

Hurricane Matthew, relocation and loss and damage

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Professors argue 'pressing need for national policies on loss and damage'

The country is still in recovery mode from Hurricane Matthew. Financial estimates of the damage caused are very preliminary, but the prime minister has recently estimated that costs may approach half a billion dollars.

Thousands of residents were advised to evacuate flood-prone areas before the storm, and to date hundreds of people are still displaced, either in shelters, or with relatives, neighbors or friends. Many residents may be displaced for some time as their homes are no longer habitable. Residents in areas particularly impacted by the storm have lost everything, and may not be able to afford to rebuild. The impacts of climate change often affect the most vulnerable in society.

Questions have been raised as to whether certain communities that suffered extensive flooding and other damage due to the storm should be permitted to rebuild in their former locations, or whether those communities should be relocated. Relocation is a sensitive issue, involving questions of



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culture, self-determination, community and, of course, financial costs. Where would these communities move to, and who would pay for their relocation?

These difficult issues are being raised as the country has suffered from an extreme event which has caused what climate negotiators call "loss and damage". Loss and damage is commonly understood to

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mean impacts which exceed the adaptation efforts of states, and includes both slow onset events such as sea level rise, ocean acidification and increased atmospheric and ocean temperatures, as well as extreme events such as hurricanes. Loss and damage includes losses which are permanent, irreversible and unavoidable, and damage which is difficult to recover from due to financial, human or technical constraints.

The Bahamas, as a small is-

land developing state, will increasingly encounter issues of relocation and loss and damage as the impacts of climate change continue to increase. Rising sea levels and coastal erosion are highly likely to result in the permanent loss of coastal areas and in many areas becoming uninhabitable. Localized data, including updated terrestrial and sea elevations and data on the extent of coastal erosion, are necessary to monitor and evaluate the impacts of climate change. The monitoring and evaluation of climate change impacts is an essential component in the development of comprehensive



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and effective strategies to address loss and damage.

As more residents of The Bahamas are impacted by flooding and coastal erosion, there is a pressing need for national policies on loss and damage that provide guidance on issues such as relocation. Hurricane Matthew, and previously Hurricane Joaquin, have shown that some communities are particularly vulnerable to flooding and sea level rise, and that rebuilding in the same location after catastrophic damage may not be feasible or wise. Indeed, as

insurance is likely to increase in cost or even not be offered, residents in these vulnerable areas will bear even more risk in rebuilding. Rather than an ad-hoc approach, where some residents may be offered governmental assistance on a case by case basis, a national and coordinated approach to addressing relocation is needed. Such an approach must take into account consultation with the Bahamian public and rely on sound research that is supported by scientific evidence.

While recovery is still in the initial stages, it is essential that the vulnerabilities exposed by Hurricane Matthew are recognized and addressed with a long-term and data-driven approach. Responding to questions about relocation must take into account the increasing impacts that will be felt in an era of climate change and be based on a national approach to addressing loss and damage.

For more information on climate change and The Bahamas, see The College of The Bahamas' Climate Change Initiative's website at www.climatechangebahamas.org.