



Don't ignore the elephant in the room: How the intangible concept of place influences the decision-making process for flood resettlement in the Danube catchment

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Flood risk management has developed a large inventory of adaptive responses to climate-induced and socio-economic driven hazards. This inventory comprises a wide array of structural and non-structural measures. Yet, one of the most effective responses is planned resettlement of people at risk, were largely ignored as a possible adaptation option towards climate changes in the national flood risk management policies. The study investigates current developments of flood relocation projects and introduces the theoretical concept of place attachment and identity to analyse the challenges when putting flood resettlement initiatives into practice.

Two study sites in Austria (Eferdinger Basin and Machland region) illustrate the social and individual dynamics as relocation schemes unfold over time. The relocation scheme is voluntary with the authorities offering to buy out buildings at 80% of their estimated market values, but without compensating for devaluation of the building plot. Legal and administrative processes for executing relocations are well institutionalized. From an engineering standpoint, relocation is the most effective and cost-efficient adaptive response to flood risk in the study areas. However, the measure is socially and politically highly contested.

For residents in relocation zones, many profound changes they are confronted with are linked to their place of living, such as terms of their livelihood, e.g. by no longer passing the family agricultural business to the next generation; in terms of their self-identity, e.g. when tasked to reformulate everyday practices tied to the home left behind; or in terms of rebuilding social networks, e.g. when those who remain have to cope with the thinning out of trusted neighbours.

To explore the role of place attachment and identity in individual decision-making, we conducted semi-structured interviews with residents. Our results show that place attachment and identity is a key factor guiding individual relocation decisions, above and beyond personal considerations of flood risk or economic affordability. The concept of place attachment and identity is a widely intangible, but nevertheless crucial concept that requires careful policy communication complementing factual arguments with empathic discourse.