

Rethinking Transformative Managed Retreat: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

Transformative adaptation calls for fundamental changes to social-ecological systems in response to climate change and increasing disaster risks, with an emphasis on addressing underlying social inequalities. Managed retreat is often framed as a transformative adaptation strategy. However, despite its conceptual prominence, transformative adaptation remains under-theorised and insufficiently applied to managed retreat. While existing literature on transformative managed retreat focuses on socio-ecological dimensions that underpin key concerns such as justice, participation, community well-being and environmental restoration, the development of climate adaptation theory has been critiqued for its relative isolation from broader social science and critical disaster scholarship. This disciplinary disconnect is problematic, contributing to limited engagement with the social, political and cultural processes that shape how people perceive, respond to and experience managed retreat. This article aims to fill these gaps by critically examining the concept through a sociological lens. In particular, we challenge static or essentialist notions of community, explore how power and privilege shape (im)mobility, and interrogate the root causes of vulnerability deeply embedded in adaptation processes. By reframing managed retreat as a deeply social, cultural and political process, this article advances a more grounded and justice-oriented conceptualisation—one that better supports equitable adaptation outcomes in both research and practice.

Keywords: transformative managed; planned relocation; adaptation; climate change; disaster risk reduction; praxis

Introduction

Communities around the world are facing decisions about how to respond to the increasing impacts of climate change and increasing disaster risks. Particularly for those in coastal, riverine and flood-prone areas, managed retreat may be considered. *Managed retreat*, also referred to as planned relocation, planned retreat, community relocation and strategic relocation, is the planned, strategic movement of people and assets from areas of risk to safer locations (Ajibade et al., 2022; Hino et al., 2017). Although retreat does not encompass all forms of climate-related mobilities and does not offer residents choices across mobility and non-mobility pathways (Kelman, 2020), a number of communities across Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand, hereafter) are considering managed retreat as a major response to flood risk, including Westport in the West Coast region, Amberley Beach in North Canterbury, parts of Dunedin, and the Auckland suburb of Kumeū. For residents in these areas, there can be mixed responses to retreat. For example, in

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Westport, some residents in the affected area welcomed the opportunities for relocation and potential growth, but others expressed apprehension about the impending changes and unequal outcomes, highlighting the complex and contested nature of managed retreat, particularly when the social dynamics and contested meanings of ‘community’ are not critically examined (Donaldson, 2025; Vallis et al., 2025).

As illustrated in the case of Westport, managed retreat remains a contentious adaptation strategy. Although intended to reduce exposure to climate change and increasing disaster risks, climate adaptation discourse often universalises ‘retreat’ as a solution to diverse forms of climate-related (im)mobilities. In so doing, managed retreat can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities, exacerbate vulnerabilities and undermine community well-being, particularly for socially disadvantaged groups (Abu et al., 2024; Ajibade et al., 2022; Dannenberg et al., 2019; Dundon et al., 2023; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021; Nalau & Handmer, 2018; Piggott-McKellar & Vella, 2023; Siders et al., 2021; Siders, 2022; Warner et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Jowers et al. (2023) highlight the common uneven outcomes of managed retreat in the US, considering the role of race and ethnicity in property buyout compensation after floods (‘buyout’ is synonymous with government-sponsored retreat in the US), in which compensation was significantly lower for African American, Hispanic and other racial minority property owners relative to White owners. Ghezelloo et al. (2023) also highlight that buyouts in the US exacerbate social inequities by only compensating homeowners. The impacts of (forced) relocation on well-being are well documented, affecting place attachment, livelihoods, health, social cohesion and identity (Binder et al., 2015; Bower et al., 2023; Piggott-McKellar & Vella, 2023). For example, Abu et al. (2024) investigated two coastal communities in Ghana, equally exposed to impacts of sea-level rise, and determined that members of the relocated community experienced lower overall well-being including lower levels of attachment, lower perceptions of safety, and higher anxiety than the non-relocated community. In a New Zealand example, community members of Matatā, a town in the North Island, reported that they felt forced to relocate and described that the lengthy process severely impacted their mental and physical health (Hanna et al., 2018, 2020). Further impacts may be felt by Indigenous people whose ancestral connections and stewardship responsibilities to land may be threatened due to relocation (Felipe Pérez & Tomaselli, 2021; Maldonado, 2014). In the managed retreat of the Isle de Jean Charles band of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe from their island home in Louisiana, US, grief and loss were some of the impacts on the community in leaving their ancestral homelands (Blakeman et al., 2023; Simms et al., 2021).

In response to these concerns and empirical research findings, there are increasing calls for a transformative approach to managed retreat, one that addresses structural injustices, confronts power asymmetries, and reimagines adaptation as a process of equitable change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders et al., 2021; United Nations, 2024). In academic literature, a transformative approach to adaptation has been widely promoted as a fundamental systems-change strategy to confront the issues of injustice and unequal power, address the root causes of vulnerability, and achieve equitable adaptation outcomes (Comelli et al., 2024; Cui & Brombal, 2023; Few et al., 2017; Kuhl et al., 2021; Moriggi et al., 2020; Pelling, 2011; Scolobig et al., 2023; Shi & Moser, 2021). However, despite its conceptual prominence, transformative adaptation remains under-theorised and underexplored in relation to managed retreat and adaptation. While existing literature on transformative managed retreat focuses on socio-ecological dimensions that underpin key concerns such as justice, participation, community well-being and environmental restoration, the development of climate adaptation theory has been critiqued for its relative isolation from broader social science and critical disaster scholarship (Solecki & Friedman, 2021). This disciplinary disconnect is problematic, contributing to limited engagement with the social, political and cultural processes that shape how people perceive, respond to and experience managed retreat. These gaps are especially pressing, given that transformative managed retreat is often discussed and implemented in ways that assume cohesive, place-bound communities and overlook how mobility is shaped by power, privilege and structural constraints.

