

## Case Study N°6: 2/7/24

# Planned relocations as adaptation strategy to climate change in the European Union: a complex process

(#Adaptation #Climate #Relocation #Europe)

By Zoé BRIARD

### Planned relocation as an adaptation strategy to climate change: a global phenomenon

In August 2023, Slovenia was confronted with extreme flooding that affected two-thirds of its territory. Three months later, these events led the Slovenian State Secretary, Boštjan Šefic, to announce the planned relocation of two Slovenian municipalities: Letuš and Rečice ob Paki. This measure aimed at protecting the residents from the increasing risk of extreme weather events in the area by relocating them to a safer neighborhood. Inhabitants of these municipalities have been offered three possibilities: either to rebuild their homes, to receive monetary compensation and leave, or to relocate to another house bought by the State (BNN 2023).

Related to climate change and natural disasters, planned relocations have been defined by Erica Bower and Sanjula Weerasinghe as: “the planned, permanent movement of a group of people from identifiable origin(s) to identifiable destination(s), predominantly in association with one or more hydrometeorological, geophysical/geological, or environmental hazard(s)” (2021, p.8).

Processes of planned relocations are planned and implemented by states’ authorities, they are almost always intra-state processes (Ferris and Bower 2023, p. 2-3) and, as far as we know, there is no initiative to tackle these processes at the European scale. In this sense, according to Climate-ADAPT, a partnership between the European Commission and the European Environment Agency (EEA), “the implementation of this measure must be coordinated at the proper spatial scale, fit to the specific local context and compliant with national and subnational regulations and plans. It specifically requires coordination with higher levels of governance and integration in land use planning” (2023). Consequently, each state can develop its own type of planned relocation and “there is no one single universal archetype of a planned relocation” (Ferris and Bower 2023, p. 3).

In the context of climate change, the most mediatized cases of planned relocations are probably the ones of the Pacific Islands whose territories are threatened by sea level rise. For example, Fiji is taking proactive measures to address these phenomena and became the first country in the world to adopt Planned Relocation Guidelines in 2018 (Bower and Weerasinghe 2021, p. 14).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) plans that the number of planned relocations is going to increase in the years to come (2022; see also Ferris and Bower 2023, p. 2-3) and, as demonstrated by this recent news from Slovenia, it would be misleading to assume that planned relocations only concern the Pacific Islands. In fact, planned relocations are a global phenomenon

(Bower and Weerasinghe 2021, p. 8). In 2021, with the support of The Platform on Disaster Displacement, of the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, the International Organization for Migration and the German Development Agency, Bower and Weerasinghe published a dataset containing information about 409 cases of planned relocations mainly caused by natural hazards or by the consequences of climate change. These processes take place all over the world but out of 409 cases, only five are on the European Union (EU)'s territory. Four of these five cases took place in Italy following an earthquake (3) or a landslide (1) and the last one was identified in France after a storm.

This number of five raises questions. Why are planned relocations as adaptation strategy to disasters or climate change so rare in the EU? Is there a specificity regarding planned relocations in the EU?

### Are planned relocations a European phenomenon? Between underestimation and terminology debates, a difficult question to answer

The dataset *Leaving Place, Restoring Home* dates back to 2021 and does not aim to be exhaustive. The scientific literature on planned relocations therefore mentions additional examples of relocations in the EU. In Austria, Arthur Schindelegger *et al.* have worked on planned relocations from the Danube floodplains (2021). In France, Marie Courtoy has analyzed an experimental relocation scheme in four different sites including Vias (2022, p. 996) and H el ene Rey-Valette and B enedicte Rulleau have scrutinized the anticipative relocation of 14 households in Criel sur Mer (2016, p.2).

These articles refer to “planned relocations” or simply “relocation”. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Elizabeth Ferris and Erica Bower, there is no consensus on how to designate these processes, “although generally it is a combination of an intention term (planned, strategic, managed) and a movement term (relocation, resettlement, retreat, realignment)” (2023, p.2). The existence of multiple terminologies implies that planned relocations in Europe may also be framed under other concepts and therefore, be less visible.

For instance, the European Climate Adaptation Platform Climate-ADAPT mentions “retreat from high-risk areas” as an adaptation option (2023), defining it as “the strategic retreat or relocation of settlements, private households, infrastructures and productive activities from a risk to a non-risk location where they are resettled permanently” (2023). Therefore, even while using different words, Climate-ADAPT does not make a difference between retreat or relocation.

Mentioning the relocation of Cerzeto in Italy, a relocation included in the dataset *Leaving Place, Restoring Home*, Eleonora Guadagno calls attention to another element interrogating the nature of these processes in the EU. The discourse of the Italian Government on this subject would be part of a broader political agenda that minimizes the phenomenon of forced displacements in the North to maintain power distinctions between industrialized countries and “developing countries” (2014, p. 4-5). For instance, people in Cerzeto were not called “environmentally displaced people”, “refugees” or “migrants”. Instead, the words used were “victims” and “evacuated” (2014, p. 2). The literature on “planned relocations” would therefore only give a partial account of the phenomenon in Europe.

