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International Conference on Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement: Bridging Research and Practice, Filling the Knowledge Gaps.  

Closing panel: Sharing wisdom and reflections on the enduring questions  
Chair: Susan Tamondong  
Panelists: Inga-Lill Aronsson (Uppsala University, Sweden), Michael Cernea (Fellow, Brookings Institute, USA), Chris de Wet (Rhodes University, South Africa, Ted Downing (University of Arizona, USA).  
Chair: Susan Tamondong, author.

This is a written contribution to the closing panel of the above conference. Parts of this text has been incorporated in the final paper “Concluding Session: Reflections on the Enduring Questions in Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement” chaired by Susan Tamondong (main author).

I was assigned to answer the following questions.

Theme 1: Experiences and views about resettlement
Q1. What is resettlement in your perception? What makes it so complex?
Q4. What is the most frequent and/or difficult challenge that you face in-resettlement projects? How have you been solving these? Do you think it was solved? Why, why not?

Theme 3: Suggestions for future works and collaboration
Q11. Toward which direction do you think the resettlement studies/works should go? What should the practitioners aim for? What are the issues researchers should be researching on?
Q14. How do you evaluate the conversations between various stakeholders so far? How do you think we should further collaborate amongst resettlement experts and other relevant fields?
Q15. Is it possible to bridge the gap between theory and practice in resettlement? (For academics) What would you like to suggest for practitioners in the field? (For practitioners) What are the research needs in the field and how would you like to address them to academics/researchers?
The questions were answered in order of priority, although some merging between topics and questions occurred.

**Q1. What is resettlement in your perception? What makes it so complex?**

Susan Tamondong greeted us welcome, opened the panel and turned to me with the first question about “my perception of resettlement”. I looked out over the auditorium and thought, how did I end up here at the first place, gave Susan a bewildered gaze and said truly that I did not understand the question (relieving laughter from all); I rose from my chair to get closer to the audience and told the story of how it all began. I was a young, female doctoral student in cultural anthropology at Uppsala University at the end of the 1980s/beginning of the 1990s, and had discovered this dark side of development that we today call DIDR. At Uppsala there was no competence in resettlement, and when I turned outside the department for guidance, a professor in Sweden found my study not only repulsing but also said: If you are not against it, you are part of the problem. I understood that my research interest in DIDR made me a bad person and I felt I had been sentence to death by the morally superior researchers within the humanities and social sciences. I was devastated. The rescue came with a Fulbright Scholarship to The University of Arizona where I met Professor Ted Downing, a leading expert on resettlement. At that time I was so insecure that I had stopped talking. But he waited patiently for three months until I slowly started to trust him intellectually. Ted saved me by explaining that I was not alone, that it was necessary to make one’s hands dirty and study this complex, difficult, multi-faceted industry of resettlement that harmed millions of people, and which will not stop because someone in an academic tower condemns it. He introduced me to the World Bank and the upcoming project of Zimapán in central Mexico, a project that was meant to be a model project for successful resettlement. In 1992 I came to the valley of Ejido Vista Hermosa, carrying my 2-years baby son on my shoulders. Together with the local people my son and I lived through the entire resettlement process of before, during and after the move. The result became the monograph *Negotiating Involuntary Resettlement. A Study of Local Bargaining during the Construction of the Zimapán Dam* (2002/2005). The book is long out of print, but still in great demand. This summer of 2013, I have received a grant (Magnus Bergwall Foundation) allowing me to return to Zimapán to enter upon this important longitudinal study of the project. So what is my perception of resettlement? I have no idea. Maybe it is simply that *Resettlement is not the answer, but the question*¹.

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¹ This is a paraphrase of Thomas Aquinas supposedly made statement that “God is not the answer. God is the question”. 
Q4. What is the most frequent and/or difficult challenge that you face in resettlement projects? How have you been solving these? Do you think it was solved? Why, why not?

From my experiences, the most difficult challenge in an informed participatory project is not only to understand, which per se demands deep ethnographic insights, but foremost to deal with peoples decisions if they go against what is regarded as best practices and good outcome in regard of compensation, social and cultural equality, equity and much more. How do we deal with the “wrong” decisions in a participatory project? Ponder the scenario that after months of negotiations, information, and knowledge exchange between the people and the experts, the people make a decision that is wrong from the experts’ point of view based on global experiences from hundreds of projects. Should the project management respect the decision with the possible outcome that the people (or selected groups) will become impoverished or hurt? Or, should the management disregard the people’s decision and be accused of being paternalistic, autocratic and not respecting people’s human rights? A “wrong” decision is complicated by the uncertainty and the seriousness of the final outcomes. There is also always the possibility that the experts are wrong and the people are right or vice versa. In such a scenario - Who is responsible? Who is accountable? The usual answer to this dilemma is that the implementer carries the entire responsibility and the accountability. From my view, in an informed participatory project, there are responsibilities, obligations and rights that both parties have to carry and be aware of. I think that we must dare to see and accept some kind of shared responsibility and accountability in participatory resettlement projects. I am fully aware of the asymmetrical relationship between the people-to-be-relocated and the project management, but it would be a mistake to ignore the dynamics in this relationship, because it can shift during the negotiations making it difficult to discern the academic and theoretically, but also the activists’ use of the categories, on the one hand “victim” and on the other “power abuse”. Between these simplified categories there is a dynamics that we have failed to capture theoretically and consequently we have failed to operationalize it. I have come to the conclusion that a participatory project is either participatory with shared accountability and responsibility, or, we must call it something else. We need to develop another kind of project model that can deal with the tensions built into the present participatory model.
Q11. Toward which direction do you think the resettlement studies/works should go? What should the practitioners aim for? What are the things researchers should be researching on?