This article addresses these limitations by offering a sociological contribution to the (re)conceptualisation of transformative managed retreat, interrogating power, justice and vulnerability in adaptation research, planning and practice. We centre three interrelated areas of concern: 1) the contested nature of community participation and the need to move beyond simplistic and essentialist understanding of community; 2) the inadequate attention to the dynamics of, and various forms of, human (im)mobility, including who is able to leave, who is compelled to stay, who resists managed retreat and who benefits from it, and how these patterns reflect deeper social inequalities; and 3) the limited engagement with the social and historical processes of vulnerability construction. Grounded in critical sociological perspectives, it synthesises current debates and rethinks managed retreat not only as a technocratic solution, but as a deeply political, cultural and social process, advancing its praxis towards justice and equity.

Defining transformative managed retreat: Core concepts

Managed retreat is often considered as a type of transformative adaptation, in contrast to more incremental climate responses and technocratic solutions such as seawalls and coastal defences (Dundon & Abkowitz, 2021; Dundon et al., 2023; Nalau & Handmer, 2018; Solecki & Friedman, 2021). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022) explicitly classifies managed retreat as an example of transformative adaptation, highlighting its potential to fundamentally reshape human-environment interactions. Building on this framing, Dundon et al. (2023) suggest renaming managed retreat as “transformational adaptation measures” to better encapsulate the systemic change involved (see also Dundon & Abkowitz, 2021). This reconceptualisation positions managed retreat not simply as a physical relocation strategy, but as a catalyst for broader transformations in governance, legal frameworks, infrastructure and socio-ecological relations. Crucially, these perspectives view managed retreat as more than an end-state or technocratic solution; instead, it is embedded within wider processes of societal changes aimed at fostering resilience, justice and sustainability. Echoing this, numerous studies emphasise that when managed retreat is implemented with a view towards systemic transformation, rather than solely risk reduction, it holds the potential to drive equitable, justice-oriented and meaningful climate adaptation (see, for example, Ajibade et al., 2022; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021, Siders, 2019, 2022; Siders et al., 2021). This section sets the conceptual foundation for understanding transformative managed retreat as about not only relocating communities but also remaking relationships between people, place and systems of power. We focus on the three core themes typically emphasised in the conceptualisation of transformative managed retreat: 1) justice and redistribution of power; 2) community well-being and relationality; and 3) environmental restoration and land futures.

Justice and redistribution

In conceptualising transformative managed retreat, much research defines *transformative managed retreat* as an approach that addresses justice concerns, including social, economic and historical aspects (Ajibade et al., 2022; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021, Siders, 2019, 2022; Siders et al., 2021). Justice consideration is a key component, since studies commonly point out the unequal impacts of relocation on socially marginalised groups including racial/ethnic minorities, Indigenous communities and low-income families (Ajibade et al., 2022; Dundon et al., 2023; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021; Nalau & Handmer, 2018; Siders, 2022; Warner et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). The equity issues inherent in neoliberal, market-driven processes of conventional managed retreat are commonly highlighted as a pressing challenge (Ajibade et al., 2022; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders, 2019; Solecki & Friedman, 2021), with scholars highlighting that buyouts, for example, are based on individual property values, and in some areas may be targeting lower socioeconomic status (SES)

neighbourhoods, while wealthier areas may receive other forms of protection. In an analysis of coastal adaptation strategies in North Carolina in the US, Siders and Keenan (2020) found a correlation between shoreline armoring, such as seawalls, and high-income, high-home-value areas; in contrast, retreat correlated with low income and low home value, as well as high racial diversity. Similar examples include coastal areas in Manila, the Philippines and Lagos, Nigeria (Ajibade, 2019) and in flood-prone areas in Houston, Texas (Nance et al., 2024). Renters may also be excluded from buyouts (Siders, 2019). Koslov et al. (2021) also note that while buyouts are legally voluntary in the US, they may not be experienced as such. Some authors argue that a shift in perspective is required to balance property rights and government authority in mandating relocation, particularly for community-held and Indigenous lands (Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Yumagulova et al., 2023).

In order to challenge some of the injustices perpetuated through these neoliberal, market-driven managed retreat processes, Mach and Siders (2021), Siders et al. (2021) and Tubridy et al. (2021), among many others, argue that transformative approaches need social justice objectives embedded in the processes and outcomes. Possible strategies for enabling such objectives include increasing community participation, fostering agency and promoting self-determination, whereby individuals and communities themselves identify their own values and priorities and decide whether to relocate or stay in place (Ajibade, et al., 2022; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders, 2019, 2022; Siders et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023).

Notably, scholars explicitly frame increased participation and agency among Indigenous populations as central to the justice aims of transformative managed retreat (Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders, 2022; Warner et al., 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Indeed, Mach and Siders (2021) and Warner et al. (2019) express the importance of including Indigenous Knowledges and their integration with local, scientific and other forms of knowledges. An example described by Warner et al. (2019) relates to the combination of traditional ways of knowing and ‘citizen science’ by Indigenous coastal communities in Alaska to track changes in their land and the climate. For Yumagulova et al. (2023), Indigenous Peoples need to be included in adaptation planning as rights holders and not merely as another stakeholder group, and their rights to self-determination must be upheld. Therefore, in cases involving Indigenous communities—who often reside in areas disproportionately exposed to disaster risks, often by coercion due to historical and ongoing colonisation (Uekusa et al., 2025)—managed retreat is a matter of justice rather than mere participation. However, Yumagulova et al. (2023) note that, in practice, meaningful Indigenous input is often lacking from adaptation planning and policy or is simply tokenistic. To advance social justice objectives and avoid tokenistic inclusion, Siders (2022) notes that transformative processes must have goals of decolonisation. Meaningful participation and equitable processes are described in terms of distributive and procedural justice (Siders et al., 2021).¹ Ajibade et al. (2022) assert that transformative managed retreat must include recognition justice that acknowledges colonial legacies and restorative justice that addresses historical harm, in addition to further social, environmental, ecological and intergenerational justice dimensions.

