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Natural hazards in a changing world



Planned Relocation in Natural Hazard Management - The Case of Austria

Arthur Schindelegger¹

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Introduction

Worldwide millions of people are displaced by hazard events and changing climate conditions (López-Carr, Marter-Kenyon, 2015). Policy makers struggle to come up with sustainable adaptation strategies. Therefore, planned relocation as a passive adaptation measure gains importance. Recently, numerous case studies as well as pertinent guidelines have been published on this matter (Petz, 2015. UNHCR, 2015). Interestingly, central European countries have developed sophisticated hazard management systems which include a combination of measures, in which planned relocation has not gained wide recognition. The contribution explores the country Austria, which faces a wide range of risks posed by natural hazards and has conducted planned relocations since the 1970s. Ever since, the framework for relocation has evolved to accomplish risk reduction and meet the needs of concerned parties.

Methods

The research is based on a mixed-method including literature review, legal documents and semi-structured interviews with institutional stakeholders to explore the regulatory framework for conducting planned relocations and to evaluate case studies. The study sites were thoroughly selected to cover different hazards (floods, avalanches, torrential hazards), scopes and regions throughout Austria.

Results and discussion

On an international level, planned relocations are carried out in different contexts and mainly analysed in independent case studies. Austria lacked a comprehensive comparative study investigating the relocations conducted due to significant natural hazard risk. Anyhow, the Austrian case is extraordinary due to its origins. During the 1970s farmhouses along the river Danube that were identified for relocation, as they were strongly affected by recurring floods. Compensation payments were provided by agricultural funds, but

¹ M.Sc., PostDoc Researcher, Spatial Planning, Technische Universität Wien, Karlsplatz 13, Vienna, Austria (arthur.schindelegger@tuwien.ac.at)

lacking any integration of the measure in the existing (technical) flood management scheme. Especially large flood events enabled an extensive political discussion and supported the development of the hazard management system as well as the regulatory framework. From the 1990s onwards specific relocation guidelines were developed and the measure integrated in flood protection projects increasingly. It is possible to acquire or even expropriate private land and property if needed for technical measures in the public interest. Furthermore, funding can be provided for voluntary relocation. People in voluntary relocation areas get the possibility to apply for funding, covering approximately 80% of the time value of buildings as well as demolition costs. Property titles remain widely with the affected people and replacing houses or flats need to be acquired individually.

The study shows clear differences in the single cases, as they are dependent on the specific local to regional context. Nevertheless, essential parameters recur. Generally, federal state or local authorities took over the coordination and communication with the affected people integrating political stakeholders as well as experts. Discussions targeted especially alternative housing areas for the affected people and the formulation of consistent guidelines. Planning regulations were widely applied as an instrument to safeguard the non-development of relocation sites. Interestingly, the analysis revealed that sectoral thinking still prevails and planned relocations are not conducted in an integrative manner. So far, planned relocations are mainly embedded in existing project structures developed for technical protection measures. This leads to shortcomings in the coordination with planning agendas concerning the striven future development as well as the long-term support of the process.

Conclusions

The research provides a clear profile of the potentials but also shortcomings of the existing regulatory framework for planned relocations and uncovers the organisational interrelation of hazard events, political will and the local population. Furthermore, planned relocation involves the planning authorities extensively and demands an early and comprehensive coordination. It becomes obvious how important a vertical as well as horizontal governance approach in developing protection measures in general and more particularly relocation processes is, to ensure a smooth implementation. In the European context planned relocation can target especially scarcely populated agricultural areas that are essential for flood run-off and flood retention to reduced existing natural hazard risks.

References

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