

What New Development Opportunities Might be Associated With Climate Change Resettlement?

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:** This contribution begins by highlighting the complexity and difficulty of the resettlement process. It then turns to a consideration of three possible opportunities that could emerge with resettlement in response to climate impacts, before concluding with a call for more long-term longitudinal research of resettlement outcomes.*

Background

1. Family and community resettlement are stressful and difficult for families and communities whether required or voluntary. Forty years ago psychiatrists M.M. Weissman and E.S. Paykel documented an interesting case of health problems among wives of Yale University professors who had moved from universities in other states. Though the move was voluntary and in the interest of the husband’s career and family wellbeing, nonetheless relocation was at the expense of the wives’ activities and friends and those of the couple’s children. My own research in over 20 countries also pinpoints difficulties among a majority of resettling households irrespective of whether they are voluntary or involuntary resettlers.
2. Family and community resettlement are complex and difficult also for governments and other institutions to carry out even where the necessary political will, finance, capacity and new opportunities are present and resettlers are actively involved in all stages of the resettlement process. That is a major reason why the first recommendation in World Bank and other responsible resettlement guidelines is that resettlement should be avoided to the extent possible and where necessary involve the minimum number of people.
3. Unfortunately climate change will require extensive family and community resettlement from lowlands near coasts and from flood prone rivers. Such resettlement has already begun along the coast of Alaska and in a river basin in Laos. Currently the combination of river flooding and high tides inundating large areas of Thailand’s capitol is a possible indicator of massive urban resettlement that may be necessary in the future.
4. Notwithstanding the problems involved for families and communities, resettlement can be successful for first and later generations of resettlers as shown by the compulsory community resettlement of over 50,000 Egyptian Nubians in the 1960s in connection with the Aswan High Dam and by large scale land settlement schemes in Brazil, Indonesia and Malaysia.

5. All the above is known. What is not known is the extent to which resettlement in connection with climate change presents an opportunity not just for improving the livelihood of a majority of resettlers but also for pioneering in the face of current global threats (climate change being only one) more equitable and ecologically sound twenty first century societies.

Three examples follow for discussion on how resettlement outcomes might help counter such global threats as poverty, unemployment and fundamentalism. Other examples are many.

6. A growing threat is insufficient employment opportunities for a population expected to increase from 7 billion today to 9 billion by mid-century. Can resettlement in locations like California's Central valley and the plains of Thailand be used to increase employment as well as to revitalize rural towns through a combination of more commercialized family farms growing high value crops and more small town manufacturing (small-scale green industry, for example) that also will attract immigrants from elsewhere?
7. Such resettlement might also be combined with a better ecological and economic balance between current commercial family farms and large-scale agribusiness. On the one hand, through a more equitable form of contract farming, such as currently advocated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, agribusiness could provide credit, inputs and technical advice for high value crops and expedite global marketing of produce. On the other hand, planning could reduce inefficient water use through ecologically sound water pricing and could eliminate agricultural subsidies such as those in the United States that place small-scale commercial farmers at a competitive disadvantage in Africa and elsewhere as is currently the case with cotton production.
8. Implement and monitor new non-sexist educational systems in resettling communities that would prepare students to think for themselves, hence providing a greatly capacity to deal with future risks and uncertainty, and to provide relevant training for future employment. Current research suggests that such education should start before the children is one year old. Should education also include a period of national service following secondary or tertiary education so as to familiar youth with pressing national and international problems?

Research Needs

9. There is a special need for researchers who are willing to start now with benchmark pre-resettlement community studies in major climate change risk areas and then be willing to follow the subsequent resettlement through at least two generations. We have far too few such long term studies. The National Science Foundation has encouraged such studies for rural and urban ecosystems but no equivalent program exists for development-induced or other types of community resettlement.