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Advocacy and research priorities for consent-based and well-supported climate relocations

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Climate-related planned relocations are happening globally yet vary significantly. Issuing general recommendations for planned relocations is difficult, as no two relocations are the same, even within one country. Indeed they are complex multi-stakeholder processes that require iterative risk and vulnerability assessments, consultative decision-making, planning, implementation, and long-term monitoring, all of which are culturally, geographically and politically context-dependent. As a result, the term "planned relocation" is applied to situations marked by very different community needs, capacities and preferences, and across national contexts with wide-ranging institutional, economic, and political capacity. To navigate these differences, conceptual frameworks comparing and categorising relocation cases are essential. They help stakeholders involved in relocation decision-making identify broadly applicable lessons without overgeneralizing and obscuring context-specific needs. Here we develop a framework for researchers, communities and their advocates to identify advocacy priorities and ultimately ensure more consensual and well-supported relocation practice. In this presentation, we identify two critical questions that community advocates and researchers should ask first of any relocation process to understand the type of relocation case and consequent advocacy priorities: 1. Does the community consent to the relocation? 2. Does the community receive the support that it needs from external actors? We use well-documented case studies to illustrate four relocation "types", concluding that relocations are most likely to lead to positive outcomes when they are consensual and well supported. Critically, we also find that levels of consent and support are dynamic, meaning cases can change types as relocation plans and projects progress and underscoring how consent and support must be continuously re-affirmed. Finally, we find that the distinctions between relocation cases highlighted by questions of consent and support offer critical insights into the set of action and advocacy priorities required in different types of planned relocation.

Examining the Impact of Multi-Level Funding Structures on Flood Relocation Programs: Case Studies in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic

Author: Melissa Tier

The limited number of climate-induced planned relocation programs that have occurred in the U.S. have largely been tackled through government-funded buyout and acquisition strategies (Siders & Gerber-Chavez, 2021). However, evidence consistently shows that buyout programs have suffered from long wait times, complex and uncoordinated multi-level governance processes, inadequate federal funding, lack of transparency or attention to equity impacts, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation, among other concerns (CRS, 2024; Siders & Gerber-Chavez, 2021; Weber & Moore, 2019).   Of particular importance to relocation programs is ensuring more distributive, procedural, and other forms of environmental justice – especially given that current data suggest poor existing outcomes on these fronts. For example, in a review paper, Mach et al. (2019) find that wealthier and denser counties are more likely to implement buyout programs – but within those counties, households in lower-income and more racially diverse areas are more likely to actually receive a buyout. Curran-Groome et al. (2021) also note that existing inefficiencies within federal application processes place an undue burden on – and therefore limit access for – lower-income and less staffed local governments. In a 2024 report, the Congressional Research Service's list of recommended improvements includes: dedicated funding for buyouts, pre-approval of buyouts before disasters, and ensuring affordable housing. Siders & Gerber-Chavez (2021) also recommend state-run programs that maximize stable, local funding (as opposed to funding via one-off federal disaster appropriations) and that offer high levels of technical support to municipalities. Despite these recognized needs, there has been little research to date on the funding mechanisms utilized by existing relocation programs. Many programs, in fact, incorporate multiple funding streams – due in large part to the fact that there is no one federal program or grant structure that oversees buyout implementation at the state or local level. In fact, the Congressional Research Service identified in its May 2024 report that there was "no database that identifies all federal funding for floodplain buyouts", let alone meaningful programmatic oversight. (In December 2024, the White House released its first "Community-Driven Relocation: Guide to Federal Programs and Resources" – which was drafted by a sub-committee of the Biden Administration's National Climate Task Force. But as of the time of this application, one week into the Trump Administration, many of those same federal programs and resources appear to be in jeopardy.)   In this research project, I take a bottom-up approach to addressing the knowledge gap of how relocation programs are funded and how these funding structures impact equity-based planning and outcomes. First, I conducted detailed archival and interview data analysis on New Jersey's multi-decadal, state-run buyout program

