Forced to Move: Understanding the Issues of Involuntary Displacement and Resettlement[1]

This article is the fourteenth in a series of articles by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) exploring various dimensions of poverty in Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka has had a long history of people being displaced, voluntarily or involuntarily, with generations of families having to deal with the repercussions of being relocated and resettled. Displacement and resettlement issues have surfaced in the recent past, because of three phenomena that have had a significant impact on Sri Lanka: the war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the tsunami of December 2004 and big infrastructure projects (mainly irrigation, power and transport) of the last three decades. Issues of resettlement will also feature in Sri Lanka's future development path, with the advent of peace requiring the resettlement of women, men and children displaced due to the fighting; the predicted increases in natural disasters and climate threats pointing towards dislocation of people living in vulnerable environments; and infrastructure development projects requiring moving people from project sites.

Any resettlement process is rife with dissension between the affected people and the implementers; the affected people struggle to make the best out of a bad situation, while the state or project implementers struggle to deal with the challenges of (re)construction and resettlement, and issues such as supplying basic needs, handling long-term livelihoods restoration, and trying to be transparent and equitable in delivery. Resettlement processes have limited financial or human resources and are often not well planned. Implementers learn through trial and error, but the learning acquired is often lost once the resettlement is completed and rarely transferred to other contexts or institutions. A resettlement policy can play an important role in giving structure and accountability to resettlement processes.

The discourse and the practice of resettlement where people have been forced to move because of development projects, or conflict or natural disasters, are very different, and the conversation about implementation principles and processes, and the issues of equity, transparency and accountability that govern them are discussed in distinctly separate forums. This article aims to bring these distinct ideas together, to explore what is common as well as different in the different approaches that can point towards greater effectiveness and equity in resettlement processes. Past experiences and lessons learnt from resettlement initiatives will be used to discuss three elements of resettlement – restoring livelihoods, addressing vulnerability and enacting equitable and participatory processes. .

Types of Resettlement

Resettlement is a response to displacement, or involuntary movement. Displacement is forced migration, where people move because of an external shock – whether it be a development project, a natural disaster or civil conflict. These lead to different types of resettlement responses. Development-induced displacement and resettlement (DIDR) occurs as a result of economic activities, mainly related to large-scale infrastructure projects, such as, irrigation, power and roads. DIDR is justified on the grounds of the greatest good for the largest number, and is often supported by the international financial institutions (IFI), such as the World Bank. IFI practice assumes that all potential alternatives have been considered and displacement is the last resort. International institutions, in particular, are conscious of the risks of impoverishment to those displaced, and have initiated resettlement practice that aims to address these risks. The risks are landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, decrease in health levels, loss of access to common property assets and community articulation (Cernea, 2000). The Sri Lanka National Involuntary Resettlement Policy (NIRP) has been influenced by this discussion.

Conflict-induced displacement and resettlement (CIDR) occurs as a result of human conflicts and wars. CIDR starts when violence begins and transitions into a phase when people flee the area of conflict and establish themselves in temporary shelters or camps. Their basic needs are provided in the camps, until such time as they are able to relocate permanently into new

areas or move back into their original locations. Displacements due to conflict are rarely preventable, outside of conflict resolution and peace building. Resettlement practice is focused on providing 'care and maintenance' during the transition phase, and searching for 'durable solutions' that will either integrate displaced people into the host communities, or return them to their original homes.

Natural disaster-induced displacement and resettlement (NIDR) is caused by natural or environmental disasters. These disasters are said to be the leading cause of displacement worldwide (Muggah, 2008), and those displaced are sometimes called environmental or climate refugees. There is a debate as to whether what is considered a natural disaster is purely ecological, or a function of human activity (e.g., land degradation and pollution). The practice of dealing with natural disaster-induced displacement can take the form of early warning risk management, as well as post-disaster emergency and restoration. Like with CIDR, those affected by natural disasters can be resettled in new or safer locations, or helped to return to their places of origin. In this case, preventive activities that can reduce the vulnerability of the people who live in different disaster-prone natural environments are also considered part of the response.

Whatever the cause of the displacement, some level of service provision is required to normalise and restore people's lives and to put in place durable solutions – to compensate for losses, address vulnerabilities and rebuild lives and livelihoods. In this article, we will try to bridge the three discourses, explore different contexts and pull out some common themes.

