

# Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Policy Brief Series

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The village of Monterusciello was built in six months in 1985 after the earthquake. © 2015 (Photo: Eleonora Guadagno)

## Planned relocation: Lessons from Italy

Eleonora Guadagno

*Social and Political Geography,  
University of Poitiers (Migrinter/CNRS)*

### I. Introduction

Planned relocations are processes “whereby a community’s housing, assets, and public infrastructure are rebuilt in another location” (World Bank, 2010:77). This brief aims to highlight some of the benefits and the shortcomings of planned relocations in disaster contexts, in the attempt to provide some recommendations for

future implementation. The recommendations are based on case studies from Italy where the practice of planned relocations dates back to the early 1900s.<sup>1</sup>

1 Already in 1908, a royal decree identified several landslide- and flood-prone municipalities in Basilicata and Calabria that needed to be relocated, and provided for land allocation to relocated families in new areas.



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Italy currently has no unified framework on planned relocation as a form of prevention or response in the case of environmental degradation or natural disasters. Some regional laws regulate planned relocation as a positive action against environmental risks, while in other cases, relocations are implemented on a case-by-case basis, based on arbitrary decisions and processes.

Generally, in Italy, neither the local nor the national authorities are well prepared to face disasters; the bureaucratic machine is often very heavy, and it is very difficult to efficiently react to the calamity. Although authorities should control, authorize, survey and manage the post-traumatic phase, this has not been the case. Rather the management of disasters has been conducted on an ad-hoc emergency basis.<sup>2</sup>

The choice of the presented cases – the more recent L'Aquila earthquake, and the other historic one – are useful examples in understanding how a lack of a normative framework can negatively impact the realization of planned relocation.

<sup>2</sup> According to the analysis made by Tacchi (2005), generally people “do not appreciate” the management of the risk and the post-traumatic phase done by the local and national government.

## II. Empirical observations: From Monterusciello to L'Aquila

In the aftermath of the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, which caused 308 casualties, around 17,000 of the inhabitants of the old town were relocated to a number of out-of-town locations with a unilateral legal act.<sup>3</sup> The lack of consultation with and participation of the relocated population and transparency in the process sparked a huge debate around the necessity of the relocation, the unfairness of the compensation given to the relocated population, and the unsustainability of the buildings. The standardized construction of buildings made the new settlement impersonal and created stronger sentiment of alienation, according to the empirical psychosocial research by the Urban Laboratory of L'Aquila (Gabrielli and Oliva, 2010).

The relocation disrupted local businesses and productive activities, resulting in economic stagnation, loss of jobs and out-migration of workers (Alexander, 2012), as no governmental action was taken to provide livelihood options and improve income-generating activities. One

<sup>3</sup> The “emergency decree” n. 39/2009 (converted to law n. 77/2009) was about the emergency interventions in the Abruzzo region.



The village of Monterusciello. © 2015 (Photo: Eleonora Guadagno)



L'Aquila in the mountainous Abruzzo region. © 2012 (Photo: Angelo Carrozza)

of the problems of L'Aquila's relocation is that its decision of relocation had not been made together with the local population, and that it did not reflect the real needs of this population, namely their livelihoods and income-generating activities, nor deeply anchored to traditions and their past home that is now is a ghostly place.

Another example from Italy is the relocation of the biggest district of the town of Pozzuoli (near Naples), following a series of seismic events in the 1980s. Among the 80,000 inhabitants of the town, more than 27,000 were relocated with a unilateral top-down decision, taken after the earthquakes (de Tullio, 2005) that casually coincided with other political and economic interests: the law 748/83<sup>4</sup> established their relocation, and about 5,000 flats were newly constructed.

After the relocation to Monterusciello in 1986, which cost almost 1.2 billion euros (Renna, 1986:25),<sup>5</sup> the new district has turned into a company town. The urban structure reveals how the relocation did not consider the needs of local communities, e.g. the new settlement lacks of community facilities, such as sports or commercial centres. More recently, Monterusciello

was considered as one of the most dangerous areas in the Campania region (Pisanu, 2011).

The two cases show that democratic, developed countries are not immune to the difficulties related to planned relocations. In Italy, in fact, due to a lack of national or regional legal frameworks concerning relocation and a high level of corruption and exploitation, relocation led to – at least in the mentioned cases – socioeconomic problems.

Planned relocations, while potentially effective in preventing or responding to disasters and environmental degradation, have the potential to have negative effects on the life of communities when poorly planned.

In these two Italian cases, it seems that the opportunities for corruption resulted in the construction of new settlements for the two communities with no local consultations, and largely benefited other stakeholders such as construction companies (Bonini, 2010),<sup>6</sup> with ascertained negative economic and environmental consequences on the community (Commissione parlamentare d'inchiesta, 2011).

4 The original "emergency decree" n. 623/83 was converted into law concerning the emergency intervention in favour of the places hit by the seismic events of 1980 and 1983.

5 The figure has been adjusted according to the values of inflation of 460 billion lira in 1983.

6 The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* reported a telephone conversation between two businessmen, which was an anecdote to the political scandal surrounding this disaster: the men talked about the profit opportunities thanks to the reconstruction after the earthquake.