The practitioners must aim for to get rid of the corruption on all levels. But that is easier said than done, people get killed in these kinds of projects. In particular, the traditional leaders who are put in charge of the negotiations are in danger of corruption, or accusation of corruption. Often there are tragic personal consequences, which nevertheless do not excuse the practice of corruption. From a research perspective, this is well documented, but still worth looking into.

Another important issue is to get rid of the prestige, which is constantly present in these high-profile projects. The experts (national and international) and the locals must accept to learn from each other’s knowledge. In the negotiations knowledge is produced and we need to be better to discern and use that knowledge without getting stuck with whose knowledge it is. Try to see it as a joint knowledge production. The attitude must be – find and apply the best solution for a specific problem. This is not the same as to romanticize the local knowledge which unfortunately sometimes happen in a “cultural sensitive participatory project”. This has led to that the locals end up being the scape goats (they wanted this) if things go wrong. Likewise, the experts must recognize that they maybe did not have the best solution to a certain problem. Here, unfortunately, we encounter the problem of corruption in the form of business contracts that have been promised in beforehand. The principle must be that all knowledge must be scrutinized, evaluated and tested before a solution is decided and final contracts are signed, or, contracts are signed with this flexibility in mind. In practice this means that much more time must be allocated to the human resettlement component and the design of the project.

Q14. How do you evaluate the conversations between various stakeholders so far? How do you think we should further collaborate amongst resettlement experts and other working in relevant fields?

Researchers should continue to develop our understanding of what happens with people in participatory resettlement project from a socio-cultural perspective. Ted mentioned earlier that we must give the local people tools to study themselves. This is right, but the tools available at the present also seem to start an objectification process and the people begin to question themselves, their culture, their neighbors and their lives. This, in combination with the destruction of their material world (houses, landscape, garden, paths) has a devastating effect on the individual and the social
relations/networks. The society starts to “fall apart from within”, which is well documented and known in the resettlement literature as the eroding of the social fabric. Theoretically (ironically!) we seem to be back in functionalism with its view on society as an organic whole.

Chris mentioned that perhaps policy gets in its own way. Here I would like to return to the participatory model and use it as an example of project complexity. I have in (Aronsson 2009) argued that we need a model that help us break with the tradition of trying to pin-point each single step in the project cycle, to help us recognize the potential of unexpected solutions, and deal with unexpected (chaotic) events. We need to explore the balance between blue-print implementation and the participatory space, a social field of interaction where power and economic muscles are flexed and estimated, a space where the struggle for Being is crafted. This is valid for both parties.

Q15. Is it possible to bridge the gap between theory and practice in resettlement? (For academics)
What would you like to suggest for practitioners in the field? (For practitioners) What are the research needs in the field and how would you like to address them to academics/researchers?

We need to produce more comparative studies. There is a frustration that we do not move forward theoretically, but unfortunately we have lost two decades of good ethnographers due to the post-modern era with its stress on a fragmented world that consists of isolated, subjective narratives that cannot be compared. Of course, things can be compared, which certainly does not mean that we end up in a Leachian world of “butterfly collections”. There is a saying that apples and pears cannot be compared. Well, surprise, they can. We only need to do it in the right way and learn how to identify the field. But I am optimistic when I see all the young researchers attending this conference, hungry to contribute to resettlement practice but also theoretically. Bring it on!

We need to incorporate more statistics in our studies, but be aware of as social scientists that the statistical package systems available on the market need to be understood, not only used. There is a danger (known by trained statisticians) that in our reports/articles/books there is sometimes a lack of understanding of what the statistical program “does” with the data which has led to some questionable results. The universities must take on this educational task and bring in statistics in the social science and humanities educations. It is irresponsible to continue to only train the students in interpretative and
in-depth, qualitative thinking. The marked is flooded by skilled, top interpretative students, while at the same time there is a glaring lack of statisticians with interpretative skills. In resettlement we need the combination of interpretative, qualitative researchers with statistical operative knowledge. We need primary qualitative date and quantitative date from the field to produce comparative studies. We also need people who are trained ethnographers, culturally sensitive (I don’t like that word because it is somehow pejorative, but I don’t have any better for now) because nothing can compensate for the field experiences. The knowledge from the field consists of so much more than a cognitive, intellectual understanding; field experience is inscribed in your body, the problem is to make use of this tacit knowledge and incorporate it in project reports.

There is an understandable and good frustration among the young resettlement researchers. Resettlement is a part of development, and I believe in development (which is not equal with consumptions). In the 1980s Arturo Escobar wrote an article that dealt with development, and that *Development stinks – literally*. It was a controversial and angry article about everything that was wrong with development. But no solution was presented. More than 25 years later, in 2009 Arturo Escobar held a public lecture and a seminar series at the University of Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia which I attended. His main conclusion was that we all would like to have a “good life”. Yes, we all want a good life, but as we all also know the problem is when one good life is clashing with another good life. Resettlement is very much part of this clash and therefore we need to involve other academic disciplines in our attempts to come to terms with the complex issue of resettlement.

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