The Micropolitics of Climate-Related Planned Relocation in the Maldives
A Case for Multiple Im/mobility Pathways

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Introduction

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022), responses to ongoing sea level rise and land subsistence in low-lying coastal settlements and small islands include protection, accommodation, and planned relocation (also called planned retreat or government organised resettlement). Protection and accommodation are generally considered in situ adaptation responses as they do not require migration (Tan/Liu/Hugo 2016) and support voluntary immobility (Yee/Piggott-McKellar/McMichael/ McNamara 2022). In contrast, planned relocation is an ex situ response that can be voluntary and/or involuntary (see Wilmsen/Webber 2015 for discussion). It is generally considered inevitable that some form of planned relocation will be required in response to climate change (Gussmann/Hinkel 2020), particularly for small island developing states.

Although in situ adaptation generally carries a lower risk of maladaptation[1] for a range of socio-cultural, political, psychological, and affective reasons, planned relocation is gaining momentum over other responses (Farbotko/Dun/Thornton/McNamara/McMichael 2020). This is despite scholars advising that planned relocation should be a last resort response to climate change due to its high risk of maladaptation (Wilmsen/Webber 2015, Sid-

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1 Maladaptation is defined as an intervention in one location or sector that could increase the vulnerability of another location or sector or increase the vulnerability of the target group to future climate change (Nobel/Huq/Anokhin/Carmin 2014).

ers/Ajibade 2021, See/Wilmsen 2020, Rogers/Xue 2015, Barnett/O'Neill 2012, Farbotko/Dun/Thornton/McNamara/McMichael 2020). However, even though climate-related planned relocation is underway in the Philippines (See/Wilmsen 2020), Fiji (Pill 2020) and the Maldives (Kothari 2015), there are limited studies on which to base this assertion.

Evidence that planned relocation could be maladaptive is mostly drawn from other contexts—poverty alleviation, environmental protection, urban expansion, and infrastructure development. Planned relocation in these contexts suggests it ruptures the social fabric of communities and produces abrupt and intergenerational impoverishment (Rogers/Wang 2006, Quetulio-navarra/Niehof/Vaart/Horst 2012, Downing 1996, Cernea 1997). Whilst such studies are helpful for understanding the impacts of climate-related planned relocation, there is urgent need to gather evidence in places where it is already occurring.

Owing to its topography and low elevation (average of 1.5 metres above sea level), the Maldives is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change[2]. The dispersal of the population across 187 small and remote islands, creates diseconomies of scale and high transport costs, challenging government responses to climate change. Due to regional weather patterns, inundation, coastal erosion, and disasters such as tsunamis are the key impacts of climate change in the Maldives (United Nations 2005). It is estimated that under extreme projections of sea level rise, 85% could be underwater by the year 2100 (Sovacool 2012: 296). However, even small changes in sea level could mean extensive land inundation (ADB 2021) and our research suggests this is already occurring. Catalysed by the 2004 tsunami, the Maldives is one of the first countries in the world to implement climate-related planned relocation. Yet, beyond the work of Kothari (2014) and Gussmann/Hinkel (2020), it has hardly been studied. This research fills this gap by exploring a planned relocation in the Maldives after the 2004 tsunami.

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2 The Maldives was described by former president Nasheed in his speech to the United Nations as the climate change "canary in the coal mine" (Hirsch 2015: 190).

2004 Tsunami in the Maldives

The 2004 tsunami was a critical event in the Maldives' climate history. It struck on December 26th, killing 83 residents. Although the death rate was low relative to other countries, around one-third of the population on 39 Maldivian islands was impacted. Damage was estimated at around 470 million USD (United Nations 2005), with 10 percent of houses suffering damage and around 20,000 people displaced (Pardasani 2006). The environmental impacts were also extensive, including, erosion and ground water contamination (Pardasani 2006). The southern atolls of Meemu, Thaa and Laamu were most severely impacted (Rasheed/Warder/Plancherel/Piggott 2022). Of the 34 deaths on Meemu atoll, 16 were on Kolhufushi, and around 346 buildings were reportedly lost or damaged (Fritz 2006).

