Chapter 21
Should Monrovian Communities Agree to Voluntary Slum Relocations: Land, Gender and Urban Governance

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Abstract Slum-dwellers in Monrovia, Liberia, facing extreme environmental hazards and flooding are being advised by the National Housing Authority (NHA) to relocate, but the process and outcome is unclear. The slum-dwellers are vulnerable owing to their location, risks and socio-economic profile given prolonged civil war, the tenuous return to democracy and an Ebola health epidemic in one of the poorest economies of Africa. This chapter analyses the multi-stakeholder endeavour to develop voluntary gender-responsive relocation guidelines, while addressing issues such as land, livelihoods, financing and urban services in a relocation package. The chapter explores how good urban governance is a requirement for a successful community-led and human rights-based sustainable slum resettlement.

Keywords Voluntary relocation · Urban governance · Liberia · Gender · Community · Land · Livelihoods

21.1 Introduction

Many slum-dwellers in Monrovia, capital of Liberia, are anxiously receiving state proposals to relocate their communities in order to escape deadly environmental hazards. Two-thirds of the estimated 1.4 million Monrovians live in unplanned informal settlements in lowland swamps and coastlines, under an average annual...
rainfall of over 5000 millimetres. Natural risks and hazards, such as floods, sea erosion, rising sea levels, storms and fire hazards, hit hard such communities. Monrovians have already endured prolonged civil war (1989–2003), state collapse and foreign troops before a return to contentious democracy in 2005, the Ebola health epidemic (2014–2015) and now the Covid-19 pandemic (2020) – all this in one of the poorest economies of Africa. Many Monrovians have been living not only in slums but in abandoned buildings, cemeteries, beachfront huts, fishing boats and other “Foucauldian heterotopias” (Hoffman 2017). For most Monrovians, relocation is a daunting and complex leap of hope that can only be realized through good governance, better land rights and gender-responsive tenure security.

This case study is a narrative and reflection on a project for the voluntary relocation of slums in Monrovia between 2019 and 2020 (National Housing Authority and Habitat for Humanity International 2020), which led to Voluntary Gender-Responsive Relocation Guidelines (VGRRG). This Cities Alliance project was led by Habitat for Humanity International (hereinafter HFHI, a non-profit international NGO), and the Liberian National Housing Authority (herein after NHA), and involved various global, national and local actors, stakeholders and communities, and supported by the University of East London (UEL). A hazards, risks and vulnerability (HRV) assessment in 2017 in select settlements in Monrovia served as evidence and basis for consultations with potential relocating communities, host communities and relevant institutional partners and organisations (Singh and Sait 2019). The author was the lead advisor on the project, working closely with HFHI and NHA to use the feedback from stakeholders, available data, best practices and tools to develop draft policy guidelines as a framework for implementation.

Slum relocation is one of the most drastic of climate-related mitigation strategies if in situ upgrading is not possible. Relocation is often deemed a measure of last resort, with the need established through evidence, its viability through technical, economic, and financial capacities and the political will of the government, and with the active support of affected communities. In contrast to top-down forced relocation, voluntary relocation should be a community alternative with informed consent of affected communities. Community resilience indicates the ability to adapt in the face of climate shocks and stresses. Governance, multi-stakeholder relations and institutional arrangements are crucial elements of slum relocation in the longer term (Minnery et al. 2013).

Sustainable voluntary relocation as “planned” movement of settlements is a lofty but mostly elusive ambition. The challenge lies in translating global standards and principles into national frameworks and local realities, such as human rights-based approaches and gender equality. Yet the fate of every relocation turns upon the strength of communities and experts, and of institutions and partnerships. Whether the slum-dwellers accept voluntary relocation depends upon whether urban governance safeguards can deliver promised and sustainable outcomes. This chapter has three sections – first, a review of the voluntary guidelines, their design and practice; second, understanding linkages with urban governance, gender and human rights;
and third, evaluating significance of the relocation package in the context of land, livelihoods and services. The conclusion reflects on the chapter’s main research question: “To what extent are voluntary relocations contingent upon good urban governance including land rights?”

