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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

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# Community Engagement and Conflict Resolution in Climate Induced Displacement: The Case of Tuvalu

**By Nure Noreci**

## Introduction

One of the biggest challenges that our globe suffers is climate change. This phenomenon, except of the environmental damage that it creates, also creates political and social problems for the biggest part of the planet. Many important issues are caused by climate change and one of them is climate-induced displacement. By this term we refer to people who may be forced to move from their environment because it is not safe anymore due to climate change (Perch-Nielsen et al., 2008). This affects mostly small island states that are threatened by rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions.

One of the countries that is in the center of the discussion for climate change and displacement is Tuvalu. A small island state in the middle of the Pacific Ocean that is considered in danger of sea level rise. As Perch-Nielsen et al. (2008) highlight, if a coastal resident at risk does not adapt in any way land and property can be lost and the direct consequence is migration. Since the climate impacts have become stronger the country is facing some serious questions about the future of its communities and the possible relocation options. The strongest solution until now involves the cooperation with regional partners as Australia. The discussions and decisions about migration and relocation can create great tension among different actors like governments, international organizations and local communities.

Taking into consideration all this, environmental governance needs approaches that will be effective, like community engagement. Community engagement is the procedure when local communities and local people are involved in discussions and take part in decisions that affect their own lives. This topic raises questions and concerns but most

researchers argue that participation of the local communities can improve the quality and legitimacy of policies, since it allows communities to share their own knowledge and concerns (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Local communities' participation creates dialogue and cooperation among stakeholders and can help reduce conflicts. One of the most significant highlights of the importance of citizen participation was made by Sherry Arnstein who explained that the method of participation can exist at different levels taking into consideration how much power citizens have in decision making (Arnstein, 1996).

This research analyses the community engagement as a method of stakeholder participation in the governance of climate – induced displacement. How this method works, what are the strengths and limitations and how it can contribute to conflict resolution. This essay uses the case of Tuvalu and its cooperation with Australia as an example on how community engagement can play a role in climate- related governance challenges.

## Origins and development of community engagement

The general idea of community engagement is connected to the discussion about citizen participation in public decision making. For a long time, decisions about the development and environmental policies were planned and taken by government or experts in the fields and local communities had a very limited influence. While time passed it was more visible that people who are directly affected by policies should also be able to participate in this decision making and have their own voices.

One of the most significant works talking about this issue comes from Sherry Arnstein. In her article "A Ladder of citizen participation", Arnstein explains that participation can have different forms and can be achieved in different ways depending on the power that citizens have in taking decisions (Arnstein, 1969). The model that Arnstein introduced is used to understand how participation works in practice, how it is actually done and if it really allows communities to participate and influence the policy making process and the outcomes. Participation can be very limited if local community is informed after the decisions have been made but if the community is asked and consulted before the decision making this can also lead to the community being a partner.

Over the last decades, all those discussions have become very important in the governance field. The idea that decision making is something that only state authorities and experts can do, collaborative forms of governance, different actors working together in order to address complex problems, are now being acknowledged. This is described as collaborative governance and it involves cooperation between different actors like governments and local communities (Ansell & Gash, 2008). The participation can include

community meetings, dialogues and public consultation. Participation processes can vary depending on how much influence participants have and the way that decision-making is organized (Fung, 2006). This happens not only if the goal is to shape a policy but also in order to gather different opinions. When different stakeholders are involved, policies can become more effective.

Environmental decisions are very important for local communities since they affect them directly. Their perspective can help the other stakeholders to better understand the needs of the locals and use their knowledge in order to shape better and more affective policies. When it comes to climate change, local communities are the first to experience its impact so they have knowledge that can be very valuable in order to bring changes and solutions.

## Method of community engagement and its forms

When we think about community engagement it is well known that it describes the involvement of local communities in discussions and decisions that affect their lives. When policies stop being designed only by governments and stakeholders but also include the participation of local citizens and communities. Locals express their views and opinions and share their knowledge and experiences. They can participate in the decision-making process that is being conducted about their lives. In environmental governance it is very important to create legitimate policies and community engagement can achieve this taking different forms.