Community well-being and relationality

As many studies highlight the significantly negative impacts of past managed retreat cases on well-being, including loss of identity, disconnection from culture and place, and livelihoods, scholars typically conceptualise well-being as an important outcome of transformative managed retreat (see, for example, Siders et al., 2021). To avoid these negative impacts, Ehrenfeucht and Nelson (2023) and Tubridy et al.

¹ *Distributive justice* in climate adaptation is concerned with how the impacts and costs of climate change are distributed across communities and nations and *procedural justice* concerns the participation of those most affected by adaptation in decision-making processes (Schlosberg & Collins 2014; Shi et al., 2016).

(2021) argue that transformative managed retreat must aim to improve the well-being of affected communities. Well-being is central to Ehrenfeucht and Nelson's (2023) classification of transformative managed retreat, encompassing enhanced community and household well-being and building community capacity and connections.

Physical and psychological well-being are also described as domains that need to be strengthened through transformative managed retreat (Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders et al., 2021). This can be achieved by mitigating risk to people and accounting for cultural needs and the environment (Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021). As Yumagulova et al. (2023) note, maintaining culture and identity is vital for the well-being of many communities facing managed retreat, especially for Indigenous Peoples.

Economic measures to ensure well-being include access to relocation resources such as financial support, housing and livelihood availability (Dale & Ajibade, 2024; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Mach & Siders, 2021). An empathic response, including support for communities experiencing grief and loss, is also seen as necessary (Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders et al., 2021), although this has not yet been widely discussed in the literature. The literature points to a need for evaluation of studies that include various forms of well-being outcomes, as definitions and measures of improved well-being remain unclear. Furthermore, Indigenous scholars and others, including Parsons (2023), Shi and Moser (2021) and Yates et al. (2023), highlight the importance of Indigenous holistic and relational concepts which offer a more encompassing conceptualisation of well-being that includes the well-being of ecosystems, aligning with socio-ecological systems theory which is widely used in adaptation and climate change research.

Environmental restoration and land futures

Another key goal emphasised in the conceptualisation of transformative managed retreat is restoration of the environment (Ajibade et al., 2022; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Göransson et al., 2023; Koslov et al., 2021; Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders, 2019, 2022). Restoration of the environment is often referred to generally in terms such as 'habitat and ecosystem restoration' and 'environmental health', without specific examples of what this would actually entail. Siders (2019) refers to the potential in transformative approaches to restore wetlands to protect against flooding and provide habitats for endangered species, as well as providing playgrounds and gardens. Göransson et al. (2023) also describe opportunities for repurposing land for recreation or wetlands as an interim measure towards transformative managed retreat. Ajibade et al. (2022) provide an example of environmental restoration in a case of transformative managed retreat in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The cited case study, which describes the clean-up of a polluted canal and the creating of recreational spaces used by local residents and the wider city, is regarded as an example of transformative adaptation and referenced in many papers (e.g., García & Martínez-Román, 2025; Shi & Fitzgerald, 2023; Yarina et al., 2019). For Ajibade et al. (2022), ecological justice, which prioritises land, ecosystems and non-human species, is a vital component of transformative managed retreat.

In the San Juan example, Ajibade et al. (2022) note that residents were protected from displacement and gentrification through collective ownership established through the creation of a community land trust. While reduced environmental risk and potential ecosystem restoration are often cited as intended outcomes of transformative managed retreat (Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023), improved human-nature relationships are also highlighted as key outcomes, particularly within frameworks grounded in socio-ecological systems theory (Mach & Siders, 2021; Siders et al., 2021). However, some scholars adopt a more critical lens, pointing to paradoxical risks of *green climate gentrification*—the social and residential displacement of low-income and socially marginalised communities following the restoration of vacated land and urban greening projects (Anguelovski et al., 2019). Such outcomes illustrate how transformative adaptation may disproportionately affect socially marginalised groups and inadvertently reproduce and reinforce social

inequalities, injustices and segregation. To advance this conceptual framing, we now turn to sociological perspectives to interrogate how managed retreat is produced through power, identity and institutional logics.

Rethinking transformative managed retreat: A sociological critique

While key aspirational goals of transformative managed retreat include addressing social justice concerns, improving community and individual well-being, and restoring the environment, significant challenges exist in conceptualising, contextualising and operationalising transformative managed retreat. These challenges are notable as there are very few empirical examples of transformation in practice (Ajibade et al., 2022; Berrang-Ford et al., 2021; United Nations, 2024; Zant et al., 2024). In a recent review of nature-based solutions to adaptation in China, Italy and Germany, Scolobig et al. (2023) found that while some transformational principals such as environmental restoration were met in those cases, the root causes of vulnerability, particularly social inequalities and injustices, were not addressed. Challenging these root causes is described as essential for transformative change to occur and is repeatedly emphasised in adaptation literature (Comelli et al., 2024; Cui & Brombal, 2023; Few et al., 2017; Kuhl et al., 2021; Moriggi et al., 2020; Pelling, 2011; Shi & Fitzgerald, 2023). However, although often framed as forward-looking and risk-reducing, transformative adaptation still inadequately addresses inequalities and vulnerabilities or even exacerbates them, particularly among socially and economically marginalised groups. This is partly because, as disaster researchers (e.g., Blaikie et al., 1994; Oliver-Smith, 2022; Uekusa et al., 2025) have long argued, exposure to risk is not merely environmental but socially produced through unequal access to power and resources and institutional repression. Dominant adaptation frameworks frequently obscure these dynamics by emphasising individual resilience or cost-benefit rationalities, rather than properly engaging with the political and social structural dimensions of relocation (Davoudi, 2012). From this perspective, transformative managed retreat must engage more directly with disaster studies critiques of conventional approaches that overemphasise natural hazards and climate threats while underplaying social vulnerability, power and inequality (Kelman et al., 2016; Matthewman, 2016; Oliver-Smith, 2022; Uekusa et al., 2025).

