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Complicating “community” engagement: Reckoning with an elusive concept in climate-related planned relocation

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ABSTRACT

As planned relocation becomes an increasingly utilized climate adaptation strategy, guidance for effective practice consistently emphasizes the importance of “community” engagement throughout relocation planning, decision-making, and implementation. Yet “community” is not a monolith operating in consensus, where engagement is achieved simply through the interaction of internal and external actors. To move beyond this binary paradigm where community engagement is a box to be checked, we offer a conceptual framework with three key questions for consideration for those operationalizing community engagement strategies in relocation policy and practice. 1) *Who constitutes the community in planned relocation?* 2) *Who facilitates planned relocation*? 3) What is *meaningful community engagement*? As part of this framework, we introduce the overlooked role of actors bridging community and facilitation worlds, here called *intermediaries,* and how they can enhance or hinder meaningful engagement. Finally, we explore novel approaches for researchers and practitioners to advance context-specific engagement before, during, and after climate-related relocation processes to promote genuine self-determination among those relocating.

1. Introduction

Decisions about whether, where, when, and how to relocate people away from a hazard-exposed area are complex. This phenomenon has diverse names – often a process term (planned, managed, strategic) and a movement term (relocation, retreat, resettlement) – here referred to as planned relocation.[2] Planned relocations of groups of people are a unique form of human mobility, distinct from the migration and displacement of individuals (Ajibade et al., 2020). Planned relocations, are already occurring on every inhabited continent in the context of extreme weather-related hazards (e.g., floods, storms) expected to intensify as climate change accelerates, but also geophysical hazards (e.g., earthquakes, volcanoes) (Ajibade et al., 2022; Bower and Weerasinghe, 2021; IOM, 2022). Relocations planned in relation to climate-related hazards may have longer planning horizons and are likely to become more common. As noted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “the need for planned relocations will increase” as climate risk intensifies (Pörtner et al., 2022, p. 65).

Ideas of ‘community’ are central to planned relocation processes, which Campbell (2010, pp. 58–59) describes as: “the permanent (or

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[2] Managed retreat, another well-known form of climate-adaptive mobility, refers to “the planned, purposeful, coordinated movement of people and assets away from risk” (Siders, 2019, p. 216). While managed retreat shares similarities with planned relocation – i.e., intentionality to move people away from harm – we draw a conceptual distinction between the two. Managed retreat, particularly in the United States, is often associated with home buyout programs taking place at the individual household and asset scale, where local governments become the owners of the house and land at risk (Siders, 2019) and individual households disperse to various locations. These approaches are distinct since managed retreat happens at the individual or family level, while planned relocation is associated with the wholesale movement of a group impacted by risks, where the intention is for the majority of the group to relocate to a shared destination site with their social networks relatively intact. This conceptualization follows what Yarina and Wescoat (2023) demarcate as “community relocation” and “planned relocation”, with the minor variation that the former focuses on maintaining social networks and the latter includes state involvement in the relocation process. For simplicity, we merge these two definitions under a singular concept of “planned relocation”. However, we separate managed retreat from planned relocation because of the differences in how community is conceptualized and leveraged under each approach.

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long-term) movement of a *community* (or a significant part of it) from one location to another, in which important characteristics of the original *community*, including its social structures, legal and political systems, cultural characteristics and worldviews, are retained: the *community* stays together at the destination in a social form that is similar to the *community* of origin" [emphasis added]. Given the importance of community to planned relocation and the ongoing debates across social sciences about how to define it, here we critically reckon with the concept to understand pitfalls and areas for improvement in its usage. We recognize the important critiques in the definition and application of this term, many of which we will unpack in this analysis. However, the term also has practical salience in the planned relocation context, and we develop this analysis in recognition of the practical limits for moving beyond this term. As such, we hereafter remove the quotation marks and italics from the term solely for readability, yet recognize the nuance and complexity of the concept.

The term community is often leveraged to argue that affected people should be engaged in planned relocation processes (Ajibade et al., 2022), ranging from information sharing, to consultation, to active participation in decision-making. This concept of community engagement is important for questions of public participation, citizen involvement, autonomy, and the right to self-determination from the perspective of environmental justice, climate justice, and equity, all well documented in the literature on planned relocation (Kumasaka et al., 2022; McAdam and Ferris, 2015; Siders and Ajibade, 2021). Practitioners and policy-makers similarly uphold the principle of community engagement in discussions on planned relocation 'best practice', as demonstrated in guidance developed by national governments (see Republic of Fiji, 2018; Solomon Islands Government, 2022) and international organizations and academics (e.g., Brookings Institution et al., 2015; Georgetown University et al., 2017; IFRC, 2018). Indeed, community engagement is nearly universally assumed by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners alike to be important throughout relocation decision-making, planning, and implementation.

Invocations of community and community engagement have been critiqued across the climate adaptation and mitigation, disaster risk reduction, and development as simplistic because of their imprecise definitions and assumption of consensus literatures (Ptak et al., 2018; Siders, 2022; Titz et al., 2018; Westoby et al., 2020). This reductive approach can lead to tokenistic engagement strategies, further marginalization of people with pre-existing vulnerabilities based on intersectional identities, and a lack of consideration of geographically dispersed affected populations. Despite the fluid meaning of community and its frequent ambiguous usage, the concept is revered and generally acknowledged as a "valuable achievement or social state" (Plant, 1978, p. 81). Referencing this normative assumption, Levine (2017) argues community is "significant without signifying a singular group or place, meaningful without stable meaning" (p. 1160). While employing the term community is not a panacea for meaningful engagement in planned relocation, the concept holds value if applied with greater nuance.

