



Displacements and Resettlements in PNG: lessons from five case studies to guide climate-induced resettlements in PNG

Friday 7 August

12:30 - 1:30pm Port Moresby / Canberra



The Port Moresby coastal settlement of Hanuabada | Flickr

This presentation is based on a study examining disaster and climate-induced displacements and resettlement efforts in PNG. The study draws on five case studies: Carteret Islands (Bougainville), Limanak Island (New Ireland Province), Manam Island (Madang Province), Kadavor Island (East Sepik Province), and Asing and Sikut Settlements (East New Britain Province).

The study involved 19 key informant interviews with participants ranging from political leaders and national departments to provincial and district authorities, and multilateral organisations.

Additionally, eight (8) focus group discussions were conducted with 144 participants, comprised of displaced communities, host communities and landowners.

Speaker

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Locations

1. MBA Suite (SBPP building, UPNG)
2. Seminar room 7, Crawford School of Public Policy
3. Online via Zoom

Register

<https://events.devpolicy.org/20260807>

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OUTLINE

ABOUT THE STUDY

BACKGROUND

METHODOLOGY / STUDY
SITES

KEY FINDINGS

KEY LESSONS

CONCLUSION

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Examine lessons from climate- and disaster-induced displacement.

Inform equitable, culturally grounded resettlement policy.

Five case studies across PNG.



**THE PNGAUS PARTNERSHIP CLIMATE CHANGE
RESEARCH GRANT**



Background

1.

World Risk Index: PNG ranks 9/187 - Exposure + Vulnerability

2.

Land: 97% of the land is customarily owned - resettlement implications

3.

PNG has 6000 islands/atolls, huge coastal communities

4.

Climate displacement vs Disaster Displacements

Methodology

Table 1. Demography of Key Informant Interviewees

Category	Total Respondents
National Agencies	5
Provincial Governments	8
District Governments	1
Political Leaders	2
NGOs / Community Organisations	1
Multilaterals Organisations / Development Partners	2

Table 2. FGD Participant Demography

Category	Female	Male	Total
Participants (Overall Total)	73	71	144
Settlers (Total)	40	46	86
Host Communities / Landowners (Total)	33	25	58



Definitions

1.

Displacement – **forced movement** of people due to environmental hazards or disasters (UNCHR, 1998; IDMC & UNDP, 2024)

2.

Disaster-induced displacement: movement triggered by **sudden-onset natural events** such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or floods

3.

Climate-induced displacement: movement driven by **slow-onset events** (climate-related hazards, El Niño)

4.

Resettlement denotes the **planned relocation** of displaced populations and the **restoration or improvement** of housing, livelihoods, and social systems (Cernea 1997)

For definitions: see United Nations Commission on Human Rights, UNCHR, 1998; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and United Nations Population Fund, 2024; Bergmann, 2021; Cernea 1997



Case Study Sites

1.

Sudden-Onset Natural Events: **Rabaul, Manam** (Madang) & **Kadavor** (East Sepik)
Volcanic Eruptions

2.

Slow-Onset Events: **Carteret Islands** Resettlement in Tinputz (Bougainville)

3.

At risk (Slow-Onset): **Kalinus Island** (New Ireland Province)

4.

Participants involved: Displaced persons and host communities

FINDINGS

LAWS

•Disaster laws were designed around **sudden emergencies**: Disaster Management Act 1984 – enacted primarily to respond to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, storms and epidemics (hazards of the 1980s).

Legislation **prioritises emergency response** over long-term recovery

Emergency governance remains highly centralised: Emergency Act and National Pandemic Act, reinforce **executive-led emergency control** through ad hoc authorities

Climate legislation recognises relocation but **lacks implementation mechanisms**.

Authority Laws: Complets State

National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (2017–2030) – Aligned PNG with the **Sendai Framework**, prioritising risk governance, resilience, investment in DRR, preparedness, and Build Back Better

Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management National Framework for Action (2005–2015) – Introduced the **Hyogo Framework** principles of prevention, preparedness, early warning, and risk reduction.

National Disaster Mitigation Policy (2004) – Shifted the focus from reactive emergency response to disaster mitigation and risk reduction.

Policy has progressively modernised PNG's disaster governance, while legislation continues to reflect an emergency-response model (**gap between policy and binding legal authority**).

