



Unequal Shifts: A Global Synthesis of the Social, Economic and Cultural Impacts of Human Relocation

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Abstract: Human relocation, whether driven by development, environmental pressures or climate change, profoundly reshapes social, economic and cultural landscapes, with impacts varying across social groups and regions. This study synthesized global evidence on the multidimensional effects of relocation, with a focus on the differential experiences of women, men, youth, elders and marginalized minorities. The analysis is organized according to Cernea's Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model, Social Disruption Theory and Sen's Capability Approach, which represent economic threats, social dislocation, and the diversity of agency and resilience, respectively. The study concludes that while women experience disproportionately lost opportunities from disrupted informal livelihoods, men endure unstable job conditions in formal labor markets. While youth are subject to long-term setbacks from interrupted education and vocational training, elders lose cultural authority; the Indigenous/minority face compounded disadvantages by historical marginalization. While the study identified some gaps, particularly in terms of longitudinal and cross-regional studies, the findings underscore the effectiveness of participatory, gender-sensitive and culturally tailored interventions. By aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 1, 5, 10, 11, 13), this study provides a multidimensional understanding of relocation and informs equitable, inclusive resettlement policies to mitigate adverse impacts and promote sustainable development.

Keywords: Human relocation; displacement impacts; social differentiation; economic vulnerability; cultural dislocation.

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Introduction

Human relocation, whether voluntary or forced has been one of the hallmarks of a modern day global development. Whether driven by infrastructure, urbanization, environmental degradation, conservation policies or climate change, the relocation of people affects millions every year in ways that are more complex than simply moving them from one place to another. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2024), more than 30 million people are displaced each year due to disasters and environmental pressures, many of whom will never be able to return home while over 15 million are affected by development-induced displacement. These displacements disturb social, economic and cultural

arrangements in ways that require people to live, work and find food differently. Examples from Asia, Africa and Latin America demonstrate how relocation disrupts livelihoods, disarticulates communities socially and negates identity and traditional knowledge (Cernea, 2003; Guo et al., 2025; Yee et al., 2024). Positioning relocation in the context of SDGs highlights its relevance for development. Displacement directly intersects with the Sustainable Development Goals through its impacts on livelihoods. It also generates differentiated gendered effects that deepen existing inequalities.

Relocation processes frequently produces patterns of social exclusion and marginalization among

vulnerable groups. These dynamics highlight the urgent need for inclusive and resilient settlement strategies. Displacement is further intensified by sustained climate-driven relocation in many regions. More directly, these impacts relate to SDG1 (No poverty), SDG5 (Gender Equality), SDG10 (reduced Inequalities) and SDG11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). In some contexts, displacement is also associated with particular forms of migration linked to underemployment and unemployment. Framing displacement within the global development agenda underlines the urgency of not simply addressing it as a humanitarian issue, but also of isolating it as a priority pathway for realization of the 2030 Agenda pledge to “leave no one behind” (UN, 2022).

While relocation has been studied extensively, several dimensions of the phenomena remain insufficiently integrated in the literature. Economically, displaced population frequently experience loss of land, employments and income sources and compensation mechanisms rarely restore pre-displacement living standards, as documented in development-induced resettlement cases in Laos and Mozambique (Boillat et al., 2015; Delang & Toro, 2011; Mayvong & Diana, 2015; Rantala & Vihemäki, 2011; Wiegink & Kronenburg, 2022) and mining related displacement in Australia (Owen & Kemp, 2015; Sincovich et al., 2018; van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2017). Socially, displacement fragments kinship and support networks, restructured local power relations and weakens community solidarity, as shown in forest resettlement in southeast Asia (Delang & Toro, 2011; Rantala & Vihemäki, 2011) and post-disaster relocation in Fiji (Salinger et al., 2024). Culturally, detachment from ancestral lands disrupts heritage practices, collective memory and inter-generational knowledge transmission, as evidenced among climate-displaced communities in Latin America (Lugo-Espinosa et al., 2024) and Indigenous youth in North America (Walls & Whitbeck, 2012). However, this knowledge remains scattered across time, space and disciplinary boundaries, often lacking an integrated perspective capable of demonstrating how the economic, social and cultural impacts of resettlement cumulatively and interactively unfold. There is, however, one serious substantive lacuna in the literature in that there is a lack of attention to social differentiation. Most research tends to have a view of households as a homogeneous group, especially in terms of the residential mobility effect

on social groups. Evidence from fragmented studies indicates that women are generally hit the hardest by loss of access to productive resource and decision-making (Bennett, 2008; Nisic & Kley, 2019). Other studies show that the youth often face interrupted education experiences and limited economic livelihood opportunities, which result in long-term poverty and social marginalization (Homewood et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2024). Studies also indicate that elders in indigenous populations often suffer from the most extreme degree of cultural dislocation, including those that involve sacred sites, social authority and continuity across generations (Wu et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2024). Similarly, marginalized minorities are found to be excluded from compensation and decision-making, further exacerbating existing inequalities (Cernea, 2008; Hu et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2020). Although these studies contain valuable knowledge, they are fragmented and do not reflect a systematic analysis structure. This fragmentation has impeded a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how movement impacts upon varied groups in differentiated ways.