As disaster researchers such as Paton et al. (2024) argue, inclusion and community participation are often uncritically invoked as solutions, yet these practices are rarely transformative unless accompanied by shifts in power and recognition of diverse epistemologies. A co-production and decolonisation approach to managed retreat can foreground community knowledge, shared decision-making and environmental justice, pushing back against technocratic models of managed retreat planning (Tubridy et al., 2022; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Similarly, the framing of managed retreat as opportunity, sacrifice or inevitability fundamentally shapes whose interests are prioritised and what kind of future is imagined and actually made possible (Siders et al., 2021). Indeed, through the lens of Foucault's (2009) governmentality, managed retreat emerges not merely as an adaptation tool but as a mode of population management, deciding who stays and who must leave, often framed in the language of safety and resilience, yet deeply entangled with power and control. Thus, as Mach and Siders (2021) argue, transformative managed retreat becomes truly transformative when it challenges existing governance arrangements and addresses systemic inequalities and larger social forces—issues which, understandably, often lie beyond the capacity of individual communities and local governments to resolve on their own. As a result, while these aims and issues have been discussed in many academic works and among practitioners in climate adaptation, these do not all extend to radical, structural change that would address power, vulnerability and inequality, nor did they provide clear directions for advancing theory and practice.

Objectives of managed retreat in the New Zealand town of Westport (described earlier), such as safety, well-being and opportunities for improvement, do not overtly address power and larger social forces. We argue that while critical disaster and vulnerability scholarship foreground the social, political and

historical processes through which disaster risk and vulnerability are produced, a sociological and more critical perspective is still necessary for transformative managed retreat to be transformative, at least to advance its theorisation. In our literature review, we identified three areas of significant challenge facing transformative managed retreat, both as a theoretical framework and in practice: 1) the contested nature of community participation and the need to move beyond simplistic and essentialist understanding of community; 2) the inadequate attention to the dynamics of human (im)mobility, including who is able to leave, who is compelled to stay, and how these patterns reflect deeper social inequalities; and 3) the limited engagement with how vulnerability is socially and historically produced. To advance both the theorisation and effective implementation of transformative managed retreat, we argue that, through sociological perspectives, scholars and practitioners in the field need to better understand power and the social processes of producing vulnerability and social injustice, including in our own research practices. To contextualise managed retreat within broader social realities, we draw from sociological and other critical perspectives to elaborate on these challenges and to unpack key concepts/conceptualisations such as community participation, (im)mobility and the social production of vulnerability. We aim to reconceptualise transformative managed retreat in a way that is both theoretically robust, practically applicable and methodologically just.

Challenging the participation paradigm: Rethinking community

The wider literature emphasises the importance of community participation, and adaptation-specific literature links such participation to improved well-being—a key goal of transformative managed retreat (Bower et al., 2023; Chu et al., 2019; Ghezelloo et al., 2023). Community participation is widely accepted as necessary; however, the complexities and vagueness of the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘participation’ are somewhat overlooked in the current conceptualisation of transformative managed retreat (Barnett, 2022; Samaddar et al., 2021).

Communities are not static, homogeneous entities; rather, they are shaped by larger social forces such as neoliberalism, institutionalised racism, racial and economic segregation, identity politics, globalisation and migration (Wilson, 2012). These forces influence the complex flow of people, resources and capital across the globe. Community is an organic, dynamic entity embedded within wider social systems, with individuals moving in and out based on structural constraints, opportunities, aspirations and resource availability (Cleaver, 2002; de Haas, 2021; Giddens, 1984). Regardless of this reality, current top-down, command-and-control approaches to managed retreat tend to reduce communities into small, spatially bound, place-based entities (Mach & Siders, 2021; Ojha et al., 2016; Siders, 2019). Despite how it is framed in literature, transformative managed retreat continues to overlook the reality that individuals belong to multiple, overlapping communities that serve diverse social functions. The concept of community itself is highly contested in the social sciences. While advocates of transformative managed retreat may acknowledge its heterogeneity and dynamism, they often fail to critically engage with the idea that community is a collective of diverse individuals robustly, loosely, sometimes virtually or spontaneously connected by varying interests, purposes, identities and/or geographic proximities (Delanty, 2003; Neal, 2012). Therefore, environment-based interest alone, such as disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate adaptation, may not be sufficient to engineer a community and foster community solidarity. We challenge the essentialist notion of community and highlight how community identities are co-constructed through place and social relationships.