### Are planned relocations in the EU peculiar?

As above-mentioned, there is no consensus on how to call these processes. In addition to that, sometimes the same words are used to describe different realities. For instance, following the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, a unilateral legal act organizing the relocation of 17 000 individuals in different locations has been adopted (Guadagno 2016, p. 2; included in the *Leaving Place, Restoring Home* dataset). The multiple choices offered to the inhabitants of Letuš and Rečice ob Paki in Slovenia, or to the inhabitants of the Danube floodplains in Austria, are also called “planned relocations”. Yet, they appear to be very different from one another.

In their definition of planned relocations, Erica Bower and Sanjula Weerasinghe mention “the planned, permanent movement of a group of people” (2021, p. 8), meaning that planned relocations are a community movement (2021, p. 22). Which group constitutes a community and which group does not is not straightforward: “for example, people living in urban apartments may not necessarily consider their apartment building as a community in the sense that people would choose to move with the apartment residents” (Ferris and Bower 2023, p.6). Nevertheless, there is a substantial gap between, in theory, wondering which group constitutes a community and in practice omitting the group’s dimension by offering a multiple choices option to individuals.

The multiple choices formula can also result in the absence of relocation. If for instance, every inhabitant of Letuš and Rečice ob Paki decides to stay and rebuild a home at the same place, there is no relocation. Other options can be considered as a relocation only with a flexible understanding of this adaptation strategy as sometimes being individual, not related to a group dynamic. And if everybody decides to receive financial compensation and leave the municipality, relocation seems to be intertwined with the process of buyout.

The fact that most of these scenarios do not involve relocations calls into question their qualification as “planned relocation”. It also questions their relationship with “other forms of government-supported human mobility (such as buyouts)” (Ferris and Bower 2023, p. 1).

### Whatever their definition, planned relocations present some risks

Notwithstanding their diversity, planned relocations present numerous risks. According to the IPCC: “existing examples of relocations of Indigenous Peoples in coastal Alaska and villages in the Solomon Islands and Fiji suggest that relocated people can experience significant financial and emotional distress as cultural and spiritual bonds to place and livelihoods are disrupted” (2022, p. 52). Difficulties have also been acknowledged in relocations taking place in Europe. Among others, the individuals relocated following the L'Aquila earthquake have criticized the lack of consultation and transparency of the relocation process (2016, p. 2). As closely related to private property rights, the compensations accompanying the relocations and the payer(s) are subject to discussions and, sometimes dispute (Climate-ADAPT, 2023).

There is therefore a consensus to consider planned relocations as a measure of last resort (Bower and Weerasinghe 2021, p. 7). In this context, a better understanding of these complex processes and their stakes would be useful for further, and hopefully more peaceful, planned relocations.

## Bibliography

BOWER, E. AND WEERASINGHE, S., *Leaving place, Restoring Home, Enhancing the Evidence Base on Planned Relocation Cases in the Context of Hazards, Disasters, and Climate Change*, Geneva, Platform on Disaster Displacement, 2021.

Climate-ADAP website, “Retreat from high-risk areas”, 2023. Link: <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/metadata/adaptation-options/retreat-from-high-risk-areas> (accessed 10 January 2023).

COURTOY, M., “‘To Leave Is to Die’: States’ Use of Mobility in Anticipation of Land Uninhabitability”, *German Law Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 7, September 2022, pp. 992–1011.

FERRIS, E. AND BOWER, E., “Planned Relocations: What We Know, Don’t Know, and Need to Learn”, *Researching Internal Displacement*, 15 March 2023. Link: [https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short\\_pieces/planned-relocations-what-we-know-dont-know-and-need-to-learn/](https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short_pieces/planned-relocations-what-we-know-dont-know-and-need-to-learn/) (accessed 10 January 2024).

GUADAGNO, E., “Planned Relocation: Lessons from Italy,” *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Policy Brief Series*, Vol. 2, No. 7, November 2016, pp. 1–6.

IPCC, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Leaving Place, Restoring Home: Global Dataset of Planned Relocations Cases, June 2021. Link: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1pDRt1hVApqJiV6E5DJ7TN0cOtXJiKvS1w8QIP149o/e/dit#gid=1611800107> (accessed 22 December 2023).

REY-VALETTE, H. AND RULLEAU, B., “Gouvernance des politiques de relocalisation face au risque de montée du niveau de la mer”, *Développement durable et territoires. Économie, géographie, politique, droit, sociologie*, vol. 7, n°1, avril 2016, pp. 1-15.

SCHINDELEGGER, A., SEEBAUER, S. AND THALER, T., “Planned relocation from Danube floodplains in Austria, Lessons learned from five decades of policy practice”, *Global Report on Internal Displacement*, Vol. 6, No. 10, 2021, pp. 1-10.

X, “Slovenian Residents to Relocate Amid Weather Threats”, *BNN Breaking*, 3 November 2023. Link: <https://bnn.network/breaking-news/climate-environment/slovenian-residents-face-relocation-due-to-extreme-weather-risk/> (accessed 9 January 2024).