21.2 Voluntary Guidelines, Design and Practice

With a large proportion of population living in low-lying coastal zones with high annual rainfall, Liberians are vulnerable to sea erosion and extreme weather events. The majority of Monrovians work in the informal economy, living in slums lacking urban and health services (Lacey and Owusu 1988). Women, children, older persons and other vulnerable groups bear a disproportionate burden of disasters, as the Ebola experience demonstrated. In 2017 HFHI and local partners carried out a Community HRV Assessment of 12 communities (286 responses, including a significant proportion of women) which showed concerns over affordability of new housing units, land tenure security, livelihoods, access to basic services, security and wellbeing (HFHI 2017). Risks that were locational, climatic, health and socio-economic were documented. Whether slum-dwellers would agree to move would depend upon whether their minimum expectations were to be addressed in the “relocation package” generated out of the needs assessment and negotiations.

Conversations between the slum communities and the Liberian government were facilitated by the NHA and brokered by a global network, Cities Alliance. Participative urban planning, sometimes through “resistance as resilience”, renegotiated the balance of power and decision-making (Castelo da Cruz and de Castro Marins 2019; de Andrés et al. 2019). In 2018 a tentative consensus emerged that relocation was inevitable but would be agreed to only if residents’ situation would improve, not deteriorate. The three basic expectations for a workable relocation would be community-driven processes, responsive to the needs of women, children and the vulnerable, and carried out transparently.

Monrovian communities then sought details of proposed relocation and associated risks, including disruption of livelihoods, social, economic and cultural networks (UNHCR 2017). The NHA and local communities decided to develop policy guidelines together with the support of HFHI and UEL. Worldwide, only Fiji had developed an outline framework for voluntary slum relocation (Government of Fiji 2018; Azango 2013). In Manam, Papua New Guinea, in 2005, 9000 islanders facing extensive volcanic activities were shifted to “care centres” in plantations, but inadequate consultations resulted in conflicts with existing landowners and deteriorating living conditions (IOM 2016). In Bangladesh, residents in flood-prone areas sought reassurances with free land, subsidies and long-term employment upon relocation (Rashid et al. 2007). Residents of Funafuti, the capital of Tuvalu, resisted relocation, citing “reasons of lifestyle, culture and identity” (Mortreux and Barnett 2009). Relocation could have differential impacts on women (in Haiti: Milan 2015), or on
different age groups such as youth or older persons (in Mauritius: Sultan 2017), reinforcing the importance of evidence-based interventions.

Across the world, an emerging consensus is that planned relocations require policy guidelines, with roles for stakeholders based on human rights considerations – where communities have ownership of relocation processes – integrated within government practices. In 2006, the Vunidogoloa community in Fiji, exposed to sea level rise, floods and erosion, partnered with government and civil society for a successful relocation, including site selection and policy guidelines in 2018. In Jamaica, the Harbour Heights community agreed settlement guidelines drafted by the Jamaica Social Investment body in 2018. In Myanmar, the National Framework for Recovery for the 2015 Floods and Landslides protects communities subject to relocation through community involvement, adequate infrastructure and livelihoods (Thomas 2016). Kenya’s National Adaptation Plan (2016) mainstreams and integrates climate change adaption in land, housing, education, informal economy and capacity-building.

These examples show that planned relocations can aid successful adaptation strategies by improving livelihoods and preparedness for future hazards, but may expose the affected population to new vulnerabilities (IOM 2017). Relocation plans only succeed when community perspectives are incorporated (Thorn et al. 2015), with the aim of reducing harm and anticipating new vulnerabilities, while identifying livelihoods, land security, community cohesion and capacity development (Campbell 2010). VGRRG draws on lessons and experiences from other relocations, with a cohesive governance framework to anticipate stakeholder challenges.

The experiences of other relocations fed into discussions between the Liberian government and stakeholders to negotiate the voluntary guidelines (VGRRG). With gender equality a priority, the NHA agreed in principle to adopt the resulting document as official policy, guided by international standards such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the New Urban Agenda (NUA), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Paris Climate Accord, VGGT and Liberian government poverty reduction and climate change strategies (Republic of Liberia 2008). The optics of national ownership and authenticity are important, so the international framework appears in the final rather than opening chapters of the guidelines.

