

Policy Brief

When communities resist relocation: rethinking strategies for protecting the displaced residents of Bududa in Uganda

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Summary

Navigating the question of protection for internally displaced persons (IDPs) require significant attention to their concerns in developing sustainable solutions. In certain instances, relocation may be resisted. Such resistance may be symptomatic of certain issues that need to be addressed. With a specific focus on the Bududa residents in the Mt. Elgon region of Uganda, this brief examines the issue of resistance to relocation and advocates for rethinking protection strategies.

1 Introduction

Uganda grapples with legacies of landslides. Its disaster management regime is being tested to breaking point as landslides continue to bury people in hundreds especially at the foot of Mt. Elgon. Such deaths are a manifestation of contemporary challenges confronting humanity with an increase in disasters. However, the response of the

government is yet to constitute a holistic solution to the issues. At present, the government is yet to learn from its citizens' past experiences of mudslides. In some incidences, the government has used 'minimum force' to evacuate and relocate people in areas labeled 'high risk' to landslides. While resistance to relocation is often assumed to be a form of adamancy, it is rather a symptom of a much deeper issue. It may result from multiple and complex situations that people grapple with including uncomfortable lessons following previous relocations. In Uganda, a specific situation that reveals this, for instance, is the situation of the Bududa residents from the Mt. Elgon region.

2 The Bududa Context

The Mt. Elgon region is an ecologically rich area. At the foot of the mountain, people grow food with rich volcanic soils to support their increasing population. The foot of Mt. Elgon is also known for its promising productivity of Arabica coffee from which people earn income (Kiva, 2018). As such, people rely on good soil and temperature to acquire hard-earned cash to fend for their families. However, it has been a region affected by landslides. Over 1000,000 people are estimated to be living insecurely on the slopes of Mt. Elgon (Mukooli & Wambede, 2019). The landslide incidents have scattered people in Bududa to near and far distances including Bukalasi, Bulucheke, Bulambuli and Kiryandongo and from temporary settlements to years of internal displacements as a result of experiencing geohazards (Gorokhovich, Doocy, Walyawula, Muwanga, & Nardi, 2013; Staudt, Kuosmanen, Babirye, & Lugaizi, 2014).

Initially, residents of Bududa preferred nearby places than relocation to long-distance places including Kiryandongo so that they can periodically check their homes. Arguments advanced by residents of Bududa include fears that the Government wants to grab ancestral lands by relocating people to Kiryandongo – fears intensified by unconfirmed speculations that Mt. Elgon has natural minerals (Juventine, 2012).

Whereas the Government outrightly denied such a position referring to it as 'mere politics' and 'misinformation', related fears are yet to be addressed (Juventine, 2012; Mucunguzi, 2019; Nangalama, 2017). The land 'grabbing' distress comes at a time when the country is up-in-arms with contentious debates on 'compulsory land acquisition' including ironical statements by political leaders who have hit headlines encouraging residents of Bududa to sell off their lands and relocate to Bulambuuli (Kiva, 2018; Samilu, 2018).

Studies in the Bududa region has shown that most people who had been relocated by the Government to Kiryandongo [on the instruction of the President of Uganda] returned to Bududa with the solace that “If any, landslides are acts of God and could occur anywhere at any time” (Juventine, 2012; Osuret et al., 2016).

The resistance to relocation has also been amplified by the fact that some of the Bududa landslide survivors relocated to Kiryandongo have been threatened with evictions by people claiming to be owners of the land on which landslide survivors were relocated. There have also been direct threats and labeling of these survivors as ‘foreigners’ (Masinde, 2010; Wanasolo, 2012).

To the government, such resistance has seemed to imply that the people are being uncooperative. In 2018, the Undersecretary in-charge of Finance and Administration within the Office of the Prime Minister stated during an appearance before a parliamentary committee that:

Government is ready to use reasonable force on all those survivors who intend to resist the relocation... Police will not beat them, but they will force them to relocate or persuade them to choose between continuity with life or death (Kiwuuwa, 2018).

However, such resistance requires a rethink in approaching protection. In 2013, a study titled “Land Science and Practice” was conducted following a landslide in Bududa. Researchers warned of a new scarp within 300 meters from the head of the Nametsi landslide which was just a ticking time bomb. The study further revealed that the absence of drainage systems, among other factors, exacerbates the potential for future ‘new’ disasters and recommended alternative sources of livelihoods to move people away from the sole dependence on Arabica coffee. Significantly, the study recommended the establishment of a ‘simple’ monitoring system as a mitigation measure in the furtherance of disaster risk reduction.

In 2014, a Geological Survey on Bududa landslides was also conducted drawing on diverse literature, field observations, and landslide classification systems (Staudt et al., 2014). From this study, it was re-echoed that Mt. Elgon is a high-risk area for geohazards: the area is prone to debris flow and complex slides. The study recommended that countermeasures, including a landslide inventory information system as well as a multi-geohazard map for validating future landslides and planning countermeasures, could be helpful. However, these recommendations are yet to be duly implemented.

3 Conclusion and Recommendations

Sustainable solutions to protecting displaced communities require a deeper analysis and discussion on livelihood, addressing land conflicts, building people's trust in organs of the state, as well as addressing past legacies of prior displacements. This is evidently the case in the Bududa context. Beyond this, there is a need to appreciate the fact that the ability to make choices is integral to the sustenance of solutions for affected populations. In rethinking strategies for protecting the displaced residents of Bududa and addressing the resistance to relocation, this brief recommends the following:

- Restrain from the use of force and coercion (verbal and physical) while relocating communities affected by natural disasters.
- Proactively engage political, cultural, and religious leaders across the community in mass sensitisation, dialogue, and education on responses to natural disasters.
- Incorporate local knowledge into disaster risk management for community buy-in of life-saving actions.
- Strengthen capacities of community-based structures to effectively support relocation and governmental efforts in addressing landslides in the region.
- Invest in early warning technologies to support community and state-led initiatives of landslide management.
- Finance and support research initiatives on early warning, adaptation, risk reduction, and community-led initiatives towards tackling landslides in the region.

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