



How voluntary is poverty alleviation resettlement in China?

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ABSTRACT

Voluntary resettlement, typically framed by the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), has emerged as a preferred alternative to the heavily criticized forced resettlement approach, but there are growing concerns over whether those “voluntary” programs are genuinely voluntary. In China, the government maintains that its poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR) program is a successful example of voluntary resettlement. Under this national anti-poverty initiative, millions of people living in the poorest parts of the country have been resettled “voluntarily”. However, few studies have critically examined this claim. In this study, we collected empirical evidence through a survey of PAR resettlers. Drawing on a large and representative household survey (1723 resettlers from 30 different PAR projects) and 142 qualitative interviews, we report inconclusive and conflicting findings. On the one hand, the respondents strongly expressed that they willingly participated in resettlement. The perception of willingness was especially high among those who were younger, wealthier, and had off-farm employment. Furthermore, the consent to relocate was mostly free and driven by a desire to improve the quality of life. On the other hand, we observed that consent was not fully informed due to inadequate consultation. The villagers were not given detailed information about the resettlement or time to consider the implications. To ensure genuinely voluntary resettlement and to enhance the effectiveness of the program in poverty alleviation, the government needs to improve the consultation process, offer more targeted assistance to poor households, and provide better post-resettlement support.

1. Introduction

Planned resettlement has been a common spatial strategy employed by governments and international agencies to achieve a diverse set of development and environmental objectives (Lyall, 2017; Morris-Jung & Roth, 2010). Most of these resettlement programs have been involuntary or forced (World Bank, 2004). Evidence collected from a diverse set of countries shows that involuntary resettlement is a socially unjust process in which the economic burden and social costs of relocation are mainly borne by the displaced persons, who in all likelihood belong to the most disempowered and impoverished groups of society (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007; Lemenih, Kassa, Kassie, Abebaw, & Teka, 2014; Wilmsen, Webber, & Yuefang, 2011b). Such problems as the loss of land, property, and livelihood, increased morbidity, food insecurity, disruption of sociocultural structures, and social disarticulation and marginalization have been reported in case studies of forced resettlement (Bui, Schreinemachers, & Berger, 2013; Cernea & Schmidt-Soltau, 2006; Kothari, 2014; Rogers & Wang, 2006). Views on forced resettlement, therefore, have become increasingly critical, shifting from previous perceptions of it being an insignificant side effect

of development to a process that should be scrutinized and avoided where feasible (Cernea & Schmidt-Soltau, 2006; Lyall, 2017; Margolius, Beavers, & Paiz, 2002; Mulugeta & Woldesemait, 2011; World Bank, 2004). International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, which have funded numerous resettlement projects, played an important role in this shift by advocating—but not mandating—a voluntary approach to resettlement (Price, 2015; Wilmsen & Wang, 2015).

The emergence of voluntary resettlement begs the question of what constitutes “voluntary”. At first glance, the answer is clear: resettlement is voluntary when the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is upheld; that is, when communities, households, or individuals have been given the information and right to choose to resettle or to remain (Goodland, 2004; Hanna & Vanclay, 2013). Many concerns, however, have been raised concerning how resettlement projects labeled “voluntary” often fail to uphold the FPIC principle's dual condition of being “informed” and “free”. Several studies of voluntary resettlement have noted that consent may not be informed because of poorly implemented consultation. Sekar (2016) found that the voluntary resettlers from Melghat Tiger Reserve in India did not understand

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their rights and were unable to picture what life could be like if they relocated or remained. Baird and Shoemaker (2007) discovered that the voluntary resettlers from Laos were deliberately misled by officials who promised benefits of resettlement that rarely materialized. Other studies have illustrated how consent is not made freely because, in most cases, the initiator of voluntary resettlement (typically the government), operating from an advantageous position in a hugely asymmetric power relationship over local communities, can influence local decision-making by applying political pressure, economic sanctions, or the threat of violence (Morris-Jung & Roth, 2010). For example, “voluntary” resettlements in Laos only occurred after restrictions on slash-and-burn agriculture and the suspension of government services made life difficult for the people to the point that they feel relocation was the only option (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007). In Mozambique, the success of voluntary resettlement in the creation of the Limpopo National Park was linked to the pressure created by restrictions on livelihood strategies resulting from park regulations (Milgroom & Spierenburg, 2008). Not all threats are made in such conspicuous forms of coercion and exclusion. Writing on the experience of voluntary resettlement to make way for oil developments in Ecuador, Lyall (2017) argues that the decision for the indigenous community to resettle is culturally embedded in the collective memories of “exclusion, violence, and dispossession in relations with mestizo traders, militaries, and oilmen over previous decades and generations”.

What these studies suggest is that resettlement is a complex phenomenon and a purely voluntary mechanism is an ideal that is seldom realized in practice. Furthermore, the conceptual dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary resettlement has been criticized by many scholars, who suggest that the boundaries between the two are not clear-cut because of the complexity of the resettlement process (Morris-Jung & Roth, 2010; Schmidt-Soltau & Brockington, 2007; Wilmsen & Wang, 2015). In response, more complex conceptual models have been developed to better capture the characteristics of voluntary resettlement. For example, Gebre (2002) introduced the ideas of induced-voluntary resettlement and compulsory-voluntary resettlement. The former refers to situations where people resettle elsewhere due to inducement from outside agents. The latter refers to situations where people resettle because of societal pressure or out of desperation.

