



RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

MITIGATION MATTERS

AWARD RECIPIENTS

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AWARD AMOUNT:
\$2,400

FEMA defines mitigation as the effort to reduce loss of life and property by lessening the impact of disasters. Effective mitigation requires that we all understand local risks and invest in long-term planning to reduce risks and enhance community well-being.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF MANAGED RETREAT AND RESETTLEMENT ON INFORMAL COMMUNITIES

SUMMARY

Informal communities—settlements that are established outside of the traditional legal boundaries of land tenure, permitting, or construction practices— in Puerto Rico face widespread issues, including inadequate infrastructure, unsafe living conditions, and frequent exposure to environmental hazards. Relocation and resettlement activities in such communities often center on moving informal communities away from high-risk areas and are generally presented as a necessary approach to address hazard-related issues. Managed retreat practices can provide an opportunity for communities to move to safer places.

This research focused on understanding the planning strategies and decision-making involved in resettling informal communities in Puerto Rico. Information was collected through interviews with planners and decision makers, as well as focus groups with local community representatives and leaders. The study examined the factors that were considered in relocations and the perspectives and experiences of community members who had been or were about to be resettled.

The findings indicate that there are several key factors to address for relocation to be a positive and inclusive experience for local communities.



An informal community in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Image credit: Monique A. Lorenzo Pérez, 2022.

These include understanding:

- the broader motivations and reasoning behind relocation and resettlement plans,
- the rationale used to identify risks and determine what qualifies as safe in new and existing locations,
- the impacts of community members past experiences with planned relocation projects, and
- community perspectives on what an ideal relocation project would look like.



Including community members in the relocation process can help avoid negative perceptions about relocating. Image credit: Monique A. Lorenzo

KEY FINDINGS

- Planners and community representatives generally agree that the resettlement process should move informal communities to areas that are safer than their previous location. However, in many cases, communities continue to be exposed to the same or new risks in resettled locations. This can include exposure to both environmental risks (flooding, earthquakes, etc.) as well as broader social risks (lack of safety, separation from social networks, etc.). In addition, potential risks such as climate change could threaten communities at the new location in the future.
- Development interests and unequal implementation of relocation and resettlement projects have created negative perspectives toward planned relocation and resettlement initiatives among informal community members.
- The planning process for selecting a new location can impact community perspectives towards relocation and resettlement projects. Limited discussion of and community involvement in resettlement plans contributed to informal community residents expressing negative feelings about the process.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Relocation and resettlement policies should look at a wide range of risks associated with proposed locations. This includes considering current environmental hazards, broader social and safety risks, and the potential for future threats related to climate change.
- Planners should engage in community outreach activities in all phases of relocation and resettlement planning, including informing residents to be relocated of a wide spectrum of current and potential risks and working with communities to achieve a high level of community acceptance before relocation activities begin.
- Prioritizing community participation in the planning process can assist in selecting resettlement locations that address the full spectrum of risk and safety needs and work to promote broader community satisfaction with the resettlement process.
- Long-term success requires that hazard, environmental, and community planners collaborate fully with impacted residents to develop equitable relocation and resettlement policies and practices.

STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders who may find this work interesting include hazard, environmental, and community planners; groups that work with informal communities; and community residents and leaders. This work also has relevance for those interested in hazard mitigation and managed retreat research and practice more broadly.

Full report: Lorenzo Pérez, M.A. & Contreras, S. (2022). Understanding the Impacts of Managed Retreat and Resettlement on Informal Communities. Natural Hazards Center Mitigation Matters Grant Report Series, 8. Boulder, CO: Natural Hazards Center, University of Colorado Boulder. Available at: <https://hazards.colorado.edu/mitigation-matters-report/understanding-the-impacts-of-managed-retreat-and-resettlement-on-informal-communities>



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