Collaborative decision-making is when communities strongly contribute to policy making. Local communities participate in advisory groups and planning committees or work in groups to find solutions to specific problems. According to Ansell and Gash, collaborative governance processes allow governments and stakeholders to work together so they can address complex issues that an actor alone cannot solve (Ansell & Gosh, 2008). Also, a common form is public consultation. The authorities invite community members in order to listen to their opinions and propositions. Consultation happens through public meetings, online or surveys that local people can participate and even if it sounds like an easy way to influence a decision making it is not always guaranteed that their opinion will influence the final decision (McKinley et al., 2021).

Moreover, organizing community meetings and workshops can also be a good form of community engagement. In this option, stakeholders can discuss all together problems, thoughts and possible solutions. This form has a more direct form of interaction and helps build trust among the actors. Community members, policymakers and field

experts can discuss all the different perspectives and opinions. The way of participation ranges. It can be direct, indirect, influential or not so much. Simple information can be shared, or forms of partnership and influence can take place (Arnstein, 2019). This depends highly on the way that authorities want to handle the community participation, if they just want to get some feedback or they really want communities to have an active voice in policy shaping. Participation mechanisms are not the same, they differ depending on who is involved, how discussions are made and how much the authorities influence the outcome (Fung, 2006).

Community engagement is not a standard method but more like a broad way of approaching decision making, and it has a variety of tools. Those tools could be highly effective for communities living in vulnerable areas. Those communities may have information about the environmental changes they are experiencing and the risks that they are facing in their daily life. Their perspective can be very important when it comes to adaptation strategies and effective decision making.

## The function of community engagement

When local communities feel that their opinions and voices are being heard and taken into consideration, they may be more willing to accept policies. Being part of the planning and decision-making process and direct involvement can bring positive functions of community engagement methods. The legitimacy of decisions can be improved since people who are directly affected participated. Participation makes less the feeling that the decisions are being imposed on the local community. The collaboration increases the trust between institutions and citizens, something that constitutes effective governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Building trust and cooperation makes stronger relationships. Communities, governments, and institutions that work together communicate better and understand better each other. In cases of long-term cooperation about climate adaptation on environmental management this is fundamental.

The inclusion of local knowledge plays also a great role in community engagement. Communities usually face all the results of climate change and have better knowledge of the environment and local challenges. This exact knowledge is very valuable in decision making, it helps policy makers and scientists to understand the real impacts of environmental change. All participants combine their knowledge and experience and lead to a great decision-making process. The conflicts among the stakeholders can be reduced. The discussions and dialogues can help in negotiation, and everyone is free to express their concerns. Interests may vary and there can also be competition but having

space for all to be heard can bring possible solutions. According to Fung (2006), good communication can create opportunities for collective problem-solving.

Climate policies usually involve decisions that affect directly the communities, some decisions can be adaptation measures, relocation plans. Participation can help policies to be more acceptable by society and understand better the local needs. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), strongly highlights the importance of inclusive governance processes that help to address climate risks and support vulnerable communities (IPCC, 2022). Community engagement can be very important in discussing also adaptation strategies for climate impacts such as sea level rise since the decisions about the adaptation strategies or migration pathways that can be possible highly and directly affect communities. The local voices that are included in these discussions can help to shape these policies not only being effective but also being accepted by society and socially sensitive.

## Strengths, weaknesses and limitations

Community engagement as a method offers many important advantages but at the same time in practice it does not always bring the wanted result and has certain limitations. It is important to understand that a method can have both advantages and disadvantages and when it is analyzed all the prospects have to be considered. Of course, community engagement brings the inclusion of local knowledge. Local people understand better than anyone their local environment, including their voices in discussions and participation processes, which can help in policy development that adapts better to local needs and in reality.