Beyond these substantive gaps, there are profound methodological and structural gaps in the existing literature. Longitudinal studies are scarce, limiting insight into long-term outcomes of relocation processes (Cernea, 2000; Oliver-Smith, 2016; Scudder, 2012; Wilmsen, 2017). Few cross-regional comparative studies exist, constraining the ability to generalize findings across contexts (Cernea, 2000; Koenig, 2001; Vanclay, 2017; Wilmsen, 2017). Analyses that integrate economic, social and cultural dimensions in a single framework are limited, resulting in limited knowledge (Cernea, 1997; Oliver-Smith, 2016). Moreover, subgroup-specific impacts remain insufficiently explored, leaving policymakers without adequate evidence to design equitable and targeted interventions (Colson, 2003; Wilmsen, 2018). In response, this study addressed these gaps through a global synthesis of relocation literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study used multidimensional analysis of the relocation of humans, integrating economic aspects as well as social and cultural aspects. The Structure focused on three complementary theoretical perspectives: Cernea’s Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model, Social Disruption Theory and Sen’s Capability Approach. All three theoretical underpinnings together capture the multidimensionality of displacement and its

interconnected nature, thence differential and dimensionally different effects on women, men, youth, elders and marginalized minorities (Cernea, 1997). Moving is not just about people but also their social system due to which people and communities may access resources and exercise agency in a various way. Furthermore, it affects their ability to use their cultural tools (Cernea, 2000). The underpinning theories provide a systematic approach to understanding the multidimensional impacts.

Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction Model

Cernea's IRR Model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the economic and material vulnerabilities caused by relocation (Cernea, 1997). The model determines anticipated risks, which come up due to poor planning or under-compensation of relocation. The risks comprise of the loss of access to land and productive assets, disruption of employment and informal livelihood activities, inadequate housing and marginalization in host communities. Relocation can also interrupt access to subsistence resources, such as communal grazing, forests, shared agricultural infrastructure, increasing food insecurity, health problems and economic insecurity. Moreover, the breakdown of social networks and community institutions aggravates these issues, hindering the recovery of displaced populations (Cernea, 2000). The IRR Model presents enabling pathways for reconstruction of livelihood that require institutional assistance, fair and context-specific compensation and participation of community in resettlement plan. In terms of relocation, the more vulnerable groups including women, youth, Indigenous peoples and others, suffer materially and socially more than any other section.

Social Disruption Theory

Social Disruption Theory focuses on the social aspect of displacements. Park and Stokowski (2009) point out how sudden structural change causes disruptions in networks, norms and collective identities. Shifting often fragments kinship networks, disrupt cooperative labor systems and weaken informal governance, which leads to changes of social fabric, reduced trust and power relations. This theory highlights that social disorganization is not always bad. Displacement can lead to adaptive practices, the forging of new alliances and social innovations, such as different gender roles, participatory forms of leadership or community organization. Social Disruption Theory

focuses on how relocation affects the governance of place, intergenerational relations and social capital. It complements the IRR Model by showing how economic loss and social fragmentation interact.

Sen's Capability Approach

Sen's Capability Approach places emphasis on both individual and collective agency, defining well-being as the actual freedom and opportunities to live meaningful lives in addition to material resources (Frediani, 2010). When applied to relocation, this framework illustrates how various social groups, such as youths, women, elders and marginalized minorities are influenced by structural inequalities and contextual constraints in their experiences and reactions to displacement. The Capability Approach draws attention to differences in livelihood opportunities, resilience, access to education and training as well as involvement in civic or cultural activities. It offers a prism through which to evaluate how social and cultural liberties, as well as economic results, are impacted by relocation and how interventions can promote long-term well-being, equity and adaptive capacity among various population groups.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes human relocation as the central process whereby Cernea's IRR Model, Social Disruption Theory and Sen's Capability Approach interact. As shown in Figure 1, the theories converge to frame displacement as both a structural and lived transformation. Human relocation produces three interlinked dimensions: economic, social and cultural impacts. The economic dimension reflects livelihood loss, land dispossession, employment disruption and material impoverishment. The social dimension captures the breakdown and reorganization of networks, institutions and power relations. The cultural dimension reflects changes in identity, traditions and practices, shaping agency and meaningful participation. These dimensions affect women, men, youth, elders and Indigenous peoples differently, generating group-specific vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities shaped by demographic factors.

The Conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the interaction of Cernea's Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) Model, Social Disruption Theory and Sen's Capability Approach at the point of human relocation, showing how economic, social and cultural dimensions intersect to shape differentiated outcomes for women, men, youth, elders, and Indigenous peoples.

