



TURNING THE TIDE

Climate Change, Emotions, and Policy

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The Policy and Practice Challenge

Why do residents resist policy makers and the demand for displacement, despite the imminent threat of climate disasters in their region?

Governments world-wide are attempting to adapt and adjust to the increasing demands of climate related hazards. Policy makers are implicated in this process, as the urgency for solutions to disaster risks increases. At present, in countries exposed to natural hazards, such as Chile, Colombia, and Cuba, policy makers advocate for the displacement of residents who are living in neighbourhoods which are most at risk of experiencing climate-related disasters. Displacement requires residents to relocate their homes and services elsewhere. Residents in climate disaster zones are often not only reluctant to relocate themselves despite the threat of climate change, but also often refuse to do so. This policy brief argues that the tension between policy makers and residents can be understood by framing the dilemma through the lens of emotions.

Emotions were noted by residents and local leaders to be at the heart of the issue of climate-related displacement in informal settings¹. However, this is often ignored or underestimated by researchers, policy makers, and governmental bodies alike. Recent findings by ADAPTO researchers suggest that by better understanding residents' emotions, policy makers will get a clearer picture of why displacement is not thought of by residents themselves as being the best solution to climate-related disasters. If policy makers engage more critically with the emotions of residents, they will be less likely to propose solutions which will be met with resistance. This will benefit both parties and enable sustainable efforts to tackle climate disaster risk.

1. Informal settings, for ADAPTO, refers to the time, places, and circumstances in which people use their own initiative—outside or in parallel to institutionalized procedures and standards—to respond to local conditions, secure access to shelter, livelihoods, or services, and improve their general wellbeing in the face of hostile conditions.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Emotions were noted by residents and local leaders to be at the heart of the climate-related displacement issue in informal settings—though often ignored or underestimated by researchers, policy makers, and governmental bodies alike.
- The different spectrum of emotions implicated in disaster risk reasoning for both policy makers and residents directly affects which solutions they believe to be most viable in tackling climate change.
- Whilst emotions are currently a dividing force between policy makers and residents, emotions can also unite the groups if they are expressed, heard, understood, and acted upon.

Rejecting Displacement: Fear of Climate Change vs Fear of Social Injustices

In promoting displacement as a viable strategy to tackle climate change, policy makers tend to assume that the fear of climate-related disasters alone is reason enough for residents to move. Whilst policy makers are correct in thinking that fear counts for residents, the fear experienced by residents does not centre itself only around climate disasters. ADAPTO researchers report that, “Leaders in Carahatas [Cuba], for instance, did not claim to be afraid of the ocean. They claimed to be more afraid of food insecurity and not having enough resources to buy common goods.” Similarly in Colombia, local leaders claimed to be less afraid of natural hazards and more afraid of issues of violence, crime, and unemployment. Residents suggest that the human aspect of climate change, which invokes issues of social and environmental injustices, should not be pushed aside. In addition, rather than fearing the destruction which can result after climate-related disasters, residents appear to have more anxiety about plans of displacement. Displacement plans could result in residents losing resources to rebuild their beloved communities, as well as mean that they have to sacrifice objects of significance and social networks. The current solution of displacement overlooks the complexity of residents’ fears regarding climate change.

Residents’ Fears

- Losing livelihoods, communities, closeness to the water as well as loss of life/homes
- Fear of social injustices which perpetuate climate change
- Fear of unemployment, violence, crime, financial instability, and food insecurity

Fears Policy Makers Consider

- Fear of losing homes to climate disaster damage
- Fear of losing livelihoods
- Fear of next climate disaster
- Fear of loss of life

The result is that the fears of policy makers and the fears of residents are not mirrored. This has consequences for the solutions both groups endorse. For policy makers, the fear tends to be loss of buildings and life. Whereas, the fear captured by residents is loss not simply of buildings, but also things which are not so easy to replace, such as community ties. It is too quick for policy makers to dismiss residents’ aversive reaction to displacement as “irrational” without first identifying the rationale that residents are using to make the decision to stay in climate-disaster zones.



Not Just Fear Counts: The Spectrum of Emotions in Climate Disaster Reasoning

We have considered that one explanation as to why residents reject plans of displacement is because residents' fears about climate disasters do not mirror the fears of policy makers and governmental bodies. An additional reason which explains the gap between policy makers and residents is that policy makers give very little weight to other emotions which are implicated in the process of climate disaster reasoning. By focusing exclusively on residents fearing disasters, policy makers ignore reasons why residents may not wish to relocate themselves even if they are in danger of experiencing a climate-related disaster in their current geographical location. Research by ADAPTO indicates that, alongside fear and anxiety over climate change and disasters, other emotions are implicated in climate disaster reasoning.

"In my village, it is much nicer, there are trees and gardens and the houses are better built. My family is surprised when they visit me and see the difficult conditions, we live in. But here it is safe. My village is surrounded by violence. I haven't seen my family in ten years because I am afraid to go back there."

Fear of Relocation

Residents also report fears regarding relocation itself. Research by ADAPTO indicates that fears of poverty and exclusion outweigh fears of climate disasters for many residents. Relocating to a different neighbourhood breeds these fears for residents.

"We are part of the river when we love and respect it."

Pride and Awe, Love and Respect

Residents and local leaders report having spiritual, emotional, and material connections to their homes and communities. They report feelings of awe and pride in their neighbourhoods, as well as feelings of love and respect for nature itself.