- **Fragmented institutional mandates and weak coordination** – Disaster management responsibilities are dispersed across multiple agencies (NDC, DPLGA, Climate Change, provincial governments, NEC), resulting in overlapping mandates, duplication, and the absence of a clear lead agency for planned relocation and long-term resettlement.
- **Weak institutional and subnational capacity** – The National Disaster Centre is under-resourced; provincial and district disaster committees have uneven staffing, funding, technical expertise, and operational capacity.
- **Over-reliance on international partners**
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- Emergency response systems are not designed for long-term displacement

**1. DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT PROGRAM
(2017–2024)**

Year	Actuals (K000)	Budget (K000)
2017	–	57,700
2018	2,966.1	5,120
2019	–	1,640
2020	2,269.3	1,890
2021	459.3	5,750
2022	4,129.0	5,750
2023	–	10,000
2024	–	10,000

Source: PNG budget documents

**2. NATURAL DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT PROGRAM
(2010–2015)**

Year	Actuals (K000)	Budget (K000)
2010	–	–
2011	–	–
2012	–	–
2013	1,358.20	5,057
2014	–	3,715.00
2015	1142.6	4,541.00

Source: PNG budget documents

- BUDGET IS INSUFFICIENT AND INCONSISTENT

One national-level officer familiar with the NDC's operations claimed that:
“The NDC only gets K2.5 million annually... held by the Treasury. NDC sends claims during disasters and wait”. (Government official, Port Moresby)

Use of LLG Support Fund, which are meant for local level government needs but are frequently diverted to respond to disasters:

“...when we have an emergency, we simply divert that (LLG Support Fund) fund... it serves a dual purpose”. (PNG politician, East Sepik Province)

Case Study 1: Manam (Madang Province)

- 1957–1958 – A major volcanic eruption resulted in the complete evacuation of Manam Island.
- Before 2004 – Most eruptions affected only a few villages, and displaced families temporarily relocated to mainland **taoa**.
- December 2004 – January 2005 – Major eruptions forced the evacuation of the entire island population (approximately 10,000 people).
- 2005 – Volcanologists advised that permanent return was unsafe, marking the transition from temporary evacuation to prolonged displacement.
- 2005 – The PNG Government, with support from international partners, established care centres at Potsdam, Asuramba, and Mangem on the Madang mainland.

Case Study 2: Rabaul (ENB)

- 1937 – A major volcanic eruption killed 507 people and highlighted the need for improved volcanic monitoring (Bismarck Volcanic Arc).
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- September 1994 – Twin eruptions of Tavurvur and Vulcan devastated Rabaul, affecting approximately 100,000 people and displacing about 30,000 residents.
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- Post-1994 – The Gazelle Restoration Authority and World Bank-supported programs established resettlement sites at Gelagela, Clifton, and Sikut.
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- 1994–2024 – Resettlement was delayed by land disputes, limited livelihood opportunities, and slow administrative processes.
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- 2024 – First 199 land titles to resettled families at Talvat Three, Sikut, nearly 30 years after the eruption.

Case Study 3: Carteret Islanders

- 1950s–1960s – The Australian Administration explored resettlement options (1965 – Han Islanders formally requested relocation, citing chronic resource shortages and declining living conditions).
- 1980s–1997 – Migration to Bougainville temporarily eased population pressure, land disputes, the Bougainville Crisis and Panguna mine closure forced many families to return
- Since the 1990s – Sea-level rise and climate change intensified existing challenges
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- 2007 – Tulele Peisa was established to lead a community-driven relocation programme to Tinputz.

Case Study 4: Limanak Island (New Ireland Province)

- Recent years – Coastal erosion, king tides, saltwater intrusion, and unpredictable weather increasingly threatened Limanak Island.
- Climate change intensified these slow-onset hazards, causing frequent flooding, loss of gardens, contamination of drinking water, and erosion of burial grounds.
- Communities experienced growing physical, livelihood, and cultural impacts, increasing pressure to relocate.
- Provincial and district authorities recognised Limanak as an at-risk community, but no formal relocation process had commenced.

Themes		Land Tenure	
Theme	Evidence Across Cases	Case Study	Unique Land Tenure Issue
Land tenure insecurity	Displaced communities lacked certainty over long-term land rights or ownership.	Manam Islanders	No formal land acquisition after two decades; ongoing disputes with customary landowners; settlers continued to feel temporary.
Pressure on customary land	Resettlement increased competition for scarce customary land and natural resources.		
Population growth and future land needs	Existing resettlement areas were viewed as insufficient for future generations.	Rabaul (East New Britain)	Land was largely secured, but concerns centred on formal land titles, declining land quality, landslides, and subdivision of blocks among growing families.
Weak government role in land acquisition	Communities expected stronger government leadership in acquiring and securing land for resettlement.	Carteret Islanders	Church-provided land enabled relocation, but land was insufficient for future relocation needs; women experienced insecurity through belonging and social acceptance rather than legal
Host-settler tensions	Unclear tenure arrangements contributed to disputes over land use, resources, and community acceptance.		
Long-term sustainability concerns	Participants questioned whether current resettlement arrangements would remain viable over time.	Limanak Islanders	Relocation had not yet occurred; communities feared losing autonomy by settling on other clans' land, while landowners worried resettlement would reduce land available for future