Ten ambitious objectives of the guidelines were agreed. These included “new and innovative” participatory governance including all levels of government and community. There are references to human rights, gender equality, cultural and environmental dimensions towards health, wellbeing of all individuals, especially children, young people and vulnerable to live in “safe, vibrant, and thriving communities in well located new settlements”. These wordings reflect not only the commitment of the state and other stakeholders but also the better consciousness and maturity of civil society, partly due to relations with international development partners and donor communities (Krawczyk 2018). The concept of voluntary relocation grew from the outline into a complex document of about 70 pages, reflecting both the gaps as well as demand of stakeholders to codify practice.

The relocation is envisaged as three broad phases: before relocation (preparation), during (management) and after (monitoring). The preparation phase starts
with the community decision to relocate, community-based needs assessment and the process of finalising the land, before establishing guidelines for eligibility and applications. Data based upon assessments determines how many can move under what conditions, and relocation is reconceptualised as having physical and economic dimensions but also psychosocial aspects. Thus stakeholders can anticipate multiple steps or adjustments with positive impacts as well as unintended outcomes for vulnerable groups. The VGRRG seeks to facilitate a smooth relocation involving all stakeholders in a gender-responsive and inclusive manner, in line with national policy frameworks.

The guidelines appear to be a breakthrough. They collate existing legal, economic and policy tools and generate several new protocols to bridge existing gaps. Every stage or decision involves the approval of the community, though not necessarily unanimity. The spirit of the guidelines is that interests and human rights of all need to be respected, protected and fulfilled for a relocation in a safe, dignified and timely manner. In April 2019, over 60 delegates from government agencies, community groups, experts and civil society proposed amendments to the draft VGGRG, subsequently approved by the Monrovia City Forum. A final version was published in March 2020 with the NHA, HFHI and local partners, acknowledging the UEL role. Two original questions still remain for the affected communities – how is the relocation to be implemented? and where?

21.3 Urban Governance, Gender and Human Rights

The challenges of pro-poor, gender-responsive, community-involved, climate change urban governance are extreme in the post-conflict and post-disaster relocation in Liberia. Urban governance refers to the process by which governments and stakeholder groups manage interventions in the communities that they represent (Paddison 2000; Goldsmith 2001). Effective land administration is an essential part of good urban governance as land underpins shelter, livelihoods and development outcomes (Global Land Tool Network 2018: 41, Chigbu 2011). Thus, good urban governance develops and implements policies, processes and institutions so that land, property and natural resources serve the best interests of all stakeholders, including the urban poor.

In the twenty-first century urban governance models have become a feature of city-regional politics as cities themselves become centres of economic activity and denser populations. Pierre (1999) argues that choices among different governance models (managerial, corporatist, pro-growth or welfare approach) are not value-neutral, but choices over inclusion of organised interests are reflected in urban policy outcomes.

Bevir (2010) notes that the evolution and contestation of urban governance models mirror the multiplicity of experience within city regions. As Mossberger et al. (2015) identifies, these approaches have fed into a growing debate over
participation, agency, institutions and societal organisation, and how to deliver local economic development in emerging city regions. In Liberia, the governance context or model is not straightforward; the Monrovia City Council or community groups seek to ride on the goodwill of an under-resourced NHA to guarantee a workable relocation package.

In most countries responsibility for human settlements has been mandated to “many ministries, agencies and commissions with unclear demarcation of responsibilities” (UN-Habitat 2014a, b). The Liberian NHA seeks to align the VGRRG with the work of over a dozen government agencies, identifying mandates in relocation as related to long-term development needs (Republic of Liberia 2013). Developing better and meaningful stakeholder relations require stronger and higher levels of political intervention.

Individuals, households and families are recognised as rights-holders and their basic human rights include rights to water, food, health, work, education and clean and healthy environment. Perforce they consider quality and adequacy of housing, basic services as well as social and cultural aspects. For example, families would prioritise that children be able to register and attend school as soon as possible and protected in particularly vulnerable situations. The legal and governance process during the relocation is intended to guarantee fairness, equal treatment and quality services, monitored by the communities.

The process has three dedicated mechanisms. The policy interventions committee within the NHA steers the process, identifying, evaluating and making recommendations for the relocation guidelines. Further, the VGRRG sets up two mechanisms that are vital to the implementation of voluntary relocation. A relocation steering committee is headed by the NHA, with some representation of communities meeting at regular intervals to coordinate ministries and oversee all stages of relocation. The relocation implementation group deals with day-to-day implementation, approves the relocation site and relocation arrangements, and guarantees the participative process and fair outcomes with an appeal process for the stages in voluntary relocation.

