communities around the world need to address. One might assume that responses will be consistent with the ways in which practitioners and citizens have traditionally planned and made decisions, which reflect their disparate political and economic conditions. If so, it may be valuable to consider how communities have responded to similar situations in the past so we can predict what the range of responses to climate change may look like in the future. By better understanding the various paths followed in analogous situations but under different regimes, we can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each and how we may improve upon them. This nascent research is based on two very different situations, which could be considered archetypes of two different political and economic frameworks – the resettlement of Tibetan nomads in Qinghai, China, and the response in the United States, and New Orleans in particular, to the displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina.*[2] *The Chinese approach can be typified as authoritarian in nature, favoring scientific management by a cadre of professional, centralized planners. The American approach can be considered market-oriented and laissez faire, minimizing government intervention. Both planning frameworks have strengths and weakness, and much can be learned from them.* ***The Chinese approach is better able to tackle the resettlement question proactively, using information to make decisive decisions****. In contrast,* ***uncertainty around the impacts of climate change, the inadequate dissemination and consideration of information, and resistance to government intervention make proactive decision making in the American context difficult****. The Chinese approach does, however, have shortcomings; resettlement plans are largely generic and thus insensitive to individual needs and preferences, and officials hold a great deal of power that can be used nefariously.*

## Introduction and hypothesis

How communities prepare for or respond to the push to migrate in response to climate change will almost certainly look quite different in different places and at different times. The variation may be attributable to a variety of factors, like resource availability and evolving understanding of best practices. I postulate that at least some of the variation will also be attributable to the political and economic regimes in which any given displacement or resettlement is taking place. That is, climate change-related decision-making is naturally nested within, and responsive to, the broader governance and economic frameworks of the countries within which it is happening. Acknowledging this may lead to more specific policy recommendations.

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[1] This contribution is adapted directly from my 2007 Master's thesis, which is available online at: http://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/50123. Thank you to PERN for the opportunity to participate in this seminar.

[2] Reflecting on the de Sherbinin, Castro and Gemenne (2010) background paper, I believe you could categorize the Qinghai response as *resettlement* and the responses to Katrina as part of *displacement*. When framed as such, this becomes a contrast of resettlement in preparation for potential risks versus response after displacement takes place.

The cases used to explore this assertion are: The resettlement of Tibetan nomads in Qinghai Province, China, and migration induced by Hurricane Katrina in the United States (US). These cases were chosen based on various criteria, including: The differences in political and economic systems; the presence of drivers of resettlement or displacement that are expected to be increasingly significant under a changing climate (e.g. storm surge); the fact that climate change *may* have been a direct factor in the cases; uncertainties in decision making in both cases; and because they involve marginalized communities.

Although both are ultimately hybrids, I would assert that China and the United States represent suitable archetypes of bureaucratic scientific management and neoliberalism respectively (Friedmann 1987; Baum 1988; Campbell and Marshall 1999). Various aspects of planning and decision-making in each country support this assertion. Despite market liberalization, China is still an autocratic one-party state. As of 2003, the state still controlled over half of the fixed industrial assets; and decision-making is largely opaque, involving a professional elite prescribing strict rules to be followed (Pei 2006). In contrast, in the US, many services that elsewhere are considered public goods and the monopoly of the state (e.g., healthcare and even prison management) are provided by the private sector.

While these two cases in no way represent the breadth of possible resettlement or displacement options, their respective positioning in such different political and economic systems provides an informative contrast for comparison. Table 1 contrasts how we might expect these two different political and economic frameworks to translate into planning for and responding to climate change-related migration. Next we will consider what was learned from each case in practice, based on interviews, site visits, and literature review.

***Table 1 – Expected differences in how China and the United States plan for climate change-related displacement and resettlement***

| China | United States |
|---|---|
| Decision-makers say when and where to resettle | Households choose how to respond when displaced |
| Single government resettlement plan centrally coordinated | Multiple responses, most coming from outside of government |
| Opaque centralized decision making | Decentralized decision making, often in private hands and with varying degrees of transparency |
| Planning and decision-making is proactive | Decision-making is reactive |

**Resettlement in Qinghai: A New Life for Tibetan Nomads**

Chinese officials are in the midst of resettling traditionally nomadic Tibetan communities into government-built colonies in larger towns and cities. The climate-change related reasons provided for resettlement are to reverse desertification and restore threatened rivers that are of national importance, and to eliminate chronic poverty, which is only expected to get worse as the climate changes and desertification continues (Namgyal 2007). As expected under China's model of strong centralized governance, this resettlement effort is highly coordinated under the rubric of strong general plans (China Tibet Information Center 2001; Wang 2009). The government claims that these programs are state-of-the-art, providing improved livelihoods and more opportunities for those involved than they had previously enjoyed (Wang 2009).

Government-initiated resettlement may, by some metrics, be improving livelihoods and combating desertification. One challenge, however, is that it is not clear *when* resettlement is the best option, nor *how* it should be carried out. Problems emerge because the resettled are not engaged in the planning

process and have little choice. This leaves a great deal of opportunity for decision-makers to act against the public interest. Accusations of corruption and poor management regularly arise.

