

Justice environnementale et relocalisation planifiée en Afrique centrale

FMR 76 – Changement climatique : des choix pour les personnes déplacées

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Alors que les déplacements internes dus aux aléas climatiques s'accroissent en Afrique, l'accès aux solutions de relocalisation demeure très inégal. Le concept de justice environnementale peut éclairer les causes profondes de cette situation et suggérer des pistes de réforme.

La relocalisation planifiée désigne un processus structuré, mené par les autorités compétentes, visant à reloger durablement les communautés exposées à des risques environnementaux vers des sites sûrs, avec la garantie d'un logement décent, de services essentiels et de moyens de subsistance durables, dans le plein respect des droits fondamentaux. Elle se distingue de l'évacuation d'urgence, qui est temporaire et souvent improvisée, ainsi que de la réinstallation spontanée à l'initiative des ménages. [1]

Dans les contextes africains, et plus particulièrement en République démocratique du Congo (RDC) et au Burundi, l'accès à la réinstallation demeure profondément inégalitaire. En 2024, l'Afrique subsaharienne comptait environ 38,8 millions de personnes déplacées internes, dont 9,8 millions en raison de catastrophes naturelles, soit une augmentation de plus de 70 % par rapport à l'année précédente [2]. Pourtant, seule une infime partie de ces personnes a bénéficié d'un processus anticipé et inclusif, conforme aux normes de durabilité et de protection.

Ces disparités ne sont pas uniquement liées à l'intensité des aléas. Elles s'expliquent par des facteurs structurels qui déterminent la capacité d'une communauté à être relocalisée dans des conditions sûres et dignes : la disponibilité des ressources économiques, la qualité des institutions locales, l'accessibilité des services et la cohésion sociale. En RDC, la pauvreté persistante, le manque chronique d'infrastructures et la faiblesse de la gouvernance locale entravent l'anticipation et la planification. Les provinces du Kivu et du Tanganyika, qui représentent 81 % des 6,9 millions de personnes déplacées internes recensées dans le pays en 2023 [3], en sont une illustration. Bien que les conflits armés demeurent le principal facteur, les aléas climatiques exacerbent les vulnérabilités, rendant plus difficile la mise en œuvre de solutions durables.

Au Burundi, les crues récurrentes du lac Tanganyika, notamment à Gatumba (ouest du pays), provoquent des déplacements de population répétés. La montée des eaux, aggravée par les effets du changement climatique, a endommagé plus de 200 écoles, affecté des dizaines de milliers de personnes et entraîné des déplacements massifs. Entre septembre 2023 et avril 2024, on estime à 179 200 le nombre de personnes touchées, dont plus de 31 200 personnes déplacées internes. Ces populations ont été abandonnées par l'État, et aucun mécanisme de relocalisation n'a été mis en place. Les déplacements spontanés vers des sites dépourvus d'infrastructures et de plans de restauration des moyens de subsistance, comme à Mutambara (province de Rumonge), révèlent un

problème sous-jacent [4] : sans planification participative, sans sécurité foncière ni financement anticipé, la relocalisation perd sa fonction protectrice et devient un facteur supplémentaire de précarité.

Dans cette perspective, la justice environnementale offre un cadre d'analyse essentiel. Elle ne considère pas la relocalisation uniquement comme une réponse technique aux menaces climatiques, mais comme une question d'équité dans la répartition des ressources utilisées pour la planification, la protection et le choix, afin que des solutions durables soient également accessibles aux populations les plus marginalisées.

Les limites des politiques de relocalisation

Malgré l'urgence croissante des déplacements liés aux aléas climatiques, la relocalisation planifiée peine encore à s'imposer comme un instrument stratégique de gestion des risques et d'adaptation en Afrique. Dans la plupart des contextes, les réponses institutionnelles privilégient une approche réactive, axée sur l'aide humanitaire d'urgence, au détriment d'une planification plus structurée. L'absence de mécanismes préétablis pour cartographier les zones menacées, identifier les sites de repli, garantir la sécurité foncière et associer les communautés à la planification conduit trop souvent à des déplacements spontanés, dictés par la pression de l'événement plutôt que par une évaluation préalable.

