

Evacuations as displacement: a research agenda



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Evacuations can be a lifesaving tool. But as recent conflicts and unprecedented disasters around the world have shown, without careful planning and oversight, evacuations can also displace people – often for prolonged periods and at great social, economic and personal cost.

In 2023, there were nearly 47 million internal displacements globally. More than half were linked to disasters,¹ and many began as pre-emptive, government-led evacuations.² This trend has been relatively consistent for more than a decade³ and the numbers are potentially even higher given that they are based on proxy indicators, such as housing loss.⁴

This paper conceptualises ‘evacuations’ as a form of human mobility, and as a form of displacement, in particular. Despite the statistics, evacuations are rarely analysed through a displacement lens. Instead, they tend to be viewed positively as a form of rescue ‘to save lives and minimise exposure to harm’⁵ and ensure people’s ‘security, safety, and well-being’.⁶ Ideally, evacuations should serve this function. However, the emergency nature of evacuations means that authorities may focus on immediate assistance and overlook longer-term needs, potentially leaving people displaced without homes, livelihoods or support networks. Done badly, an evacuation may become the disaster itself.

As climate change amplifies the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, it seems likely that evacuations will increase.⁷ High numbers of evacuations are not necessarily a bad thing: they could be a sign of a well-functioning disaster risk management system. Indeed, relatively few deaths in some major disasters have been attributed to proactive evacuation policies.⁸

However, poorly planned and executed evacuations may have severely detrimental effects on people’s rights and wellbeing. In some cases, evacuees may find themselves

displaced for many years. While longitudinal data is scarce,⁹ a scoping study by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in 2015 concluded that there are probably many more people living in protracted disaster displacement than previously thought.¹⁰ For example, in 2020, 33,000 Haitians remained displaced following an earthquake a decade earlier, while 52,000 people had not found a durable solution 9 years after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan.¹¹

Evacuations may also reflect and reinforce systemic patterns of inequity and discrimination, increasing vulnerability and inhibiting personal choice and agency. Political choices about where houses are built, what disaster risk reduction measures are put in place, right through to larger issues relating to race, gender, class and social supports, all affect whether hazards transform into disasters for particular communities and individuals. For example, a detailed analysis of Australian law and policy revealed that existing evacuation frameworks pay insufficient attention to people’s protection needs over time.¹² While Australian law safeguards the right to life in the emergency phase, it is otherwise silent on human rights.

Furthermore, the traditional ‘rescue’ paradigm may undermine human agency if evacuees are viewed as ‘victims’ who need ‘saving’, obscuring their entitlements to rights and solutions. This may be linked to a depoliticisation of the circumstances resulting in displacement, where disasters are cast as ‘natural’ rather than deeply embedded in social, economic and political structures and decision-making processes.

Unlike displacement, migration and planned relocations (which are already distinct areas of scholarship and public policy), evacuations have escaped sustained, systematic scrutiny.¹³ A flow-on effect of this is that without robust analysis, a clear conceptual framework for understanding evacuations will remain lacking, impeding evidence-led policymaking. This is of concern given the scale and frequency of evacuations and their potential for adverse human consequences. The latter poses a particular risk if the attention of authorities is disproportionately focused on the initial emergency, rather than what comes next.

To address these challenges, the Evacuations Research Hub was launched in July 2024 at the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at the University of New South Wales. Funded by a 5-year Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship, the Hub provides the first sustained, integrated legal analysis of how, when and why evacuations are carried out. By ‘seeing’ evacuations as a form of displacement, and by overcoming existing fragmentation across a diverse range of legal sub-fields, it will identify the legal and policy innovations required to ensure that evacuees’ human rights are respected and that they do not end up in arbitrary or protracted displacement, without durable solutions.

Through the Hub, the research will analyse why and how evacuations are used, what legal standards govern their conduct and when and how they come to an end. It will map evacuations across international law and explore whether there are (or should be) common legal principles governing when and how evacuations are carried out. It will compare laws and practices across a number of case study countries with extensive experience of evacuations but vastly different resources and contexts (including in Australia and the Pacific). Through a cross-cutting methodology, the research will generate comprehensive and comparative insights into evacuations from a diverse range of factual and legal settings, jurisdictions, periods and actors. This will enable a cross-fertilisation of ideas from traditionally siloed contexts. It is hoped that these insights will provide law- and policy-makers with conceptual clarity about whom to evacuate, when and for how long, thereby embedding more protective and sustainable legal and policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels.

Endnotes

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