

Resilient Resettlement: Lessons from the 2017 Peru Floods



This brief is based on a Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance Post Event Review Capability (PERC) study analyzing the 2017 “El Niño Costero” floods in Peru. This document, and companion briefs, have been produced as quick, at-a-glance summaries of the Peruvian PERC report. The full report, can be found at: floodresilience.net/resources/collection/perc. Additional information about flood resilience can be found at www.floodresilience.net

Throughout Peru, there are significant populations living on high-risk lands, some with official land title and some without. The 2017 “El Niño Costero” flooding in Peru has led to broad discussions about whether and how to resettle communities that were heavily impacted. However, resettlement is a complex and challenging issue.

The existing Peruvian resettlement law allows for government relocation of households if they live in locations with “unmitigable risk”. Recent national legislation has refined the definition of unmitigable risk to include areas where there is a likelihood that the community or their livelihoods will suffer recurrent damages in disaster events. However, a government-driven, top-down approach to resettlement is unlikely to meet local realities and needs. And, global experience suggests that efforts that don’t address local needs and priorities are unlikely to be effective.

What is Being Done

The government wants to address the issue of households and communities living on high-risk lands. Resettlement has been identified as one of the possible solutions in areas where there is high risk and the risk has been determined to be unmitigable. In particular, according to Article 4 of Law No. 29869 about Resettlement, resettlement should be carried out where “the implementation of mitigation measures will be more expensive and more complex than relocation”. In parallel, the Ministry of Housing has developed modular housing as a way to quickly create resettlement communities.

Challenges Moving Forward

Nonetheless, many challenges still remain. These include:

- Technical and quality problems with the modular housing: for example, the modules cannot stand high heat, and housing installed in early 2017 was showing signs of deterioration within months. Global experience demonstrates that after a disaster, “temporary” housing is often still in use 10 years or more post-disaster. Inexpensive but durable modular houses designed for long-term use are a fundamental component of resilient reconstruction.
- Where to put modular housing/resettlement communities and how to pay for them: At-risk lands have been occupied because they provide livelihood benefits and are low cost. Resettlement communities will need to provide similar benefits to attract and retain inhabitants, such as being close to public services, highways, hospitals, etc. However, the lands that have been identified as resettlement sites so far are far from the municipality or are communal lands that lack basic services.
- How to convince communities to resettle: people live where and how they do for a reason. Beyond livelihoods, social networks are key. Often, the support of family and friends

within the community is a primary survival mechanism. Communities may be unwilling to relocate unless the entire community relocates together. Similarly, multi-family households may be unwilling to move if only one family is granted new housing or legal title to land.

- How to prevent “unmitigable” lands from being reoccupied: this is frequently done by creating public spaces such as parks, playing fields, parking areas, or amenities that are at lower risk. However, there needs to be public and local government buy-in for these to be installed and maintained.

Recommendations

- For many highly vulnerable households, social capital – social networks and support from friends, family and community – is one of their few assets. Whole communities, and the households within them, may need to be moved as a unit.
- Housing is also a livelihood for many people. Homes are the site of economic activities, or even the economic activity themselves (for example, renting part of the house). Resettlement actions need to take into consideration these local realities.
- Resettlement is more than just physically relocating people. Resettlement requires long-term engagement, needs to include the provision of core services, must support livelihoods and create market linkages, and must match or exceed the security households currently experience.
- Both individual households and the community as a whole need to be part of the resettlement conversation. Resettlement issues are frequently very conflictive; non-state actors can help to build a “neutral” space for dialogue between the population and the authorities. It is also important to involve local institutions and government; they have better understanding of local needs, the private sector, civil society and the media.



- Assessments of “unmitigable risk” should, in addition to considering resettlement, also evaluate less disruptive solutions such as elevated housing or drainage improvements. Simple participatory cost-benefit assessments conducted with at risk communities can often identify alternative that are not always obvious to outside players and experts.
- New development on high risk lands must be prevented. New permanent settlements are being created in the cities every year, many in high risk areas where space is “available.” Allowing authorities to continue to grant land titles and public services, effectively legalizing these settlements, will continue to generate new communities in need of resettlement post-disaster. Using a risk-based approach to land-use planning and enforcing land-use designations will help prevent new settlements in hazard zones.
- Though creation of new high-risk settlements must be avoided, it remains necessary for housing policy to allow impoverished groups access to adequate housing in safe areas according to their needs.

Conclusion

Done well, resettlement can work, providing permanent, lower risk housing solutions for vulnerable communities. However, to do it well it is important to take advantage of global examples of successful resettlement efforts. There is no “one size fits all” approach.

At the national level, the process will need to be planned in an integral, ongoing manner while maintaining the flexibility to address location- and community-specific needs. At the local level, it will need to involve multiple stakeholders, in particular establishing alliances with the Informal Property Formalization Agency, the Ministry of Housing, Construction and Sanitation, municipalities, private

sector, and civil society, and others in order to generate a strong and profound process. And across scales, the management of disaster risk must be built in, with the selection of clean, safe land a priority.

Peru has been given an opportunity with these floods to reduce risk and increase resilience. Taking the time to assure resettlement is successful will ultimately benefit not just the communities involved but also positively affect the economy, both now and in future disasters.

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The Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance PERC provides research and independent reviews of large flood events. It seeks to answer questions related to aspects of flood resilience, flood risk management and catastrophe intervention. It looks at what has worked well (identifying best practice) and opportunities for further improvements.

Prepared by the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance and ISET-International, this publication is intended solely for informational purposes. All information has been compiled from reliable and credible sources; however, the opinions expressed are those of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance and ISET-International. — August 2017