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SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF RELOCATION OF
DISASTER-AT-RISK COMMUNITIES:
SOME QUESTIONS AND SOME PROBLEMS*

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF ADJUSTMENT AND RELOCATION:
SOME QUESTIONS AND SOME COMMENTS

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The following remarks are offered with the intent of challenging what
may at times to some seem obvious. The central thesis is that the notion
of relocating people away from dangerous localities is not as simple or
self-evident as may appear at first glance. The process of relocation is
very complex and it is not something to be automatically accepted as a good
thing.

Relocation as a preemptive and mitigation measure in the face of possible
danger is not a new activity. The history of the human race in all parts
of the world is marked by stories of permanent movement of populations in
the face of threats to social life. To a considerable extent the migration
patterns of many groups is partly rooted in such activities.

There is a difference between relocation and evacuation, at least in
principle. Evacuation involves a round trip; people leave with the inten-
tion of returning. Relocation involves the idea of a one way journey. It
is permanent and therefore different from evacuation.

However, while in principle the difference between evacuation and re-
location is clear, actual cases of the physical movement of people are some-
time not easily labeled with one or the other term. Evacuees sometime
leave with the intention of returning, but never do. At times, potential
victims of disasters depart with no intent of ever coming back, but even-
tually do return. On occasion, the crisis situation is very ambiguous

as to outcome--is the story of Noah and the Great Flood in the Western religious tradition an instance of evacuation or relocation?

The account given of the use of the Ark by Noah does, however, suggest some central questions which can be asked about relocation. Among central issues and factors involved are:

1. What is to be moved and relocated?

As we shall try to indicate, if the answer given is "people", that is both incomplete and misleading. Evacuation may involve people (actually in most cases it really consists of household units), but more needs to be moved in relocation than just people.

2. What are the means to be used in relocation?

There are all sorts of possibilities. For example, direct or indirect measures can be used to bring about the movement. There are all sorts of issues, too. For instance, what are the limits of voluntary means, or for that matter, are there no limits even to involuntary means?

3. What are the obstacles to be overcome in bringing about relocation?

The other side of the coin, of course, is what are the factors which can facilitate the process? In both cases, there are a number of factors involved, ranging from the physical to the social psychological.

4. What is the purpose of relocation?

It might seem to be to get a population at risk out from an area. But if the "costs" in the broad sense of the term, are more than the benefits, is that a meaningful goal? Presumably, movement is sought not just for its own sake; if so, the goal of relocation is not as simple as may appear at first glance.

Let us consider these four questions and related issues in more detail.

1. What is to be moved and relocated?

It is no accident that populations, families, groups, and communities are physically located in certain neighborhoods and places. Such physical placements are the result of very complex and historically rooted natural social forces. A village is located in a particular spatial location for many reasons--it just does not happen to be there accidently.

There are some very important implications of the general observation just made. Relocation could be working against natural social forces which have led that specific population or community to be located in that specific place. This is particularly true with respect to the short run. Thus, you might want to relocated a village which has been in a particular locality for hundreds of years, because of the possibility of flooding in the next ten years. The time dimensions involved simply reflect the fact that in one case there has been a slow, natural social evolution, and that in the other case, there is a sudden, planned social intervention. The latter act is often not consistent with the former process.

Furthermore, relocation involves not so much the moving of individuals or people, but of families, villages, and communities. In fact, in a fundamental sense, you have to move a way of life. There has to be movement not only of where people live, but where they work, where they play, where they worship, and where they carry out the multiple integrated functions that constitute social life.

Put still another way, relocation involves moving a collectivity--the complex of the physical and social which is the neighborhood, the village, and

the community. It is relatively easy to move physical entities per se.
It is much harder to relocate the psychological webs, the social net-
works, and social support systems which are the heart of social life. In
some post disaster recovery efforts in the United States, individuals and
families have been moved from their destroyed homes to distant trailer
camps and parks. The results have often been a second disaster as victims
have been uprooted from familiar settings, symbolically important things,
crucial social ties, and interactions. Uprooting people from their way of
life is bad enough in an evacuation from a disaster, but at least the evacuees
can look forward in such situations to their returning to their old way
of life. In a relocation situation, with the idea of permanancy in the
move, the negative consequences could even be worst.

In developing countries in particular, the web of social life at the
village or community level is very complex and there are a number of highly
interrelated physical and social elements. In many respects the whole is
more than the sum of its parts. What has to be relocated is the whole --
the collective way of life. It is in this sense that we suggest that re-
location involves far more than moving individual persons or particular
physical entities. They are part of what has to be moved, but only part,
and they have to be relocated as a whole.