The central government responded to the tsunami by intensifying planned relocation. Drawing on the 1997 Population Consolidation Policy (PCP) and 2001 'National Population Consolidation Strategy and Programme', the Gayoom government planned to consolidate the population in two regional growth centres and on 85 islands (Gussmann/Hinkel 2020, Kothari 2014). The aim was to increase economies of scale, service delivery, living standards and economic opportunities (Gussmann/Hinkel 2020). While early attempts at relocation, for example, at Hithadhoo, were met with resistance, the tsunami provided an opportunity to reframe the programme around reducing coastal risk (Gussmann/Hinkel 2020, Kothari 2014). Of the 17 communities the government planned to relocate, 14 were finally resettled (Gussmann/Hinkel 2020).

To understand the lived experience of planned relocation after the tsunami, we selected one of the most badly impacted islands on Meemu. Rather than planned relocation to another island, planned relocation at Kolhufushi was within the island. Other contexts suggest that small scale relocations, over short distances, where communities relocate together and maintain access to livelihood resources have the best chance of long-term success. Thus, unlike island-to-island resettlement, planned relocation on Kolhufushi was at least theoretically more likely to succeed. Even so, before we began our fieldwork, we became aware of significant issues on Kolhufushi. Still, we felt this provided an opportunity to understand the complexities of the lived experience of planned relocation.

Although we planned to conduct fieldwork at the resettlement, on arrival at Kolhufushi in December 2021 it was clear that not everyone had relocated. Some households had repaired their pre-tsunami homes in the northern and southern settlements. As such we modified our sampling strategy to capture these households (in situ management/voluntary immobility) and those who moved to new homes in the resettlement (planned relocation/ex situ response/mobility). With the assistance of the island council, we selected households in the northern and southern in situ sites and in the central resettlement. We also spoke to a range of women (seven) and men (six) of different ages (37–77 years old). In total, 13 interviews were conducted (10 respondents from the community, two former island executives, and current island council members). Interviews were conducted in Dhivehi and later translated and transcribed into English. In what follows, we present our findings by unpacking the micropolitics on Kolhufushi which was the dominant theme framing their lived experiences of planned relocation.

The Micropolitics of Planned Relocation

Although the political divisions that emerged on Kolhufushi dominated interviewees' narratives, in the initial days and months after the tsunami they emphasised community unity. The first two weeks after the tsunami were spent in the island school, followed by six months in tents before moving into temporary shelters close to the harbour. Invariably this period is described as a time when the residents banded together to respond to the devastation:

> "Even for about one year after the tsunami …or till around five or six months, everyone stayed together. Till then, all of us were extremely close, we cooked and ate together" (Mahmood[3], male, 43 years, planned relocation).

However, as the period in the temporary shelters stretched from months into years, tolerances for extreme heat, overcrowding, limited privacy, and inadequate toilet facilities waned. In desperation, some people decided to return to their damaged houses:

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3 All names have been changed to pseudonyms.

"It was extremely difficult to live in temporary shelters because I also have my parents, my husband, my siblings who are also married, three unmarried men and three unmarried women so they couldn't sleep in the same room. We are married couples so they couldn't also sleep in our rooms and so we moved back home" (Hafsa, female, 45 years, in situ management).

On observing the return of some residents to their pre-tsunami homes and following a central government directive, the executive of Kolhufushi insisted that households remain in the temporary shelters where provisions such as food relief, water and electricity would only be provided. This stoked animosities in the community:

"After we moved back to our house … we were denied the basic necessities and stones were thrown at our house at night" (Hafsa, female, 45 years, in situ management).

The rigidity of the central government's response to the tsunami extended to its planned relocation, exacerbating the growing divisions in the community. Regardless of former land size, lost and damaged houses would be replaced with new houses on 3000 m² plots in the resettlement. While this suited most households, the poorest and the richest were disadvantaged. In the case of the former, those who held land before the tsunami but had been unable to afford to build a house were ineligible for new housing. In the case of the latter, those who held plots between 7000 and 20,000 m² before the tsunami were expected to move to a 3000 m² plot in the resettlement like the other residents. These families tended to be the most powerful on the island, the most vocal, the most resistant and as such, turned several other families against the planned relocation:

"One of the influential people was a relative of the housing minister who had four plots of around 20,000 sq ft [*sic*] which they had to let go and this led to a lot of problems." (Former island executive of Kolhufushi).