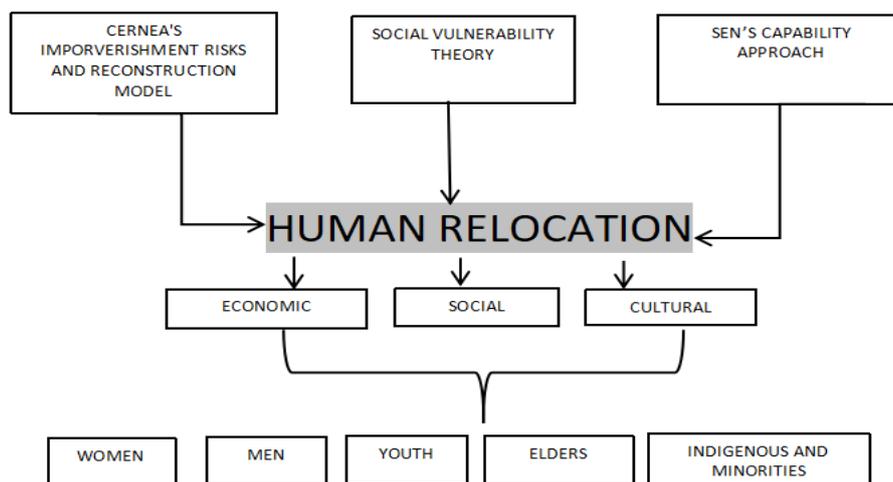


Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework for Human Relocation

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to synthesize global research on the social, economic and cultural impacts of human relocation. A systematic review enabled comprehensive, transparent and replicable mapping of existing evidence, highlighting patterns, divergences and gaps across regions, types of relocation and social subgroups (Monageng, 2006; Uddin Ahmed, 2010). The review focused on studies published between 1990 and 2025, a timeframe chosen to capture both historical and contemporary relocation experiences, including large-scale development projects, conservation-related displacement, disaster-induced resettlement and climate-related relocations.

Population and Sampling

Peer-reviewed journals, books, institutional reports and credible grey literature were examined. Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR and ProQuest. Key concepts used in the search included human relocation, resettlement, displacement, social impacts, economic impacts and cultural impacts, combined with terms for specific social groups such as women, youth, indigenous peoples and minorities. Boolean operators and truncation strategies were applied to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant variations.

The initial search yielded approximately 800 publications. Following title and abstract screening, 320 studies were selected for full-text review. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 89 studies were retained for final analysis. Studies were

included if they reported empirical findings on human relocation, resulting from development, conservation, disaster or climate-related causes and addressed social, economic or cultural outcomes, with attention to subgroup-specific experiences (gender, age, minority status). Studies focusing solely on ecological relocation, lacking empirical evidence, or not reporting relevant outcomes were excluded.

Data was systematically extracted from each study, including author, year, study location and context, type of relocation, affected social subgroups, key findings across social, economic, and cultural domains as well as identified policy or research gaps. The extracted data was synthesized qualitatively, using the thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo software, to reveal recurring patterns, trends and differences across regions, relocation types and social subgroups. The analysis approach combined inductive and deductive coding, allowing both emergent themes and theory-driven insights to be captured.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure methodological rigor, all studies were evaluated for clarity of objectives, appropriateness of design, transparency in data collection and analysis as well as reliability of findings. Discrepancies or uncertainties in coding were discussed among the research team to reach consensus. Lower-quality studies were not excluded but considered with caution to maintain transparency and balance.

Data Analysis

As this is a qualitative systematic review, data was analyzed systematically, using thematic coding in NVivo software to identify recurring patterns, trends and differences across regions, relocation types and

social subgroups. The analysis combined inductive and deductive approaches, allowing both emergent themes and theory-driven insights to be captured. Figure 2 illustrates the process of study identification and selection for analysis.

