



Uninhabitable futures? Navigating the exploitation of climate disasters and 'uninhabitability': *insights from Barbuda post hurricane Irma*

ARIADNA ANISIMOV
RESEARCH FELLOW, UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP
ARIADNA.ANISIMOV@UANTWERPEN.BE

Adaptation Futures
NZ October 13 2025

Uninhabitability

Depict a place where an individual and/or communities can no longer live due to climate driven changes

- What determines a place becoming uninhabitable under climate change?



Current research on uninhabitability

► Adaptation Limits & Thresholds

IPCC AR6

Low-lying coasts & small islands at risk from sea-level rise

► Beyond Biophysical Limits

Shaped by values, choices, lived experiences, & power relations

► Value-Based Approaches

Challenge environmental determinism

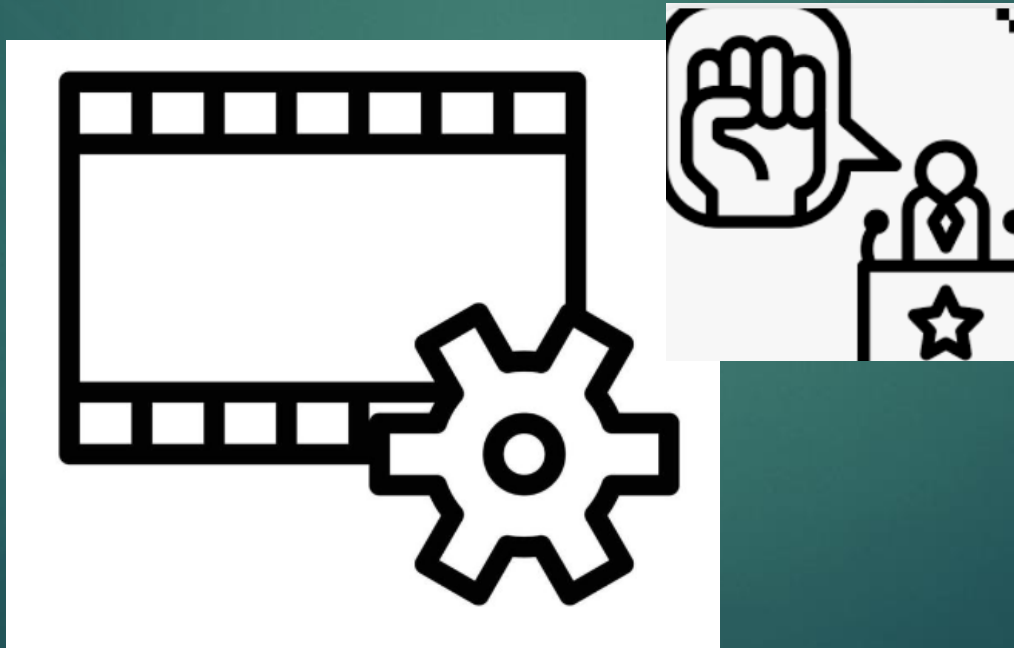
► Mobility as Adaptation

Example: *HABITABLE* project

HABITABLE
Linking Climate Change, Habitability
and Social Tipping Points:
Scenarios for Climate Migration

Power in Defining Adaptation & Uninhabitability

- ▶ **Epistemic power:** whose knowledge counts in decision-making
 - Scientific vs. local vs. Indigenous vs. lived experience
- ▶ **Normative power:** who decides what is *right*, *acceptable*, or *desirable* adaptation
 - Shapes values, priorities, and “acceptable losses”



Decolonizing Adaptation Knowledge

Challenges **Western control over what counts as “valid” knowledge**

- ▶  Questions **technocratic fixes** (indices, thresholds)
- ▶  Exposes **power, colonial histories, and structural vulnerability**
- ▶  Centers **Indigenous knowledge and relational worldviews**
- ▶  Enables **self-determined futures — not imposed adaptation**

Declaring places uninhabitable

Barbuda: A Caribbean paradise lost



- *People live here*
- *Displacement isn't just a statistic*
- *Local knowledge matters*

has real human consequences

Barbuda (Caribbean)



- 90km²
- population 1600
- low-lying coastal areas, coral reefs, mangrove wetlands, salt ponds and lagoons
- Codrington – settlement concentration
- Lagoon and bird sanctuary – Ramsar Convention

Governance and colonial history

- **1981:** Antigua & Barbuda independence; Barbuda looped into twin-island nation.
- **Barbuda Council (1976):** Local governance under Barbuda Local Government Act.
- **Central Government:** Based in Antigua; Barbuda represented in Parliament.



