

Displaced: The Human Cost of Development and Resettlement

Edgar Graham Book Prize 2012 - Acceptance speech by Olivia Bennett

Chris and I would like to say how grateful we are to the judges of The Edgar Graham Book Prize, and in particular to Professor Naila Kabeer who chaired the panel, to Professor Henry Bernstein, who is representing the judges this evening, Professor Richard Black, and also to Dr Laura Hammond, Head of the Department of Development Studies for organising this event. I'd also like to thank everyone for coming and celebrating this award with us – we're extremely pleased, not least because it raises the profile of the book – and should gain it a wider readership, and so amplify the voices of the displaced within it.....

And also because it is, among other things, an endorsement of the use of oral testimony.

I've been asked outline a bit about this methodology. I can't go into much detail in 10 minutes but I think it's important to explain that the collection of the interviews was conceived primarily as a communication project rather than pure research.

The people whose experiences informed our book - our 'data set' - wanted to give their perspective on resettlement: what it had meant to them, their families and communities. They were not so much the subjects of a research assignment but rather participants in an information project, which aimed to give voice to people who had found themselves the unwilling experts in the complex effects of displacement – through first-hand experience.

While the project reflected a desire of people to speak out, and to represent themselves - to be the ones who framed questions as well as answered them, it also aimed to complement more academic or quantitative research on displacement by gathering and disseminating material which is unapologetically qualitative, and which offers insights, perceptions, emotion, and anecdote as well as more factual information.

We hoped that these first-hand experiences would provide new insights on development-induced displacement – and in particular shed more light on the less visible and quantifiable aspects, especially the social and cultural impoverishment that is so often a feature of post-resettlement existence – people speak of a life less rich, a life 'without colour' - and which hinders people's ability to adapt to or prosper in their new environments.

For those of you who have not yet read the book it draws on six interview collections with communities in Africa and Asia, in which the displaced acted as interviewers as well as narrators. We hear from people resettled more than 30 years ago, to those displaced far more recently. The causes range from dams to coalmining and conservation projects.

One of the differences distinguishing this collection of interviews from pure research is the emphasis on process. Working in partnership with a locally based organization, usually over several years, there was a commitment to involve local people at all stages. Training was provided in many aspects including interviewing skills, selecting narrators, and the pitfalls of being an "insider" interviewer, such as assuming particular kinds of knowledge.

We also supported the communities to use their interview material to raise awareness and understanding of their concerns and situation, locally and nationally.

So most interviewers had no prior experience of open-ended interviewing, and few had university-level education. What they did have was knowledge and understanding of the communities concerned. In most cases, interviewers were themselves displaced. If they were NGO fieldworkers, they had lived and worked with the displaced long-term, and 'spoke the language' of the narrators in every sense: interviews were undertaken in 15 local and national languages.

Using professional researchers might have achieved a higher level of 'quality control' - inevitably, not all trainees proved to be gifted interviewers and each collection contained some disappointing transcripts.... Yet given the circumstances in which these projects were undertaken - when people were anxious, suspicious - often demoralised by the process of displacement - trust and rapport between interviewer and narrator was vital.

The book goes into more detail about some of the challenges of this approach, including ethics, power relationships, translation issues. For example, unable to speak the multiplicity of languages, we had to work with English transcripts and could not use the recordings to understand better inflection, nuance, pace, or mood of the speaker (the O Hs among you would find this a significant limitation).

Enough of process; what about the products?

Over time, we generated a collection of 300 personal narratives. 200 were translated into English and every one of these was read many times and informed our book. Obviously it would be hard to gather enough personal accounts to match the huge samples of quantitative research, but we believe the wealth of material allows one to abstract dominant themes and concerns.

Among the strengths of this collection I would like to mention briefly:

How these interviews reveal the centrality and complexity of non-material factors in displacement: for example the disruption to the complex web of social roles and relationships and kinship networks which are so crucial to the survival of those living on the margins - economically, ethnically, geographically, politically etc - as the vast majority of the displaced were. People vividly describe how these relationships and support networks were tested, fragmented, distorted and sometimes unravelled beyond repair by forced relocation.