There are psychosocial consequences that add to the high cost of planned relocations. In the case of L'Aquila, post-traumatic stress disorders have been recorded by the Italian Superior Institute of Health (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2013). In fact, homelessness can be also considered as "placelessness" (Relph, 1976:9). The imagination and the memory of the lost place are still alive in the thoughts of the two communities. The space where they are now living will be never the same; the attachment to an imagined place makes the reality less attractive and makes the sentiment of alienation grow (OECD, 2012:14; Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2013:16). The complex consequences of planned relocation modify the geography of the affected sites and transform the relationship of human communities with the landscape.

Planned relocations may cause cultural and social disruption and can increase unemployment as demonstrated in the case of L'Aquila (CRESA, 2013) and higher crime rate as for the case of Monterusciello, as well as the feeling of isolation and exclusion of individuals, never consulted in the relocation plan and segregated in ghettos (Giglia, 2000:172). The weakening of social bonds and the loss of time-honoured sacred places such as the Casentino cemetery in L'Aquila can create a feeling of alienation.

Furthermore, social marginalization is one of the negative outcomes reordered in the two presented cases: in the case of Monterusciello, it is possible to recognize a high presence of local mafia as demonstrated by the Parliamentary Commission on Mafia (2011); in the case of L'Aquila, the problem of social exclusion affected various groups, such as youth and impact on their education (Puglielli, 2010), the elderly and migrants. In addition to the social consequences, economic impact is one of the biggest challenges to the planning and implementation of planned relocation. In neither of the cases described, development interventions for the areas of destination were actually foreseen, and immediate economic interests were prioritized rather than local communities' needs.

The Italian cases presented show how that whenever social and economic impacts are not considered, relocation can entail impoverishment; the district of Monterusciello remains a very poor periphery of Naples (Gerundo and Di Maggio, 2011), and L'Aquila suffered economic losses in specific sectors such as tourism and real estate (CRESA, 2013). Powerful actors in local and national institutions purposefully took advantage of the situation as an excuse to forcibly relocate people, in order to promote construction businesses and stress the importance and the power of the central State, for electoral and political purposes (Alexander, 2012:336).

As noticed by Skeggs, "mobility and control on mobility both reflect and reinforce power" (2004:211).

### III. Lessons learned from the Italian case studies

Planned relocation is a very complex process in disaster management. Relocation in the longer-term does not only mean the possibility of reconstruction, but also the re-establishment of an "original place," a symbolic space, full of memories for the population who lived in a given territory and, eventually, it should strive to enhance the development of the community.

In fact, post-disaster reconstruction can present opportunities to promote unexplored development strategies, and funding should be used to help local populations and enhance local environmental, cultural and economic sustainability. In this sense, negotiations and participatory planning process should be promoted; a network between citizens, local associations and economic actors should be developed to better monitor the procedures in order to avoid aggravation of existing and vulnerabilities and new ones.

The participation of the resettled and the host community, in fact, is a central element to provide technical (through local expertise and know-how) and economical options for the new settlement. The respect for the historical, social and economic features of communities is needed to develop efficient and fair planned relocation programmes. This calls for the implementation of income restoration programmes to accompany the relocation, in order to prevent the negative effects of loss of resources and livelihood opportunities, in particular for the more vulnerable groups (the elderly, children, disabled people, migrants, ethnic minorities, nomadic communities, indigenous people and women (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2013) and their access to land tenure.

Access to economic and social services by providing adequate infrastructure are crucial to helping people resettle in productive, sustainable ways; they should be tailored, to the extent possible, to the community's previous activities, reflecting the skills and aspirations of the population and expanding them when needed (including through vocational training and support to local micro-enterprises and businesses). The improvement of access to credit, the implementation of transitional finance support and the promotion of equal access to employment for women, children and migrants should be addressed as priorities to enhance inclusion, provide compensation for lost assets and avoid social marginalization, alienation and negative psychosocial consequences.

Lastly, while planned relocation should be a last resort option for communities at risk to prevent or adapt to environmental degradation or disasters (often exacerbated by the impacts of climate change), sometimes it could be the only viable risk reduction solution, in particular in hazard-prone areas. In the case that relocation seems the best option, a pre-assessment should be conducted to take into consideration the potential social and economic impacts on the respective community.

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## About the Author



**Eleonora Guadagno** has a PhD in Social and Political Geography from the University of Poitiers (Migrinter/CNRS), with a thesis titled “How environmentally induced displacement is perceived in the Global North?”

Empirical evidence from Italy following Sarno and Cerzeto landslides” under the direction of Professor Veronique Lassailly-Jacob and Professor François Gemenne. She mostly works on the linkage between human communities’ mobility and vulnerability, its media representation in Global North contexts, through a critic geography approach.

## Contact

To discuss any aspect of the *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Policy Brief Series*, or to submit an article, please contact:

**Frank Laczko** ([flaczko@iom.int](mailto:flaczko@iom.int))

**Susanne Melde** ([smelde@iom.int](mailto:smelde@iom.int))

**Sieun Lee** ([silee@iom.int](mailto:silee@iom.int))

**MECLEP** ([MECLEP@iom.int](mailto:MECLEP@iom.int))

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