We argue that community is not a monolith that speaks with consensus, but rather a complex, multidimensional, and dynamic entity requiring iterative consideration. Thus governments, intergovernmental agencies, development banks, and other actors engaging in relocation policy and practice should not pay attention solely to the presence or absence of community engagement, considering this to be a binary checkbox with a 'yes or no' answer. Instead, they should consider *who is involved* at each stage of the relocation process and *how*.

Current logic within planned relocation often depicts two umbrella groups: *internal* actors who will relocate (e.g., 'lived experience experts', 'residents') and *external* actors who facilitate relocation (e.g., 'learned experts', 'implementing actors') (Hino et al., 2017). While this binary conceptualization offers many practical benefits, it also obscures the dynamic nature of how community engagement develops throughout each stage of the relocation process. In pursuit of this more nuanced conceptual approach, we raise three critical questions that policymakers, practitioners, and relocators can ask themselves while developing community engagement strategies in planned relocation contexts:

1) *Who constitutes the community in planned relocation?*
2) *Who facilitates planned relocation?*
3) *What is meaningful community engagement?*

We propose a shift in the standard paradigm of *internal* and *external* actors and develop a new conceptual framework for engagement among actors working in planned relocation policy, practice, and research, drawing on an interdisciplinary review of literature from sociology, geography, urban studies, adaptation science, governance theory, human rights, and development studies. We first explore the utility of the term community in planned relocation challenges that emerge from boundaries imposed by varying spatial-, social-, legal-, and cultural-based definitions, and the problems with insinuating consensus. Next, we consider the role of the stakeholder facilitating engagement and their motivations, the type of support offered, and the complexities across multiple scales, including the often-neglected role of *intermediaries* (stakeholders who span internal and external domains). Then, we identify pathways to meaningful engagement according to the quality and sustainability of engagement and explore power challenges like trust in local representatives and elite capture. Finally, we offer questions for consideration in future research, policy, and practice.

2. Who constitutes the community in planned relocation?

The elusive definition of community has plagued scholars and policy practitioners for decades. In Hillery's (1955) foundational exploration of the community, the non-exclusive categories spanned geographic boundaries, kinship or institutional networks, consciousness, shared values, notions of self-sufficiency, and ecological relationships. Similarly, subsequent typologies have found that community has continued to have "a complex range of descriptive, often incompatible, meanings" (Plant, 1978, p. 82), resulting in a state in which "cross-disciplinary confusion seems to be the order of the day" (Barrett, 2015, p. 182). Common amongst all categorizations, however, is the centrality of interactions that socially construct the space, in which there appears to be social cohesion (Chaskin, 1997; Tyler, 2006) or entitativity (Whitham, 2019) that is palpable, yet often empirically intangible.

Contemporary scholarship has dealt with the ambiguity of community by qualifying the term using versions of Hillery's categorizations. For example, communities of place (Thomsen et al., 2009; Whitham, 2019) typically evoke geographic boundaries, often in reference to spatially defined residential contexts. Imagined communities (Ptak et al., 2018), contrasting with place-based communities, are not spatially-bound groups and have less frequent interactions, creating a sense of "community without propinquity" (Gottdiener et al., 2019, p. 258) both in a physical and emotional sense. Each of these examples contains within them communities based on networks and shared interests (which Thomsen et al. (2009) would label as communities of interest), amongst other qualifiers. Culture-based conceptualizations center on shared identity – including shared history and experiences, codes and norms for behavior, language, values, and so forth (Titz et al., 2018).

Most definitions of community reference spatial, social, legal or cultural elements. Fig. 1 introduces the boundaries and overlaps between these dynamic definitions from the scholarship. When applied to planned relocation policy and practice, however, challenges emerge from boundaries imposed by these various definitions. For example, the case of the Jean Charles Choctaw Nation's relocation from Isle de Jean Charles to a mainland site in Schreiver, Louisiana, highlights some critical challenges when defining community (Jean Charles Choctaw Nation, 2024; Siders, 2022). A *spatial* definition, meaning people living within a geographic boundary such as an island, would include one

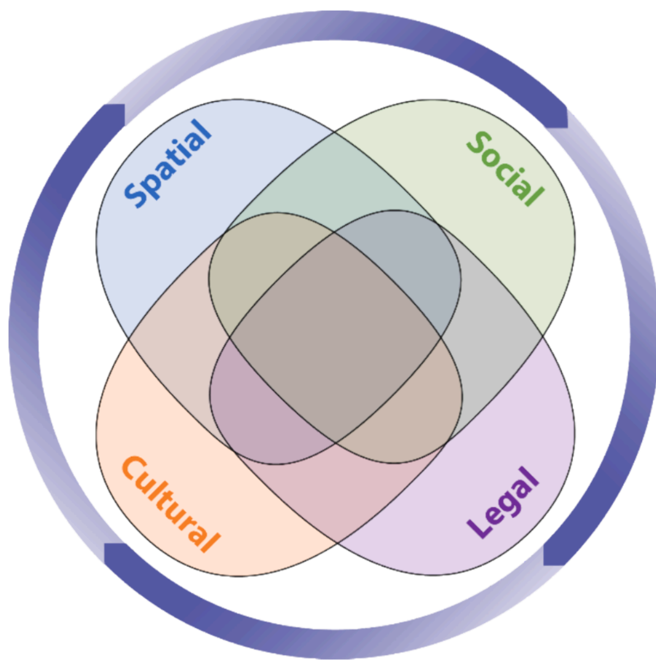

Fig. 1. Overlapping definitions of community. Arrows represent the multi-purpose, iterative changes in definitions over time.

nontribal affiliated resident (Jessee, 2020), exclude tribal leadership who had already independently migrated away but still play a critical role in decision-making, and ignore people's everyday translocal movements across multiple places (Sakdapolrak et al., 2016). Despite these shortcomings, an advantage of a place-based definition is it aligns with spatialized risk assessment needs and building and zoning requirements.