Les cadres existants, qu'il s'agisse d'instruments régionaux comme la Convention de Kampala (2009) ou de législations nationales relatives à la gestion des catastrophes, ne couvrent pas pleinement la diversité des situations de mobilité environnementale. Ces textes tendent à privilégier les aléas soudains (inondations, tempêtes, glissements de terrain) et à négliger les processus lents et irréversibles (érosion côtière, désertification, élévation du niveau de la mer) qui exigent non pas un retour rapide aux zones d'origine, mais des solutions durables, sûres et encadrées juridiquement.

This focus on sudden hazards deprives displaced people of effective safeguards and limits the authorities' ability to fulfil their human rights obligations including the duties to respect, [5] protect[6], and fulfil these rights[7] in accordance with relevant international instruments.[8] However, existing legal frameworks, by focusing primarily on sudden-onset hazards, tend to channel resources toward emergency responses, thereby constraining authorities' ability to plan durable solutions for slow-onset and irreversible processes like desertification or sea-level rise. In the context of climate change, the duty to protect implies that governments must take proactive measures to prevent foreseeable harm, such as exposure to environmental risks or precarious living conditions.

In addition to these legal shortcomings, there are structural inequalities in access to relocation programmes. The political and media visibility of a community directly influences the speed and scale of assistance it receives. Areas with strong institutional support are more likely to attract resources, while remote rural populations, ethnic minorities or people with disabilities are frequently moved to more precarious sites, without prior consultation or appropriate support measures. This lack of transparent selection and prioritisation mechanisms reinforces socio-spatial divides and, in some cases, weakens social cohesion in host areas.

Finally, institutional fragmentation undermines the coherence and sustainability of relocation initiatives. The lack of coordination between government ministries, specialised agencies, local authorities, and technical partners such as UN agencies, international NGOs, or expert consultancies in risk management – leads to dispersed efforts and operational inconsistencies. Over-reliance on external funding, which is subject to aid cycles and changing donor priorities, increases the vulnerability of projects. Without integration into a long-term national strategy and multi-year monitoring, relocation risks displacing vulnerability rather than reducing it, or even creating new economic and social dependencies.

These findings underscore the need for a clear legal framework, coordinated governance and a forward-looking approach. In this way, planned relocation can move from being a one-off and reactive tool to become a real lever for resilience and environmental justice.

Avenues for reform

To make planned relocation an effective instrument of environmental justice, it is necessary to go beyond the reactive approach that is still dominant in most African countries. It must be thought of as an exceptional anticipatory measure, to be undertaken only when it is no longer possible to maintain the status quo, and

conducted in conditions that guarantee the dignity, autonomy and fundamental rights of the persons concerned. [9] Such a paradigm shift first requires a precise legal framework, defining reasons and triggers for relocation on the basis of transparent and scientifically validated risk analyses. This framework must incorporate the principles of necessity and proportionality. It should require that decisions, and the reasoning behind them, be made public, and should stipulate that there should be free, prior, and informed consultation with communities, as well as effective remedy mechanisms.

The effectiveness of such a normative framework depends on the existence of standardised and enforceable procedures: mapping of areas at risk, upstream identification of fallback sites, definition of triggering indicators such as thresholds of rainfall, soil saturation, or population exposure that signal when relocation planning should be activated. These indicators must be defined before a crisis occurs, based on scientific data and risk modelling, to allow for anticipatory action rather than reactive response. Prior environmental and social assessment and multi-year monitoring based on verifiable indicators are also essential. This institutional foundation must be complemented by operational planning, which, rather than being reduced to a simple transfer of the population, is part of a gradual process that includes technical and social preparation, the design of sites according to the needs expressed, the organisation of safe relocations, the rebuilding of livelihoods and sustainable integration into the local socio-economic fabric.