called Blue Acres. I document how each pot that provides money to Blue Acres – including but not limited to FEMA HMGP, HUD CDBG-DR, and state appropriations – has its own stipulations (or sometimes lack thereof) for: appraising the fair-market value of a property, determining which properties are prioritized as high flood risk, which homeowners are considered vulnerable or disadvantaged, what is done with the land after a purchase, and so on. Municipal land use laws and local relocation incentives add to the complexity of the Blue Acres program's structure, all in all creating a dizzying range of possibilities even within a singular "state" program. Second, I compare these results in New Jersey to parallel data collected from other programs in the Mid-Atlantic: two post-Hurricane Sandy programs that have since ended (New York City's Build It Back and New York State's NY Rising) and four programs currently in design (New York City's Rainproof NYC flood mobility work area; New York State's Blue Buffers buyout program and, somewhat confusingly, a separate managed retreat initiative; and Philadelphia's to-be-named flood relocation initiative). As with NJ Blue Acres, these other programs draw on heterogenous funding sources that intersect with federal, state, and local policy. I focus in particular here on these programs' eligibility criteria, use of social vulnerability indicators, and definitions of climate and environmental justice communities. Finally, I offer recommendations for improved relocation policies in the coming years – such as increasing community-driven planning, engaging with private-sector voluntary consensus standards, experimenting with innovative funding opportunities, and more. I also take into account the current Trump Administration's antagonism to and dismantling of federal climate and environmental justice resources. I discuss ways in which these case study buyout programs, and the funding sources that they rely on, are resilient and ways in which they are vulnerable to targeted assaults under the current federal administration.

Lessons from the field: Buy-In Community Planning's Community Partnerships Program

Author: Kelly Leilani Main

Buy-In Community Planning, Inc. (Buy-In) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to improving voluntary home buyout programs for flood and pollution affected communities. Since its inception in 2020, Buy-In has partnered with six community-based-organizations (CBOs) in five states and Puerto Rico through its Community Partnerships Program (CPP). Buy-In's CPP utilizes a household surveying technique similar to the Housing and Land Rights Network's Eviction Impact Assessment Tool, which is grounded in the international human rights of internally displaced persons. The base survey is modified in close partnership with CBO partners to ensure it is locally appropriate, contextually relevant, and useful for fulfilling the needs of CBO partners' organizational goals. Data from the survey is used with the goal of creating more holistic relocation support programs that are able to direct relocation resources where they are needed most, but the data also provides insight into other key indicators regarding mental, physical, and financial health, community housing needs, and adaptation aspirations. Respondents seeking buyouts are also automatically entered into a waiting list of households in communities with a rolling buyout program, such as Buy-In's partnership with the City of De Soto, MO. Data gathered in the survey can also be used to inform more robust planning efforts, such as the current Relocation to Restoration planning initiative in Pascagoula, MS. CPP CBO partners can also use the survey data to advocate to their local government to pursue certain flood adaptation measures or establish a voluntary relocation program. The range of examples provided by Buy-In's CPP program provide a unique insight into the challenges and opportunities of pushing a community-led relocation program in diverse contexts across the country. In this session, Buy-In Community Planning founder and Executive Director will share more about Buy-In's approach to surveying with CBO partners in its Community Partnerships Program, as well as results from more than 1000 surveys to date. Buy-In Project Manager Jennifer Crosslin will share more about the NFWF NCRF-funded Relocation to Restoration Project in Pascagoula, MS. Community members and city officials from other ongoing CPP programs will be invited to participate virtually or in person pending acceptance.

What Are You Doing In My Swamp?: A Case Study of a Community-led Buyout and Ecosystem Restoration Program in Staten Island, NY, from 2012 - 2024

Author: Hannah Dancy

This project analyzes the after-effects of the Managed Retreat Buyout Program in the Oakwood Beach community of Staten Island, New York, after Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. While the short-term managed retreat program was viewed by experts and community members as a success, the long-term ecosystem restoration project is viewed as a failure. These differences in perception are due to a lack of a long-term plan, combined with policy mismanagement and miscommunication of how Nature-based Solutions will benefit the community. To prevent such issues in the future, a set of guidelines and questions are developed to aid various subject matter experts in the implementation and long-term continuity of Nature-based Solutions as hazard mitigation and managed retreat practices.