

Thirty years of development-induced displacement in China

François Dubé

To accelerate the process of poverty reduction in its poorer regions, China decided in 2001 to implement a national programme of displacement of populations living in areas considered environmentally fragile. But these programmes were hardly a novelty for China, and the record of previous such attempts has been far from positive.

In 1984, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in northern China – a sparsely settled, mostly desert region – launched extensive displacement programmes intended to restore a deteriorating ecosystem and eradicate absolute poverty, with the support of the central government and the World Bank. Parts of this mountainous province are the most vulnerable in China in terms of their ecological and environmental capacity to support people and livelihoods. Over the last thirty years, it is estimated that the authorities in Ningxia have displaced about 700,000 peasants living in the extreme south of the region, an area particularly affected by droughts and water scarcity.

Although ostensibly designed to increase the well-being of those displaced, these large-scale displacement policies have instead given rise to serious problems for the people forced to move. In most cases, these projects include a component of 'local economic development', whereby industrial plants with high emissions and high energy consumption were established in areas previously untouched by industrialisation, often with consequences that proved more damaging for the environment than the original situation. It may be that such projects, however, raise the political profile of sponsors and advance individual careers, regardless of environmental impact. The question arises as to why the government policy failed to achieve its desired effects.

Prioritising modernisation

Our field research, conducted over the course of 2014 with displaced communities in Ningxia, revealed how displacement policies can harm families. This is the case

of the Ma family from the Guyuan district of Ningxia, for example, whose access to education, health care and housing clearly worsened after their displacement to Yinchuan. We believe that one of the problems lies in the fact that the population displacement policies are so deeply steeped in the government's modernising doctrine as to prevent any alternative being considered in the fight against poverty and environmental degradation.

There is a consensus among Chinese policymakers at all levels of government that development and modernisation (usually expressed reductively using a single indicator, namely Gross Domestic Product – GDP) are inherently beneficial processes and to challenge this reflects an anti-productive attitude, or even a lack of patriotism. For Chinese policymakers, the relocation of entire communities from ecologically fragile zones to industrial areas is an inherent part of the modernisation process, and a manifestation of social progress. The institutions responsible for the design and implementation of these displacement projects cannot afford to seek the opinions of those being displaced, despite long-existing international guidelines on this subject.¹ If the people to be displaced were to prove refractory or even hostile, it would call into question the developmentalist premise of the Chinese leadership.

Challenges remain

Recent field surveys show that many of those who were displaced still face difficulties adjusting to their displacement: smaller living spaces, substantially increased living expenses, different planting methods and techniques to assimilate, and social

January 2016

www.fmreview.org/destination-europe

discrimination. In view of the negative consequences for those displaced, promoting modernisation by population displacement and forced migration programmes is perhaps the ultimate illusion. Although the rapid development of infrastructure is undeniable, too little attention has been paid to the concerns of the displaced people themselves. In many cases, their traditional way of life has been disrupted.

The interaction between rural communities, development policies and the environment is complex, and it is crucial to ensure the full participation of all stakeholders throughout the process. Local communities affected by proposed development programmes need to be given adequate space and opportunity to express themselves and to choose whether relocation is the best solution to their problems, regardless of whether the government considers the

communities' lifestyle to be contrary to its idea of a fully modernised society.

It is essential to develop other less risky and less disruptive solutions for rural communities suffering from environmental fragility while developing the economy of the regions concerned. By sharing successful adaptation experiments that do not involve forced population displacement, researchers may be able to sensitise political leaders to the existence of alternative models, helping to build their willingness and ability to adopt flexible and participatory approaches in solving environmental problems.

François Dubé 9585078@gmail.com

PhD student, College of Economic Studies,
University of Ningxia; Resettlement intern,
UNHCR Bangkok



1. See Cernea M (1988) *Involuntary resettlement in development projects: Policy guidelines in World Bank-financed projects*.

ISBN: 978-0-8213-1036-6

<http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/0-8213-1036-4>