

Let's Talk about Coastal Relocation

Communication & Engagement of Communities amidst a Societal Transformation

Advancements in science make it ever clearer that scores of people located in or near coastal regions and floodplains will face extraordinary challenges due to the unprecedented scope, scale, and speed of sea-level rise and climate change. Relocation of property and people away from threatened places that cannot be protected is a potentially transformative change for the individuals and communities involved. It tends to be a complex and difficult process, and without proper support – technical, financial, and human – it can become conflictual even before a single structure is moved. This poses great demands on those leading, facilitating, and considering such relocation processes. Experience and a wide-ranging scientific literature suggests that communication and engagement in support of relocation must be more than ticking a checkbox. It must be adequate to the task.

It takes far more than finding “the right words” to use, i.e., whether to call it retreat, relocation, resettlement, or realignment. Communication in this situation requires more than guessing the least-triggering, most-persuasive language, to overcome resistance and getting “buy-in.” This fails to recognize the bigger need retreat communication has to answer: namely, how to empathetically and respectfully assist people in making a difficult change that severs their ties to place, community, heritage, and livelihoods, and rebuild their lives elsewhere.

This brochure offers a brief overview of what communication and engagement must accomplish to support the successful relocation of at-risk people and structures to safer locations. The full underlying research can be found at: http://susannemoser.com/documents/Moser_10.4324_9781003141457-20_chapterpdf.pdf



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Tasks of Communication Amidst a Societal Transformation



framing

1. Naming & framing the depth, scale, nature, and outline of necessary change

Help people understand the risks they are facing so they will entertain the idea of relocation. Explain the range of adaptation options in a trauma-informed way, and frame relocation as part of a new beginning toward a meaningful tomorrow.

2. Fostering the transformative imagination

Summon people to a vision of a worthwhile future because it offers an opportunity to generate novel ideas with which to create something potentially better than what is being left behind.



imagination



empathy

3. Mirroring change empathetically

Facing present realities or difficult future outlooks, including those of relocation, requires courage. Such difficult news must be conveyed with empathy, time, and sensitivity to people's needs. Facilitators of such conversations must be comfortable with accompanying others in climate grief.

4. Helping people resist the habit of acquiescing to going numb

Resist the temptation to “going numb” to growing devastation and loss as climate change accelerates. Foster compassion, stamina, and emotional resiliency while attending to both the logistical and psychosocial needs of those in the current and new location.



resiliency



truth

5. Orienting & course-correcting toward the difficult

Recognize and embrace that relocation is more than managing a logistical process. It inevitably involves dealing with racism, housing injustices, gentrification, exclusion from economic opportunity, and deeper questions about community safety in a disruptive climate context.

6. Distinguishing & deconstructing valuable uncertainties

Present and future sea-level rise are certain, but rate and extent are not. In the face of persistent uncertainties, foster curiosity, open minds, and ask questions that are not easily resolved but aim at healing and restoration.



curiosity



sense-making

7. Sense- & meaning-making of difficult change through story (not facts)

Explore together what would make the unfolding story of relocation and sacrifice meaningful. Instead of retreat as a story of permanent loss, what would render the challenge as one of moving through time-limited discomfort to tolerable and maybe even improved prospects?

8. Fostering authentic & radical hope

Foster hope and agency that is anchored in communal values, embraces reality, identifies a worthy outcome, charts a path to that goal, demands active participation, but also harnesses the steady and strategic support from others in realizing it.



hope



love

9. Promoting & actively living a public love

Use communication not to reinforce old injustices, but as a means of reconciliation and healing, by fostering a sense of solidarity and generosity, and counter the litigation culture with re-education and conflict transformation.

10. Fostering generative engagement in building dignified futures for all

Tap the desire not to “be right” but to “do right” by each other, and thus maybe – against overwhelming odds – not just to “do good” but “be good.” Communicating relocation is not about the right words, but about right relations.



engagement