Alternatively, a *social* definition of community emphasizes the importance of social cohesion and the complexity of evolving kinship ties, especially during a relocation process. However, social-based definitions of community fail to consider geographic hazards of those exposed and do not delineate who is entitled to make relocation decisions. In the case of Isle de Jean Charles, questions arose about including members of another local tribe (the United Houma Nation) that some residents had close ties with and who also claimed historical connection to the island (Jessee, 2020). Moreover, *legal* definitions of community present different challenges; membership criteria of tribal governments may exclude spouses, children might not be heard because adults customarily make decisions, or renters may not be involved in decision-making because legal frameworks emphasize property ownership as a basis for access. While legal definitions may pose barriers to engagement, they can, however, be important for a community with customary legal systems as among some Indigenous Peoples. *Cultural* definitions of community based on shared cultures and interests, such as federally or state recognized tribes or Indigenous Peoples (e.g. members of the Isle de Jean Charles Choctaw Nation, formerly the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe), underscore the importance of preserving the shared heritage and spiritual ties to non-human elements during relocation (Gini, 2022), yet are less relevant in urban areas where identity varies substantially. Some scholars acknowledge that these qualified definitions in Fig. 1 are not mutually exclusive characterizations, but rather these components interact to create more dynamic understandings of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Titz et al., 2018).

These definitions introduce the numerous ways to define and 'bound' community. Yet communities are much more expansive beyond these ascribed internal boundaries and can evolve through normative alignment, shared histories, and other non-human elements (Gini, 2022). Religion and spirituality (Mortreux and Barnett, 2009), cultural history (Ferguson-Bohnee, 2015), emotions (Gini et al., 2021), and intimate relationships with flora and fauna in ecosystems (Gini, 2022) all inform people's experiences of climate change and the ways they form community. Further, conceptualizations of community are often spatially bounded, yet people's experiences of community and place attachment (Adams, 2016; Gurney et al., 2017) are relational.

Such bounded definitions do not account for changing relational community elements of community (McMichael and Katonivualiku, 2020). For example, a community that is spatially and culturally linked can also include dynamic sub-communities such as religious or affinity groups and other ways of gathering, with people moving between these sub-groups. A community may also include people who live some or part of the time outside of it, but who maintain spatial or relational ties. In planned relocation processes, not everyone may choose to move (Farbotko et al., 2020), and others may return to their place of origin (Arnall, 2015). If the community is defined exclusively as those who have moved, this can ignore and even further marginalize the people who stay behind, either voluntarily or involuntarily (Farbotko et al., 2020) but who have the same social and cultural ties despite not moving in the community relocation.

Communities may also self-define in ways that intersect with one or multiple conceptions in Fig. 1, including in established protocols for how external actors should engage during a planned relocation (Naquin et al., 2019). Ways to define community often vary depending on whether the purpose is internal for bottom-up self-governance or imposed externally for top-down management of a population while navigating practical relocation challenges, underscoring the need for dynamic definitions of community. These definitions can arise incidentally or intentionally as a performance that people within the group are conscious of creating and performing (Levine, 2017). The logistics of defining community may be necessary for relocation, but also inherently reflect colonial legacies of sedentarism and forced movement (Marino, 2012), especially when imposed on indigenous populations. Community under these imposed definitions remains contested and complex. Even when attempting to approach relocation in a bottom-up or decolonial manner, each step in the process – down to defining the bounds of the community – must still navigate persistently colonial systems (Gini, 2022), with hierarchies of knowledge that prioritize Western definitions over more holistic, expansive, or resonant ways to conceptualize what is means to be a community (Datta and Starlight, 2024). It is therefore essential to focus on the *process* of defining community rather than reaching a singular definition, where the 'who, what, where, when, and why' questions defining the boundaries of community are drawn, and by whom, are all part of this dynamic equation.

Even when a dynamic definition of community exists, there is often an unspoken assumption that the term serves as shorthand for a homogenous group of people who hold identical perspectives. Communities engaging in planned relocation are not monoliths (Titz et al., 2018), and members may have differing opinions about whether and how to relocate based on age, gender, disability, lived experiences, or place attachments. A local mayor or tribal leader may be part of the community but also hold a position of power that makes their role and opinions distinct from others (Arnall, 2015). Invoking the term community provides humanitarian, disaster risk reduction, and community-based adaptation practitioners with legitimacy in presumably locally-led processes (Soanes et al., 2021), but inherently includes assumptions of homogeneity, equity, and a bounded, deliberate construction of a social and cultural grouping (Titz et al., 2018; Westoby et al., 2021). Titz et al. (2018) note the appearance of consensus may stem from a number of factors: in-group obligation or fear, belief that in-group compromise will better serve the 'common good', or any number of power dynamics (hidden or visible) within the group.

