

Should I stay or should I go? How citizens decide on and cope with planned flood relocation

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After a severe flooding in 2013, public authorities initiated an extensive relocation project in the Eferding Basin in Upper Austria. Over 146 at-risk residents, declared un-protectable within the existing technical, economic and legal constraints, had to decide on a relocation offer until the end of 2015. By Autumn 2016, about a third of the households had agreed to relocate; some have already demolished their buildings. While the relocation scheme is voluntary from a legal standpoint, there is a strong political impetus to encourage all residents to leave the risk zone.

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 78 relocation households prior to the relocation offer deadline in order to identify their decision-making processes, perceived fairness and risk perceptions. Follow-up interviews to capture long-term impacts are foreseen for the end of the year 2016. The interview audio records were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis.

Relocation households consider a wide range of risk judgments, economic consequences and emotional aspects when deciding on the relocation offer. Numerous residents call on their experiences with the most recent flood event to determine future flood risks at their own buildings. Households contrast the offered compensation with the current and future value of their property on the housing market. Personal circumstances, such as recent family foundation, employment, retirement or the prospects of one's children play into their economic assessment. The emotional appraisal is shaped by the personal attachment with the residence or farmyard and by the extent to which the available coping options threaten one's way of living. We find that relocation is usually described as uprooting and undermining people's self-identity. Some households fear stigmatization such as those who remain in the flood plain may receive less social and financial support during future flood events.

In general, households lacked opportunities to express their individual perspectives and considerations with respect to the relocation and regional flood hazards. Future relocation projects should consider engaging an individual or institution to moderate the relocation process between all involved parties in an empathic, neutral and trustworthy way.

Politicians and public authorities should communicate information in a timely, clear and binding manner to avoid raising unreasonable expectations by rash promises; they should disclose decision-making criteria and put them up for discussion. By integrating affected households and their flood risk expertise in a participatory dialogue, small-scale and citizen-oriented concepts may help to manage flood risk and land use in a more effective and consensual way.