A key commitment of the VGRRG is alignment with the SDGs, especially poverty alleviation (goal 1), gender equality (goal 5), livelihoods (goal 8), sustainable communities (goal 11) and climate actions (goal 13). Viljoen (2012) reiterates the critical role of human rights in framing urban governance as part of processes to meet developmental aims and objectives. The end of decades-long conflict brought human rights to the fore in Liberia towards strengthening rule of law and the country’s institutions (Marong and Jalloh 2005; Young and Park 2009).

The VGRRG maps five categories of stakeholders in voluntary relocations: (1) Communities – affected or relocating communities, host communities and those left behind; (2) government departments and agencies with relevant mandates, including city councils; (3) civil society and development partners; (4) social protection workers and volunteers who aid the relocation; and (5) private sectors, developers, funders and professionals including paralegals. The space ceded by the state to non-state actors reflects the dilemma of social control and democratic freedoms (Deng 2018). Engaging with a range of local, national and global actors, NHA helped
formulate and design the guidelines, but they needed to be embedded at the institutional and grassroots level before implementation.

Resnick (2014) emphasises the “fitful” and fragmented nature of decentralised urban governance – arising from limited political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation across the continent. The competition between the needs of communities and the influence of third sector actors in the delivery of vital services are not easily filled by municipal governments. Lindell (2008) points out that urban governance has not been merely about who might carry power, but how this power is exercised (Allen 2004). Thus, power in many African cities is dispersed across stakeholder groups, and building bridges is necessary to deliver transformative change (Elander 2002; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Pierre (1999) reminds us that the language of urban governance is one of both contestation and reconciliation in formulating trust and recognition of common aims, particularly relevant for slum relocations that cause disruptions and instability, at least in the short term.

The VGRRG repeatedly flag gender-responsiveness, at all stages and levels of the enterprise. Emphasis upon community involvement does not guarantee gender balance, so women’s experiences and voices are critical (Beall 2010). Post-conflict Liberian women experience high levels of gender-based violence (Abramowitz and Moran 2012), but remain resilient, for example, grassroots women contributed to land rights policy (Kaba and Madan 2014). The guidelines are evidence-based and recognise that household and general population data can mask major differences if not disaggregated by gender or household type. Gender audits are keys to understand and respond to challenges women face. African women have contributed to developing tools and perspectives that can deliver better urban governance outcomes (Chant 2013), yet obstacles remain to realising equality for women (Global Land Tool Network 2019).

Monrovian women are not merely slum-dwellers, but practitioners, leaders, professionals and policy makers. The guidelines recognise that women must play a vital role in all steps such as selecting sites, influencing infrastructure design and monitor site construction/preparation. These will incorporate the lived experience, needs, voices and choices that women make for themselves, families and community. Women are also a diverse group, with gender identity often intersecting with class, race, nationality, poverty, ethnic group, displacement, disability, age, marital status or sexuality. Thus girls, young females, older women require attention. Gender mainstreaming the relocation process involves not only removing obstacles for meaningful participation of women and girls in the community. The SDGs represent an opportunity to further women’s role in building critical capacity to deliver on the promises of sustainable development, framed through the unique position of women to understand and help respond to the needs of their communities and ensure effective, inclusive and accountable governance (Alberti and Senese 2020).

The VGRRG notes that public institutions should make and carry out decisions through partnerships and dialogue, considering the concerns and needs of different actors. The gap between theory and practice in urban governance is a result of several factors (Obeng-Odoom 2017). These are due to inconsistent implementation;
problems resulting from replicating singular experiences; tensions arising from socio-historical and economic challenges; restrictive assumptions; and general incoherence. The VGRRG recognises that successful urban governance requires mediation between the practicalities of delivering on mutually agreed outcomes, such as voluntary relocation and the aspirations associated with commitments – such as gender responsiveness, improved land tenure security, livelihoods restoration and fair and adequate compensation, among others. For the VGRRG, good urban governance is both a pre-condition and a core aspiration to promote “free and prior informed clear consent of affected communities, the full assessment of community needs including safety, health, livelihoods, educational, social and cultural dimensions and the provision of choices to communities”. Community governance focuses on facilitating relocation choices to maximise potential success by providing forums and avenues to anticipate and deal with implications of relocation on communities.

