



## Political economy of planned relocation: A model of action and inaction in government responses



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### ABSTRACT

Planned relocation has been shown to have significant impacts on the livelihoods and wellbeing of people and communities, whether the resettlement process is inclusive or coercive. For states, planned relocation represents risks to those communities but also to government investments and political legitimacy. Evaluations of relocations commonly focus on the risks and benefits of government interventions while overlooking the consequences of not intervening. Here we develop a conceptual framework to examine the factors that influence government decision-making about whether or not to undertake planned relocation of populations in the context of environmental change. The study examines planned relocation decisions and non-decisions by government agencies in West Bengal in India for communities seeking relocation due to coastal flooding. It focuses on three localities facing river erosion losing significant land areas in small islands and communities where populations recognize the need for public intervention, but where there has been a diversity of responses from the state authorities. Data are derived from interviews with key respondents involved in planning and implementing relocation and with residents affected by those government decisions ( $n = 26$ ). These data show that government action is explained by a combination of risk aversion within political systems to avoid perceived negative consequences, and a lack of government accountability. The empirical cases demonstrate the uneven application of action and inaction and the consequent uneven distribution of potential outcomes on populations. The study suggests that while there may be a growing demand for planned relocation in places affected by environmental change, its implementation is likely to be uneven, with profound socioeconomic implications for those living in such localities.

### 1. Introduction

One key responsibility of states is for the protection of their vulnerable citizens. Governments everywhere have intervened through spatial planning to ensure that populations are not exposed to identifiable risks and hazards. In some cases, and for multiple political reasons, governments intervene and encourage or coerce communities and settlements to move for the perceived public interest and for their own private good. Governments have frequently induced individuals and communities to move location to make way for infrastructure development, dams and roads through compulsory purchase of land and places of residence. There is a significant evidence base on such involuntary resettlement practice. It focuses on the legitimacy of such actions and the limits of state power, on the human rights of those being resettled with respect to their governments, and on the experience and

outcomes of being resettled (Cernea and McDowell 2000).

With increasing environmental risks through global change processes such as climate change, planned relocation (often also referred to as resettlement) is now widely discussed as a necessary or potentially effective intervention for vulnerable communities (McAdam and Ferris (2015); Hino et al., 2017). But the relationship between climate change and planned relocation is widely contested: previously planned development strategies by governments that involve resettling populations, are themselves now increasingly justified and rebadged as climate change adaptation (Barnett and O'Neill 2012; Kothari 2014; Arnall 2014). At the same time, development imperatives of urbanization and infrastructure, that include bio-energy and hydro-electricity projects themselves lead to populations being involuntarily displaced and relocated by governments despite protestations and resistance (Dabelko et al. 2013). Much emphasis on planned relocation focuses on the

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outcome for residents, which is directly affected by the legitimacy and levels of agency in the process. Bronen and Chapin (2013), and Sipe and Vela (2014) show that maximum transparency and direct engagement with communities is a pre-requisite for maintaining community coherence and sense of agency. In many circumstances, relocation leads to decline of well-being and livelihood for those resettled, not least when communities are dispersed (Kura et al., 2017).

Given the risks to states in terms of the legitimacy of their actions, and the risks to populations being displaced as a result of environmental changes, how do governments decide to engage in the contested spaces of actively planning for relocation? There are, of course, international protocols and regulations to guide displacement and resettlement responses (Tilt et al., 2009). These guidelines and protocols emerged due to a response to a long history of breaches of human rights associated with development-related forced displacement and planned relocation (Warner et al., 2013; Baird and Shoemaker 2007). However, international protocols are known to be a weak instrument when contending with political interests of individual states. The outcome of decisions on whether to intervene and undertake planned relocation is often ad hoc responses ranging from full scale movement of communities to no investment or intervention at all. The full range of responses is apparent, yet the evidence base from the political science of planned relocation focuses almost exclusively on those situations where interventions actually occur (Warner et al., 2013). Hence there is less evidence on what influences governments in their decisions on whether to support communities who may be calling for relocation, how so-called non-decisions come about, and the barriers to action for those governments and affected communities. In essence, government inaction results from an interplay of what agencies desire to do, what they are obliged to do, and what populations demand from them: these are the core of the conceptual model of this study.