Diverse identities, place attachments and unequal voices

Community membership expresses both individual and social identities, which cannot be engineered (Townsend & Hansen, 2001). Identity formation within a community is a complex interplay of individual

experiences, social hierarchy, cultural practices, lifestyles and shared histories (Cohen, 1985; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). For example, place attachment varies significantly among community members, influenced by factors such as length of residence, amount of time spent daily, homeowner status, life stages, lifestyles, family composition, economic opportunities, government regulations, personal experiences, social connectedness, resource availability and cultural significance of the place. Along with many other factors, place attachment can deeply affect individuals' willingness to relocate and their perception of managed retreat as either a threat or an opportunity (Anton & Lawrence, 2016; Clarke et al., 2018). Here, 'place' needs to be framed more critically and in a nuanced way. As Massey (1994) would argue, place should not be seen as static or bounded either, but as a site of intersecting social relations shaped by power and mobility, which is a lens critical for understanding the contested nature of place attachment (see also Tuan, 1977). Other social, emotional, political and economic factors such as social networks, life stages, SES, political views and risk perceptions can influence community members' perspectives on managed retreat, which can vary widely within communities (Cain et al., 2020; Lawrence et al., 2021; Wiegel et al., 2021). A global review found that managed retreat was the least preferred adaptation option for some residents in coastal communities (Malette et al. 2021), while a study undertaken about managed retreat in O'ahu, Hawai'i revealed some residents in communities value retreat to maintain beaches and surf (Coffman et al., 2024), showing that different communities and community members can value and prioritise different elements. Additionally, power imbalances and social factors can inhibit participation, leading to privileged voices often dominating discussions, reinforcing the power and hierarchies within communities through this process (Bertana, 2020).

Hierarchical structures, mobility and power imbalances are inherently present within communities, with financial resources, disabilities, education, gender, cultural and racial tensions, and social networks potentially inhibiting people's ability to participate in discussions and planning and to feel a sense of belonging. In this context, key questions still revolve around who should be involved in managed retreat, and by and for whom (Cretney et al., 2023), with unequal power and opportunities preventing all community members from equal involvement.

The myth of consensus and the politics of community participation

In New Zealand, Macpherson et al. (2024) describe how diverse perspectives are missing from adaptation policies which have prioritised technocratic, top-down approaches, while, on the surface-level, community members are encouraged to participate. A key challenge for advocates of transformative managed retreat is that the technocratic, top-down approaches often oversimplify the concept of community, assuming consensus where there may be none. As discussed above, if an 'imagined community'—which is often bounded by externals as members may not know each other (see Anderson, 1991, for his original concept)—exists, it tends to ignore the internal dynamics, power relations and social structures that shape community interactions or disengagement and collective decision-making processes. This approach marginalises voices within the community, particularly those of minoritised groups such as renters, racial minorities, migrants and low-income families, leading to majoritarian decisions that do not reflect the community's diverse needs and aspirations (Bertana, 2020). In an example from the village relocation of Vunidogoloa in Fiji, Bertana (2020) found that power and gender dynamics among the villagers meant that not everyone who lived in the community was included in the decision-making process or satisfied with the relocation outcome. Following Hurricane Sandy, households and neighbourhoods in Staten Island in New York mobilised collectively around buyouts but remained divided over whether to stay or leave, their decisions shaped by their personal and family circumstances, individual preferences and broader structural factors (Koslov et al., 2021). Even where relocation was agreed upon following Cyclone Gabrielle damage in Tairāwhiti on the East Coast of New Zealand's North Island, the implications varied considerably across

the community: for some community members, relocation meant moving just down the road, whereas for others, it meant moving a few kilometres away (Daly, 2025). Community identity and a sense of belonging may be cultivated through shared experiences, mutual support, more resourcing, investment in social infrastructure, and collective action over time (Cohen, 1985; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Putnam, 2000); however, the notion of an imagined community highlights the tension between imposed identities and organic community formation based on shared interest and ideologies. In other words, we can ‘imagine’ a place-based community, but we cannot ‘assume’ its cohesion or identity based solely on geographic proximity, due to varying interests, experiences, attachments and ideologies that may exist within it.

As community identity and a sense of belonging may be cultivated through shared experiences, mutual support, more resourcing, investment in social infrastructure, and collective action over time (Cohen, 1985; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Putnam, 2000), effective transformative managed retreat should consider the social fabric of the community, recognising the importance of social networks, social infrastructure, cultural ties, redistribution of power, and historical contexts. The key question in reconceptualising transformative managed retreat through the critical lens of community is: How can community identity and a sense of belonging be cultivated to build a place-based ‘community’ for the purpose of climate adaptation, before initiating managed retreat discussions? This requires moving beyond top-down approaches of community participation to resource community members and to embrace participatory, inclusive and context-specific strategies that honour the complex, multifaceted and dynamic nature of communities. Processes such as these require time and financial resources which funders may not provide for. A study of coastal managers in England showed that they are acutely aware of the need to involve residents in adaptation planning but are mired by lack of capacity and resourcing (van der Plank, 2024). In a current example in Selwyn Huts, Canterbury, New Zealand, the retreat process had to begin again due to a lack of consultation with community members (Leask & Sargent, 2025). Practitioners working with communities facing managed retreat must be supported with resourcing to undertake this challenging work. Such support may include partnerships with critical scholars, as in *Tomorrow’s Cities*, a DRR initiative managed by University College London and the University of Edinburgh in partnership with practitioners, policymakers, community leaders and members of marginalised groups (Comelli et al., 2024).