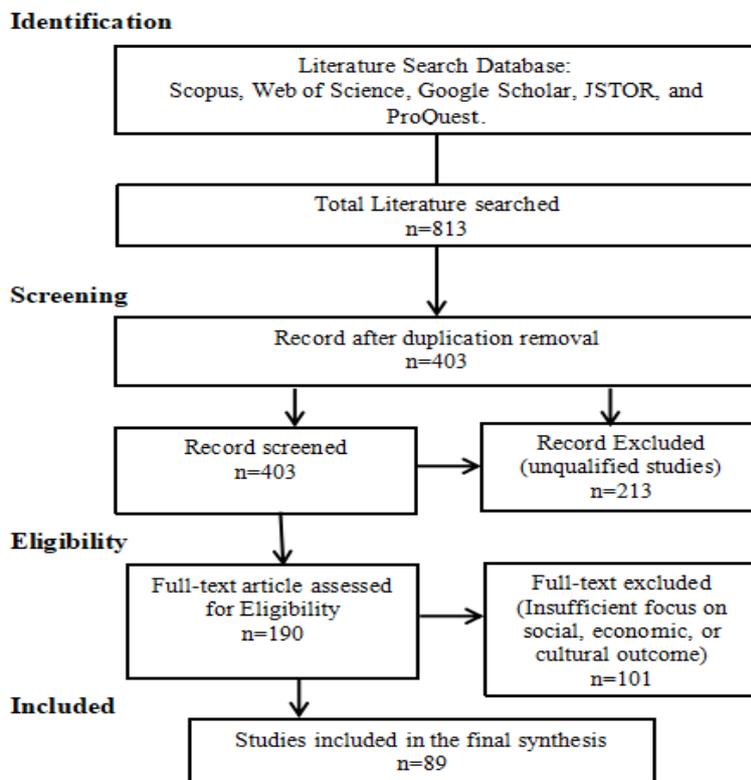


Figure 2: Systematic Review Process

Findings and Discussion

This section synthesizes evidence from selected papers that have been incorporated into the review. It is thematically structured around the social, economic and cultural effects of human relocation, being sensitive to differences across different social subgroups. By exploring distinctions according to gender, age, ethnic or social location, the findings describe both general tendencies and subgroup-specific experiences.

Economic Impacts Across Social Groups

The analysis reveals that the economic effects of relocation are not dispersed equally but are influenced by social position, gender, age and ethnicity. The most frequent victims of economic loss are women, especially in rural agrarian settings where moving compromises access to livestock, land and informal trading networks (Marshall et al., 2005). These sources of livelihood, which frequently fall outside the official definition of property ownership, are rarely taken into consideration by

compensation frameworks, which serves to further entrench gender inequality that already existed (Cernea, 2008; Montgomery, 1960). For example, some women lost control over their kitchen gardens and small livestock, which had previously been their main source of income, during the Sardar Sarovar dam resettlement in India (Sikka & Mathur, 2017).

Similar trends were noted in Ghana's Bui Dam project, where compensation packages disregarded the roles that women played in household-based livelihoods and informal trading, causing them to remain economically marginalized and become more economically dependent (Emmanuel et al., 2020; Owusu et al., 2019). Evidence from the Pugu-Kinyamwezi resettlement in Tanzania indicates that women's access to productive land and informal income-generating activities was reduced due to displacement, which increased their vulnerability and economic dependency (Magembe & Madega, 2023).

In a few documented cases where women were purposefully included in livelihood restoration programs, access to training, microcredit or cooperative business models has demonstrated a partial recovery of income sources and enhanced household economic security (World Bank, 2023). For instance, women's access to cooperative savings and shared farming plots in Narikoso village, Fiji, improved post-relocation income stability (Yee et al., 2024).

Men tend to receive more direct compensation because land titles and household assets are often legally registered in their names (Baldrige et al., 1996; Cernea, 2000). However, their economic security weakens due to disruptions in local labor markets, seasonal farming cycles, and informal trading systems. For instance, some men found it difficult to adjust to new job opportunities in Wushan New Town and Maoping Town, areas designated for resettlement, after being relocated from the Three Gorges Dam area in China. These new areas situated along the Yangtze River offered distinct economic environments, making it challenging for those who had been relocated to maintain their previous livelihoods (Jackson & Sleight, 2021; Wilmsen, 2017). Many men faced precarious employment and were compelled to migrate seasonally to cities (Jackson & Sleight, 2021; Wilmsen, 2017).

Some men respond through temporary labor migration to urban areas, which frequently results in unstable incomes and family disintegration (Day & Cervero, 2010; Montgomery, 1960; Vidal et al., 2015). Conversely, in Brazil's Tucuruí Dam resettlement, whereas men were able to regain income more quickly by participating in infrastructure construction projects, women and other vulnerable groups frequently continued to rely on meager subsistence activities (Fearnside, 1999; Mougeot, 1990; Velastegui-Montoya et al., 2022).

Youth are disproportionately affected because relocation disrupts the key developmental and livelihood pathways that typically support their future economic and social stability through indirect channels. Specifically, relocation interrupts education, vocational training and access to early-stage labor markets, producing long-term income consequences (Byck et al., 2015; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2014). In Wellangiriya, Sri Lanka, adolescents displaced during the 1970s reported decades later that interrupted schooling

and vocational training constrained their ability to secure stable employment and pursue career advancement (Samarakoon, 2018). Although small business grants and youth-focused skills programs have shown promise in a few instances, they are not routinely combined (Byck et al., 2015; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2022). Relocated youth in Narikoso, Fiji, for instance, had access to communal plantations that allowed them to start small enterprises and work in agriculture, sustaining their livelihoods after the relocation (Yee et al., 2024).