In 2005, the Red Cross, contracted by the Maumoon government to build the resettlement, arrived at Kolhufushi to construct the first 50 houses. As the central government had promised survivors "a house for a house", the resi-

dents were expecting at least 250 houses to be built and were extremely upset about the plan:

> "After keeping the residents in such poor conditions for that long, it was disappointing that they would build only 50 houses and they said if they are to build houses they need to build houses for all the residents" (current island council officials).

In late 2005, central government representatives came to Kolhufushi to negotiate, but the residents occupied the harbour and refused to let them disembark. The island executive was called to the capital to explain why they were not fulfilling their responsibilities as the government's representatives on the island. The island executives were in a difficult position—caught between the imposed resettlement and social unrest on Kolhufushi:

> "I was taken by the government and asked why I am against its decisions. I said the residents are only expressing their anger. They thought it was because of me but no it was because they had promised more houses, but now they are only constructing 50 houses. I said its okay if they think I'm responsible. Then they released me. When I returned, the residents closed the office and I officially resigned".

The deadlock continued until President Nasheed won the first direct presidential elections in 2008. Although generally regarded as a period of instability, it heralded greater freedoms for Maldivians. Island chiefs were replaced by democratically elected island councils headed by a president and vice-president. The new island council of Kolhufushi was aligned with President Nasheed, which helped to break the stalemate on Kolhufushi. In 2010 the Nasheed government allowed the residents of Kolhufushi to self-determine their path to reconstruction:

> "Since the presidency changed, those who wanted houses built on their own land are building them or if they want housing under the plan (resettlement site) they can" (Salma, female, 40 years, planned relocation).

In 2012, after almost a decade of conflict, unbearable living conditions and associated trauma, the households finally moved into permanent replace-

ment housing. Interviewees generally expressed satisfaction with this housing; however, climate related issues remain, suggesting maladaptation:

> "The difficulties we face are worse now. You can see that the saltwater reaches to the back of my house. The island is eroded, the beautiful mangrove river area is almost gone, and many leaders have said they'd do something, but they're still stuck surveying. The water tastes good while it rains, but it smells bad when there's no rain" (Nazim, male, 61 years, planned relocation).

The protracted conflict on Kolhufushi had long lasting impacts. One of the main themes of our interviews was community disarticulation. People spoke about the children "no longer playing together", thatching being undertaken within private houses "rather than as a communal activity on the beach" and the general "coldness" within the community. Hasna (female, 54 years, planned relocation) describes the situation,

> "At least in my heart, I feel like there's a big distance between us. Because in the past, even though we weren't blood related, it felt like we were; now it feels so distant. The atmosphere now feels very unfriendly and inhospitable. It's not the same".

Although the election of Nasheed helped to progress reconstruction on Kolhufushi, it added a macro political element to the fissures in the community. Residents' alliances were split along national political lines, the MDP (Maldivian Democratic Party) and the PPM (Progressive Party of the Maldives), resulting in an escalation of the existing unrest on the island. According to our interviewees, infrastructure built by the island council (aligned with the MDP) was regularly destroyed by those who supported the PPM. Children were even caught up in the conflict, sent to push political propaganda and take part in the destruction. This has had profound impacts on relationships on the island with people noting:

> "But what really ruined relationships was the silly political dramas and ploys. With the new political wave, people's relationships got strained and they became difficult" (Mahmood, male, 43 years, planned relocation).

Im/mobility preferences

The protracted situation on Kolhufushi can in part be attributed to the central government's staunch commitment to planned relocation after the tsunami. By ignoring the preferences of powerful residents to retain their land and repair their houses, the government stoked political division that led to ongoing social disarticulation and ten years of unbearable living conditions. Whilst the powerful on the island loudly articulated their preference to remain in situ, other interviewees revealed other preferences:

> "If they consulted me, I would've gone to Gan Island (Laamu Attoll); an island big enough and developed enough that there are many ways to earn a living" (Nazim, male, 61 years, planned relocation).