When communities are involved in discussions, they make the decision making transparent. Their perspective and opinion are being seriously heard, and the final decision is also made by taking into consideration their will and needs, this makes the outcome fair and local people more willing to accept the adaptation plans or the final result. Conflicts can be prevented since everyone has a fair say at the end. Negotiating the different interests openly can avoid later competition because the result will be achieved with cooperation and communicating openly.

Although the good impacts, community engagement can also have weaknesses and limitations. One of the most discussed ones is the true meaning of participation. Sometimes the local participation can have a symbolic role since the final decision can be already made. The consultations and surveys and discussions can just be feedback

and opinion collection rather than actual opinion sharing. This cannot give locals an actual opinion on what is going to be the result even if they are the first to be affected by it. In Arnstein's article (2019), this is also being discussed as some form of engagement that remain very weakened since they are only limited to consultation and information sharing.

Also, the inequalities can be a challenge to community engagement. Not all participants have the same influence in decision making so not all voices can be heard unlimited and not all of them have technical knowledge that may be needed, sometimes when the explanation is not simple people are ashamed to say that they cannot understand (Wiseman et al., 2010). In addition, there are some very practical limitations that can affect participation. Time and resources can challenge the participation since sometimes processes can last very long if all voices are heard properly. This makes procedures more complex and if an environmental issue is very demanding and needs to be resolved immediately then it can be a challenge to take things slower. Good governance outcomes can be achieved when communities are truly allowed to contribute equally and without restrictions.

## Arnstein's Ladder and community engagement

Sherry Arnstein, in her original article in 1996, has analyzed a very significant way to show how important participation is in the governance processes. She introduced a model (fig.1) where participation is shown as a ladder with 8 rungs that represent the influence that citizens have on decision making. The ladder has the step of manipulation and ends with the step of citizen control.

Starting with the lowest level of participation (non-participation) we have manipulation and therapy, we start with the situation when authorities influence the public opinion and participation of citizens is symbolic. In the middle of the ladder, we have "degrees of tokenism" which includes the rungs informing, consultation and placation. These forms of participation are when authorities do inform citizens about the policies and keep them updated or ask for their opinions, but they have very limited influence. They are more for feedback. Last, the higher levels of the ladder the "Degrees of citizen power" that have partnership, delegated power and citizen control, the upper levels of the ladder. When participation does only remain a way to gather feedback, but when community actively participates and contributes to the design of the policies.

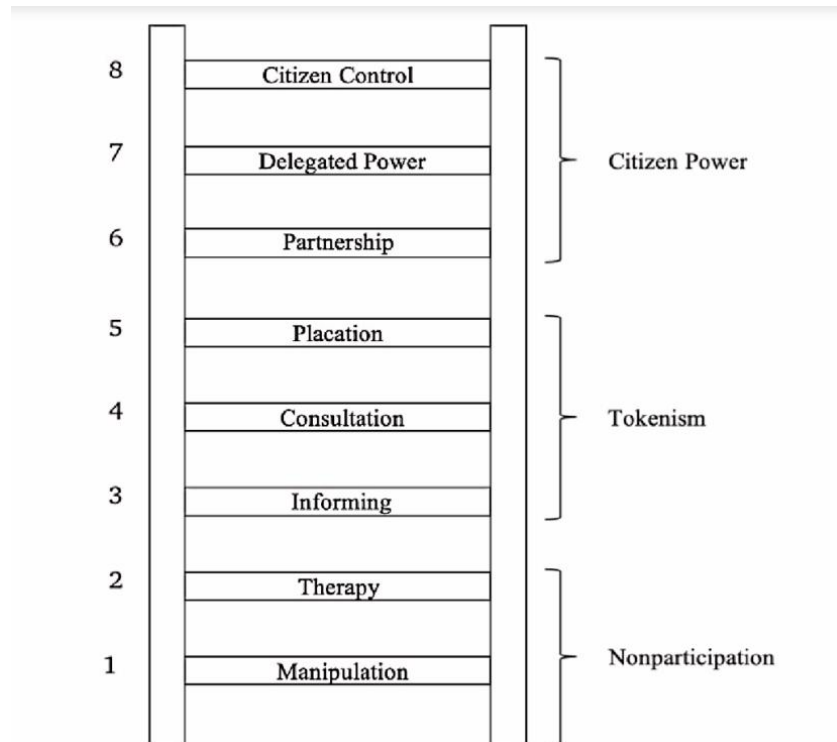


Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217)