2. What are the means to be used in relocation?

It is sometime thought that force or at least involuntary means could
be used to mandate relocation. There is an element of truth in that view.
However, it is necessary to note that even very totalitarian societies
during wartime have had extreme difficulty in trying to force semi-permanent
evacuations on their own civilian poplulations. Studies of wartime evacuation

in Germany and Japan during World War II found that there were definite limits to the population movements which could be forced even when drastic sanctions, such as taking away ration coupons, were used.

There is reason to believe forced disaster threat relocation as a whole would be even more difficult to implement that civilian wartime evacuation. In addition, such actions would run contrary to the actual or pseudo democratic values which prevail in most societies around the world today. Most governments are reluctant to be seen as forcing their own reluctant citizens to relocate, and as the current famine disasters in some African countries show, there is a desire to avoid being perceived on the international scene as engaging in such actions. All of this does not mean that forced relocation cannot be attempted, but that there are limits to what can be achieved operating that way, and also, that there are both internal and external political factors which will often discourage public use of force.

On the other hand, if relocation is left up to purely voluntary action or on grass-roots action, almost certainly nothing will happen. To inform a population or community that they are at some indefinite risk at some indefinite time from some dangerous agent will not provoke a relocation effort. People and groups tend even not to evacuate in the face of specific warnings about specific dangers in specific places. If there is no evacuation in such situations, it is much less likely there will be relocation in even less clearly dangerous situations. Put another way, permanent relocation is very unlikely when temporary evacuation, as study after study has demostrated, is not that common a response in the face of immediate danger.

Insofar as relocation is concerned, there is some fine line between the use of forced and voluntary means. Perhaps, even though the terms are

not totally the same and interchangeable, instead of talking about forced
and involuntary, it might be more useful for operational purposes, to talk
of direct and indirect means. Direct refers to where what is done, and is
clearly linked to possible relocation. An example of direct would be cash
payment or reimbursement to families for the loss of their old homes and
purchase of new ones. Direct means are the more obvious ones. Indirect
means are where something is done which does not have a clear link to the
attempted relocation. An example of indirect would be setting up a new
industrial plant in the intended relocation area so as to lure workers to
the nearby neighborhoods. In the case of both direct and indirect means
there can be both rewards and/or punishments.

Presumably, there are certain mixtures of direct and indirect means,
and of rewards and punishments, which would be better than others. However,
we feel that there are probably no universal sets applicable to all situations.
Our view on this is influenced by the fact that there are different cultural
values and beliefs in different societies around the world. Some cultures
tend to emphasize rewards more than punishments, and vice versa. Some
societies, such as some in Asia, value indirect rather than direct ways of
talking about and doing things. Such cross-societal cultural differences
would undoubtedly influence the use of different sets of means which could
effectively be used to bring about relocation in different countries. To
give another kind of example, populations differ widely in their expectations
and reactions to different governmental levels -- the national, regional
or prefectural, the city, village or community level. What would be seen
as the proper initiative at a particular governmental level in one society,
could be seen as completely inappropriate in another society.

There is an important implication in all this for anyone planning a relocation program. The implied suggestion is that one should first analyze the characteristics of the population targeted for relocation. From this analysis it ought to be then possible to estimate or project which mixtures of direct and indirect means might be most effectively used with that particular population. This approach is contrary to the view that certain means or techniques are universally and inherently better for bringing about relocation, and that one should first select certain means and then apply them to those targeted for relocation. We suggest the reverse procedure would be a better starting point. This would prevent trying to use those direct and/or indirect means which are alien for that particular socio-cultural setting . Developing countries, in particular, would escape trying to use social technologies created for Western-type societies but inappropriate for their own socio-cultural settings--a problem in technology transfer which has been increasingly recognized in many areas, and which should be kept in mind in the relocation area.

3.   What are the obstacles to be overcome in bringing about relocation?

Perhaps to be first recognized is that in some cases there are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable obstacles. For instance, in many developing countries there is simply no vacant or unused land to which a threatened group could be relocated. There is hardly need to document population pressure upon the land in many places. Or if there is land which is not populated, it is almost a certain sign that land cannot support for a variety of reasons a population, such as would be true of deserts or rocky mountain regions.

To be certain, in some societies, there may be nominally useable land not given over to agricultural and/or residential purposes. Could not such empty space be used in relocation efforts? Probably not, for such cases probably reflect the natural social forces we mentioned earlier. They may be indicative of the land tenure pattern of that society, where perhaps a small elite of absentee owners for reasons that make sense to them, do not allow and can not be made to allow more productive use of their land resources.