The weakening of bonds was not all negative: the social upheaval opened up some new opportunities, particularly for those whose societies were isolated and highly traditional. Women spoke of being able get an education or a job; landless tenants described breaking free from restrictive working practices and relationships.

But for the most part, people talk of a slow, steady and cumulative loss of independence - the psychological burden of this was striking. And this is another real strength of the narratives: how they reveal the psychological / emotional dimension to people's experience of displacement.

The enduring nature of grief for lost places, lifestyles and associated identities is one aspect -

but what comes across particularly strongly is the sense of powerlessness and loss of control over their lives that losing their land brought - and the great difficulty experienced in

regaining a sense of agency and autonomy. “We are not all the same,” said one woman, frustrated by compensation policies designed to protect the least financially competent but insufficiently flexible to take account of families’ differing capacities and circumstances. The effect had been to stifle her ability to act with autonomy.

These peoples’ experiences show there is a huge challenge to ensuring compensation, and benefit sharing, is managed in such a way that it doesn’t contribute to dependency, but instead fosters agency and sustainability. And implicated here is a *new* relationship for the displaced – that with the resettlement authorities and their staff.

These interviews revealed how crucial this relationship is and that however good resettlement guidelines are, their effectiveness relies on those charged with implementing them on the ground – staff who were often insufficiently trained or supported. Shifting dates for relocation, poor information-sharing, promises made but not delivered, the weakening and dividing of families and communities throughout negotiations by consulting only certain individuals and interest groups – people related how time and again these things had spread confusion and uncertainty before they even been relocated, all too often generating a suspicion that the authorities were not on their side. By the time they were resettled, many people’s relationships with those charged with managing the process were characterised by hardening distrust.

The importance of transparency, and of *demonstrating* real commitment to the welfare of the displaced, the need to acknowledge the perspective of the resettled, and to support those charged with implementing compensation policies at field level – these come across loud and clear. Failure to act on these points had time after time led to a breakdown of trust and confidence, and significantly impeded the ability of the displaced to rebuild their lives in the midst of such profound change.

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I’d like to end with some words spoken by an elderly woman in the foothills of Maluti mountains in Lesotho, southern Africa. Some months before she was due to leave her mountain valley, where she had lived all her life, she spoke of the fields she was giving up: *Here where I have built is a place where I have lived well...I was ploughing, I was eating and getting full in the stomach. I was planting each and every single crop in the fields. I was getting wild vegetables... We cut grass, we weave, we help ourselves.*

Here, she had long-term relationships with neighbours who ploughed her fields, and whom she trusted to give her half the produce in return. At times of need, she could borrow in kind from families who knew she repaid them, and vice versa. She and her neighbours coaxed a living out of fragile mountain environments because of years of accumulated knowledge - the ‘wisdom of this place’ – knowledge which would have no value in their new locations. Without access to the land that allowed them to “help themselves”, she feared resettlement will reduce her to begging.

Once she had been moved, she explained, memories of her old life will weigh heavily on her heart:

I feel that the beat of my heart will be in the direction of this place where my life was. It will remain as a rock on my heart when I think of the place that I am being removed from.

'Maseipati had never had any formal education, but she expresses herself with undoubted power. I met her very early on this project, and her words have stayed me with ever since. And this brings me to one final quality of personal narratives.

Of course such evidence cannot change policy and practice on its own, and it doesn't necessarily throw up lots of new findings, but people's words can illuminate and shed new light on existing topics... and they can generate empathy and they can motivate. They bring home the everyday reality – and the multi-dimensional nature - of the challenges faced by the displaced. In this way, they have the potential, as Robert Chambers once put it, to help *“those in power to be more realistically informed and persuasively influenced”* - and so perhaps to begin to close the gap between those devising policy and those living with its consequences...

Thank you

Olivia Bennett