In light of the above arguments, this paper takes a critical view on China's poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR). PAR has long been described as voluntary resettlement by the government and state-run media, but this paper represents one of the first attempts to critically evaluate this claim. PAR is one of China's flagship programs in poverty alleviation. Through this nationwide initiative, the government aims to improve the living standards, incomes, and access to infrastructure and services of poor rural people living in areas deemed unable to support sustainable livelihoods (Lo, Xue, & Wang, 2016). A typical PAR project involves relocating the rural poor away from their original home to a centralized resettlement site with better facilities and a more accessible location (Xue, Wang, & Xue, 2013). PAR was first experimented with in the early 1980s as a decade-long pilot program in the western regions of the Loess Plateau. This program resulted in the resettlement of nearly half a million impoverished farmers. In 2001, the government expanded PAR nationally. By the end of 2015, PAR had relocated more than 12 million people, making it one of the largest resettlement programs in China if not the world (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the implementation of PAR is accelerating. According to the latest official plan, 10 million impoverished people will be resettled between 2016 and 2020, which means that China is about to resettle approximately one-eighth of its total poor population (Zhu & Ma, 2016).

1.1. China's poverty alleviation resettlement

Most resettlement programs in China have been and continue to be involuntary (Wang & Lo, 2015). These programs include development-

driven resettlement such as the Three Gorges Dam (Duan & Wilmsen, 2012; Wilmsen, 2016; Wilmsen, Webber, & Duan, 2011a) and, more recently, the South-North Water Transfer Project (Lin, 2017; Moore, 2014; Webber, Crow-Miller, & Rogers, 2017) and the Upper Mekong dams (Tilt & Gerkey, 2016); ecological resettlements which particularly affect the nomadic pastoralists living in the vast grasslands of Inner Mongolia and the Tibetan Plateau (Du, 2012; Fan, Li, & Li, 2015; Tashi & Foggin, 2012); and urbanization-driven resettlements where farmers on the urban fringe are resettled to make way for urban expansion (Liu, Zhang, & Lo, 2014; Ong, 2014; Tang, Hao, & Huang, 2016; Zhang, Wu, Zhong, Zeng, & Wang, 2017). Taken together, these studies have shown that despite the promises of “resettlement with development” (RwD), the priorities of the state have consistently trumped those of the resettlers, leading to a wide range of negative economic, social, and ecological impacts on the affected communities and their habitat.

PAR in China differs from other forms of state-driven resettlement by its official emphasis on voluntarism. In 2016, the central government formulated four pillars to guide the implementation of PAR programs: precision in targeting the poor, voluntarism, preparation of resettlement sites, and long-term benefits. Under voluntarism, the following guideline has been issued: “fully respect the will of the public with regards to resettlement; do not engage in forced resettlement; do not turn PAR into campaign style resettlement” (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016). In February 2017, Xi Jinping, the president of China, instructed the Politburo that PAR needed to “adhere to the principle of voluntarism” (Xinhua, 2017). However, there is a lack of guideline on how voluntarism can be guaranteed in practice, as much of the implementation details are left to be determined by local authorities. Furthermore, the target of relocating 10 million people by 2020 may pose a threat to voluntarism because it may pressure local officials to encourage resettlement to fulfill the target.

Is there any substance behind the rhetoric? In one of the few scholarly studies that took a critical look at this issue, Xue et al. (2013), using a local case study from Shanxi, described the process of PAR in great detail and highlighted a number of mechanisms through which voluntarism is guaranteed. These researchers observed that in a typical PAR program, the local government was the initiator by designating villages that satisfied the national and provincial criteria as potential candidates. The local government then approached the village committee, which was a village-level governing body, and the two parties would meet and negotiate details such as resettlement sites and timelines. Resettlement sites were typically chosen based on a number of criteria, such as topography, accessibility, the availability of resources, and ecological and social impacts. If an agreement could be reached between the village committee and the local government, a village-wide assembly was convened to inform the villagers of the plan and to vote on whether the village was to participate in the PAR program. Only if more than a certain percentage of households in the village (over 80% in Shanxi province) agreed to participate could the project proceed to the next phase. If there was more than one possible resettlement site, the villagers could vote for their preferred site. It should be noted that even if the villages as a whole agreed to resettle, individual households were allowed to not participate. Lo et al. (2016) interviewed non-movers of PAR programs and found that the most common reason for non-participation was that they could not afford the costs of resettlement. Additionally, unlike most forced resettlement projects, PAR resettlers do not lose their land and original dwelling and therefore can return to their former home if they were unsatisfied with the result of resettlement. Several independent reports from foreign media have provided evidence on this phenomenon of returning. For example, a recent report from Guizhou, Southwest China, observed that many resettlers were returning because of the high cost of living in cities and the lack of jobs (Financial Times, 2017).

Despite the confirmation from these studies and reports, there remain ambiguities with regards to PAR and voluntarism. First, we know very little regarding the consultation process conducted prior to

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