(Im)mobility, choice and constraint

Managed retreat as human (im)mobility

As clarified earlier, ‘retreat’ does not encompass all forms of climate-related mobilities and does not offer residents options to move, stay or return. Yet, whether transformative or not, managed retreat can be indeed experienced as a form of forced or voluntary human (im)mobility, encompassing local, regional and international migration, as well as resistance to remaining in or leaving an area (Kelman, 2020; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Although some argue that (transformative) managed retreat is a deliberative strategy to relocate people and resources and is different from migration or displacement (Ajibade et al., 2020; Hanna et al., 2022), the theory and practice of transformative managed retreat would benefit from engagement with the critical question of why migration does, or does not, occur. We challenge transformative managed retreat narratives that frame mobility as voluntary and demonstrate that, following the mobility literature, (im)mobility is stratified and shaped by systemic forces (Cresswell, 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Mobility scholars remind us that managed retreat is not just a movement across space, but also a socially embedded process conditioned by class, race, ethnicity and political economy and is highly context specific. Indeed, property buyouts, or ‘red zoning’ as it is known in New Zealand (Pawson & Blaikie, 2025), act as a blunt tool with significant equity challenges which fail to recognise the complexities of human mobility and internal as well as international migration. Buyout programmes primarily aim at DRR and may be driven by cost-benefit analysis (Peart et al., 2023), often conflicting with the priorities of individuals and communities

regarding staying or leaving (Wiegel et al., 2021; Yarina et al., 2019). Furthermore, insurance companies influence and incentivise relocation decisions by increasing premiums, potentially trapping people in high-risk areas (Beaumont, 2024; Starks, 2024). Neoliberal, market-driven processes for retreat can perpetuate injustices and constrain or direct community members' (im)mobilities, conflicting with central aims of transformative approaches found in the literature.

For Indigenous Peoples, mobility may be considerably constrained by spiritual and ancestral connections to land (Felipe Pérez & Tomaselli, 2021; Yee et al., 2022). Yee et al. (2022) describe that even when facing changes to the coastal environment that are threatening their ability to stay, ancestral and historical links continue to provide powerful reasons to remain. Furthermore, as Uekusa et al. (2025) note, for many Māori, land dispossession has left Māori with only approximately 5% of their ancestral lands, meaning that even in the face of Cyclone Gabrielle damage, there are, quite literally, no lands left to retreat to (see also Wynyard, 2019). While the retreat literature recognises key social motivations to move, resist or stay in relation to cultural, spiritual, ancestral and emotional attachments to place and land, livelihood dependence, and other economic and non-economic factors, a deeper understanding of complex community dynamics, including the in-migration and out-migration of community residents, compliance and resistance, and cohesion and division within communities requires the application of social theories, concepts and critical perspectives. For example, despite the increasing flooding and questions regarding retreat in some riverside suburban communities of Ōtautahi Christchurch in New Zealand (Gaikwad, 2026), a number of properties have been put up for sale and recently sold.² While managed retreat may be a mitigation option for some community residents, new (and prospective) residents simultaneously move into the communities for a wide range of reasons including housing market crisis, affordable opportunities, lifestyles, investment and preferred futures. Alongside these dynamics, new forms of community are also emerging in the deserted streets of the Christchurch red zone, while one of the last remaining houses was sold to the council and demolished. This informal settlement, partly driven by the recent housing crisis and widening income inequalities, is now supported by the city council, which provides rubbish collection and portable toilets for the 'new' residents or, as they describe themselves, 'refugees' in their own country (Graham, 2026). These shifting dynamics highlight the need to critically situate these residents' perceptions, beliefs and experiences within wider economic, political and social contexts, well beyond narrowly defined temporal and spatial frames.

Migration theories and transformative managed retreat

In exploring managed retreat through the lens of mobility and migration theories, particularly the aspirations-capabilities model (de Haas, 2021) and migration network theory (Massey, 1999), we can gain insights into the complex decision-making process at both individual, community and structural levels. We argue that synthesising mobility and migration studies perspectives with managed retreat discourse offers a novel contribution, shedding light on the multifaceted dynamism involved in such initiatives. Migration theories, which encompass various frameworks to analyse the motivations and mechanisms of internal and international mobility, provide valuable insights into the drivers behind residents' perceptions of relocation beyond an exclusive focus on climate emergencies and their rational choice. According to de Haas's (2001) aspirations-capabilities model, individuals, families and communities decide to migrate or not migrate based on the complex interplay of their aspirations for life betterment, place attachment and other structural constraints/enablers and future prospects, and the resources, including social capital (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000), available to them to facilitate or hinder the movement. By applying this and other migration theories to transformative managed retreat, we can identify similar factors influencing the decisions to stay or go within the context of climate change adaptation and DRR.

² See <https://homes.co.nz> for the recent data.

People's ability to make rational mobility choices is supported and constrained by states, policies and other social structures such as family, community, social networks and culture, which ultimately determine the social, economic and cultural resources available and willingness to migrate (Cresswell, 2010; de Haas, 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2006). This perspective is also supported by Carling's (2002) "aspiration/ability model", which attempts to balance diversity and unity in migration theory by breaking down migration into two separate steps: the evaluation of migration, and the realisation of actual mobility (Carling, 2002; Carling & Schewel, 2018). In this process, migration scholars recognise the role of social capital, social networks and community ties in shaping migration decisions (Haug, 2008; Massey, 1999): some have strong social capital and social networks outside their placed-based communities while, for others, their social capital and social networks are predominantly embedded in their placed-based, localised communities. Elaborating on this, Szreter (2002) notes that socially disadvantaged individuals and families tend to have stronger localised connections (or bonding social capital) to "get by", while their wealthier counterparts usually have broader connections (or bridging and linking social capital) to "get ahead", facilitating their broader mobility (see Putnam, 2000, for details). An example of this from managed retreat literature describes how in the US, homeowners of Colour in historically non-White communities were often reluctant to retreat due to limited social networks beyond their racially segregated local communities, making it particularly difficult for them to identify where to relocate (Elliott & Wang, 2023). Understanding these mobility patterns is crucial for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to anticipate where people are likely to move to in response to managed retreat efforts and therefore how to support both retreating and receiving communities.

