

## SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



### Recap of 7/14/21 conversation with Damla Kuru

Post-disaster Relocation in the Face of Rising Seas:  
The Florida Keys after Hurricane Irma

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

Last week, we spent a fascinating hour with Ömür Damla Kuru, one of this year's ASPA Founders Fellows and a Ph.D. candidate in the Public Affairs Program at Florida International University in Miami. Damla told us about a research project she conducted by means of an NSF Natural Hazards Center Quick Response Grant. Hurricane Irma (2017) was the project catalyst. Damla began with a brief [slide summary](#) to set the stage. (For more, see her 2018 report at <https://hazards.colorado.edu/quick-response-report/relocation-repopulation-and-rising-seas>.)

This research addresses a gap by examining the link between disaster recovery and sea level rise and by analyzing relocation and repopulation decisions of residents. Damla's interests cut across environmental policymaking, local response to sea level rise, emergency management, post-disaster recovery, and resilient development. We may be hearing from this scholar in the future, as our conversation demonstrated that she bridges the divide between research and practice with ease.

Make sure to view the summary slides. You will find, as we did last week, that the questions and findings bring up commonalities with other kinds of disasters as

well, increasing awareness of some gargantuan challenges that are facing people everywhere. Damla found that there was an optimal time to focus on sea level rise: the period between recovery and return to “normal.” There’s a lot of complexity. She characterizes the response thus far as “slow and kind of behind” and told us that her research focus is likely to expand to include social justice issues that are being laid bare in the course of disasters related to sea level rise.

There was mainly observation, not too much judgment, in the room the other night, perhaps because of the thorny issues presented by the recent Surfside condominium building. The discussion moved among the impacts of sea level rise in Monroe County, Florida, and:

- The tension between a condo board’s long-term obligation to maintain adequate financial reserves and a condo owner’s short-term view of personal finance;
- Arguments in a Rhode Island community about whether or not to build stone wall barriers to stop beach erosion near homes;
- Costs related to relocating, whether individual resident or town;
- The National Flood Insurance Program’s encouragement to stay put, and the necessity of addressing this on a national level;
- The interaction of building codes and human nature, along the coasts as well as wildland urban interfaces (where human settlements are at greater risk of catastrophic wildfire);
- An epidemiologist’s account of basic systems failures in the Virgin Islands after Hurricanes Irma and Maria (Where to go after evacuation! How to have safe drinking water! No fresh food!). First, she first slept on the basement floor of a hospital that wasn’t destroyed. After that, she lived for months on a cruise ship anchored offshore.
- The collective action problem of fresh water waste and lack of compensation for Pakistani people who suffer loss due to the flooding of the Indus River (one of the world’s largest river deltas).

We heard some good news:

- There is the realization that mangroves hold water in marshes – people can be financially supported to grow more of them;
- St. John, Virgin Islands residents are moving off the beaches and into the hills and raising and covering their cisterns to increase the likelihood of having fresh water after huge hurricanes;
- The California Coastal Commission suggested that the town of Del Mar, California consider including “retreat” in its response plan for dealing with cliff erosion that is threatening homes and train tracks;
- The Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact (The Compact), a partnership between Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Palm Beach Counties, has worked collaboratively for over a decade to reduce regional

greenhouse gas emissions, implement adaptation strategies, and build climate resilience across the region.

My realization during this session was that, although it would be all too easy to wring our hands, as public service leaders we really can't have that as our default position. My non-exhaustive take on leadership practices that will be especially useful in the future includes 1-systems thinking, 2-fostering inclusive, non-combative conversation (generating light, not heat) among affected parties and constructive experts, and 3-supporting the kind of partnering that The Compact intends.

### **Participant affiliations**

Architect of the Capitol  
ASPA Founder's Fellow 2021  
ASPA National Capital Area Chapter  
Charlestown, RI Town Council, Retired  
Department of Education, Retired  
Department of Energy  
Department of Health and Human Services  
Florida International University  
Yonsei University

Participants joined from Richland, WA, Philadelphia, PA, Providence, RI, Colorado Springs, CO, Wonju, South Korea, and the DC Metro Area.

There were interesting overlaps in participant knowledge and experience. Each time, we discover commonalities and warm up the space by beginning with a round of introductions. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,  
Kitty Wooley

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