

## **Resettlement: a possible strategic instrument within the Austrian spatial planning system**

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Resettlement is a rarely used measure in Austria and does not exist as an autonomous instrument in planning law. Nevertheless, Austria faces nowadays two major spatial challenges, which seem to make it more relevant. First a strong exposure to a changing climate especially in the Alps, which leads to a rising hazard frequency<sup>1</sup> and second a decrease in population in certain regions<sup>2</sup>. Planning authorities have basically two main options: Either they can witness the change in relevant framework conditions without setting countermeasures or actively try to steer the ongoing developments. Understanding spatial planning as a holistic state assignment means planning should not only focus on governing growth, but rather manage decrease. Thus, resettlement has to be recognised as a necessary instrument within spatial planning.

Austria's provinces have established a complex and highly sophisticated legal planning system governing the consumption of land. Surprisingly, regulations addressing resettlement processes are largely missing.

Planners and authorities in Austria are as mentioned confronted with two main spatial challenges that are highly relevant for resettlement measures:

- (1) Due to a changing climate hazard intensities and frequencies are shifting. Especially mass movements such as rock fall and landslides are likely to increase. That sets some existing settlements but also roads, power supply lines etc. at high

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<sup>1</sup> Current data on the connection of climate change and vulnerabilities in Austria:  
<http://www.climateadaptation.eu/austria/avalanches-and-landslides/> (23.10.2015).

<sup>2</sup> Population prognosis for Austria 2014-2030: <http://www.oerok-atlas.at/#map/312/2/47.7443,13.3300> (23.10.2015).

risks and brings up the question of reducing the exposure by resettling. Such measures are already discussed internationally.<sup>3</sup>

(2) Many peripheral Austrian regions have a decreasing population. So there is a growing need of restructuring the affected settlements. Otherwise structural problems in infrastructure provision and cost issues burden the municipalities.

Resettlement though is a grave intervention in people's livelihoods by authorities. It has many dimensions such as the economic aspect of losing immovable property, the social side of the loss of the familiar environment and most likely also of the social structure. The involvement of many official and other stakeholders and the massive impact on the people affected make resettlement a delicate topic. Thus, politicians try to avoid resettlements as such decisions are unpopular.

As a result, hardly any research on this topic has been undertaken in Austria, so far. After two major floods in several alpine regions and especially along the Danube River in 2002 und 2005 an integrative interdisciplinary study was commissioned. It aimed at analysing measures, which could be undertaken to reduce flood risks as well as vulnerability of settlements and at initialising a discussion about the relevant legal framework. Resettlement as a strategic instrument was shortly assessed as one part of this research but neither further analysis nor policy formulation did follow.

But interestingly, resettlement does take place in Austria, however, so far only in a few cases after major floods and after an avalanche catastrophe. This raises the question of how these resettlements did work in detail as well as how planning authorities participated within the processes.

My research on resettlement starts with a comprehensive analysis of provincial planning laws and of the capability of planning authorities in taking a leading role in resettlement processes. Expropriation rights however exist mainly within infrastructural measures of national interest. Such rights are largely missing in the Austrian spatial planning law, which is settled at the provincial level. Regional concepts by the provinces did not address resettlement so far and municipalities, which are the

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<sup>3</sup> David López-Carr, and Jessica Marter-Kenyon. "Human Adaptation: Manage Climate-induced Resettlement." *Nature* 517, no. 7534 (2015): 265.

responsible authorities for zoning base their zoning plans on development concepts. Due to political reasons – as explained before – these are not likely to list resettlement as planning measures. Thus, resettlement is based on voluntary participation of the population affected. It further needs the willingness of all stakeholders and as well as public financing. That brings the research to the second key point, the role of spatial planning and planning authorities in resettlement processes. For this analysis the study relies on interviews with stakeholders who that took part in executed resettlements and their assessment of the role of spatial planning tools. The collected qualitative data serves as a foundation for the construction of a system theory based resettlement model. This model can identify key elements in such processes and values the role of spatial planning within.

The ongoing research shows so far, that the Austrian spatial planning system could be adapted in certain ways to implement resettlement as a strategic planning instrument. A first essential step would be defining resettlement guidelines for the process as well as for the financing, followed by the adaption of legal regulations. Resettlement could thereby help to face spatial challenges originating from climate change or decreasing population as well as others.