Restoring Livelihoods

Involuntary displacement, whatever the cause, is disruptive of livelihoods. One of the accepted tenets of resettlement is the commitment to restore these livelihoods to at least the levels that existed prior to displacement. Much of the rhetoric is, however, to 'build back better'. There are several issues about livelihood restoration that resettlement policy and practice that need to be taken into account.

The drop in incomes for those displaced by violence of a conflict is likely to be more significant than that for those displaced by development activity, because they have no time to plan their evacuation or organise the removal of their assets (Amirthalingam and Lakshman, 2009). This is also true for natural disasters where there is limited early warning. Assets, such as, livestock, household equipment and food stocks, are immovable in conflict and disaster situations. Development projects, on the other hand, are required to provide notification of evacuation and support the relocation of these assets. In practice, though, this will depend on how well the notice to evacuate is communicated and understood and how much of the assets can be moved. In Southern Transport Development Project (STDP), a horticulturalist lost his livelihood, because, he could not relocate his trees, and a cattle owner had to receive special dispensation to relocate his herd.

Livelihoods are not homogenous, and the potential for restoration varies according to the type of livelihood that is affected. Where livelihoods are dependent on labour, recovery is greater where the labour and skills have a high demand in the new/host location (Amirthalingam and Lakshman, 2009). Agricultural labourers and fishermen find it difficult to restore their livelihoods, if they are displaced to locations of considerable distance from their agricultural lands or fishing areas, or when these areas are inaccessible for security and other reasons. Home-based enterprises, largely the domain of women, take time to regain a new clientele. Where livelihoods are dependent on capital assets, their loss can severely depress the individual or household's ability to continue their livelihood activity. In the formal sector, waged employment, especially in government, provides the most stable form of livelihood that can be sustained even with displacement.

In the STDP, the principle of resettling within close proximity to the original location helped maintain livelihoods at the same level in many cases. This is not always possible, especially when people are displaced because of conflict or natural disasters. In the case of CIDR, transitional camps can be located at a great distance from their places of origin while in NIDR, the surrounding areas may no longer be safe for human settlement. In addition the ability to initiate livelihoods restoration programmes increases in complexity in CIDR when the initial temporary housing of communities in transitional shelters becomes protracted, and when resettlement is viewed as being able to return to the place of origin once the conflict/ war has ceased or is controlled.

When looking at re-establishing lost livelihoods, the STDP experience shows that people who lost large tracts of cash cropped agricultural land, but had sufficient productive land remaining were able to recover more rapidly than small land holders who may have lost far less land area but the intensity of loss was greater and were more demotivated by the displacement. The time taken to address livelihood needs was also a critical factor. Where displaced families have had to concentrate on rebuilding their homes before they could think about their livelihood, the period of recovery becomes

protracted, especially, when the livelihood is linked to home-based production (Kumarasiri, 2009).

Development-induced resettlement practice also tends to compensate heavily for loss of livelihood assets; so even though commercial property owners among the displaced in the STDP have been relatively impoverished in the short term, they have been able to use their compensation to restore their livelihoods. The chances of recovery to past livelihood levels is greater when both the value of original assets and compensation are high.

It is also important that livelihoods are restored in a manner that takes into account long-term sustainability. The widespread provision of boats, nets and other fishing equipment to those affected by the Asian tsunami of 2004 has alerted the fishing industry to potential dangers of over fishing. Also, in Sri Lanka, the types of boats and nets provided led to a reduction in the traditional artisanal community-based fishing method of Beach Seine Fishing (*Ma Del*), using a locally-made net. This has had considerable impact on the livelihoods of the fishing community in terms of loss of labour work (Gunewardene and Wickremasinghe, 2009).

Vulnerability

The process of displacement can be particularly difficult for those who are already vulnerable (poor, elderly and disabled people). It can also create new vulnerabilities because of loss of livelihoods, adverse impacts of displacement on mental and physical health or friction with host communities.

External assistance that aim to prevent impoverishment of the involuntary displaced tends to focus on vulnerability of those who were physically displaced. Most often though, the 'host' communities of the people resettled due to conflict, development, or natural disaster are also vulnerable, and ignoring this could give rise to tensions between resettled populations and their host communities.

'Focusing' on the displaced goes hand in hand with 'labelling' or categorising people as 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs) or "affected persons" (APs). Labelling helps supporting agencies (government or non-government) to define who are the dislocated, but it can have other impacts. It can homogenise the people made vulnerable by dislocation and fail to recognise the inherent differences among them; it can privilege them in relation to other groups of people not labelled in the same way; it can localise them by establishing their status as people from a particular place; and it can contribute to the politicisation of the resettlement process (Brun, 2009). The term 'affected people' used as label in the development-induced and natural disaster contexts, implies passivity and disregards the active agency of those who have been displaced.