The viability of relocation depends on an intrinsic relationship between land tenure security, access to essential services and restoring livelihoods. Land tenure security involves the recognition of customary rights, the issuance of official titles, including joint titles to promote gender equality, and fair compensation for material and intangible losses. At the same time, basic services including drinking water, health, education and mobility must be restored or created, in order to prevent relocation sites from becoming new sources of vulnerability and risk. Livelihoods, whether agricultural, artisanal, or commercial, need to be reinstated or adapted through targeted support to local value chains, vocational training and access to credit.

Another essential pillar is the predictability and stability of funding. The most effective funding options combine domestic budget allocations, international climate finance, and bilateral partnerships, complemented by anticipatory instruments such as forecast-based financing. This mechanism, by automatically triggering resources on the basis of hydro-meteorological thresholds, makes it possible to acquire and prepare sites before crises peak, thus reducing human and economic costs.

Finally, integrated governance structures are essential. They must make clear the role of national authorities, local authorities, specialised agencies, and technical and financial partners within an intersectoral coordination structure with resources and clearly defined powers. These governance structures must ensure the effective participation of populations, including women, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups, by integrating their specific needs from the design stage of projects. Stakeholders must also be open to regional solutions where internal relocation is not viable, by mobilising free movement agreements and regular migration routes as safe and predictable alternatives.

Applied to the DRC and Burundi, these guidelines call for the development of a National Climate Relocation Plan, integrated with land use planning, disaster risk reduction and social protection policies. Such a plan, based on a clear legal framework, enforceable procedures, equitable land tenure arrangements, proactive financing and robust inclusion standards, would make it possible to shift from a forced movement of final resort to a strategic choice, contributing both to community resilience and to the correction of inequalities in access to protection and opportunities.

Final thoughts

Ultimately, considering planned relocation from the perspective of environmental justice makes it possible to shift the centre of gravity of public policies, moving from ad hoc crisis management to an equitable redistribution of the capacity for anticipation, protection and choice. An analysis of the contexts in the DRC and Burundi reveals a paradox: while climate hazards are increasing and aggravating pre-existing vulnerabilities, the legal frameworks, operational mechanisms and resources needed for sustainable relocations remain incomplete, which too often turns these operations into vectors of new fragilities.

However, successful international experiences demonstrate that relocation based on a clear legal foundation, standardised procedures, effective land tenure security, and simultaneous restoration of services and livelihoods,

as well as anticipatory and stable financing, can become an instrument of protection and dignity. The challenge for Central Africa, and in particular for the DRC, is not only to adopt these principles, but to make them effective, measurable, and verifiable, through independent monitoring and shared indicators.

It is only in this way that planned relocation will cease to be a choice of last resort forced by an emergency situation, and instead become a strategic choice, contributing to sustainable risk reduction, the socio-economic integration of displaced communities and the building of truly inclusive resilience.

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[1] UNHCR, Brookings and Georgetown University (2014) *Planned Relocations, Disasters and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future*

[2] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2025) *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025*

[3] International Organization for Migration (2023) 'Record High Displacement in DRC at Nearly 7 Million'

[4] Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024) *Burundi : L'impact des inondations (effets El Niño) – Flash Update No.3 (13 juillet 2024)*

[5] The state must refrain from unjustified human rights abuses, ensuring protection from interference. However, such protection may be limited if the restriction is lawful, necessary, and proportionate.

[6] This obligation, whether preventive or remedial, requires the state to prevent foreseeable attacks and to guarantee reparation in the event of a violation.

[7] The state has a positive obligation to create the conditions for the full enjoyment of human rights, by putting in place the necessary legal, institutional, and procedural bases. This requirement, which is often legislative, implies pro-active action on its part.

[8] Such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

[9] Brookings, Georgetown University and UNHCR (2015) *Guidance on Protecting People from Disasters and Environmental Change through Planned Relocation*

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