

A surge in violent conflicts, as well as increasing risk of environmental disasters and degradation driven by climate change, have forced people to flee their homes

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Relocation scheme of displaced communities due to Meeriyabedda landslide, Sri Lanka © Prof. Dilanthi Amaratunga

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Forced displacement of individuals and communities is not only a massive humanitarian concern but also a major development challenge, and these displacements are becoming increasingly protracted, many lasting over 5 years. There is a need to develop longer-term sustainable and efficient ways to support both the displaced and their hosts, so that the increased strain on the built environment can be managed.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) **reports** that 59.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced in 2014, but this number had risen to 70.8m by the end of 2018. According to UNHCR, the drastic increase of forced displacement was mainly due to the Syrian conflict as well as other conflicts in the region, conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa and the inflow of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) **highlights** that the Philippines and China have the largest number of internal displaced people due to disasters, with each having 3.8m newly displaced in 2018, followed by 2.7m in India, and 1.2m in the United States.

The difficulties these people endured through their displacement have made them vulnerable. They have lost assets and livelihoods and are unable to plan their future. Apart from the displaced, the host communities need support, too. The forcibly displaced often live in poorer areas that are struggling to meet their own development goals. Accommodating a sudden arrival of large numbers of displaced people presents a challenge for host governments at the national and local levels. It puts further pressure on their ability to deliver essential services, but also the functioning of the built environment, particularly housing and physical infrastructure.

The built environment serves the functionality of day-to-day life, ensures the comfort and wellbeing of humans, and can protect and enhance a person's life even in a stressed situation. In a displacement situation, where people are forced to leave their homes, the displaced community will be introduced to a new community and a new built environment without planning. This will occur through a process of relocation. However, this process goes beyond physical or geographic relocation. It includes socio-cultural, livelihood and economic aspects of their lives. Relocation programmes must consider all these aspects.

Recognising this, it is important to examine the complex and multifaceted role of the built environment in supporting the relocation of forcibly displaced communities, and its potential to better integrate displaced people with their host community. Addressing this research need, **REGARD** (REBuildinG After Displacement) is a collaborative research project between 5 partner universities in Europe and Asia. They are investigating the role of the built environment in rebuilding communities and enhancing social cohesion between those who have been displaced and their host communities.

By examining a range of displacement situations within and between countries, the research team identified 6 critical roles that the built environment can play in fostering relationships between displaced and host communities:

- constructing physical assets
- stimulating economic assets
- facilitating institutional assets
- developing human capital assets
- nurturing social assets
- protecting natural assets.

The built environment is most typically associated with the construction of physical assets for communities. The physical assets mean not only housing, but also basic services and infrastructure facilities, and provision of public places and play areas. Housing is an essential element in relocation, linked to livelihoods, health, education, security and social and family stability. However, refugees and asylum seekers who gain access to housing are usually restricted by affordability, especially in big cities. This often leaves them with little choice and a likelihood of poor housing conditions.

Further, if social and cultural needs are not considered, this can adversely affect the integration of the refugees in the dispersal areas. The size, layout and design of resettlement housing should be commensurate with the size and needs of the family. However, size, age, disability and demography of families are often overlooked in relocation housing.

The physical assets also include the provision of basic services and infrastructure facilities, including provision of safe drinking water and sanitary facilities, electricity, education and healthcare facilities, as well as transport infrastructure including roads, bridges, and public transportation. Lack of access to basic services and facilities can create wider development issues and negative impacts on physical and mental health among the displaced. For example, this might include a lack of access to open spaces and play areas. Also, sharing basic facilities and services with host communities, especially where there are already limited capacities, often causes tension between the new arrivals and their host communities.

The built environment is also closely associated with economic development. For some communities, such as those involved with fisheries or agriculture, their physical location is both livelihood and identity. No access to grazing land means farmers are deprived of both their livelihood and a loss of local identity. Unemployment or less economic opportunities can lead to marginalisation, poverty and many other issues such as human trafficking and social tension. Providing access to previous livelihoods or creating new economic opportunities are vital to provide displaced people with financial independence. This also helps to avoid tensions with host communities, who often view immigrants as a threat to their livelihoods or a drain on local resources.

The built environment can also help address the social needs of displaced and enhance social integration between the displaced and host. This is especially important in situations where the built environment has been destroyed by conflicts or disaster. Effective planning can help bring people together to participate in activities, for example through public, cultural, and religious places.

The built environment can increase the new arrivals sense of belonging to the new environment by improving the local characteristics of buildings and neighbourhoods. However, care must be taken to ensure that these new design interventions are sensitive to and preserve the local identity of the host as well. Easy access to social services and support, social equity in housing and services provision, easy access to emotional support and mental healthcare provisions are some of the other interventions that can contribute in addressing social needs.

Effective planning of settlements will also ensure that displaced communities have access to education and training opportunities. More broadly, the built environment-related industries and services are major employers. It is important to help new arrivals gain employability skills and match their vocational and professional qualifications with those of the host country. Access to quality language training programmes is also important, along with orientation to help them integrate, such as financial support and management, housing, rights and responsibilities, employment, culture, and politics, available services and facilities.

