

Displaced: The Human Cost of Development and Resettlement

Edgar Graham Book Prize 2012 - Acceptance speech by Chris McDowell

I'm extremely sorry and disappointed that I can't be here to make this presentation and accept the award along with Olivia. Ironically, it is due to my own *human cost of resettlement*. I'm in hospital recovering from surgery to repair damage that I suffered during my research in Cambodia among a group of people who were being relocated as a consequence of the widening of a highway on the Vietnam border.

One reviewer of *Displaced* was kind enough to observe that the power of the testimonies lay in their potential to influence policy - or at least to sufficiently move policy makers into accepting that changes are necessary.

This in itself is a large topic. What kind of evidence and scientific advice could persuade law makers and politicians that a problem exists at all; and that it is a problem for which they bear some responsibility; and moreover, is a problem that can be solved. Despite preparing my own Impact Case Study for the REF, and reading many others produced by my colleagues at City University, I am still no nearer to understanding this elusive and magical process where research can claim a positive influence on society.

The problem of development-created involuntary resettlement is essentially that people who find themselves in the way of infrastructure schemes, both public and commercial (and indeed the line between the two is increasingly blurred), are - social science and economic evidence suggest - further impoverished and politically marginalised as a result of their resettlement.

Today, the majority of the kind of resettlement that concerns the book takes place in China and India, with other fast industrialising countries accounting for an increasing proportion of that global resettlement. It affects people who tend to be rural (though this is rapidly changing), they tend to live in remote areas (often mountainous), speak a different language from the majority and dominant population, and often exist on the periphery of the formal economy.

By and large the people who occupy land that is targeted for development – for roads, mines, dams and so on – are poor, and they are made poorer as a result of losing land and other assets.

The legal rights they have over their land and property is weak, and the possibility of meaningful resistance to their displacement, as Anthony Oliver-Smith has recently written, is remote. Opponents of HS2 in the Chilterns have mustered an army of barristers to oppose compulsory purchase, indeed a number of the properties scheduled for demolition, are the weekend retreats of London lawyers.

Effective recourse to law for subsistence farmers in India, despite the efforts of civil society, is not impossible but it is rare. The majority of rural land in China is owned by the state and the limits of legal remedies against state-enforced land use change can be observed daily in rural unrest led by landless Chinese farmers angered at the unfairness of decision making and pernicious corruption. Those farmers lash out at local mayors but would want to direct their dissatisfaction at Beijing.

So the evidence tells us that involuntary resettlement is a problem because it is essentially weak citizens losing out in a direct confrontation with powerful states, and in particular where governments line up with commercial interests to deliver short term development benefits measured only in GDP.

But involuntary resettlement arising out of development processes is not an entirely neglected problem. Over the past thirty years or so various international institutions have recognised the counter-development impacts of resettlement, and they have sought remedies through strengthening the legal and policy framework within which land acquisition and resettlement take place.

Landmarks have included the pioneering work of the World Bank under Michael Cernea in the 1980s and 1990s which led to the safeguard policies that set new international standards for resettlement, and imposed positive conditionalities on Bank lenders. And determined officials in other major International Financing Institutions, such as Ruwani Jayawardene in the Asian Development Bank, who champion the cause of resettlement despite institutional resistance.

The UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement recognises development as a potential cause of arbitrary displacement and it urges governments to acknowledge their obligations to avoid unnecessary resettlement and to protect those displaced when land acquisition is justifiable. The African Union Kampala Convention on the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons takes up the same theme though in a diluted form.

And at the national level, governments in Asia and South America have in the past decade or so adopted new resettlement laws. The Chinese have compensated for historical displacement-related losses stretching back over many decades. And the Australian Government has produced its own and rather bold statement on where it thinks development lenders' responsibilities lie.

Though often misguided, the burgeoning academic writings and the Framework Convention diplomacy on the human impacts of projected climate change, have opened up new discussions on environmental migration and protective resettlement.

Despite these encouraging developments the governance of development-created involuntary resettlement remains weak and fractured at both the international, regional and national levels. The development banks have retreated from their role in setting international standards on resettlement. The UN Guiding Principles remain only non-binding guidance. Governments repeatedly fail to enact their own resettlement laws, and in exercising their powers of eminent domain the land and property rights of minority citizens are ignored. The use of force in expropriation is commonplace.

It's hard to see from where any new governance initiatives might come to improve the protection of those who by happenstance find themselves in the way of progress.

Pressurising western governments is unlikely to yield results as they - and our own government is no exception - regard decisions about land and population as being firmly in the domain of developing states domestic sovereignty and therefore not a matter for aid or trade negotiations. Multilateral channels also appear to be furred up and sclerotic.

So, for those of us engaged in applied research the lack of active policy making around land acquisition and resettlement opens very few opportunities to be persuasive.

What we can do however, and this is what Olivia and I have sought to do in *Displaced*, is to keep telling the human story in as much of its complexity as we can. To reveal and examine the impacts of the profound changes that resettlement brings at the level of the individual, within families, between genders and across societies both immediately and through generations.

The book owes a debt of gratitude of Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder's path breaking longitudinal study of the Kariba Dam resettlement and we will be honoured if the two studies are read alongside one another.

If there is one direct policy recommendation in the book, then it is an ambitious one, that involuntary resettlement in the development process should give way to resettlement-with-consent as the basis for development decision-making.

Once again I am sorry I was not able to be here this evening and I would like to thank SOAS and the panel of judges for awarding our book the Edgar Graham Prize.

Christopher McDowell