Land relations

- **Symbiotic relationship between people, nature and shared land**
- Rooted in the fight against colonialism and slavery

Barbuda Land Act in 2007 – communal land system in local legislation

► Article 6.1,

“The Council, with the approval and on the advice of Cabinet and having obtained the **consent of a majority of the people of Barbuda, may grant leases of land for major developments.**”

Hurricane Irma 2017 and aftermath

► September 6th, 2017



Mandatory evacuation and the uninhabitable discourse

September 6th 2017, the Prime Minister stated on radio that, “In fact, I am of the view, that as it stands now, **Barbuda is barely habitable**” (q95 News, 2017).

- *Proclamation that the island was 95% destroyed and was therefore **uninhabitable***

Mandatory evacuation of
all inhabitants ordered
By the central government

Criticisms: no official evaluation of the damage;
no information on when people could return

UNFPA responds as entire population of Barbuda evacuated following Hurricane Irma



Instrumentalizing Uninhabitable for an agenda

Declaring an area “uninhabitable” can be a political tool for dispossession

- **Breaking up the Barbuda commons** towards individual privatized property
- **Land grabs** - influx of international investors with their ‘playbook’
 - Peace Love Happiness Ltd.
 - Paradise Found Ltd.
 - Discover Land Ltd.
 - And more...
- New development plan for **luxury real estate / airport**
- **Label habitability-related projects as “climate resilient development”**

On the island with Barbudan land defenders



Site 1. Airport

Construction of an international airport (6000ft + 1000ft runway)

► Issues:

- No application with the Barbudan Council
- Absence of public consultation
- No EIA
- Water challenges



Site 2. Coco point

Newly built residences at Barbuda Ocean Club

- Introduction of fencing and private beaches + no grey water/ sewage plans



Site 3. Palmetto Point

Golf course and high-end residences

- Destruction of mangroves and wetland including Frigate Bird Sanctuary
- Toxins



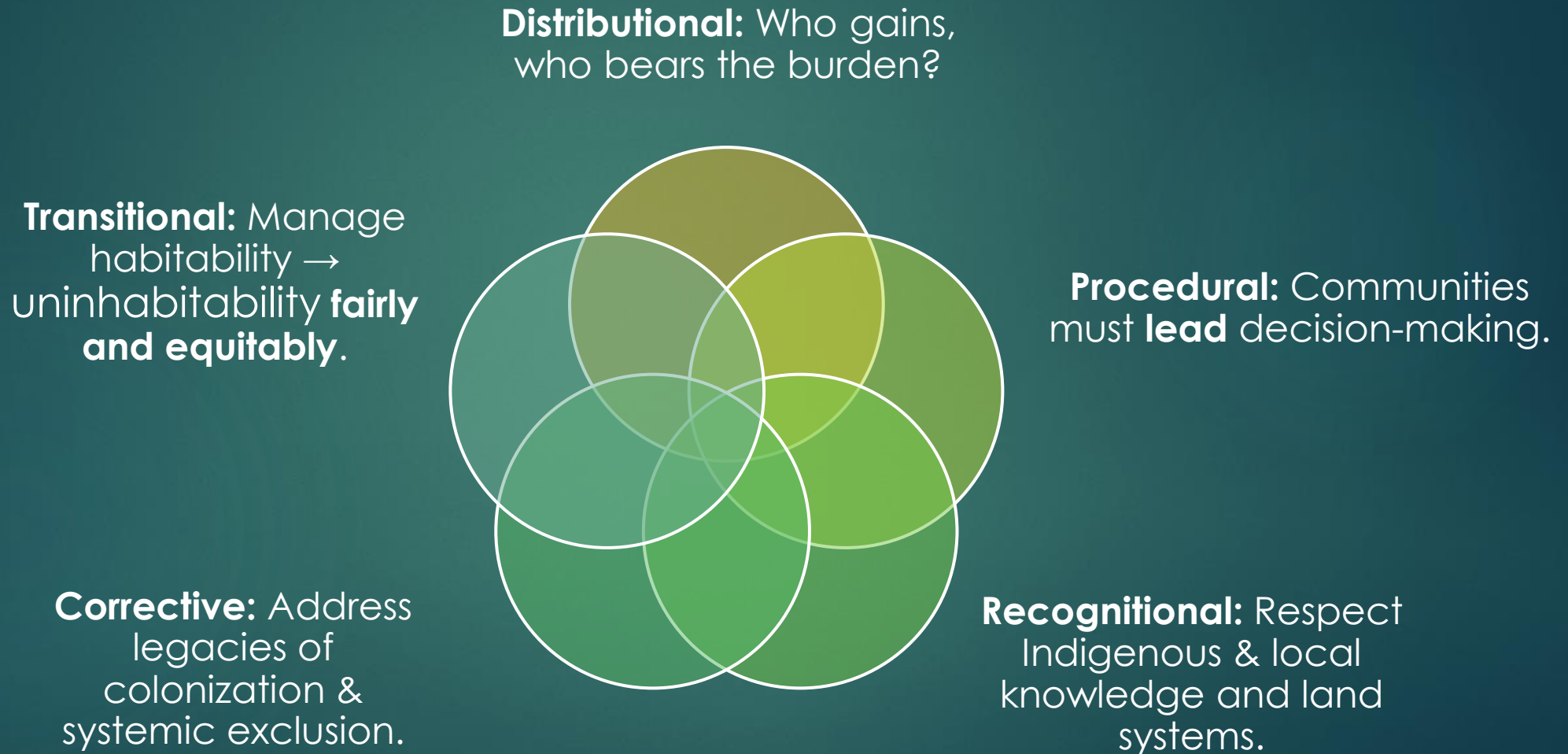
Habitability and uninhabitability for whom?