It is also vital to make sure those responsible for the built environment are more culturally aware and better able to understand refugees' concerns. This will help them to provide culturally appropriate facilities, services, spaces and places for the refugees and asylum seekers.

This could be achieved in several ways. Race, equality and diversity training could be embedded as an essential part or requirement of the professional competency ladder. This might include real-world and practical-based awareness training programmes for built environment professionals and in-depth training to improve cultural awareness among those professionals and officials who directly work with communities.

Displaced communities also require access to relevant institutional and legal frameworks, some of which link to the built environment. For example, the legal and policy framework of relevant authorities can greatly improve the effectiveness of resettlement planning. This will ensure that displaced communities are properly represented in matters related to property and the provision of services, and legal rights are upheld.

Finally, the built environment and the way it is planned and developed is a dominant paradigm of urban sustainability and environmental protection. Displaced communities need access to natural resources but in a sustainable matter. Natural and green environments have a significant effect on the psychological wellbeing of people. Most of the displaced people have suffered, and are still suffering, from the trauma of whatever made them leave their habitual place of residence. Studies have demonstrated that access to adequate daylight and natural views positively influence the physiological wellbeing of people. Visual and physical access to green space and natural resources is an important intervention in relocation planning.

Recent trends suggest the need to help displaced communities resettle will become greater in the years ahead. The built environment can help to support the physical and geographic relocation of communities who have been forced to leave or flee their homes due to conflict, disaster risk or environmental degradation. But the role of the built environment goes beyond the physical needs of communities, such as providing housing and infrastructure. Effective interventions related to the built environment can also address the wider socio-cultural, livelihood and economic aspects of their lives.

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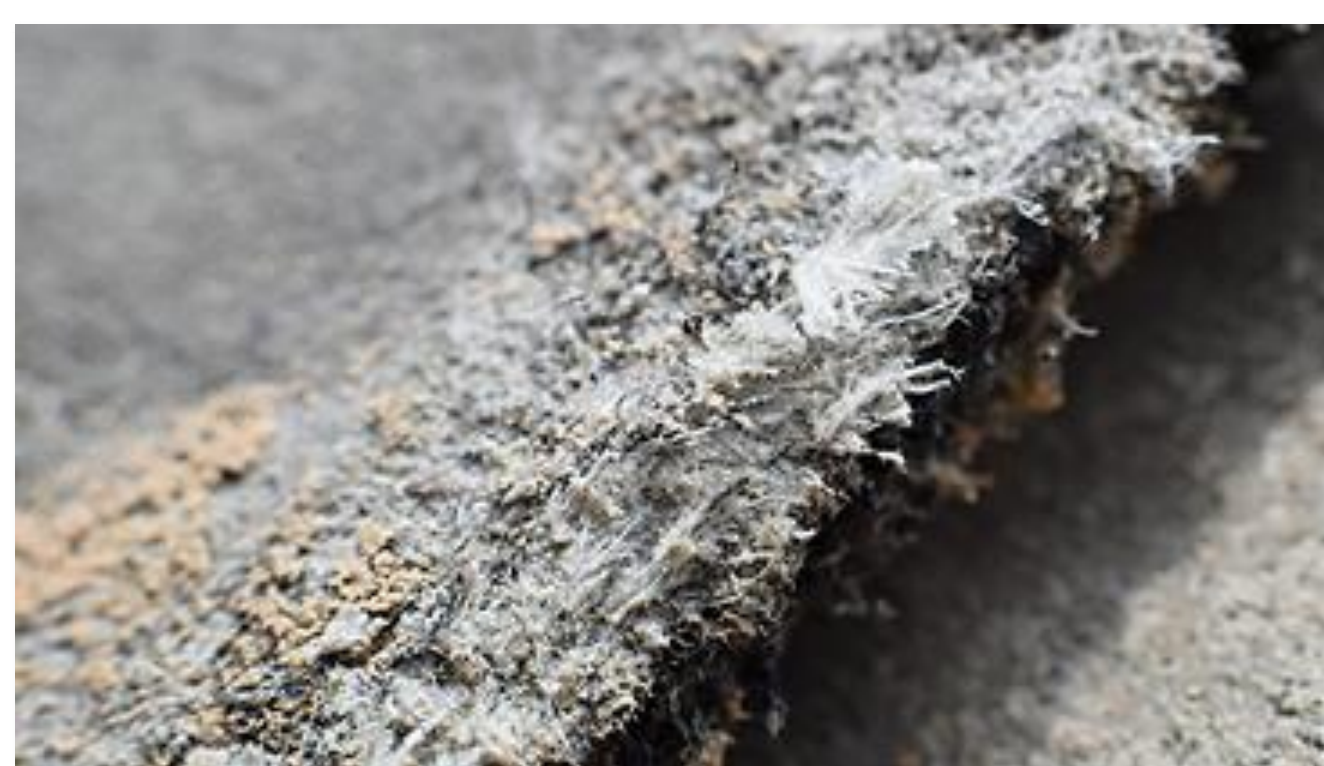
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