

# Lessons from planned relocation and resettlement in the past

Jane McAdam

**Placing contemporary deliberations about relocation within a longer historical and intellectual framework reveals unexpected connections and salutary lessons.**

Planned relocation<sup>1</sup> has recently gained prominence as a strategy to reduce vulnerable communities' exposure to the impacts of climate change and disasters. Among scholars and policymakers, there have been two widespread assumptions about historical relocations of communities: first, that they have occurred almost exclusively within countries, not across international borders; and secondly, that most have resulted from large-scale development projects. Indeed, the only comparable examples of cross-border relocation in this context are three historical cases from the Pacific from the mid-20th century, thought to be isolated instances. These were the relocation of the Banabans from present-day Kiribati to Fiji in 1945; the partial relocation of the

Vaitupuans from present-day Tuvalu to Fiji, beginning in 1947; and the relocation of Gilbertese to Gizo and Wagina in the Solomon Islands between 1955 and 1964.<sup>2</sup>

But from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, population redistribution was regarded as a legitimate means of addressing problems of overcrowding, resource scarcity and, in turn, conflict.<sup>3</sup> Relocation was understood both as a pre-emptive solution to anticipated overpopulation and resource scarcity, and as an answer to existing displacement. Throughout this period, scholars and statesmen alike were busy concocting schemes to address concerns about global population. Many genuinely believed that migration, population

May 2015

transfers and colonisation (also described as ‘migration for settlement’) could redistribute the world’s people from densely populated regions to low-density or ‘empty’ areas.

For instance, at the 1927 World Population Conference, population growth was posited as the most important problem confronting the world. In 1937, the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation brought together 150 scholars at its Peaceful Change conference to examine the idea of ‘international de-crowding’. In February 1938, the International Labour Office (ILO) held a conference on the ‘Organisation of Migration for Settlement’.

At the infamous Evian refugee conference of July 1938, US President Roosevelt sought not only immediate solutions for those already displaced in Europe but also long-term plans to address future overcrowding. He argued that land was needed for new settlements of 50,000 to 100,000 people, and for some 10 to 20 million people altogether. In 1942 Roosevelt created a covert research initiative, the ‘M Project’ (‘M’ for migration), appointing a small team of experts to study

possible resettlement sites across the world. At the project’s conclusion in November 1945, they had compiled over 660 land studies, spanning 96 volumes. Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, Australia’s Northern Territory, Canada and Manchuria were identified as the best prospects for settlement.

But not everyone shared the President’s zeal for resettlement. Even if land could be found, resettlement would be neither an easy nor a rapid process. Population experts noted impediments, such as its high costs, incompatible skill sets (merchants and professionals moving to rural areas, for instance), inadequate transportation facilities, concerns about adaptability to tropical climates, questions about disease, and states’ disinclination to accept groups large enough to resist absorption. Attention also had to be given to legal requirements for admission and stay, local attitudes towards the newcomers, and the adaptability of the settlers themselves (including their willingness to accept, for a time, standards of living below those of the home country).



A monument on Rabi Island (Fiji) showing a map of Banaba (Kiribati), the home island of the Banabans who relocated to Fiji in 1945.

These factors help to explain why – despite powerful political champions and elaborate theoretical proposals – the reality of large-scale cross-border resettlement was far more limited than the visions. Proposed resettlement schemes in Alaska, the Philippines, Africa and Latin America either failed to materialise or in the end involved only very small numbers. In addition, political brinkmanship between Britain and the US meant that both seemed enthusiastic when the projected resettlement area was in the sphere of the other nation, but were reluctant to commit resources or amend domestic immigration law to translate ideas into concrete plans.

### Familiar factors

There are important precedents showing the many considerations to be taken into account in any proposed move. For instance, the ILO's 1938 conference compiled a long list of practical and legal issues requiring consideration before any movement was contemplated.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, similar problems impede action today to address mobility relating to the impact of climate change and disasters. Contemporary discussions about planned relocation echo deliberations a century earlier: concerns about the carrying capacity of land, resource scarcity and potential conflict. There are concerns in common about whether the benefits of movement outweigh its significant psychological and practical challenges. And governments now, as in the past, commonly cite the need for more research before they can take concrete steps, despite a plethora of empirical evidence. While some knowledge gaps remain, there are already many clear priorities for policy development.

There are also familiar methodological debates about how to identify who may need to move, and over what timeframe. Now, as in the 1920s, there are concerns that determining the on-going habitability of land solely based on population size and projected hazards is too crude. Then, the concern was that this failed to take into account the mitigating impact of technological or agricultural advances. Today,

the concern is that such projections overlook people's adaptive capacity and resilience, in addition to possible technical developments.

Finally, contemporary concerns about 'climate justice' evoke early 20th century ideas about entitlement to territory. In the 1920s and 1930s some thinkers suggested that countries should cede their territory to people who needed land (and food) if their own citizens were not cultivating it. Why should growing populations not benefit, they argued, as other countries had previously done by acquiring their land and wealth when the world was open to colonisation? Today, some argue that countries with the highest greenhouse gas emissions should be obliged to compensate those most affected by anthropogenic climate change, which are typically countries that have contributed the least to global warming.

Looking at relocation through a historical lens, there is much we can learn – substantively, procedurally and conceptually. The history of relocation is characterised by a gulf between grand theoretical visions on the one hand and the challenges of practical implementation on the other. The political and practical obstacles that stood in the way of relocation in the past still remain today, and those experiences reinforce the findings of modern scholarship that resettlement is a fraught and complex undertaking, and rarely considered successful by those who move.

Jane McAdam [j.mcadam@unsw.edu.au](mailto:j.mcadam@unsw.edu.au) is Scientia Professor of Law and Director of the Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at the University of New South Wales, Australia. [www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au](http://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au)

1. This article uses the terms 'relocation' and 'resettlement' interchangeably, drawing on the language of the historical periods being examined.
2. See McAdam J (2014) 'Historical Cross-Border Relocations in the Pacific: Lessons for Planned Relocations in the Context of Climate Change', *Journal of Pacific History* 49, 301.
3. See McAdam J (2015) 'Relocation and Resettlement from Colonisation to Climate Change: The Perennial Solution to "Danger Zones"', *London Review of International Law* 3, 93.
4. See International Labour Office (1938) 'The Organisation of Migration for Settlement', *International Labour Review* 37, 561 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8292.1938.tb00554.x/pdf>.