This illusion of community solidarity generates slippage between differing definitional boundaries and has practical consequences. Actors or agencies may capitalize on the malleable bounds of community by

purporting to hold in-group interests, knowing the motives for action are less likely to be contested under the guise of the 'community' (Faas and Marino, 2020; Levine, 2017). Given these pitfalls, some are calling for a shift away from the usage of community entirely. Titz et al. (2018) argue against the use of the term in favor of a 'people-centered' approach, and the use of more context-specific language. Alternatively, the notion of 'locally-led adaptation' pushes back on 'community-based adaptation' framings precisely because of the assumption of uniformity and static nature of who and what constitutes a 'community' (Westoby et al., 2021) and its potential to obscure micro-level power dynamics. For Westoby et al. (2020), the reframing from being 'based' in a community to being 'led' by local actors allows for opportunities to more adequately delineate who must adapt and better positions locals to be truer agents of power within the adaptation process, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustainably adapting. While locally-led adaptation is gaining popularity, this approach faces similar definitional challenges as community-based frameworks – in that 'who' and 'what' comprises the 'local' has yet to be communally understood, generating a charge for "more nuanced and dynamic understandings that recognize the various layers of complexity in 'local' and 'community' framings" (Rahman et al., 2023, p. 1548).

We build on these critiques in the climate-related planned relocation context, where scholars and practitioners must consider how an ambiguous community definition and an assumption of consensus can be leveraged in ways that prioritize special interests and lead to elite capture (Arnall et al., 2013; Westoby et al., 2020) among those with power in representation over those most impacted by a potential relocation. It is imperative for planned relocation policy and practice to regularly consider who constitutes the community, recognize that dynamic, diverse community definitions may emerge throughout the relocation process for different purposes, and build in flexibility to define community iteratively as needed. Like the development and disaster contexts, climate-related planned relocation processes are usually organized around a bounded group of people who are moving. This bounding often obscures the blended meanings of community and includes a number of inherent uncertainties: not everyone who might be considered part of the relocating community will want or be able to move; the relocation may involve moving near to or within a host community; and in some cases local representatives, government, and civil society actors might be part of facilitating the relocation, but also part of or connected to the community. How should these actors be considered within the conception of community and the practical bounds of the relocation process? Given these problems with conceptualizing community, we argue that a more nuanced and critical analysis is needed regarding what and who constitutes a community. With the bounded nature of planned relocation, the term community still holds value, but should serve as a starting point for context-specific analysis of who is moving and who is not, who facilitates the process, and how the different entry points of engagement between these groups (via intermediaries) impacts the relocation process.

3. Who facilitates planned relocation?

Understanding governance of planned relocation requires also identifying who facilitates these processes (Hino et al., 2017). Governance is rarely straightforward or unidirectional and traditionally involves two types of stakeholders: *internal* – community members and their representatives, and *external* – planning partners and funders. Even where planned relocations are community-initiated and led, a network of external actors and institutions facilitates the process. This network may span local, regional, national, and sometimes international scales, and include both state and non-state actors like non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or United Nations (UN) agencies (Robinson and Berkes, 2011). The role of these non-state actors in particular can be critical in fragile states where governments may be less directly involved in relocation governance (Alaniz, 2017). Together, these state and non-state actors sometimes cooperate through mutual adjustment to form a polycentric approach to governance, creating a system with multiple centers of decision-making with overlapping jurisdictions (Ostrom, 2010). These actors play many distinct roles in planned relocation processes, including supporting the development of policy frameworks to safeguard human rights (e.g., Solomon Islands Government, 2022), funding mechanisms to coordinate relocation finance (e.g., Fiji – Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund, 2019), implementing a relocation process (e.g., U.S. FEMA, 2022), conducting scientific assessments about the 'habitability' of an origin or destination site (e.g., Fiji – FTRD, 2024), and building capacity at different scales (e.g., Vietnam – IFRC, 2018).

National governments often shape the rationale for relocation and establish relevant pathways for support. Creating a mandate for climate-related planned relocation is complicated, even when affected people request it, largely due to controversial histories of relocating marginalized populations, the logistical challenges of financing and procuring new land, and poor previous outcomes in analogous relocation contexts (Piggott-McKellar et al., 2019). The nature of government involvement, particularly at the national level, may also be driven by underlying power-related concerns, including a desire to strengthen legitimacy through being seen as responding to environmental impacts (Mortreux et al., 2018).

Local and sub-national actors also play critical roles alongside national ministries. For example, in the intended relocation of Taro in the Solomon Islands, the provincial premier, Watson Qoloni, is a critical stakeholder both in driving the relocation process and in advocating for attention from the national government (Kekea, 2021). In Valmeyer, Illinois, Mayor Dennis Knobloch ran for office because of the need to find a solution for the town's flooding concerns, and then proceeded to lead relocation efforts (Knobloch, 2005). As these examples illustrate, a resident that may be relocating can also be in a position of government authority, or others outside of the community can serve as advocates for local interests; these individuals may fall into both internal and external categories.

3.1. *Intermediaries*

To capture the important role of those who transcend relocating and facilitating domains, we introduce the concept of *intermediaries*: crucial actors who operate both within and between the internal and external stakeholder groups to drive relocation processes. These intermediaries act as facilitators and critically shape engagement in ways that the standard paradigm of internal versus external stakeholders ignores. Identifying the role of these individuals in these processes is important because they are often under-recognized in community engagement strategies. Initiation and planning for relocation, including communication and representation, often takes place through these intermediary leaders. Fig. 2 builds upon the traditional binary internal/external divide, depicting a more complex, practice-based story with intermediary leaders operating across internal and external stakeholder groups.

