

## THE CASE FOR RETREAT AS A FORM OF DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

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*“Retreat, Hell! We just got here!”<sup>1</sup>*

The term ‘retreat’ originates from military strategy and has negative connotations (as can be discerned from the quote above) – it is usually a prelude to defeat and a likely subsequent massacre. However, when undertaken in a strategic or planned manner, retreat can be used to serve positive objectives as well. Records suggest that retreat was first used as an offensive strategy by the Mongol armies of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (who were masters at feigning disarray and inviting cavalry charges that drew enemies into locations of their, i.e. the Mongols’, choice), and most famously by the Tsarist army during the Napoleonic invasion of Russia in 1812 (letting the French reach the outskirts of Moscow before pouncing – of the 500,000 strong invading force that crossed into Russia in June, only 27,000 crossed back in December).

Thinking on disaster risk reduction (DRR), too, has a negative lens on retreat (or the resettlement of communities to pre-identified locations); it is seen as a last resort, as a one-time emergency action, and/or as a failure to adapt – often undertaken in an abrupt, ad hoc and inequitable manner that involves some level of human rights abuse and is unfair to renters and low-income house owners. DRR prefers to focus upon building resilience of vulnerable communities where they already are, so that they have the ability to withstand the hazards that come their way.

And yet, retreat has always been an adaptation option – there is little point in building resilience of communities in areas that are prone to avalanches or landslides, for example, because no amount of resilience is sufficient protection in the face of certain hazards. And people in hazard prone areas usually look to move themselves and their assets out of harm’s way, more so nowadays with global warming, rising sea levels, and climate related extremes. Those with fewer resources have fewer options to address such risks; they are unable to return, or to rebuild more resiliently; some may feel forced into retreating; conversely, some may be unable to afford to move, and feel therefore trapped in a hazardous location. People staying in contexts of informal settings or insecure land tenures can be particularly affected.

Due to some of these reasons, retreat is often undertaken after an unfortunate event, and usually in some distress. The author happened to pass Malpa in 2014 (a Himalayan village along the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra that lost 221 people and its entire housing stock in a landslide in 1998), an eerie ghost village whose surviving residents had resettled in safer locations. While hindsight is always 20/20, the case for retreat was blindingly obvious given the steep, almost vertical, slopes of rock above the location, the proximity of the rock mass to major (and unstable) tectonic plates, and the heavy rainfall that ensured water seepage into the porous rock.

Retreat as a form of adaptation has attracted little research, and there is therefore limited guidance for administrators and DRR practitioners on using it for more than the physical removal of people and infrastructure. There is also limited focus on the social, cultural,

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<sup>1</sup> Exclaimed by a US Marine during World War I when advised to withdraw from his position.

psychological and long-term economic consequences for those retreating, those remaining, and those receiving the retreating communities.

It is therefore refreshing to find a recent academic paper<sup>2</sup> that reconceptualizes retreat as a positive DRR option enabling achievement of societal goals and letting communities choose actions most likely to help them thrive. It recognizes that retreat is hard to do (and even harder to do well) due to issues such as place attachment, a preference for status quo, imperfect risk perceptions, inter alia, and suggests that a strategic, managed retreat could be an efficient and equitable adaptation option.

On the strategic front, the paper suggests that a retreat should not be a goal but a means of contributing to a societal goal (such as economic development, environmental conservation, etc.), and should be larger than a group of individual households relocating for their own benefit in that it is coordinated across jurisdictions, involves multiple stakeholders, addresses multiple hazards and risks at both origin and destination sites, and integrates into planning for economic, social and environmental goals. It should also be forward looking and responsive to economic opportunities, market forces and demographic changes. Policy makers need to identify why a retreat should occur and influence the ‘when’ and ‘where’ of it.

Management of a retreat addresses how it is executed. To enable it to be equitable and efficient, there is a need to a) understand and address barriers – especially those in the form of institutional silos within government agencies and financial constraints, b) develop tools to identify residents who want to retreat and require assistance, and c) have communication strategies that engage reluctant residents.

There are several issues that complicate retreat and incentivize living in risky locales – fishing communities on India’s eastern coast, for example, are constantly battered by cyclones, but any attempt to move them to safer locales inland has to counter the suspicion that the administration is acting at the behest of the tourism and prawn cultivation lobbies that are always looking to occupy sea front areas. There is therefore a need to develop and disseminate high quality hazard maps that enable market prices to capture risk and help communities make informed choices.

There is much to be done before retreat is repositioned as a positive DRR option, despite the limitations of ‘build back better’ and other strategies that look to win against nature<sup>3</sup>. Evaluation of retreat outcomes, and recommendations for suitable and context specific policies and practices, are scarce. Key research gaps need to be addressed, and deployments in practice require testing and refinement. But first

steps have been taken, and there is growing recognition that sometimes retreating from nature instead of fighting it can open new opportunities for communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Siders AR, Hino M and Mach KJ; ‘The Case of Strategic and Managed Climate Retreat’; Science Vol. 365 Issue 6455 pp 761-763; 23 August 2019

<sup>3</sup> Pierre-Louis, K; “How to Rebound After a Disaster: Move, Don’t Rebuild, Research Suggests”; NYT issue of 22 August 2019; accessed on 23 August 2019.