For elders, relocation undermines their economic independence and disturbs their subsistence livelihoods. A substantial proportion of elderly people, especially those reliant on communal resources like forests or grazing areas, become dependent on family or external assistance after relocation (Diamond et al., 2007; Montgomery, 1960). Elders who were relocated from their traditional villages in the Lower Omo Valley to newly constructed resettlement sites in Ethiopia's Gilgel Gibe III Dam reported a loss of land for cattle herding and a rise in economic dependence (Kahsay & Mishra, 2013; Yntiso, 2008). In a few programs where elders are included in advisory or cultural roles, small livelihood benefits are maintained. For example, in Brazil, relocation associated with large-scale conservation and hydropower projects, such as the Belo Monte and Madeira River projects in the Amazon region, displaced forest-dependent communities from riverbank settlements along the Xingu and Madeira Rivers to newly constructed resettlement villages near Altamira and Porto Velho. Elders who were later engaged in communal forest planning retained access to resource-sharing benefits, helping to mitigate total economic loss (de Lacerda et al., 2012; Guerra & Moutinho, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

While elders traditionally played central roles in livestock management and community decision-making, the resettlement environment and restrictions on customary practices limited the extent to which these roles could provide economic or social benefits (HRW, 2024a; OI, 2022; Rantala & Vihemäki, 2011; Sachedina & Nelson, 2010).

Indigenous peoples and marginalized minorities remain the most economically vulnerable groups. Their ability to seek compensation is limited due to their historical exclusion from formal property systems (Agrawal, 2007; Kumaska et al., 2021; Perez & Tomaselli, 2021; Yee et al., 2024). Even when

compensation or land restitution is provided, structural inequalities persist, leaving many communities trapped in cycles of poverty. Persistent economic marginalization has been observed among Indigenous Mapuche communities in Chile, where, despite restitution efforts in the La Araucanía region, high levels of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to resources continue to hinder their economic recovery, where compensation failed to replace lost agricultural land, perpetuating poverty (Agostini et al., 2011; Arias-Bustamante, 2022; Huencholl, 2021; Serenari et al., 2017).

Where culturally appropriate livelihood interventions are introduced, recovery is more balanced, but these remain rare and unevenly distributed. Positive examples are documented in Fiji and in Amazon Basin relocations, where Indigenous groups retained access to traditional resource zones (Fearnside, 2001; Yee et al., 2024). In Tanzania, Maasai communities displaced from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area were relocated to Msomera. The resettlement was driven primarily by government conservation and tourism policies, which restricted their access to ancestral lands. Following relocation, some elders retained partial economic benefits through continued involvement in livestock management and advisory roles, although opportunities were limited by restrictions on customary practices (HRW, 2024a, 2024b; Kweka & Mbaza, 2025).

Social Impacts and Community Reconfiguration

Relocation deeply reshapes social relations, networks and power structures, often eroding collective capacities. For women, the loss of proximity to extended kinship networks, cooperative labor groups and informal markets leads to increased isolation and reduced participation in decision-making spaces (Liu et al., 2019; Mutie & Macharia, 2025; Zhang et al., 2017). For example, women displaced by Ghana's Bui Dam reported weaker collective trading networks after being relocated from affected communities, such as Brewodi, Lucene and the Dam Site to the Gyama Resettlement Township, a temporary settlement with limited infrastructure and services (Emmanuel et al., 2020). In contexts where relocation planning integrates gender-sensitive participation, women demonstrate stronger adaptive strategies and community engagement (Nuru et al., 2024; van der Ploeg & Vanclay, 2017). This was observed in Narikoso, Fiji, where women-led committees played a pivotal role in re-establishing market linkages and

childcare networks following their relocation from coastal areas threatened by sea-level rise to higher ground in the interior of Kadavu Island. These initiatives were part of a broader effort to support community resilience and ensure the sustainability of livelihoods in the face of climate change impacts (Yee et al., 2024).

Men frequently experience weakened traditional authority and diminished roles in community governance when customary power structures are disrupted. This sometimes generates household tension and undermines previously stable community leadership hierarchies (Ouma et al., 2024). A similar pattern was documented in the Three Gorges resettlement, where male elders reported erosion of clan-based authority (Wilmsen, 2017). In Tanzania, recent relocation programs affecting Maasai communities, notably from Ngorongoro to Msomera relocations, initiated under government-led conservation and land-use reforms, have been associated with cuts to services, pressure to move people off ancestral lands and weakening of traditional leadership and community decision-making, undermining elders' authority and community governance (HRW, 2024b; Kweka & Mbaza, 2025).