This study therefore seeks to analyze the factors that influence governments in deciding on whether to support planned relocation for communities at risk, and to explain in particular how non-decisions come about in circumstances of environmental change. In order to answer these questions, we adopt a political economy approach to develop a conceptual model that examines uneven government responses for planned relocation in terms of incentives for decision-making, the decisions themselves, and the consequences of decisions on affected communities. Decisions whether to undertake planned relocation involve the exercise of power by both governments and communities: by power we mean the exercise of formal and informal authority to determine the allocation of resources and influencing the legitimacy of actions (Morrison et al., 2017). Communities may be at risk from displacement associated with climate change: yet some communities demand such interventions while others ignore such risks or actively resist such interventions.

The deductive conceptual model is developed with reference to political economy theory and to experience of planned relocation globally. In summary, the political logic of intervening to relocate populations is strongest when risks to political systems themselves are manageable and predictable, and weakest in the face of uncertainty that induces risk averse behaviours within political systems. The conceptual model is tested through examining cases of government action and inaction in Bengal in India, showing that both action and inaction are present and observable, and that in those cases concerns over government risks and legitimacy appear to be driving the uneven distribution of action.

## 2. Government action and inaction

This section examines government inaction in the context of social contract theory and policy action drawing on models from political economy and public administration and, in the environmental context from spatial planning and disaster management. Much of political economy is devoted to explaining the scope and limitations of state

power and the processes by which state interventions are legitimate and legitimized. At its core, political economy suggests that the underlying motivation for state intervention is maintaining and improving their own legitimacy (Hindess 1984; Jaeger et al., 2013) and that social and economic interventions are attempts to maintain or extend that power (Scott, 1998). Political ecology is the application of those ideas to resources and environment: it similarly focuses on the distribution of power and authority over environmental resources (Forsyth, 2004). In this study we therefore draw on concepts in political ecology and environmental justice on the nuance and context of political, economic and environmental processes at multiple scales, recognizing that scale itself is part of political discourse and construction (Birkenholtz, 2012; Robbins and Bishop, 2008). Our theoretical approach focuses both on social outcomes (the distribution of resources and of environmental risks) and the social processes that create the landscape in which responsibility and power resides, and in which decisions are legitimized (Morrison et al., 2017; Agrawal and Perrin, 2009; Ribot, 2014). In adopting this theoretical framework, we focus here specifically on how divisions are made and how action and inaction are undertaken.

How states choose to intervene depends on context, notably the type of political regime and ideological preferences for state and market. In the context of environmental risks and hazards, it has widely been demonstrated and documented that governments are seen to be derelict in their duty, and hence risk their legitimacy, if they do not protect vulnerable populations (Pelling and Dill, 2010). Social contract theory has been used to explain how the demand for action to avoid harm to citizens is manifest, and what can happen to states when they do not fulfill their implicit social contract of protection. Pelling and Dill (2010) document diverse historical cases where major events such as earthquakes, floods and nationally-important events have rocked governments and created circumstances for revolutionary change to established orders.

Policy inaction is a result of systematic under-reaction to external circumstances with policy processes, either through under-estimating the risks of not acting, or through inertia and persistence of status quo means of making decisions (Maor, 2014). At their core, research in public administration shows that governments explicitly or implicitly weigh up the reputation and transaction costs of interventions. Reputational considerations include how interventions affect the likelihood of electoral success, how interventions fit within existing state priorities, and the opportunity cost of interventions against other government interests. In crisis management situations in particular, governments seek actions and interventions that bolster legitimacy and ‘attract universal or near universal support, and attract virtually no opposition’ (McConnell, 2011 p.70). Inaction can be a manifestation of risk aversion in order to avoid risks to political reputation (McConnell, 2011, McConnell and T’Hart, 2014, Howitt and Wintrobe, 1995). In crisis situations, inaction may in fact be institutional paralysis: institutions are overwhelmed by a crisis such that their institutional mechanisms are rendered ineffective (McConnell and T’Hart, 2014)

These principles of action and inaction are all observable in the area of spatial planning and specifically in the context of potential relocation. During the 2011 flooding in Bangkok, for example, national and local authorities did not act to direct flood waters away from poorer communities: by doing so the government effectively prevented flooding of wealthier Bangkok suburbs (Marks, 2015). Hurricane Katrina provides an example of how government systems engage in so-called defensive avoidance, thereby failing to assist some disadvantaged communities from recovering the deceased from the rubble (Thompson et al., 2009). The incentives for inaction are hard-wired into many political systems: Healy and Malhotra (2009) show that US voters reward politicians for disaster relief efforts but not for preparedness such that governments at all levels have low incentives to preemptively reduce disaster risk.

Likewise, history and political stability shapes incentives and disincentives for state intervention related to environmental displacement

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