Power, inequality and constrained mobility choice

Incorporating mobility and migration concepts into the discourse on managed retreat can ensure that relocation discussions and efforts are informed by a nuanced understanding of human (im)mobility patterns, as well as enhance community participation and promote adaptive governance grounded in social theories. Aspirations play a crucial role in managed retreat, as communities facing the impacts of climate change may aspire to secure their safety, livelihood and well-being, sometimes leading to decisions to stay. Resources significantly influence the aspirations, feasibility and success of managed retreat initiatives, with adequate resources being essential for facilitating relocation and ensuring the well-being of relocating/relocated communities. A key takeaway from this synthesis is that, as de Haas's (2001) theory of aspiration and capabilities/resources highlights, power dynamics and inequalities are central to migration patterns and decisions. Applying this theoretical notion to transformative managed retreat highlights that while aspirations can be fostered—for example, by raising awareness of climate emergencies and disasters risks, fostering community identities and cultivating solidarity—unequal capabilities, resource constraints and other personal circumstances can affect people's engagement with the idea. This calls attention to the importance of addressing underlying disparities and vulnerability, which certain community members disproportionately face, by better understanding the dynamic processes through which vulnerability is produced, reproduced and reinforced, including constrained mobilities, lack of voice, limited participation and systemic marginalisation.

Reframing research and practice for transformative outcomes: Addressing the social construction of vulnerability

Limitations of community participation and Indigenous inclusion in addressing vulnerability

Advocates of transformative adaptation argue that achieving transformative change must involve systemic shifts that address power structures and the root causes of vulnerability and social injustices (Comelli et al., 2024; Cui & Broomball, 2023; Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2023; Kuhl et al., 2021; Siders et al., 2021). However,

many of these studies do not explain why some groups are better positioned to navigate managed retreat, as they tend not to critically engage with the root causes of vulnerability or offer concrete strategies for critically examining how vulnerability is dynamically constructed through social, economic, historical and political processes. While community participation and Indigenous inclusion are widely promoted in current frameworks, these measures alone do not resolve underlying vulnerabilities and dismantle persistent patterns of social exclusion and injustices. Community participation, by itself, does not address entrenched social inequalities, and Indigenous inclusion alone does not rectify the impacts of colonial legacies, ongoing (re)colonisation and racial segregation. An overemphasis on participation—without accompanying efforts to address structural issues, such as redistributing resources to economically disadvantaged individuals and dismantling (institutionalised) racism—simply risks reproducing neoliberal logics that responsabilise imagined communities that might, in reality, be fragmented, contested or not even exist for the purpose of climate adaptation. Thus, the core problem, then, is that superficial participation and inclusion inadvertently reinforce and reproduce, rather than transform, existing social injustices and institutionalised racism.

Historical, economic and social processes of vulnerability construction

To genuinely address the root causes of social vulnerability, it is imperative to incorporate more empirical findings and critical perspectives that help delve deeper into the historical, economic, political and social processes through which vulnerability is constructed. Disaster literature helps us understand why some individuals and social groups are more vulnerable to environmental changes and disproportionately exposed to disaster risks. Although we have no intention to use vulnerability and social injustices synonymously, *vulnerability* is a social dynamic rooted in class, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, political views and other power relations (Blaikie et al., 1994; Enarson et al., 2006). The Pressure and Release model by Blaikie et al. (1994), which theorises people's vulnerability as a result of the intersection of wider social, ideological, economic and political conditions, is particularly helpful. According to this model, vulnerable individuals and groups live under consistent dynamic pressures where their access to services such as education, political system and healthcare, as well as to secure resources and livelihood options are limited, leading to, for example, unstable income and economic opportunities, resulting in poverty, poor health and unsafe living conditions. To alleviate these pressures, we must address and reduce the root causes of inequalities and poverty, such as the unequal distribution of power, wealth and resources, as well as political and economic ideologies. From a Bourdieusian lens, managed retreat outcomes may reflect not only institutional designs but also the uneven distributions of social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital, which shapes how community members varyingly interpret and act on adaptation choices (see Bourdieu, 1986). We argue for transformative managed retreat frameworks that go beyond inclusion and participation to materially and financially redistribute resources and institutionally revalue socially marginalised groups. In this view, transformative adaptation must be grounded in transformative social change; adapting to the climate crisis necessarily involves transforming the very structure of society. This is why engaging with critical social science perspectives is crucial.

Historical and ongoing practices of land dispossession, racial/economic segregation, discriminatory zoning laws, and unequal access to resources including education, healthcare and even healthy food and green spaces have disproportionately affected marginalised communities or members, leaving them more vulnerable to environmental risks. These systemic issues cannot be addressed through community participation or inclusion without substantial structural changes. Indigenous inclusion is a crucial step in inclusive managed retreat process, but it often remains superficial and tokenistic, failing to address the deeper issues of sovereignty, self-determination and reparative justice stemming from the impacts of historical land dispossession, forced relocations and cultural erasure due to colonisation. An example of this in the New Zealand context is the Rauora framework, which was developed by Ihirangi,

part of the National Iwi Chairs Forum, and was included in the first National Adaptation Plan in New Zealand (Ihirangi, 2022; Ministry for the Environment, 2022). Critics argue the transformative Indigenous principles—including abundance, holism, collectivity, interconnectedness, balance and intergenerational equity—outlined in the Rauora framework were not integrated throughout the National Adaptation Plan (Macpherson et al., 2024) or adhered to in the Government’s consultation process (Parsons & Crease, 2024). Furthermore, Cyclone Gabrielle in 2023 disproportionately affected Māori communities (Hamilton-Irvine, 2024), but the historical confiscation of ancestral lands makes it difficult for Māori to reestablish themselves elsewhere (Uekusa et al., 2025)—a large proportion of the Māori land in New Zealand that remains in Māori ownership today is on exposed land, with 80% of the nearly 800 marae built on low-lying coastal land or flood-prone rivers (Bailey-Winiata, 2021; Kowhai, 2022). For managed retreat in this context to be truly transformational, it must adopt a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and addresses historical injustices and intergenerational trauma. Without this, managed retreat can simply become another traumatic forced displacement.