This last example, primarily of a political nature, indicates that there are a whole variety of social institutional factors -- legal, economic, psychological, and cultural -- which at worst are obstacles to relocation attempts, or at best make for inertia. Many social scientists have long recognized that the societies and their institutions tend to be weighted in favor of the status quo, the form of which can vary considerably in space and time. Revolutions in social structure can and do occur in the long run, but in the short run -- which is the time frame for a relocation effort -- the overall traditional pattern is not favorable to social change.

Legal systems vary considerably around the world. But such legal institutions and norms as do exist in many developing countries would not facilitate attempts at relocation. For instance, ownership of land and sometimes other resources is of a collective nature, in many nations around the world. In other places, title to resources is formally unclear. In either case, such kinds of socio-legal arrangements and understandings do not make change easy, do not facilitate relocating a neighborhood or village. If a specific group or village collectively owns the land, think of the difficulties involved in trying to relocate only part of that

group or village.

Then, too, there are economic factors. It is often the poorest of a population which may live in a risk or vulnerable zone or area, such as a flood plan. Thus, those populations which should be relocated, are those with the least economic resources to do so. Furthermore, there is a parallel problem if the question of relocation is examined at a higher or more macro-level or social organization. Under almost all circumstances, there will be economic or financial costs for any relocation. But developing countries tend to have those populations most at risk from disasters. Therefore, such nations should be making the greatest efforts at relocating endangered communities. Of course, such countries are least likely to have the economic resources to use for relocations. We leave aside here the fact that when financial resources are scarce, national priorities have to be set for their use, and relocation of population from high risk but low probability events, is not likely to rank high on the agenda.

One of our Chinese colleagues noted that officials in his country had found it difficult to convince the elderly to evacuate when earthquake predictions were issued. This example, which could be documented in the relocation as well as evacuation literature, calls attention to the psychological barriers in both activities. It is a specific example of the more general social scientific principle that continuity rather than discontinuity is what prevails in human and group behavior. People will continue to do what they are accustomed to doing. Habitual, customary behavior is the norm. The discarding of such behavior which is what would normally be involved in any relocation process, is the kind of change from routine which is not easy to bring about, and is usually bought at some psychological cost.

The psychological bias towards continuation of the usual behavior
often tends to be reinforced by certain cultural values and beliefs.
In many societies considerable value is placed on land, home ownership,
and certain kinds of spatial locations. These all tend to root and
anchor individuals and groups to the places in which they live. Some-
time such matters are dismissed as being only "symbolic" in nature, but
the whole cultural realm consists of the symbolic environment that human
beings create for themselves. There are, of course, some cultural symbols
which are very supportive of the physical movement of people, such as
in the case of some gypsy groups, but far more typical, cultural symbols
and values discourage rather than encourage moving around and not having a
fixed, stable place of residence.

Finally, as already alluded to, there is the importance of political
factors in any relocation process. To a considerable extent, the political
area is the arena where competing, if not conflicting, interests are
fought out in any society. It is the place where power is brought to
bear and manifested. What does this have to do with relocation? Of
much that could be said, we shall note only two points. Politically
it is much easier to oppose relocation than to initiate or to support
it. Most political figures are attuned to the political realities of
their worlds, and it does not take much imagination for them to see that
usually there are more and better reasons for opposing rather than supporting
relocation efforts (the major exception being for those few politicians,
as over against the great majority, who may happen "to represent" an
endangered constituency who might benefit from relocation--assuming that
there is consensus about moving within the group). In addition, everything

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else being equal, political figures find it much easier to engage in reactive, rather than proactive behaviors. Relocation, of course, represents a pre-emptive measure, an effort to prevent a problem from emerging. But politicans, as studies in many areas and about many issues indicate, find it much easier to operate in a reactive rather than proactive setting.

In talking about the political, cultural, psychological, economic and legal institutions and factors, we have primarily stressed how they can act as obstacles, or at least inertial elements, in efforts to initiate and sustain relocation activities. Some of these factors, depending on their content in specific situations, could facilitate the relocation process. For example, there has recently been the relocation away from dangerous areas of three small communities within the United States. But in these situations the residents wanted to move, and all the factors we have discussed, for various reasons, were supportive of the efforts. However, these are the rarer situations, so we have emphasized that the content of the social structural aspects are usually not of a supportive nature for relocation. Nonetheless, the examples are enough to indicate that relocations are more than hypothetical never realized possibilities; they can and have happened.

4. What is the purpose of relocation?

That something can be done, even rarely, does not necessarily mean it should be done. Apart from the matters we have already discussed, there are other considerations that need to be taken into account. We shall discuss a few of the more significant ones and try to indicate that it is important in planning to specify clearly what is being attempted in a relocation attempt.