Managing planned relocation processes requires the involvement of different types of intermediaries to represent the needs and desires of community members to external stakeholders. In some cases, intermediaries can include local and community-based leaders while in others they may be sub-national governments and regional administrators who translate national policy to local action. In Alaska, for example, communities pursuing relocation not only have managed the process through distinct, culturally relevant, internal leadership structures, but also have partnered with different divisions of city, state, and federal government agencies, and non-governmental organizations to advance their relocation projects (Bronen et al., 2020; Bronen and Chapin III, 2013; Kumasaka et al., 2022). Intermediaries may also be non-state actors, such as affiliates of nongovernmental organizations, faith-based groups, or business interests. In many parts of the Pacific, for instance, both churches and traditional village leadership (e.g., chiefs)

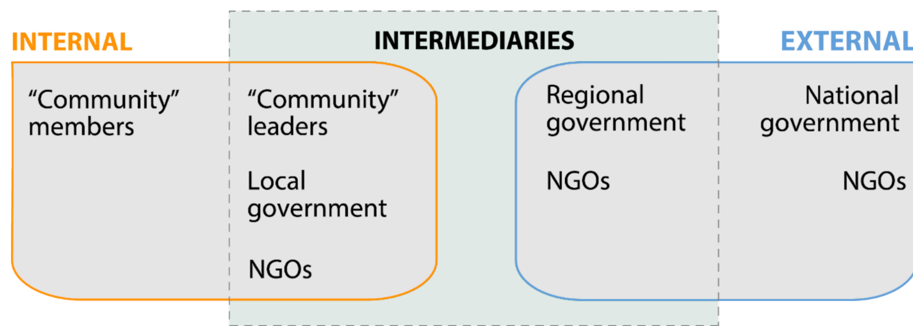

Fig. 2. Expanded paradigm of engagement between internal, intermediary, and external actors in planned relocations.

play an important role in communicating and advocating for the local values such as place-belongingness (Yee et al., 2022a), cultural preservation (Piggott-McKellar et al., 2020), as well as knowledge sharing and community engagement (McMichael et al., 2019; Yee et al., 2022b). Within this multiscalar governance of planned relocation, the actions of intermediaries can shape whether and how community members are able to engage in the planning and implementation process. These intermediaries can act as gatekeepers and as facilitators, with the power to determine who has a voice in decision-making and to ensure the needs of community members are addressed in implementation. For example, in Letau, Vanuatu, many residents had ideas for community adaptation projects, but only two or three 'community champions', i.e., intermediaries, initiated and drove the action and community engagement (Warrick, 2011). In Gardi Sugdub, Panama, a few college-educated residents served as translators between Indigenous and scientific worldviews, playing key roles in mobilization decisions in response to sea level rise (Arenas, 2015). These formal and informal intermediary representatives can also be a center of decision-making authority. In post-disaster housing projects for example, Davidson et al. (2007) describe how responsibilities are often decentralized to local authorities, while community-based organizations provide support by conveying residents' recovery needs. These examples highlight the complexities of relocation governance, with multiple sources of authority and levels of intermediary engagement: traditional or community-based leadership often occurs alongside municipal authorities and non-governmental stakeholders. Yet particularly where there may be many sources of authority, finding common ground can be challenging if intermediaries have different goals from the groups they represent (Ristroph, 2021).

How a planned relocation project is governed, and by whom, can determine how a relocating community is engaged in the process. To understand how communities participate, it is therefore essential to not just consider whether they are included, but rather to examine the whole system, who is involved, who leads, and how (Davidson et al., 2007). Identifying the composition and goals of leadership, including the actions of intermediaries, is important for enhancing meaningful engagement. Explicitly naming the roles that facilitating actors including intermediaries play (across national, regional, local, and tribal government, as well as civil society), is important to avoid reproducing existing inequities and to create spaces for community voices to be included at every stage of relocation (McNamara et al., 2018; Sipe and Vella, 2014).

4. What is meaningful community engagement?

Despite good intentions, there is a real danger of 'community washing', or misrepresentation of community needs to meet other stakeholders' goals (Ptak et al., 2018). Recognizing this, we examine the interactions between the community and these many facilitating actors to understand the implications for *meaningful* community engagement. We also recognize that some communities may have established protocols and mechanisms for engagement, which should be recognized and respected (e.g., Naquin et al., 2019). While there are many ways to define 'meaningful' – including more abstract, justice-oriented, and results-oriented criteria – here we focus on three dimensions: the type of engagement, the frequency of engagement over time, and power dynamics.

4.1. *Type of engagement*

Not all types of community engagement in planned relocation processes are equal, nor should they be measured according to a binary distinction of present or absent (Bower et al., 2023). McAdam and Ferris (2015) articulate a participation spectrum tailored to planned relocation projects, which ranges from 'passive participation or information sharing' to 'local initiative and control.' Their spectrum builds on Arnstein's (1969) canonical ladder of citizen participation, which was later adopted by Choguill (1996) for post-disaster recovery in non-western contexts. Table 1 presents evidence of community engagement practices in planned relocations aligned with the types of engagement identified on the McAdam and Ferris spectrum.

Appropriate types of community engagement can mean something different not just across regions but within countries. An appreciation of context is therefore critical when comparing practices in Table 1; differences may arise from relative levels of resources, approach to democracy, and governance cultures. Between Brazil (Gini et al., 2020) and Fiji (Yee et al., 2022b), for example, local initiative and control may look fundamentally different. Among Pacific Island nations, both community hierarchies and land tenure systems vary not just across countries but also between individual islands (Monson, 2022). This shapes how the decision to move is made, who is consulted in planning, and, especially when it comes to customary land tenure systems, defines the set of available options for relocation (Charan and Kaur, 2017; Yamamoto, 2020). The policy context can also ease or obstruct community leadership in decision-making. In places like Fiji (Republic of Fiji, 2018) and the Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Government, 2022) a formalized procedure and institutional pathway through new policy frameworks is emerging for communities wanting to relocate to ask for support. Elsewhere, in places without a unified policy framework or procedure (Bronen, 2021), community leadership must navigate their own path for engagement with the government on appropriate steps towards relocation.