Institutions dealing with development-induced displacement, define the term 'vulnerable' according to criteria set prior to the implementation of the project. Typically they tend to be groups of persons with characteristics that suggest that they cannot adequately 'cope' with the displacement and need special attention (e.g., older people, women, people with disabilities, etc.). It does not provide much space to address the vulnerabilities created by the project, nor is there a strong institutional mandate and capacity to deal effectively with the vulnerability of those people who are not directly and physically 'affected' by the project. The last is particularly important when development projects impact negatively on people in the catchments of the project, who become vulnerable because of lost livelihoods, loss of common property (i.e., water sources) or changes to the environment (e.g., flooding due to blockage of local irrigation works).

In the STDP, different vulnerabilities (women, the elderly, and the disabled) were identified and the tendency to homogenise vulnerability through the provision of a single allowance was avoided through working on a case by case basis. At the same time, narrow categorisation (e.g., limiting the analysis of gender issues solely to female-headed households), has precluded dealing with other groups of vulnerable people such as women engaged in home-based livelihoods. The 'affected people' have been able to reduce their vulnerability by using their compensation and other support received to increase their financial and fixed asset base, make good investments and strengthen their networks. Vulnerability increased when people lost the stability of their income sources, when networks broke up, and there were problems of illness to cope with, in addition to the trauma of resettlement.

Equitable and Participatory Processes

The preceding discussion suggests that one of the values of categorisation is to identify who is (and who is not) entitled to benefits that accrue from government or non-governmental sources, even though that demarcation itself can be problematic and can create tension. The issue of equity arises from how these categories are defined. For instance, the concepts in the Tsunami Housing Policy, and the administrative practice of its implementation tend to discriminate against single women, non-marital cohabiting couples and some ethnic and social groups in urban areas. Judgment is left to the local government officials, usually the *Grama Niladhari*, to categorise the beneficiaries. Under the policy, encroachment has been

regularised, but women with housing deeds in their own name have often been disregarded in the allocation of new houses (Caron, 2009).

Another difficulty for the urban poor displaced as a result of the tsunami has been the process of self-resettlement. Insufficient compensation to purchase land in close proximity to their original residence has forced some families to move out of the district. Some displaced people have also failed to obtain their total entitlements, because, illiteracy and low levels of education prevented a good understanding of the documents and the procedures involved (Caron, 2009).

The Land Acquisition and Resettlement Committee (LARC) process instituted by the STDP, provides an example of a positive institutional arrangement to deliver entitlements. The design of LARC is based on two important principles; compensating at 'replacement value' and providing space for affected persons to understand the basis for the compensation decisions, influence the decisions made in relation to their case and present any grievances relating to the compensation process or amount. The LARC was not without its problems. Documentation was woefully inadequate, and as a result, there was some concern about the transparency and fairness of the process. The process did, however, provide people whose land was acquired with compensation based on replacement value, which increased their capacity to replace their lost land and assets. People considered it a more equitable and participatory process, and as such, it has helped avoid large-scale grievances regarding compensation that could have resulted in court cases and project delays (de Silva and Gunetilleke, 2009).

Another innovative approach is the Lunawa Environment Improvement and Community Development Project which incorporated community participation in the design of the project from the beginning. The resettlement, here, took place under the statutory laws of Sri Lanka, but the whole process of determining compensation, designing resettlement sites and effecting relocation was carried out in a consultative and participative manner, resulting in relocation 'voluntarily' rather than 'involuntarily' (Hewawasam, 2009).

Conclusion

By bringing the three discourses, we attempt to show that there are common issues that need to be addressed in different cases of displacement and resettlement. The importance of overarching principles and themes can reduce the disparities and the inequalities of delivery that exist when these processes are designed in isolation. We have also shown that resettlement is varied and complex and that dealing with resettlement, whatever the cause of displacement, must take into account the different aspects of resettlement (provision of basic needs, restoring livelihoods, addressing vulnerability etc), consider each stage of the process - pre- and post-resettlement as well as temporary phases, the time span - short and long term, as well as policies and procedures that are followed.

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Footnote:

[1] Based on CEPA's experience of monitoring the impact of the resettlement in the Southern Transport Development Project and papers and discussions at the CEPA Annual Symposium on Poverty Research, 2008.