## Case study: Climate induced displacement and community engagement in Tuvalu

One of the most discussed cases in relation to climate change and displacement is the case of Tuvalu. The island state is just a few meters above sea level and rising sea level, coastal erosion and extreme weather events have caused serious environmental risks to the island and to its citizens, risks that threaten the long - term habitability of the island (IPCC,2022). The island is not only facing an environmental challenge but also a social issue that affects the future of the population.

By climate-induced displacement we refer to people who are forced or highly encouraged to move to another place because their homes are unsafe. Reports on asylum and migration governance show that climate change is influencing the patterns of mobility and displacement specifically in vulnerable regions like small islands (European Union Agency of Asylum,2023). Particularly visible these concerns are in the Pacific Ocean because many countries face the challenges of risks related to sea -level rise.

Tuvalu, as a response to these challenges has developed a strong cooperation with regional partners and especially Australia. The Australian - Tuvalu Falepili union treaty was signed between the countries in 2023 and entered in force in 2024 (Falepili Union

Treaty, 2023). The treaty is a unique agreement that addresses the climate change problems, security cooperation and human mobility between the countries.

The objective is to support Tuvalu handling the impacts of climate change and provide cross- border mobility options for its citizens by creating a mobility pathway that will allow citizens of Tuvalu to move to Australia through a special visa system (Gamboa & Goh, 2025). A limited number of citizens are able to migrate in Australia live and work there. A pathway that is was designed to support “mobility with dignity” and allow people to migrate voluntarily and not being forced, it was highlighted by the prime minister that the Falepili Mobility Pathway is not just a one-way traffic but the island aims to benefit greatly from those that return to Tuvalu after exposure to work, study and life in Australia (Marinaccio, 2025).

In this situation, community engagement becomes very important. Local communities are directly and highly affected by all the decisions that are related to the pathway, the adaptation policies and other relocation options. For many Tuvaluans, moving abroad raises questions about their identity, culture and future of their land they want to fight for those (Yeo,2024). Researchers highlight that climate mobility is not only an environmental issue, but also a very demanding social and political process that requires careful governance, policy makers need to understand and harness human mobility as a process that can facilitate both climate change adaptation and human development (Farbotko, 2018).

Community engagement is a great method to ensure that the perspectives of the most affected people are being included. Consultations with local leaders, dialogues and discussions can affect the processes and help the piemakers understand how climate risks and changes are experienced from a local perspective. In Tuvalu, citizen participation is supported through public consultations, community forums and local initiatives that allow the residents to express their views about policies that affect their community (Mexico Historico, 2024). This can reduce potential conflict that can arise from relocation or migration policies. This kind of police can create tension if communities feel excluded from the decision-making process. Involving though will increase trust and improve cooperation.

Community engagement does not always guarantee that local population will have a full influence in the policy outcome. The limitations of the method can also be seen in Tuvalu. Structural challenges as geographical isolation and limited resources can make the participation even more difficult for communities living in island states (Mexico Historico, 2024). Despite this, encouraging citizens to participation remains a very important element of governance.

## Conclusions

New challenges are coming to the surface due to climate change. Governments, communities and institutions are called to answer questions and create policies and adaptation methods especially for regions such as small islands. By examining community engagement as a method of stakeholder participation this essay explored how this method can contribute to address complex governance issues such as the issue of climate displacement. Explaining and analyzing the origins, function, strengths and limitations of community engagement the conclusion is that participation can really play a very significant role in improving legitimacy and effectiveness of policy making.

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