Regardless of the context, guidance (Brookings Institution et al., 2015; Georgetown University et al., 2017) suggests that to improve outcomes, engagement opportunities should aim to align with more community-driven approaches, in line with scholarship such as McAdam and Ferris's (2015) 'local initiative and control', Arnstein's (1969) ladder 'participants in charge', or Choguill's (1996) 'self-management'. While higher levels of engagement can lead to better livelihood outcomes (Bower et al., 2023), communities with strong leadership but no external support – such as policy frameworks for multilevel governance with clear and navigable procedures – can face institutional, financial, social, informational, and cognitive barriers that extend far beyond the climate context (Biesbroek et al., 2009; Juhola, 2016), and must rely on

Table 1
Types of engagement and corresponding examples. Note: Types of engagement modified from McAdam and Ferris (2015) and examples adapted from Supplementary Information of Bower et al. (2023), and additional sources (Arenas and Oliver-Smith, forthcoming; Gini et al., 2020).

Type of engagement	Case study example
Passive participation – the affected population is informed, but not heard, such as through dissemination of documents or public briefings by officials.	**La Barquita, Dominican Republic:** Community members were unable to design the relocation project but were required to attend trainings on the rules of living in the new condos and apartments. People's participation did not make them "active agents in the decision-making process and thus did not change power relations regarding the formulation and execution of the project" (Hamdouch and Galvan, 2019, p. 40).
Information transfer—affected populations supply information in response to questions but do not make decisions and do not influence the process.	**Denimanu, Fiji:** Denimanu residents shared in a focus group that "[government actors] came to the village and notified us of the relocation in an information session and they gave us the reason why we have to relocate" (Piggott-McKellar et al., 2019, p. 7).
Consultation—affected populations are asked to offer their opinions, suggestions, and perspectives but are not involved in decision-making or implementation of projects.	**Grantham, Australia:** Affected Grantham community members were consulted often by the local government authority and were informed and involved in planning and decision making including through focus groups and community visioning exercises (Simmonds and Davies, 2011; Sipe and Vella, 2014).
Collaboration—the affected population is directly involved in needs analysis and project implementation, and may contribute agency-led projects with labor and other skills.	**Gardi Sugdub, Panama:** Members of the Guna Indigenous community identified the new site, cleared the land, and were involved in site planning and development. Some members were formally employed by the actors supporting the relocation, including the construction company and the Intern-American Development Bank (Arenas and Oliver-Smith, forthcoming).
Decision making and control of resources—affected populations are involved in project assessment, planning, evaluation and decision making.	**Valmeyer, United States:** The decision to relocate emerged from within the community when many residents expressed support during an internal meeting (Knobloch, 2005; Leonard, 2013). Residents also served critical roles in site selection and site development: "Within eight weeks of the day the first flood waters entered the village, seven different committees composed of [more than 100] village residents were created" (Knobloch, 2005, p. 43).
Local initiative and control—affected populations take the initiative; the project is conceived and run by the community, potentially with the support of agencies.	**Enseada de Baia, Brazil**: Community members initiated the process of relocating. They rejected the solutions offered by government authorities because integrating with another community or moving to an urban area would change their lifestyle, traditions and systems of organization based on solidarity principles (Gini et al., 2020). To pursue their goals and relocate to a closer site, they established mutirões – "a system of collective mobilisation to achieve a common goal, based on free, mutual help" (Gini et al., 2020, p. 37).

the embedded processes and path dependent resources available (Gini et al., 2020). Local autonomy is insufficient to ensure community-based or locally-led adaptation, and must also be paired with governance shifts and institutional reform that actually provide pathways and resources oriented around local initiative (Bronen, 2021; Juhola, 2016; Soanes et al., 2021).

The importance of cultivating conditions for community autonomy applies to planning relocations specifically, as well as for climate change adaptation efforts broadly (Pisor et al., 2022). It is essential that community engagement is not just a box to check in a policy or guidance document but is embedded throughout implementation and requires identification of key intermediaries to optimize outcomes for relocating populations. Meaningful engagement galvanized through involvement of intermediaries can be decisive for bridging the gap between best practice guidelines and relocation planning and implementation realities.

4.2. Temporality of engagement

Engagement should not be a single occurrence, but rather a continuous, dynamic, and iterative process that spans multiple stages of deciding whether, where, and how to relocate. Yet engagement levels rarely remain constant throughout a relocation process. Evidence from analogous post-disaster recovery settings in El Salvador, Turkey, and Colombia demonstrates that the early stage engagement is the most important: if "participation occurs at late stages… there are frequent problems either with the project process or with the project outcomes", yet "when the beneficiaries are integrated into the up-front stages…they can have an important impact on the project with long-term advantages to them and to the other stakeholders" (Davidson et al., 2007, p. 112). Even if community members initiate a planned relocation, continuous engagement remains important at later stages of site selection, site planning, implementation of site development plans, and monitoring and evaluation (Opdyke et al., 2018). Multiple opportunities for continuous engagement are essential for improved livelihood outcomes (Bower et al., 2023).