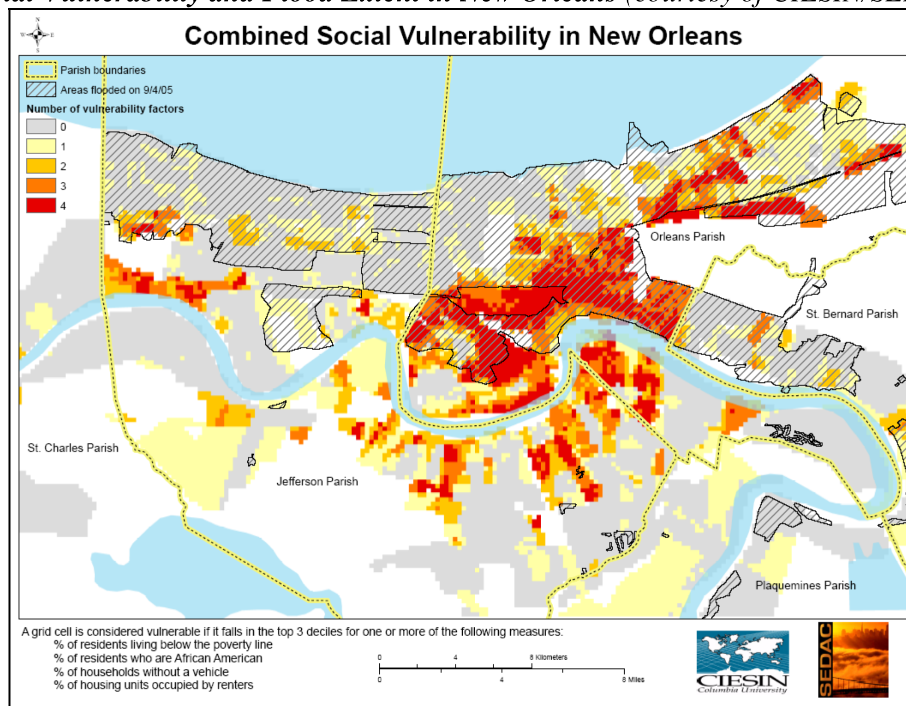
One strength of the Chinese approach is that the planning conducted is fairly comprehensive, addressing a wide range of needs from shelter to fuel provision. There is also an element of equity, with the needs of all, including the most marginalized, at least theoretically addressed. The corresponding weakness is that this approach is also very restrictive; there is little room for the resettled to improvise to overcome shortcomings, or better meet their preferences (Mkhargyal 2009). The response is not sensitive to individual needs and wishes, with a single approach applied to everyone. It is also insensitive to local cultural traditions and ecological conditions – i.e., rather than using local materials and traditional building techniques, the homes in most resettlement colonies are uniformly constructed from imported bricks. Furthermore, despite claims to the contrary, it is not clear that the state can satisfactorily meet everyone's needs. How peoples' needs, including food, fuel and water, are being met must be considered – it is far from clear that service provision is currently sufficient.

Resettlement has profound impacts on communities, particularly when it involves significant lifestyle changes, such as the loss of ability to herd livestock (Namgyal 2007). The changes in culture and social norms are significant. The actions of the state and social and economic conditions in the communities in which the former nomads are being resettled are explicitly and implicitly weakening self-sufficiency, increasing dependence on the state, and leading to other social problems.

**Displacement in America: Katrina's Refugees**

Hurricane Katrina came ashore from the Gulf of Mexico in August of 2005, taking over 1,800 lives and causing more than USD 81 billion in damage (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2009). The City of New Orleans was hit particularly hard, with levy breeches allowing water to flood large swaths of the city, including many of the poorest neighborhoods (see Figure 1). Slow and inadequate government preparations and response made matters much worse (Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina 2006).

***Figure 1. Social Vulnerability and Flood Extent in New Orleans*** *(courtesy of CIESIN/SEDAC)*



While the stranding of residents in the city received more media attention, the mass migration of evacuees during and post-storm was no less shocking and unwieldy. Over one million people were displaced, approximately 400,000 from New Orleans alone, in what was the largest mass migration in the United States since the Dust Bowl (Appleseed 2006). Most found themselves in nearby cities, with destinations decided based on a variety of factors, from relatives with a free couch to where the bus they got on happened to stop. Many were not able to return home quickly; only one quarter of residents from flooded areas of New Orleans had returned a year after the storm (Appleseed 2006).