Youth lose peer networks and access to community spaces as well, creating social dislocation that can manifest in increased risk-taking behavior, reduced civic participation, and weakened cultural engagement (Byck et al., 2015; Lwankomezi & Kaganga, 2024). In Sri Lanka, youth displaced from ancestral villages in the Kaluganga Valley to new settlements in the Mahaweli Development zones, as part of the Mahaweli River Development Project, experienced disruption of social networks and cultural continuity due to the large-scale hydroelectric and irrigation relocation program (Chattoraj, 2019; Samarakoon, 2018; Werellagama et al., 2004). Programs that create youth leadership platforms or educational continuity schemes demonstrate improved social integration outcomes (Samarakoon, 2018; Zhao et al., 2020). In Narikoso, Fiji, following the government-led coastal relocation due to climate-induced sea-level rise, youth councils re-established communal gatherings and cultural events, which helped rebuild social cohesion and facilitate smoother integration into the new settlement area (Yee et al., 2024).

Elders face the most pronounced social marginalization due to diminished authority, loss of

community roles and declining intergenerational interactions (Serenari et al., 2017). Their exclusion weakens the social fabric of relocated communities and erodes informal governance systems. This was evident in Peru's dam relocations, where communities displaced by projects, such as the Chaglla and Inambari Dams, experienced breakdowns in traditional leadership hierarchies, elders wasting their customary mediation and advisory roles, which in turn contributed to fractured social networks and weakened collective decision-making (Bergmann, 2021). Among the Maasai in Tanzania, particularly those relocated from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area to Msomera Village in Handeni District, elders reported a loss of ritual leadership and weakened authority in the newly established resettlement villages, as traditional decision-making structures were disrupted by administrative oversight and altered settlement patterns (HRW, 2024b; OI, 2022).

The indigenous communities and marginalized minorities are usually the ones that face more intense levels of exclusion; this displacement happens top-down with no place for meaningful community participation (Agrawal, 2007; Kumaska et al., 2021; Yumagulova et al., 2023). This further widens pre-existing gaps of inequality. Yet in some contexts, where there has been reliance on a more participatory approach, a higher level of collective social capital can be achieved (Cernea, 2000). For example, in Brazilian Amazon resettlement and sustainable development planning associated with the Tucuruí and Balbina dam programs, Indigenous communities that actively engaged in land-use and livelihood restoration planning were able to preserve collective institutions and traditional governance structures (Fearnside, 2001).

Displacement and Identity Transformation

Cultural impacts of relocation are profound and often irreversible, particularly among groups whose identity is strongly tied to land, heritage and ritual spaces. Women may face reduced participation in cultural rituals and decision-making, especially when these practices are land-based. For example, women in Ghana's Bui relocation lost access to riverside ritual sites essential for their cultural identity (Emmanuel et al., 2020; Owusu et al., 2019). However, women's involvement in cultural committees or preservation initiatives can enhance their agency in new settings (Mutie & Macharia, 2025). This occurred in Fiji, where women contributed to cultural site mapping and revival

projects after relocation (Salinger et al., 2024; Yee et al., 2024).

Men often maintain symbolic authority in cultural spaces but relocation tends to fragment traditional leadership, weakening collective identity and heritage transmission (Downing, 2002; Guo et al., 2025). Among Chinese dam-affected communities, traditional male leadership structures were weakened after spatial dispersion of clans (Wilmsen, 2017). In Tanzania, male elders of Maasai communities reported loss of authority in conducting age-set rituals post-resettlement (HRW, 2024a). Youth face an intergenerational disconnect as cultural knowledge transmission is interrupted, leading to partial loss of language, ritual practices and place-based identity (Lwankomezi & Kaganga, 2024; Scudder, 2012). In Sri Lanka, displaced youth from the Mahaweli Development Program areas, relocated from ancestral villages in the Central Highlands to newly established irrigation settlements in the North Central Province, reported the loss of oral history traditions and weakening of community storytelling practices that once reinforced local identity and intergenerational ties (Fernando et al., 2020; Samarakoon, 2018).

Elders, as cultural custodians, experience acute dislocation when sacred landscapes, burial grounds or community centers are lost. This undermines both personal and collective identity (Diamond et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2015). Among Peruvian communities relocated for hydroelectric projects, elders reported profound grief over lost burial sites and ritual spaces (ICRC, 2025). In Fiji, elders from Narikoso village were relocated in 2020 due to climate-induced sea-level rise and coastal erosion. Despite the partial relocation of seven households, the community faced challenges in preserving cultural practices. Elders played a crucial role in reconstructing ceremonial sites and revitalizing oral traditions, which partially restored community identity (Salinger et al., 2024; Yee et al., 2024).

In the Amazon Basin, sacred groves and communal ritual grounds were lost due to infrastructure relocation projects (Fearnside, 2001). In Tanzania, Maasai communities lost sacred grazing lands tied to cultural rituals during dam-related resettlement from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area to Msomera Village in Handeni District. These relocations, driven by conservation policies and population pressure, disrupted traditional grazing patterns and access to ritual spaces, leading to significant cultural dislocation (HRW, 2024a; OI,

2022). Participatory cultural preservation programs, such as land memory mapping, oral history projects or ritual space reconstruction, show positive but limited outcomes.

