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By Ariadne Baskin (https://www.urbanafrica.net/?taxonomy_author=ariadne-baskin) on 27 March 2017 Housing (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/theme/built-environment/housing/>), Slums (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/theme/built-environment/slums/>), Urban Development (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/theme/built-environment/urban-development/>) | Monrovia (<https://www.urbanafrica.net/region/liberia/monrovia/>)



Home to a community of roughly 75,000 people, West Point is Liberia's largest urban slum. The settlement is situated at the heart of downtown Monrovia on a man-made sand peninsula between the Mesurado River and Atlantic Ocean. With a high-water table of just 0.6 meters below the sand, the settlement is highly vulnerable to sea level rise and related coastal hazards, notably erosion, and inundation.

The first community profiling and mapping of West Point undertaken in May to June 2015 by Liberia's YMCA in collaboration with Shack/Slumdweller International, found sea erosion and insecurity as the settlement's "major threat," according to an unpublished report from the YMCA. Up to 80 percent of respondents in a **2012 survey** (<https://lavotest.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/security-environment-and-opportunities-in-west-point-2012-pdf-1-69-mb.pdf>) declared that "erosion affects their household."

Residents have built their homes up to the water's edge, making homes vulnerable to tides, abrasive currents and storm surges. When the high tides and sea surges converge during the rainy season (May to November), there is near total flooding of the settlement.

During flooding periods, shelters along Kru beach are completely inundated and thousands of residents are wholly displaced. This has become so bad that the only access road into the settlement has been destroyed by erosion.

When, “the sea rises and the tide comes it could take you five minutes to swim out to where your home was,” says West Point community leader, Abraham Bropieh.

Once the tide submerges, residents mark a spot on the beach and rebuild. Displacement is cyclical in West Point. With each high tide and converging sea surge, the abrasive currents and high-energy waves erode more of the shoreline. After each event there is less room to rebuild, resulting in immense densities, smaller lots and new homes at risk.

Along with the destruction of homes, sea level rise and flooding also impacts residents’ ability to obtain freshwater and sanitation.

Climate change is expected to exaggerate the frequency and effects of sea level rise and its associated hazards in coming years.

In Monrovia, coastal erosion and flooding is expected to get worse with an estimated coastal retreat of up to 20 metres yearly (UNDP 2010, 11 (<http://adaptation-undp.org/resources/prodocs/undp-liberia-project-document-april-2010>)). The Liberian Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) projects that a 1-metre sea level rise would completely inundate around 1/6th of land in the country’s coastal zone (Wiles 2007, 14). Estimates place over 1.8 million people at immediate risk (UNDP 2010,11).

Clearly, West Point is in a dangerous position. As the Mayor of Monrovia, Clara Doe Mvogo, bluntly put it, the “sea will claim its own; West Point will be wiped off the map.”

(<https://www.urbanafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/WP-2.png>)

The outside of West Point resident Thomas Saah’s house faces the Atlantic. Picture taken during low tide. Ariadne Baskin

The resettlement debate

With projected sea level rise set to make matters worse for West Point’s residents, the settlement’s future is under debate.

As part of the process of reconstruction and development that began in Liberia after it emerged from over a decade of civil wars, the government has tried to no avail to relocate West Point to peripheral suburbs. However, the lack of livelihood opportunities in these isolated areas saw resettled households simply returning to West Point.

Relocation has been the favoured government response to informal settlements during the post-war reconstruction period. As Cities Alliance notes (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjS1OSL3unSAhWijSAKHVVoBgcQFggbMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.citiesalliance.org%2Fsites%2Fcitiesalliance.org%2Ffiles%2FAR09_FullText_0.pdf&usg=AFQjCNG66qgWCKZHfuz_M0zvNKX), "In Monrovia, a belief that the "slum problem" can be solved only by relocating slum dwellers to peri-urban areas or the rural land of the provinces has been a widespread, albeit unsubstantiated, tenet of government at all levels."

Today, government reasoning is that the pressing threat of sea-level rise and objective limits of expansion provide the state with no choice but to intervene and continue with its resettlement ambitions. This signals a policy shift from resettling West Point because of a "slum problem," towards resettlement as an "anticipatory or preventative" measure.

Three issues underline the government's outlook: Firstly, space constraints due to the dense nature of West Point make it unfeasible to adapt in-situ without resettling large numbers of people. Secondly, the financial costs of protecting the area against the 'threat of the sea' through breakwater systems or groynes is not considered feasible in the context where 75 percent of the city lives informally. Finally, there is an acknowledgement that the present 'threat of the sea' will be accentuated by climate change, further undermining any in-situ development in the future. The public messaging surrounding the resettlement is that it is "not worth investing," as there is, "no solution to stop the sea," as Robert Bestman, assistant minister of urban affairs explained in an interview.

Most residents are ardently against peripheral resettlement and would prefer government to upgrade the settlement in-situ. This would clearly require adaptation measures to protect the shoreline but what these measures would entail still remains unclear. However as in all communities, there is diversity of opinion. A government petition was signed by **1,779 families** (http://emansion.gov.lr/2press.php?news_id=3645&related=7&pg=sp) who have agreed to resettle voluntarily as 'the threat of the sea' outweighs the benefits of living in West Point.

Regardless of the risk of living in an area under 'threat of the sea' and in the face of uncertainty about the government's plans, geographical displacement is viewed by most residents as a greater risk because of the potential loss of livelihoods. While residents are very aware of the sea, they are also acutely aware that being resettled entails a multitude of risks including losses in social, economic and cultural assets.

The shifting displacement-resettlement debate in West Point cannot be simply presented as one in which it is government versus slum dwellers. It is possible for resettlement to take place alongside in-situ upgrading. Slum dwellers have a right to the city and to decide on options for in-situ upgrading as well as voluntary resettlement. Resettlement cannot be approached as simply a preventative measure, but rather as a larger more complex issue of spatial geography, social cohesion and the collocation of employment and housing opportunities.

Ariadne Baskin is a recent LSE graduate and is currently living in Nairobi working with UN Environment. Her interests are in international urban development and environmental planning

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Unpublished Report.

Main photo: West Point's Kru Beach, at low tide, with remnants of shacks taken by the sea. Ariadne Baskin.

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