Urban governance especially in relation to urban poor remains highly volatile in the context of African cities. In Liberia, no clear single model adequately captures the complexity of intergovernmental, community-based, and third sector stakeholder relationships involved in the delivery of a gargantuan relocation project. The NHA’s lead role in multi-stakeholder consultations through gender-responsive and human rights-based approaches is encouraging. The Monrovian slum-dwellers appear to be persuaded by the goodwill and positive messages from the NHA to engage fully, but are not so sure about the capacity, resources and political clout of the agency in delivering. For this requires not only inclusive urban governance in the coordination and rallying of different actors, but also sustainable interventions related to pro-poor gender-responsive land management and housing tenure security, livelihoods restoration, budgeting and finance, compensation and basic services.

21.4 Relocation Package: Land, Livelihoods and Services

The Community Relocation Package serves as an agreement between the government and community groups, as well as the legal framework on the rights and responsibilities of all concerned. Relocation involves negotiations between the affected communities, state and other stakeholders over housing adequacy and affordability, environmental safety, basic services, livelihoods and social networks. Land and property rights, including tenure status, need to be captured, protected, adjudicated and secured through robust land administration systems (Norwegian Refugee Council 2017).

Four main concerns raised by Monrovian slum-dwellers in the negotiations are addressed in the VGRRG. First, how to restore livelihoods in the new location through understanding localised patterns of employment and job opportunities. Second, how land rights or tenure security in the relocation settlement could be
strengthened to prevent further marginalisation and displacement. Third, how the relocation could be made viable and affordable by the willingness and ability of the state to subsidise or bear the cost of relocation and attract public–private partnerships. Finally, how to deliver adequate and fair compensation to those affected by relocation. In each case, urban governance emerges as vital to redress obstacles in a sustainable and fair manner, lack of which could be fatal for planned relocation efforts.

Relocation potentially alters existing social and economic networks, disrupting existing support systems as well as safety nets in times of hardship (Modi 2009). Where communities relocate, some are either forced to commute back to their former settlements for economic reasons, or have to abandon previous employment or income streams (Khatun 2009). Therefore, restoring livelihoods for the urban poor has been a priority within the VGRGG. Integrating communities in newer labour markets include providing support, such as access to finance, skills training, adequate transport and unemployment insurance. However, these require robust and coordinated responses by the state with the employers or regulators. At the least, relocating populations must be informed, consultative and involved in their own relocation planning and livelihood restoration (Kabra 2018).

The challenge of livelihoods in Liberia and elsewhere requires mapping the types of employment, skills and sectors, and financial vulnerability of urban poor to allow for a managed transition to new livelihoods with financial and other support (Nikuze et al. 2019). Workable relocation plans are contingent on substituting or recovering the range of relevant livelihoods: land-based, wage-based and enterprise-based livelihoods, each with distinct pattern of livelihood reconstruction. Potential for restoration may also depend on the nature of relocation sites and extent to which the government is willing to work with the private sector and communities to enhance economic opportunities, and limitations of budget in underwriting the relocating process. Perspectives from local economic development scholarship emphasises that improving livelihoods for Monrovia’s slum-dwellers depends not only upon skills and training but also aspects such as improved access to finance, infrastructure investment and business support needed to make these voluntary relocations viable (Sait 2019). While the VGRGG flags livelihoods with many partners working in the informal economy, there is no budget or partnership with the private or financial sector to secure livelihoods.

Apart from affordable housing, land tenure issues were seen as critical to delivering economically viable and sustainable relocation processes. Voluntary relocation, unlike forced displacement, implies the exchange of existing land rights onto new arrangements. Land governance is vital for the success of relocations and avoidance of disputes (USAID 2016), with local government playing a vital role in identifying land for relocation through land-use plans and shelter strategies. Community role in selecting the land through assessing the location, size, physical characteristics and suitability of the land for relocation, looking out for flood risk or other hazards, as well as potential rezoning and housing quality standards is vital. Land is a complex
issue in Liberia, as in other African countries, and often the basis for conflict and exploitation, for example, between relocating and host, pre-existing or neighbouring communities. Prominent forms of land tenure arrangements include private land rights, customary land rights, Islamic and hybrid land rights as represented by Tribal Certificates (TCs) and public land rights held in “concession agreements”. Further, Monrovia slum tenure patterns are deeply affected by political, social and religious practices (USAID 2018; Sait and Lim 2006).