On economic, societal and cultural fronts, findings indicate overlapping vulnerabilities. Women, young persons, elderly and marginalized communities face compounding disadvantages where loss in one domain amplifies others (Oliver-Smith, 2016; Scudder, 2012). For instance, in Ghana's Bui Dam case, women's economic loss reinforced social isolation and cultural marginalization (Emmanuel et al., 2020; Owusu et al., 2019). Similarly, indigenous groups in the Amazon experienced simultaneous loss of land, cultural authority, and livelihoods (Fearnside, 2001).

A minority of cases document positive outcomes, primarily where relocation integrates participatory planning, gender-sensitive approaches, livelihood restoration and cultural preservation initiatives (Bayisenge, 2015; Downing, 2002). This was the case in Narikoso, Fiji, where relocation involved community decision-making, ensuring more balanced outcomes across gender and age groups (Yee et al., 2024). These cases highlight that adverse impacts are not inevitable but shaped by institutional design and political will (Cernea, 2000; Scudder, 2012). Regional variations are evident. Asian programs often implement cultural restoration as part of resettlement plans, producing partial mitigation. African programs frequently lack these components, leading to extensive cultural erosion. Latin American approaches, particularly those involving indigenous mobilization, illustrate stronger cultural preservation, where relocation is negotiated rather than imposed (Agostini et al., 2011; Cernea, 2000; Guo et al., 2025).

Synthesis of Patterns and Research Gaps

The global evidence demonstrates that human relocation is a profoundly multidimensional process, producing economic, social and cultural impacts that are highly uneven across social groups and regions. Economically, women, youth, indigenous peoples and marginalized minorities frequently experience the most severe disadvantages. Women-headed households often lose access to land, livestock and informal income-generating activities, with compensation schemes frequently favoring male property ownership, perpetuating pre-existing inequalities (Guo et al., 2025; Mutie & Macharia, 2025). Despite these vulnerabilities, evidence shows

that targeted interventions, such as vocational training, micro-credit programs and inclusion in livelihood planning can partially mitigate economic disruptions and provide avenues for recovery. Men, while more likely to receive formal compensation, face disruptions in traditional labor networks and local markets that destabilize household economies and temporary migration to urban centers may increase long-term financial uncertainty (Muchiri & Opiyo, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). Where structured employment programs accompany resettlement, men are better able to rebuild economic stability, illustrating the importance of institutional support.

Youth experience indirect but profound economic impacts due to interrupted education, limited access to vocational training and competition for scarce employment opportunities in new settlements (Lwankomezi & Kaganga, 2024). Positive outcomes are observed in contexts where youth are included in skill-building programs or entrepreneurship initiatives, allowing them to acquire marketable skills and income-generating capacities. Elders face economic marginalization through the loss of communal resources, limited participation in traditional productive activities and dependence on younger family members or external assistance (Serenari et al., 2017). In some resettlement programs, however, elders are engaged in advisory roles or craft-based livelihood activities, which help preserve partial economic autonomy. Indigenous peoples and marginalized minorities are consistently the most disadvantaged economically, reflecting historical exclusion from land rights, credit access and formal employment. Even where compensation exists, systemic inequities often perpetuate cycles of poverty, though culturally tailored livelihood interventions can improve outcomes and promote equity across social groups (Agrawal, 2007; Yee et al., 2024).

Socially, relocation disrupts networks, hierarchies and community cohesion, producing differentiated outcomes across groups. Women often lose access to informal support networks, cooperative labor arrangements and decision-making forums, increasing isolation and reducing agency (Meth et al., 2023; Mutie & Macharia, 2025). Men experience diminished social authority when traditional leadership structures or labor hierarchies are disrupted, sometimes generating intra-family tension and weakening communal cohesion (Guo et al., 2025). Youth face social dislocation through the loss of peer networks, mentors and educational

institutions, which can increase vulnerability to marginalization and risky behaviors (Lwankomezi & Kaganga, 2024). Elders experience social marginalization when removed from familiar community structures, diminishing their capacity to guide younger generations and mediate disputes (Serenari et al., 2017; Yee et al., 2024). Indigenous peoples and marginalized minorities are particularly vulnerable to exclusion from participatory governance, which fragments networks and undermines collective adaptive capacity (Agrawal, 2007; Muchiri & Opiyo, 2022). Positive social outcomes emerge where inclusive planning and culturally sensitive social programs foster participation, strengthen networks and enable collective problem-solving, although such interventions remain inconsistently applied across regions.