High risk areas are far from being all alike. Two areas which are

equally at risk from a natural disaster agent, are not necessarily equally

vulnerable. One area may be able to undertake preventive or protective

measures, such as building levees, which may not be possible in the other

area. This is another way of saying that the possibility of relocation

has to be evaluated against other actions which could be taken to neutralize

or mitigate a disasterous impact. If it is easier and simpler to implement

other hazard mitigation measures, that ought to clearly signal caution

on insisting on relocation as the measure to implement. Put another

way, relocation is almost always one of several options for dealing with

the problem which will be available. Very seldom, perhaps never, is the

situation one just of relocating or not doing anything else at all.

Also, it should not be automatically assumed that experts always

know best. Experts tend to look at the world from the technical perspective

of whatever are their specialties. Such a perspective, which usually

is of very high quality from a technical point of view, is necessarily

selective and uses only certain criteria. The average citizen or official

is likely to use a more general perspective and to use different criteria

in making judgements. While it does not follow that the latter view

is therefore better than the view of the expert, the converse is not

necessarily true either. Who would really argue that judgements of experts

in the disaster area, both at the macro and micro levels, have always

been correct? In the course of more than twenty years of research in

nearly five hundred different kinds of mass emergencies, we could cite

numerous examples where the views and opinions of professional experts

were incomplete or misleading, if not contradictory or downright incorrect.

Deference to experts not only varies cross-societally, but there is almost

always a degree of scepticism of expertise in the general population

of all societies. Experts take themselves more seriously than dose the

average citizen.

Apart from the matter just discussed, the average lay person may

grant the greater knowledge of the experts, but still may not be moved

to behaving differently, especially taking such a drastic action as is

involved in relocation. People live in a risky world. They take chances

everyday when they do such things as smoking, driving, or drinking.

They "know" the negative consequences of the just indicated behaviors,

are more likely than whatever may happen in such low probability events

as major disasters. To be certain such views are "intuitive" and are

not derived from statistical probability theories. Nonetheless, possible

major disasters are only one of many risks for individuals, families,

officials, and communities, and are less probable in negative consequences

than a number of the other risks. Given this, it should not be surprising,

and it certainly should not be seen as irrational, that even if people

are convinced of a possible danger, that they will not undertake such

a severe and life disrupting action such as would be involved in relocation.

But even if relocation is accepted by the target population, the

community officials, and planners have to consider other matters. As

said earlier, it is extremely unlikely that there will be a relocation

into an area devoid of residents already there. There are some lessons

which can be learned from evacuation studies on what might develop between

the native or host population, and the evacuees or those who move into

the area. In evacuation situations, the relationship between hosts and

evacuees is relatively good. Both sets of parties temporarily accept

many discomforts and difficulties they would not in non-emergency situations. But as time goes on, the relationship becomes conflictive and a great number of problems emerge. Even close relatives eventually develop a strained relationship. Evacuations are usually seen as temporary situations, and often there has been an actual disaster; these two elements would be absent in the great majority of relocations with the consequent probability of the earlier emergence of many more conflictive problems between the "natives" and those that have been relocated.

If the objective in relocation is more than a simple movement, the kinds of questions and issues we have just discussed have to be put into the equation. There obviously should be far more pluses than minuses if relocation is to be attempted and implemented. If on balance there are more negatives than positives, as a result of the effort, the removal from a risk area would not seem totally warranted. At least a very systematic cost-benefits analysis including far more than economic factors ought to be undertaken.

What do we generally conclude out of all this insofar as relocation is concerned?

Stated without qualifiers, we will say that from our perspective, relocation:

    (1)   is a one way journey and therefore different from the roundtrip involved in evacuations;

    (2)   involves the movement of ways of life rather than just people;

    (3)   is not a viable solution for many situations;

    (4)   is difficult under almost all circumstances;

    (5)   should be initiated by looking first at the characteristics of the target groups;

(6)   requires the use of both direct and indirect means compatiable with the local setting;

(7)   necessitates the absence of a range of institutional obstacles from the legal to the cultural;

(8)   will probably be fought out in the political arena;

(9)   should be recognized as usually only one possible option in the situation; and

(10) should be evaluated in a very broad costs-benefits framework.

What we have presented may not be the ten commandments of relocation, but they are ten major aspects about the phenomena that need to be attended to by officials and researchers interested in the process. If officials can not come up with some on-the-scene understanding of the phenomena along these ten lines, they are unlikely to be able to intelligently deal with relocation. On the other hand, if researchers were able to provide even more systematic and valid data than we have now about these ten matters, they could be more helpful to those with direct responsibility for considering whether relocation ought to be considered as a viable mitigation measure for dealing with disasters and catastrophes.