Towards holistic and grounded approaches: Empirical insights and research imperatives

Addressing root causes requires a critical, multifaceted and holistic approach that incorporates economic, cultural, ideological, political, environmental and social dimensions. Economic policies, including neoliberal deregulation, privatisation and the responsabilisation of individuals and communities, exacerbate poverty and inequality. Social policies that fail to protect the vulnerable, and environmental policies that do not consider the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems, all contribute to the persistence of vulnerability and injustices. While addressing root causes may exceed the traditional scope and capacity of managed retreat, we argue that it needs to be addressed within a transformative approach, otherwise it simply risks reproducing inequalities and injustices. As discussed in the previous section, people’s aspirations to move or not are also influenced by the various forms of resources or access to resources they possess, which are facilitated and constrained by ever-changing social structural factors, including the global and political economy, labour market shifts, population decline, population ageing and environmental degradation, among others. Therefore, managed retreat strategies must be developed through critical perspectives that reveal how power and inequality are embedded and reproduced in research and practice. To reiterate, meaningful and effective transformative managed retreat requires radical societal changes such as the redistribution of wealth and anti-racism measures, which must be explored further through sociological perspectives.

Empirical research, particularly through ‘insider’ perspectives from marginalised communities, is essential for unpacking the dynamic processes of vulnerability construction and for ensuring that the voices of underrepresented groups are heard. In the context of decolonising research, employing standpoint theories or standpoint epistemologies (e.g., Harding, 2009; Pohlhaus, 2002) and incorporating community voices and experiences are no doubt crucial for properly conducting root cause analysis (RCA). As identified in our literature review, there is a significant lack of empirical work that currently presents and incorporates community voices and lived experiences, which limits the development of more grounded, community-oriented approaches to transformative managed retreat. For academics in the field, to align with standpoint epistemologies, the field demands counter-system “insider/outsider” researchers who can “use the tools of the discipline (outsider) to make a difference in the lives of people in [their] communities (insider)” (Kersen, 2016, p. 104). Although participant action research is popular in climate adaptation research (e.g., Douglas et al., 2018; Kitagawa, 2023), transformative managed retreat still demands further theorisation grounded in empirical investigation conducted, or at least led, by researchers who are part of the managed retreat discussion and are from socially marginalised groups within it. Therefore, when reconceptualising and better contextualising transformative managed retreat, there is an urgent need to move beyond superficial

inclusion and participation—not only in community discussions but also in research itself. For this, we need to critique our own research practices, too: transformative managed retreat research should be conducted for, by, with and within the community in question. For practitioners and policymakers, transformative managed retreat as policies and practice requires addressing the interconnected systems of inequalities—economic, cultural, political, environmental and social—that perpetuate vulnerability. A holistic approach, grounded in social theory and community-based research, is vital to guide these changes, ensuring that managed retreat processes are not merely participatory but also genuinely transformative.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the concept of transformative managed retreat, arguing that it needs to be reimagined not simply as a technical and policy solution to natural hazards and climate threats, but as a deeply sociopolitical processes rooted in justice, well-being and structural change. While recent literature advances the idea of retreat as transformative, we have shown that many studies overlook the complex social realities of community identity, power asymmetries and (im)mobility. Planning processes for managed retreat are often framed as participatory and benevolent, yet they frequently mask power imbalances and predetermined outcomes (Ajibade et al., 2022; Siders, 2019; Yumagulova et al., 2023). Through the lens of Foucault's (2009) concept of governmentality, this process can be understood as a mode of population management, deciding who gets to stay and who must move, often enacted under the guise of care and resilience. Here, government-led, top-down adaptation interventions are not merely technical solutions but strategies for regulating space, risk and citizenship. Thus, through a sociological lens, we have challenged and must continue to challenge the dominant framings of participation and community, highlighting the constrained mobility choices facing vulnerable populations and the risks of reproducing inequality through market-driven and superficial participatory approaches.

To move towards more transformative praxis, we argue that managed retreat needs to be grounded in decolonisation and critical social theories, embrace Indigenous and marginalised perspectives and voices, and address the historical and systemic drivers of vulnerability from insiders' perspectives. This requires a shift not only from procedural inclusion to structural transformation, but also from imagined consensus to relational accountability, and from token participation to community-led, justice-centred processes, including in research itself. In this sense, future research has to prioritise empirical work led by or undertaken in close collaboration with marginalised communities and community members to better capture lived experiences and advance place-based, context-sensitive strategies. For policy and practice, this can mean resourcing long-term engagement, redistributive justice and reflexive learning across disciplines. We acknowledge that practitioners and researchers in climate adaptation are often aware of the importance of involving community members. However, as we have emphasised in this article, it is troubling when critical theoretical foundations are overlooked or insufficiently engaged in research, practice and policy. Only by confronting the root causes of social and environmental vulnerability and injustices can managed retreat contribute meaningfully to equitable climate adaptation, rather than reproducing and reinforcing inequalities. Although making concrete policy recommendations is beyond the scope of this article, our conceptual discussion contributes to advancing the theorisation of transformative managed retreat. As we reiterate, a transformative managed retreat must not simply manage natural hazard risk and climate threats, but redistribute power, reckon with displacement, and remake the social relations between people, place and the state.

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