ADAPTO's research highlights that residents do not always report feeling scared of climate disasters themselves—though this undoubtedly is a fear for them. On the contrary, residents report strong feelings of attachment to the sea. They feel connected to it, as well as a related desire to care for it in a responsible way. In addition, residents tend to report feelings of fear with respect to relocation. This is due to socio-economic deprivation in their neighbourhoods. Residents are scared to relocate to areas with higher rates of violence, crime, and unemployment.

The Power of Emotions in Dividing People and Uniting Them

Emotions fill the explanatory gap as to why policy makers and residents have different views on displacement. They enable us to explain why it is that policy makers and residents are divided on how to effectively tackle issues of climate change. These two groups are divided because both sides reason differently based on which emotions they prioritize as significant. Residents report feeling a sense of awe in their natural environments, a sense of pride in their social neighbourhoods, and ability to orchestrate communal solutions to climate risks. However, residents also report feelings of disconnect between themselves, policy makers, and governmental bodies. This disconnect often breeds anger, as well as suspicion, amongst residents regarding policy makers and governmental actors. ADAPTO researchers note that the common message from local communities in affected areas is:

“[W]e are abandoned by our government and resent the lack of roads, jobs, libraries and clinics, but look at the magnificent neighbourhood we have, we are happy to live here.”

This anger and suspicion at institutions indicates that one reason why residents may resent the idea of displacement is because this proposed solution epitomizes the level of disconnect felt between residents and policy makers. In addition, policy makers tend to overemphasize the role of negative emotions in climate disaster reasoning. ADAPTO's research suggests that negative emotions such as fear and pessimism around climate change are not sufficient to mobilize action from residents themselves. Focusing exclusively on the importance of negative emotions in climate disaster reasoning could achieve the opposite goal. Local leaders emphasize that residents in risk zones are victims of environmental and social injustices, but that they refuse to be reduced to victimhood. They emphasize the combination of pride and victimhood as being an essential pairing of emotions which is important to understanding climate disaster reasoning in the Global South. By failing to engage with residents' emotional responses to climate disasters, policy makers overlook not only what divides the two groups, but also what could potentially unite them in finding solutions to the kinds of concerns raised by climate disasters.



Turning The Tide: Lessons from Practice

Due to the lack of emotional engagement between policy makers and residents, trust between these two groups has been eroded. This in turn affects how viable residents predict policy makers' solutions will be. Nevertheless, trust can be rebuilt if a process of sincere engagement begins to take place in affected areas in the Global South. This policy brief has shown that such engagement must not fail to consider residents' emotions on matters of climate change. Doing so will turn the tide away from resistance and opposition towards collaboration on potential climate solutions. Research by ADAPTO suggests the following steps to rebuild the strained relationship between residents and policy makers and integrate emotions into climate change adaptation programs.

1. Emotion Sharing

Research by ADAPTO suggests that the first stage in building trust is emotion sharing between groups of local leaders, residents, policy makers, and researchers. Whilst emotion sharing is not common practice in the field, ADAPTO researchers argue that it should be, as it is only when emotions are understood, heard, and respected that viable solutions to issues of climate disasters can be created.



2. Developing Critical Empathy

Whilst emotion sharing is a critical pillar of successful community engagement and trust building, simple expression of emotion between groups is, by itself, not enough to build trust. For instance, if residents share their emotions of anxiety about social injustices and this is met with pity, emotion sharing will fail to build trust and will only seek to heighten tensions between groups. Research by ADAPTO instead promotes that cultivating critical empathy for others is the precursor to engaging in successful emotion sharing. Critical empathy requires an exercise of one's imaginal capacities, morals, and emotions. According to ADAPTO researchers, critical empathy requires mastering active listening, and preparing to engage in meaningful dialogue for a significant length of time to build trust between groups.



3. Action

Research by ADAPTO suggests that acts of emotion sharing and critical empathy will be undermined if policy makers do not take consistent action to help residents or if they let residents down on their promises to help them.





Photo: ADAPTO-Chile

Creating Climate Solutions that Acknowledge the Role of Emotions

Research by ADAPTO suggests that whilst climate disasters are feared by both residents and policy makers, residents give greater weight to the social and environmental injustices which give rise to climate disasters. Doing so is rational because residents are simply appreciating that “disasters are not natural, but created through our own decisions.” Consequently, residents are not satisfied with the proposal of displacement because it does not tackle the root problem of climate injustices, nor does it speak to how much residents love their communities, neighbourhoods, and their attachments to the sea.

To make progress on creating sustainable efforts to tackle climate change, and create viable solutions for climate disasters, policy makers cannot simply dismiss residents’ lack of desire for displacement as irrational. Residents’ reactions are rational when considering what they give emotional significance to. Failure to engage with this will only cause further divides between policy makers and residents, ultimately resulting in a lack of solutions to problems of climate adaptation.

The alternative, as shown by ADAPTO, is for policy makers to engage in a solution which is not such a quick fix for climate change related disasters. This alternative solution must involve: (i) a sustained effort to tackle the root causes of climate disasters; (ii) developing critical empathy for residents and local leaders in affected areas; and (iii) engaging in a process of emotion sharing to begin to build trust on the ground. Failing to listen and engage with the concerns of residents affected by climate disasters is not a viable or desirable solution for tackling climate crises.



ADAPTO is a multidisciplinary research project funded by the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and coordinated by the Disaster Resilience and Sustainable Reconstruction Research Alliance (*Œuvre Durable*) from 2017-2021. It investigates climate change adaptation in informal settings in understanding and reinforcing bottom-up initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean. For more information, see: http://www.grif.umontreal.ca/acciones/en_index.html

Resources

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- › Lizarralde, G., and Bornstein, L. (2021) Empathy in Times of Climate Change: Understanding Disaster Risk Creation and Response