4.3. Power challenges in engagement

Community engagement becomes meaningful when different perspectives are understood and the interactions between actors translate the concerns and desires of the community into policy and action. However, different levels of agency and planning among leading stakeholders can affect the translation of commitments into action, creating power-related challenges for community engagement (Yarina and Wescoat, 2023). Fig. 3 summarizes some of these challenges, which occur between different configurations of internal, external, and intermediary stakeholders.

One common problem arises when members of a community are 'named' in a relocation process but not engaged. Stakeholders gain legitimizing power by evoking community involvement, which purports an idealized social state of governance (Faas and Marino, 2020; Levine, 2017). The vagueness of community and its ubiquitous usage can also lead to boundary conflicts, wherein efforts are redirected away from the planning process and spent policing who and which interests represent the community (Araos, 2023; Levine, 2017). This boundary work can give the appearance of participatory governance, but ultimately reduces the role of community members to holding only symbolic power rather than equal decision-making authority. Equally, these boundaries may exclude host or receiving communities – as well as individuals who choose not to relocate – from consultation and engagement processes. This challenge can span across internal, external, and intermediary actors.

By leveraging the concept of community, external actors can promote plans that, in some cases, mislead local actors about potential benefits and alter local engagement in the planning process. Embedded

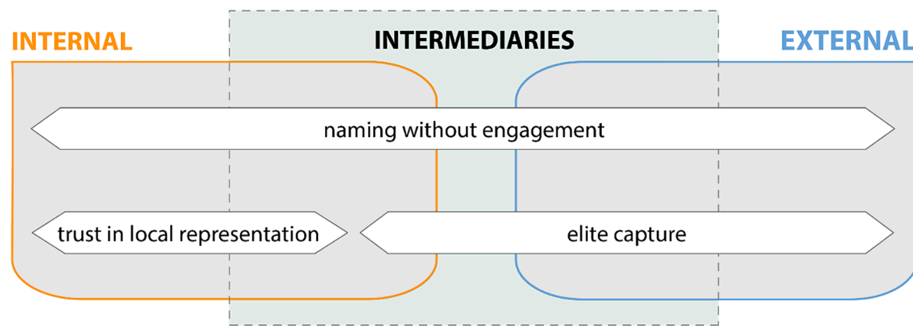

Fig. 3. Power-based challenges to meaningful engagement.

power dynamics within community engagement can lead to the potential for *elite capture*, which occurs when elites from any level of government or civil society change a project or capture financial or physical assets or informal benefits for their own gain. Moreover, even when power has been decentralized more democratically, elite capture can manifest among internal community authorities and representatives and lead to distrust (Arnall et al., 2013). This elite capture can also occur through more informal community hierarchies where those with higher socioeconomic or educational status who have greater influence in participatory processes and consultations can shape the results in their favor. In Mozambique, *regulos* (chiefs) acted as intermediaries representing communities to regional authorities, overseeing the customary land tenure system by mediating disputes and allocating land in new sites (Arnall, 2015). Yet during a past relocation programme in the Lower Zambezi River Valley, questions arose about equitable land distributions with indications that some regulos leveraged their intermediary role for personal gains (Artur and Hilhorst, 2014). As McCarthy (2014) finds, the local capacity that attracts external financial support, such as those with identifiable intermediaries, is also ripe for elite capture. These problems with elite capture can span across both internal and external hierarchies of power, including between external or intermediary stakeholders and the community, as well as among elites and representatives from within the relocating group.

Moreover, the actions of intermediaries in leadership positions can affect overall trust in representation. Community members may lose trust in their representatives when consultation during relocation planning is insufficient, or their stated preferences lose priority. This distrust can emerge at any stage of the relocation process. In Gramalote, Colombia, a post-landslide government-led relocation prioritized community engagement; when newly elected leaders opposed relocation, community members had to bypass them to engage directly with regional and national actors, ultimately leading to distrust in representation and further complicating the relocation process (Oliver-Smith and Arenas, 2015). Community members' loss of trust in key intermediaries can impact their sense of inclusion in the relocation process. Considering these challenges, community-based governance strategies can also provide important checks on intermediary leadership and elite capture across scales of governance.

5. Conclusion and implications

Fostering meaningful engagement in relocation decision-making, planning, and implementation requires understanding who constitutes a community but also the landscape of facilitating stakeholders. We build on previous scholarship in development and disaster risk reduction to explore the conceptualization of community (Arnall et al., 2013; Titz et al., 2018), the role of facilitating actors (Hino et al., 2017), and meaningful community engagement (McAdam and Ferris, 2015) in climate-related planned relocations. We introduce the concept of intermediaries – essential bridging actors who can effectively engage internal community members and external facilitating agencies – to advance understanding of the networks facilitating community engagement in planned relocation processes. By introducing intermediaries into the standard internal versus external paradigm, we develop a more nuanced conceptual framework that connects debates from within academic circles to practical implementation challenges. Table 2 below builds on this framework with practical questions and considerations for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Unpacking these questions moves beyond whether or not the 'community' is included, and instead considers who is involved and how, and in what ways this may shape relocation planning.

Community engagement in planned relocation is an area ripe for future research. For instance, research that further develops understanding of intermediaries in shaping engagement between external relocation facilitators and internal relocating persons may improve relocation processes and outcomes. Similarly, future research could expand on the McAdam and Ferris (2015) spectrum by comparing cases to evaluate which approach and conditions lead to more 'successful' and equitable outcomes for relocating persons. Research could also elaborate on engagement of host communities and other populations affected by planned relocations that are not typically included in differing conceptions of community. Theoretical and applied academic work on the themes identified in Table 2 would provide evidence for how relocation processes can better meet the needs of those most impacted.

