

Managed retreat through partial relocation: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Property Buyouts in Flood-prone Areas?

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CONTEXT OF PROJECT

Governments worldwide are adopting property buyout programs—the public acquisition of properties (obligatory or voluntary) in return for a specified amount of money to protect residents from flood risks. In response to the 2017 and 2019 floods, the Quebec government obliged certain households to demolish their homes, offering buyouts in compensation. In New Brunswick and Vermont, similar policies entailed voluntary household participation. However, limited research has explored the impacts of buyouts on different stakeholders. Preliminary research suggests that buyouts may not contribute to long-term resilience: they appear highly disruptive to dislocated households; entail challenging implementation for municipal authorities; prompt inequitable real estate dynamics; and may leave the urban fabric fragmented in ways that undermine municipal capacity to deliver services. Are buyouts an effective risk-reduction policy instrument? What happens to the land left behind? How could such programs be improved? In response, this research investigates how mandatory (QC) and voluntary (NB and/or Vermont) buyout policies compare in their effects on shaping the socio-economic vulnerabilities of relocated and flood-affected households. The research also explores the challenges municipalities face in implementing buyouts and maintaining services. Finally, the research documents the fate of post-buyout abandoned lots and the effects they have on the neighbourhood and ecological systems.

GOAL AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The goal is to identify policy tools—with specific examination of flood-related buyouts—that reduce the vulnerabilities of individuals, households, and communities, limit spatial fragmentation, and enhance the ability of municipal authorities to carry out service and stewardship roles. The objectives are to examine the (a) impacts of buyouts on the socio-economic vulnerabilities of relocated and flood-affected households, (b) challenges municipalities face in implementing buyouts and maintaining services, and (c) treatment of abandoned lots with respect to neighbourhood, ecological, social or other potential benefits.

PLANNED METHODOLOGY (type of research, study population, data collecting tools)

The primary study area to evaluate the effectiveness of mandatory buyouts and abandoned lots planning is Rigaud (QC) where nearly 100 houses were expropriated. Other study areas for comparison of mandatory vs voluntary buyouts, given the availability and access to data, are the Lower Saint John River region (NB) where 80 properties were bought out through voluntary buyouts and/or the TRORC region in Vermont where 154 properties were acquired through voluntary participation of households. Data from policy reviews, household surveys and interviews with residents, local and provincial government officials, service providers and retreat experts will be analyzed at the individual, household, and community levels.

EXPECTED OR ACTUAL RESULTS

Results will provide insight into how different buyout approaches target specific vulnerabilities and with what effect and highlight the challenges faced by municipalities in policy implementation and post-buyout abandoned lots planning.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS

The research will contribute to evidence-based policies regarding property buyouts as adaptive or maladaptive policy instruments for flood risk management and resilience enhancement in Quebec and elsewhere. Exploring gaps in Quebec buyout policies and comparing Quebec mandatory buyout policies with other provincial and USA voluntary buyout policies, will generate knowledge to fill existing policy gaps and develop best practices.

FRQ SECTOR(S) IMPLICATED: Society and Culture

RIISQ RESEARCH AXIS(ES): 2, 3, 4, 5

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