Themes

Host-Guest Relations

Theme	Evidence Across Cases	Case Study	Distinct Host–Guest Challenge
Relations changed over time	Initial hospitality often declined as displacement became prolonged and pressures increased.	Carteret Islanders	Hospitality gradually gave way to movement restrictions, surveillance, harassment, and questions over belonging.
Resource pressures	Competition over land, water, schools, and livelihoods strained relationships.		
Government support shaped relations	Declining or inadequate government support increased tensions between hosts and displaced communities.	Rabaul (East New Britain)	Host communities remained largely supportive; concerns centred on unequal government assistance and internal settlement governance rather than host conflict.
Different experiences by gender	Women emphasised everyday interactions and access to services, while men focused on governance, land, and long-term coexistence.	Manam Islanders	Relations deteriorated significantly over time, with disputes over land, water, schools, resource access, movement restrictions, and continuing resentment from host communities.
Community solidarity persisted	Despite tensions, many communities maintained friendships, mutual assistance, and intermarriage.		

Theme	Evidence Across Cases
Delayed or inadequate government support	Communities consistently reported delayed, limited, or absent government assistance during emergencies and resettlement.
Weak health services	Shortages of health facilities, medicines, and staff reduced access to healthcare and contributed to preventable hardship.
Limited access to education	School access declined due to costs, distance, or inadequate education services after displacement.
Deteriorating infrastructure	Roads, water systems, shelters, and other infrastructure were poorly maintained or insufficient for growing populations.
Growing pressure on basic services	Displacement increased demand for health, education, water, and transport services in host communities.

Case Study	Distinct Service Delivery Challenge
Carteret Islanders	Government assistance remained slow before and after relocation, with delayed delivery of housing materials and essential supplies.
Rabaul (East New Britain)	Emergency response relied heavily on host communities and private support; long-term concerns centred on deteriorating roads and
Manam Islanders	Communities experienced prolonged institutional neglect, including inadequate health care, education, temporary shelters, and
Limanak Islanders	Communities reported worsening freshwater shortages and concerns that existing services could not support future relocation.
Host Communities	Host communities reported increasing pressure on existing health, education, water, and transport services as displaced

Themes		Governance Challenges	
Theme	Evidence Across Cases	Case Study	Distinct Governance Challenge
Weak state presence	Communities consistently reported limited or absent government leadership before, during, and after displacement.	Carteret Islanders	Tulele Peisa assumed responsibilities normally expected of government, while state support remained limited and inconsistent.
Poor coordination and planning	Resettlement planning was fragmented, inconsistent, or delayed across sites.	Rabaul (East New Britain)	Government was largely absent during the emergency response, leaving communities dependent on host communities and private assistance.
Unmet government commitments	Participants described repeated promises that were delayed, changed, or never implemented.	Manam Islanders	Long-term governance failures included weak planning, poor coordination, shifting resettlement plans, and an ineffective Manam Resettlement Authority.
Reliance on non-state actors	Churches, NGOs, customary leaders, and host communities filled gaps left by government.	Limanak Islanders	Communities reported little government engagement or forward planning despite increasing climate risks.
Prolonged uncertainty	Ad hoc interventions and weak governance left communities facing long-term uncertainty.	Host Communities/Landowners	Landowners perceived government as failing to consult fairly, honour commitments, or resolve long-term resettlement arrangements.

CONCLUSION

- **Hazard type influenced the speed of displacement, but not its long-term consequences.**
 - Sudden-onset disasters (volcanoes) and slow-onset climate change both resulted in prolonged social, economic, and cultural disruption.
- **Early planning determined long-term resettlement outcomes.**
 - Planned relocation (Carteret) achieved better outcomes than delayed or ad hoc responses (Manam), while Rabaul remained only partially resolved.
- **Secure land tenure was the foundation of successful resettlement.**
 - Unresolved land ownership, insecure tenure, and limited land availability undermined stability, livelihoods, and future relocation.
- **Strong host–guest relations depended on adequate support.**
 - Positive relationships were sustained where land, services, and government support were available; tensions emerged where these were lacking.
- **Weak service delivery prolonged displacement and vulnerability.**
 - Delays in housing, health, education, water, and infrastructure reduced resilience and increased hardship for both displaced and host communities.
- **Governance failures were the common thread across all case studies.**
 - Weak coordination, unmet government commitments, and reliance on NGOs, churches, and customary landowners allowed temporary displacement to become long-term or intergenerational resettlement.

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