The questions raised here can also inform future relocation policy-making and practice. The recent Solomon Islands Government (2022) Planned Relocation Guidelines uniquely acknowledge the diverse and dynamic definitions of community that emerge through consultation and allow that to define the scope of who is included for different purposes. Rather than prescribing one definition, this approach offers opportunities for meaningful engagement by creating space for context-specific and self-defining approaches to community. In Fiji's new Standard Operating Procedures (Office of the Prime Minister, Fiji, 2023), the government has taken a first step in standardizing climate-related relocation procedures to enshrine community involvement over time, across all stages of the process, and diverse community representation (e.g. consulting equal groups of women, older people, etc.) although quotas may be challenging to meet in smaller populations. Whether either of these tools achieve their intended outcomes remains to be seen, but they represent novel pathways towards shifting how communities and community engagement are conceived in relocation planning. Recent scholarship advancing frameworks with indicators to measure such procedural justice considerations in adaptation planning (Juhola et al., 2022) could help guide the integration of these approaches in future national planned relocation policy, building on experiences in the Solomon Islands and Fiji.

Across policy and practical guidelines focused on planning relocations in climate contexts, community engagement in decision-making is nearly universally assumed to be important. But the classic binary paradigm of people moving and outsiders facilitating masks the critical role of intermediaries in planned relocation governance and community engagement. Accounting for their contributions is essential

Table 2
Questions for consideration and implications for further research, policy, and practice.

Questions for consideration		Further research	Policy and practice
1. Who constitutes the community?	a) What are the implications of spatial, social, legal, and cultural-based definitions of community in planned relocation?	Explore the benefits and consequences of competing community definitions within and across case studies of planned relocation. Consider groups excluded by these definitions of community, but that require engaging (e.g., host communities and people who chose not to move).	Incorporate open definitions of community that recognize multiple overlapping conceptions that change over time and for different purposes, e.g., see the Solomon Islands' Planned Relocation Guidelines (Solomon Islands Government, 2022).
	b) Is there an illusion of consensus? Which voices are missing? Whose voices are upheld and whose are silenced?	Investigate the embedded power dynamics before relocation, including within the community itself. Evaluate planned relocation processes and outcomes based on culturally relevant frameworks.	Create inclusive consultation spaces and proactively seek out diverse perspectives. Potential measures could include: Establish guidelines for inclusive consultation to ensure diverse stakeholder groups are represented, as in Fiji's SOP approach (Office of the Prime Minister, Fiji, 2023). Supplementary anonymous and asynchronous surveys of initial consultation groups to mitigate groupthink and gauge inclusivity of interests.
	c) Is the community being defined by internal or external actors? And for what purpose: bottom-up self-governance, or top-down manageability?	Critically examine how internally and externally imposed definitions either diverge or converge. Interrogate the purpose of defining community, and the extent to which different stakeholders have agency in creating the definition.	Integrate opportunities for the community to define itself iteratively throughout the stages of relocation. Support communities to develop protocols outlining how they would like to be engaged (e.g., the Isle de Jean Charles protocol, noted in Naquin et al., 2019).
2. Who is facilitating the relocation?	a) Who is involved in facilitating the relocation at what levels? What are the implications of this configuration of actors?	Examine political and financial contexts (e.g., Gussmann and Hinkel, 2021) and stakeholder motivations.	Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) assigning roles and responsibilities. Establish accountability and grievance mechanisms. Create sub-committees for community engagement based on the strengths of local community members (e.g. Knobloch, 2005).
	b) What is the role of intermediaries who span both internal and external stakeholder groups? What are the implications of their involvement?	Map and analyze the role of intermediary actors, including their function, stakeholder type, and the consequences of their involvement.	Identify intermediaries and their unique challenges and capacities to do translational work between government officials and relocating people. Develop safeguards to minimize challenges of elite capture and lack of trust in intermediaries.
3. What is meaningful engagement?	a) What type of engagement is most appropriate within the given context?	Evaluate the McAdam and Ferris (2015) spectrum of community engagement with empirical evidence.	Create context-appropriate conditions that promote a right to self-determination for relocating persons, leveraging existing local protocols or established practices for decision-making (e.g., Newtok Village Council, n.d.). Develop protocols for community leaders to be able to initiate relocation (e.g., Office of the Prime Minister, Fiji, 2023).
	b) How can engagement be sustained over time, at multiple stages of the process?	Compare the evolution of engagement throughout a relocation process across cases.	Create policies and plans that embed multi-stage consultation, not just at the initiation stage. Secure adequate financial and human resources for consultation and interactive planning.
	c) How is power being contested? What is the likelihood for naming without engagement, loss of trust, and/or elite capture to occur, and how will this be addressed?	Explore cases where these challenges have manifested and identify points of inflection for change.	Embed transparency frameworks and accountability mechanisms around resource allocations and planning decisions throughout the relocation process (Harrington-Abrams, 2022). Provide opportunities for relocating people to express their needs separately from local elites in planning models.

to create meaningful engagement in planned relocation processes. Defining and centering the community in planned relocation requires more nuanced discourse around how to move beyond tokenistic information sharing and consultation with affected populations, towards efforts to empower people to lead on the decision-making and planning. As climate change accelerates and increasing numbers of communities and governments contemplate ways forward, a more complex and dynamic framing of community and understanding of how to enable meaningful engagement will become all the more essential for just policy and practice.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Erica Bower: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rachel Harrington-Abrams:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Betsy Priem:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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