Cultural impacts are particularly pronounced for elders, youth and indigenous populations. Women may experience indirect cultural marginalization when displacement alters gender roles or limits participation in communal rituals, whereas engagement in heritage committees can enhance cultural agency (Mutie & Macharia, 2025). Men may retain influence over certain cultural practices if leadership or economic authority is preserved but relocation often redefines customary roles and weakens broader community identity (Guo et al., 2025). Youth face generational gaps in cultural knowledge as relocation interrupts the transmission of language, customs and heritage practices (Lwankomezi & Kaganga, 2024). Elders, as custodians of rituals and oral traditions often experience the deepest cultural dislocation, though incorporation into resettlement cultural initiatives can partially preserve continuity (McCabe et al., 2020; Meth et al., 2023). Indigenous and marginalized minorities suffer profound losses when displaced from ancestral lands and sacred sites, threatening intergenerational knowledge and collective identity; participatory cultural preservation programs show potential to mitigate these effects but such initiatives remain limited (de Wet, 2009; Yee et al., 2024).

Across economic, social and cultural domains, several cross-cutting patterns emerge. Vulnerable groups, particularly women, youth, elders and marginalized minorities, experience simultaneous challenges that reinforce one another. Economic losses amplify social marginalization, which in turn exacerbates cultural dislocation. For example,

women who lose land and income often lose access to social networks and cultural decision-making spaces, creating cumulative disadvantage. Indigenous groups frequently face concurrent economic deprivation, social exclusion and cultural dislocation, producing intergenerational vulnerability. Regional comparisons reveal that African relocations often exacerbate multidimensional vulnerabilities due to limited institutional support, Asian programs mitigate some risks through structured compensation and social programs and Latin American initiatives demonstrate partial success when participatory and culturally sensitive planning is implemented (Guo et al., 2025; Muchiri & Opiyo, 2022).

Despite a growing body of literature, critical knowledge gaps remain. Longitudinal studies tracking subgroup-specific recovery trajectories are scarce, limiting understanding of long-term resilience mechanisms. Cross-regional comparative analyses are rare and studies that simultaneously integrate economic, social and cultural impacts remain limited. Data disaggregated by gender, age and minority status are often missing, constraining evidence-based policy development. Positive outcomes of inclusive and culturally sensitive interventions are documented only sporadically, highlighting the need for systematic evaluation of strategies that promote equity and well-being across social groups. These persistent gaps underscore the necessity for research that informs socially inclusive, culturally sensitive, and economically equitable relocation policies and programs globally.

Limitations

Although this review is extensive, reliance on secondary sources may overlook local nuances and undocumented experiences. Furthermore, longitudinal evidence on post-relocation trajectories is limited, as few studies follow communities over extended periods, constraining insights into long-term resilience and adaptation. Next, informal economic activities, particularly those dominated by women or Indigenous populations, are often underreported, potentially underestimating the economic impact. Self-reported experiences may be affected by recall or social desirability bias. Finally, cross-regional comparisons are constrained by methodological differences and variations in definitions of social, economic and cultural indicators. Despite these limitations, the study offers robust evidence of consistent vulnerability

patterns and the potential for targeted interventions to mitigate adverse impacts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section presents the conclusions and the recommendations of the study.

Conclusions

This study concludes that human relocation is a multidimensional process with profound and lasting impacts on displaced populations. The study underscores that displacement is not merely a physical event but a transformative social experience, intersecting economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Vulnerabilities are structurally embedded and socially differentiated, producing unequal shifts in well-being and opportunities across social groups. Women often face loss of livelihood and reduced access to informal economic networks. While youth experience interrupted education and limited early-stage labor market access, elders lose economic independence and subsistence resources. Indigenous peoples confront erosion of cultural continuity and communal land access. These marginalized groups face compounded disadvantages that extend beyond material loss to include diminished agency, weakened social networks and disrupted cultural continuity.

Importantly, relocation outcomes are not predetermined. Programs incorporating participatory planning, culturally sensitive interventions and tailored livelihood restoration demonstrate measurable resilience, adaptive capacity and partial restoration of social and cultural cohesion. This evidence highlights the importance of accounting for social disparities and unequal impacts, emphasizing both risks and opportunities for recovery and empowerment.

Recommendations

The study highlight actionable recommendations to enhance relocation programs. Policymakers at national and local levels should explicitly recognize and address differentiated vulnerabilities across gender, age, and social status. Compensation frameworks must account for informal livelihoods, subsistence practices and communal resource access, particularly for women, youth, elders and marginalized minorities, ensuring that economic, social and cultural dimensions are equitably considered.

Local development agencies, vocational training institutions and implementing partners should prioritize context-specific livelihood restoration initiatives. These include skills training, microcredit, cooperative business models and youth enterprise schemes. Preserving elders' advisory and cultural roles is essential for maintaining intergenerational knowledge and reinforcing community cohesion.

Cultural heritage authorities, local government offices and social development NGOs can complement economic interventions with social and cultural measures. Maintaining peer networks, cooperative labor groups, cultural committees and initiatives, such as cultural mapping, ritual site reconstruction and heritage preservation supports long-term resilience.

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