The sensitive question of whether or not it is appropriate to reverse the displacement and rebuild vulnerable parts of New Orleans that are below sea level must be asked (Henderson 2005). Some predict that climate change will continue to make matters worse. One potential weakness of the neoliberal approach is that even if decision-makers deem resettlement – or 'selective rebuilding', as the Urban Land Institute blue ribbon panel proposed – a suitable response to the increased risks, they are often powerless to impose it. Zoning and building codes obviously set some limits, but most decisions around what should and should not be rebuilt in New Orleans have largely been left to the market and individual choice. A significant racial and class divide in New Orleans has compounded the challenge of collectively agreeing on whether or not to redevelop, as many perceive any suggestion that the poorest, and hardest hit, areas should not be rebuilt as a nefarious attempt to gentrify the city to the benefit of the corporate white elite (Reardon 2006). Aside from ongoing vulnerability, leaving the rebuilding decision to individuals can be inefficient from a resource allocation perspective; the city has to run services across its entire former territory, for example, rather than focusing on zones deemed most suitable for rebuilding (Henderson 2005).

The citizens of New Orleans responded to the displacement caused by Hurricane Katrina in a variety of different ways. This ability to respond to climate change, or any crisis, as one wishes is a strength of the neoliberal approach. Marginalized populations have, however, had a more difficult time finding satisfactory options, which is a weakness of this framework. In fact, the amount of resources one has ultimately seems to be a better indicator of which option one has chosen, or had chosen for them. Those with the resources to rebuild in New Orleans have often done so, though some have chosen to rebuild elsewhere. Those who could not rebuild but had employment opportunities or support networks in other cities have often resettled in them, at least temporarily. Those who are willing and able to live by the requirements of non-profit initiatives (e.g., Brad Pitt's Make it Right, Frank Stronach's Magnaville and Habitat for Humanity's Musicians' Village), and are fortunate enough to be selected, have often taken that route.[3] And finally, those who have nothing else often found themselves in FEMA trailer parks, and are still struggling. In other words, the notion of individual "choice" in the neoliberal paradigm may be an illusion for many.

Self-sufficiency is seen as a priority under the neoliberal framework, and the supporting objective of helping people get established and into the workforce is typically highlighted in projects initiated by governments and non-profits alike. The strength of emphasizing self-sufficiency is that it fosters resilience at the individual and family level, lessening dependency on government agencies that may not be able or willing to meet everyone's needs in all cases. The weakness is that self-sufficiency is often emphasized at the cost of a safety net for the marginalized. Post-Katrina, the government failed to protect the poor, leaving them in New Orleans without an adequate emergency response plan, then failed to provide satisfactory housing and resettlement options (Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina 2006).

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[3] More information on these initiatives may be found at www.makeitrightnola.org; goo.gl/lklc6; and http://habitat-nola.org/about/musicians_village respectively.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

The successes and failures of these two cases suggest that both the more authoritarian scientific management and market-oriented neoliberal approaches to planning and decision-making have strengths and weaknesses. The key observations drawn from each are presented in Table 2 for comparison.

Any implications drawn from this, or other, analysis must recognize that overarching political and economic frameworks are unlikely to radically change in most times and places, but can be improved upon, responding to their weaknesses and capitalizing on their strengths. While acknowledging that this research is very preliminary, some potential recommendations and areas for further investigation include:

- explore opportunities for facilitated multi-stakeholder decision-making that actively engages officials and communities;
- implement stronger instruments for information exchange between decision-makers and citizens;
- consider how stability and flexibility may be appropriately balanced in plans;
- identify ways to foster self-sufficiency while providing adequate safety nets;
- explicitly set equity and social justice parameters; and
- consider the roles of non-governmental organizations.

Case studies like these offer opportunities to assess how decision makers in various countries with different political and economic frameworks may plan for and respond to resettlement and displacement. General best-practice recommendations on how to manage climate change-related displacement and resettlement are valuable, but it would be naïve to forget that action is not taken in a vacuum, but in well-established economic, political and social contexts. By examining cases in particular contexts that approximate what may be implemented in the future in light of climate change, researchers and practitioners can improve more precisely on *theories in use* rather than just *espoused theories* (Argyris and Schön 1996).

***Table 2 – Key observations drawn from the case studies***

| China | United States |
|---|---|
| State resettling nomads proactively; strong response to perceived change | Little up-front planning despite warnings; government response to disaster is weak; resettle only in response to disaster (i.e. when need clear) |
| Reasons for resettlement not always clear | Most information freely shared, but not necessarily translated into direct action |
| Single government-orchestrated response – not necessarily appropriate in all contexts | Multiple (not entirely mutually exclusive) responses, some public but most private, including: Rebuild in New Orleans; move to other cities; FEMA trailer parks; NGO initiatives (e.g. Magnaville) |
| State purports to act as a caretaker indefinitely, promising shelter, food, fuel, and so on | Emphasis on getting people 'back on their feet' so they are self-sufficient and meeting their own needs as quickly as possible |
| State not meeting these promises adequately in all areas:<br>-Resettled populations need to get fuel and food from relatives<br>-Shelter provided, but of poor quality<br>-Provided healthcare and education, but sometimes difficult to access | Some are able to adapt well, but others are not recovering satisfactorily:<br>-Those with resources rebuild and/or resettle elsewhere independently<br>-Marginalized depend on a variety of (often unsatisfactory) programs |
| Stringent plans that are strictly followed | Various plans; in Magnaville, loose plans with constant innovation and change from the project team |

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