Others would have moved closer to the capital:

> "I would prefer to live on an island my heart desired, and if I had a choice, I'd choose islands closer to Malé, the capital" (Ahmed, male, 68 years, planned relocation).

And,

> "If my husband gets a plot of land on Hulhumalé I would go" (Seema, female, 37 years, planned relocation).

Finally, some people preferred planned relocation to another island.

> "If we were on another island the government officials would treat everybody the same. If that was the plan, I would have moved. I'm fine with that being on any island in any atoll" (Hafsa, female, 45 years, in situ management).

The former island executives of Kolhufushi revealed that soon after the tsunami there were discussions with the central government about relocating the population of Kolhufushi to another island. Since relocation was politically controversial and generally unpopular, this option was never proposed to the residents and was rejected by the island leadership in favour of resettlement to the centre of the island. This decision demonstrates that the

government presumed to know what was in the best interest of the residents. However, had it listened to the residents and provided support for multiple mobility and immobility pathways, perhaps conflict could have been avoided.

Discussion and Conclusion: Multiple Im/mobility Pathways

That planned relocation rarely follows a linear trajectory is not a new finding. Literature in other contexts is thick with studies of government organised resettlements that did not go to plan (Mathur 2006, Nguyen/Lobry de bruyn/ Koech 2016, Smyth/Esteves/Franks/Vaz 2015, Vanclay 2017, Wilmsen 2019); nor, is it novel to observe climate-related planned relocation as political. The politics of climate change adaptation is emerging as a key concern for researchers (See/Wilmsen 2020, Funder/ Mweemba/Nyambe 2018, Eriksen/ Nightingale/Eakin 2015). Some see politics as a condition that supports or derails the expectations attached to adaptation interventions (Few/Morchain/Spear/Mensah/Bendapudi 2017). Others conceptualise "adaptation as politics" because it inherently speaks to issues of power, conflicting policy preferences, resource allocation and administrative tensions (Dolšak/ Prakash 2018). Whereas others point out that the political contestation observed is often not about climate or even adaptation but instead about who accesses resources, who is authorised to govern and who is considered worthy of assistance (Nightingale 2017). Indeed, planned relocation at Kolhufushi laid bare the messy micropolitics of the island as elites struggled to retain control over their resources.

While our research adds another troubled case of planned relocation to the emerging register, our interviews also demonstrate the diverse mobility preferences of a small number of residents within one small island community in responding to an extreme weather event—in situ reconstruction, within island resettlement, relocation to another island and migration. Yet, the central government never consulted the residents, instead imposing planned relocation and leaving the island leadership to deal with the fallout. It's rigid commitment to planned relocation precluded other more locally relevant and socially acceptable mobility responses. This reiterates findings elsewhere that in attempting to tightly control mobility, planned relocation blinds governments to diverse, community driven responses (See/McKin-

non/Wilmsen 2022). At Kolhufushi this resulted in conflict and a decade of unbearable living conditions that undermined the long-term cohesiveness of Kolhufushi. One interviewee summed up the disconnect between the government and local people:

> "They are not the ones living here. They live in their royal palaces, while we are the ones who live one day on the reef, the next day on the sea, and the other day we're planting trees, to earn our living. They cannot grasp our lifestyle, our situation" (Khalid, male, 60 years, in situ management).

Depending on their socio-economic positioning, resources and power, island residents have diverse preferences for where they live, how they rebuild after an extreme weather event and how they anticipate withstanding future climate events. This research supports the contention of Barnett and O'Neill (2012) and Yee et al. (2022) that to be successful and sustainable, adaptation strategies must acknowledge resources, needs, perspectives, preferences, and values of local people. Whilst our findings reaffirm the central role of acknowledging local knowledges and im/mobility preferences in producing socially acceptable responses to extreme weather events, we extend on previous research by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of its considerations. Even within one small community there can be multiple im/mobility pathways, and these should be supported so far as social cohesion can be maintained.

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