Concepts & definitions
shape **policy & political
action.**

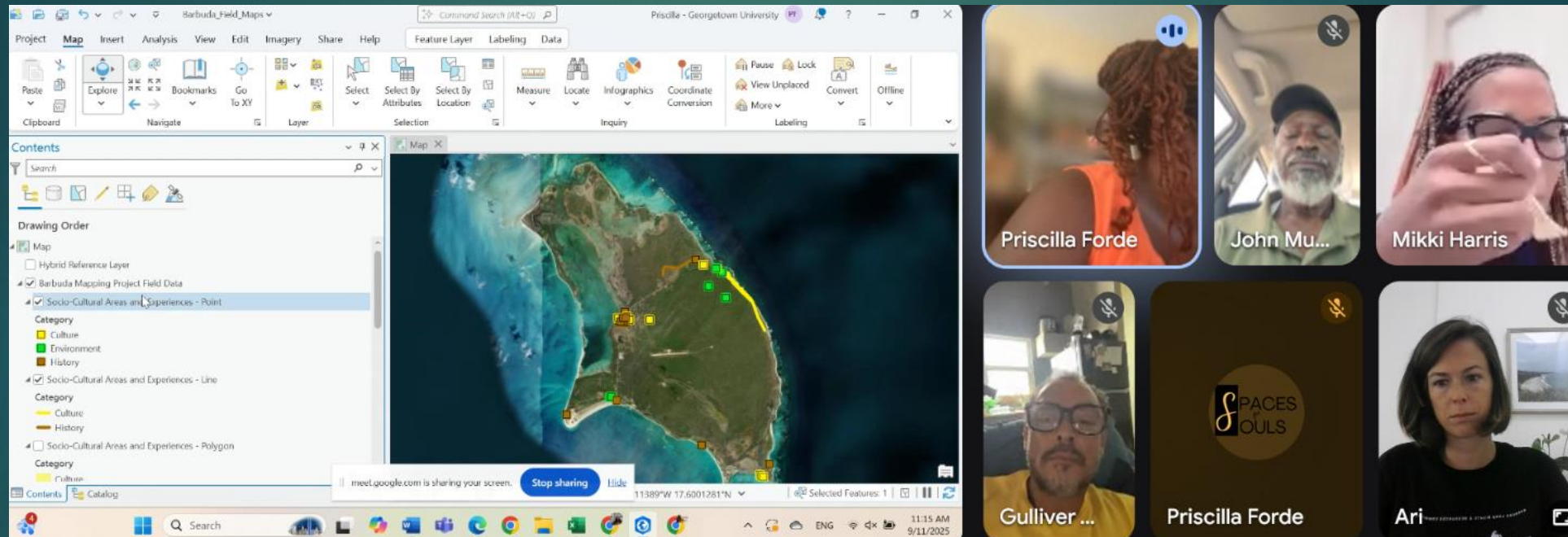
**Temporality &
reversibility** matter:
can communities
return?

Narratives of
uninhabitability **define
adaptation futures.**

Advancing a justice-centered approach to climate uninhabitability



Counter-cartography: mapping social values



Adaptation futures for Barbuda by Barbudans

Local leaders & partners



John Mussington
Barbuda Council



Gulliver Johnson
Barubda Land Rights and
Resources Committee

Social Cartography



Priscilla Forde
Spaces for Souls

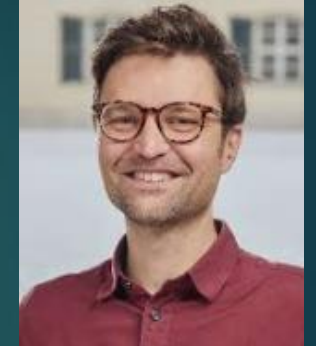


Prof. Mikki Harris
Morehouse College

Equity & justice work



Teresa M.
Deubelli-Hwang
Env. Agency Austria



Dr. Thomas
Schinko, IIASA



Dr. Carol Farbotko

Thank you

Climate Mobility Justice, the Right to Stay, and the Problem with Mobility Regimes

by Carol Farbotko, Ingrid Boas,
Taukiei Kitara, Ariadna Anisimov