Although Liberia’s 1974 Registered Land Law formalised land registration, less than 20% of the country’s land is privately titled and registered (Republic of Liberia 2012) with widespread boundary disputes (World Bank 2008), resulting in dysfunctional land markets and poor tenure security (UN-Habitat 2014a, b). This disproportionately impacts women, traditional communities and other vulnerable groups with lesser access to, use, control, security and overall rights to land, compared to men. Therefore, land rights of these groups must be improved or at least protected. Further, voluntary relocation requires the availability of suitable public land or ability for compulsory purchase which is critical for the viability of the Monrovian relocation. The existence of informal, traditional, customary, group and collective rights, including secondary rights, lease, rental arrangements that are significant for women, minorities and other vulnerable groups to gain tenure security in addition to formal land ownership. Though specific land for the new location has not been officially declared, NHA remains confident that the state will find appropriate land and clarify land rights.

Proposed relocation is contingent upon technical, economic, and financial feasibility, with the implementation of the relocation depending upon projected actual costs for planning and execution, as well as resources required such as land and services (International Financial Cooperation 2002). The assumption of the VGRPP that the Government of Liberia sponsors the relocation efforts renders them responsible for assessing cost-effectiveness, associated costs be it powerlines or new transport connections, and identifying newer forms of funding. Additional costs of relocation include administration, project management, training, communications, dispute resolution and monitoring. While a variety of funding models have been used (UN-Habitat 2009) in Liberia, the potential of foreign funding and investment has been under-analysed, with government funding used to leverage external donor funding. The VGRRP only makes a start. Blended finance, affordable loans, subsidies, microfinance and community savings need to be pursued, but funding arrangements have not yet advanced.

An obvious challenge to the relocation proposals is the repayment capacity and finance risks in the budgeting process. A UN-Habitat review (2014a, b) of financing slum upgrading programmes demonstrates various levels of community contributions: low-interest microfinance loans with returns that are reinvested back into local community projects (Indonesia); in-kind contributions where some community members may work on the project delivery, reducing overall costs (Colombia); service charges that are levied over a period of time against a particular project (India); government-backed mortgages and blended finance to securitise community involvement (Morocco); and funding operational costs with some capital costs,
reducing state-funded burdens (Tanzania). In Liberia, relocating communities may have to take responsibility for particular services, given the limitations of external relocation funding without any form of security, and uncertain government capacity.

Relocations impact individuals, households and communities physically, economically, directly and indirectly. In principle, all affected persons should be compensated fully and fairly for losses, at market rates under the law (International Financial Cooperation 2002). Yet, in the case of large-scale voluntary relocations, limited budget and legal restrictions can limit permissible claims. The VGRRG signposts best practices through reference to legal expectations, but can work only if there is a sufficient relocation budget. The guidelines envisage that compensation for physical displacement needs to be recorded by the relocation implementation group, and responsiveness to the needs of the urban poor is vital owing their reduced resilience to economic shocks, to survive the relocation process.

Compensation is recognised by the guidelines to extend to commercial property owners, renters, vendors, and squatters. Yet, proper valuation and compensation to support the urban poor is contingent on professional capacities as well as understanding the needs of the communities facing hardship during relocation. The use of Community Needs Assessment to create an inventory of property and existing livelihoods and services to estimate potential claims for compensation for affected persons can provide a mechanism for compensation but should be settled before relocation begins, so that all stakeholders are aware of all available economic measures, including compensation for land acquisition, affected assets and resettlement. Land governance implies that clear criteria and process for compensation will be implemented fairly and consistently, with the engagement of communities (Roquet et al. 2017), but expectations must be tempered with the reality that land administration of Liberia is basic and not always transparent.

The slum-dwellers of Monrovia do not yet have answers to their concerns which does not depend upon merely the existence of budget or political support, but an urban governance framework capable of delivering. As the VGRRG emphasise, voluntary relocation is first and foremost dependent on the involvement and consent of communities themselves, as well as strategic partnership with other actors, stakeholders and support groups. It is inconceivable the government or the affected community could carry out relocation unilaterally. In Monrovia, the poor slum communities are generally weakened through exposure to natural disasters, conflict, health epidemics and economic stress, while government is also fragile and overburdened with numerous responsibilities.

Voluntary relocation is promoted on the hope that, while the process and outcome may be daunting, existing deficiencies could somehow be redressed during the relocation process though goodwill and partnerships. VGRRG is workable only if underpinned by strong urban governance principles and appropriate responses to seemingly insurmountable challenges. By outlining the principles and procedures for good governance and the mechanisms for delivery, the VGRRG focuses on human rights and gender-responsiveness as practical ideals. For the Monrovian slum-dwellers, now facing the prospect of a Covid-19 epidemic, the existence of a fit for purpose pro-poor gender- and age-responsive urban governance framework
offers some reassurance that their indomitable faith, resilience and climate action can be rewarded.

21.5 Conclusions

The VGRRG proposals for planned slum relocations in Monrovia test assumptions about urban governance in a pro-poor, gendered, community led and climate change context. The VGRRG acknowledge that urban governance cannot remain a unidimensional bystander where relocation requires multifaceted and multi-stakeholder intervention. We have arrived at the age of “planetary urbanization”, a worldwide condition in which political economy, infrastructure and landscapes are all integrated into the urban fabric (Brenner and Schmid 2017). These are compounded by increased expectations of governance capacity, reflexivity and accountability (Rhodes 1997; Healey 2006). As Myers (2011) points out, the consensus that African cities need good governance necessitates inclusion of marginalised and underrepresented stakeholder groups, who are not currently part of policy discourse. Monrovian slum-dwellers, informal workers and grassroots communities do not enjoy equal rights to the city, and struggle to get heard when relocations are forced or even planned (Milbert 2010).

While the guidelines appear to be a breakthrough in shared principles and co-authorship between communities and the state, the gap between discourse and reality continues. Pierre’s (1999) four models of urban governance understate the connections and tensions that characterise contemporary debates on urban governance in African cities. Thus, managerial approaches pledge professionalism; corporatism conjures “buy-in” from stakeholders; and pro-growth makes economic development paramount, while welfarism seeks to redistribute wealth and improve public services. Monovian urban poor seek synergies between creating social safety nets and improving municipal investments alongside private sector confidence and better employment opportunities. All governance strategies converge on multi-scalar, multi-stakeholder processes and dialogue, to restore confidence in society and rebuild relationships among the private sector and communities (Guha-Khasnobis et al. 2006; MacSweeney 2008). VGRRG pursues adequate governance systems and local legitimacy to support fragile conflict-ridden or disaster hit communities, where top-down interventions fail to meet their needs (Ogbaharya 2008; Pugh et al. 2008). In post-conflict, post-disaster societies like Monrovia demand of unequal economic development require greater attention to tackle inadequate natural resource management, socio-economic and environmental insecurities, and inequalities (Brown and Kristiansen 2008). Thus, the complex demands of secure land rights, livelihood restoration, basic services involve structural changes and institutional responsiveness.

A fit for purpose land administration is an essential part of good urban governance (Global Land Tool Network 2018; 41, Chigbu 2011). VGGRG promotes land governance by setting out clear criteria and processes, with the engagement of
communities to discuss their expectations and concerns (Roquet et al. 2017). However, land administration in Liberia is basic and still evolving. Liberia’s recently reformed land rights policy, through its Land Rights Act 2016, allows for Customary Land Development Associations, recognising roles for chiefs, elders, youth and women leaders. The VGRRG also highlights the role of other tools such as needs assessments and enumeration exercises in documenting the continuum of land rights.

The VGGRG are a useful start for initiating genuine collaborations, honest characterisations and practical responses in Monrovia, especially in messaging gender-responsive and human rights approaches. Dealing with contemporary urban change is not merely about generating urban governance ambiance that captures aspirations of all, but also effective participative mechanisms through which expectations and risks can be managed. The quest for urban governance can take various forms but will rest on five core values of responsiveness, effectiveness, procedural justice, resilience and counterbalance. Whether global standards and entry points will translate into credible local practices remains debated (Björkdahl and Somun-Krupalija 2020). For Monrovian slum-dwellers the relocation process can only succeed where embedded within strong, community-driven, gender-responsive urban governance.

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