**Strong social bonds ease community resettlement**

Displacing and resettling communities is a global challenge, but closer involvement of communities and consideration of their needs and social ties can ease the process and increase community security and wellbeing.

**The issue: Helping communities cope with displacement**

Relocating and resettling communities displaced by development projects, conflict, or disasters is a global problem. In 2015 alone, infrastructure and business development projects pushed an estimated 15 million people from their homes.

Regardless of the cause, involuntary urban displacement is often violent. Overnight, people are deprived of their property and livelihoods. Longer-term negative effects can include weaker human and social capital and slower economic growth. Displacement can also lead to human rights violations and breed grievances leading to conflict, general violence, crime and instability.

On the other hand, it can contribute to economic growth benefitting both the displaced and the host region. Successful resettlement can also bring valuable human and economic capital to the recovery process.

How people cope with displacement and resettlement has been little studied, notably in South Asia. This gap has led to ineffective policy and planning strategies to assist those trying to rebuild their lives.

**Findings: Maintaining social ties key to violence reduction**

In 2013, researchers from India and Sri Lanka set out to identify the relationship between violence and displacement, and poverty in neighbourhoods of strongly affected cities: Colombo and Jaffna.

**Recommendations**

Because of the high degree of social fragmentation caused by displacement, research teams are grappling with how to account for the complete costs — economic and social — in a way that lets policymakers fully weigh the pros and cons in making decisions.

Among their recommendations:

- Reassess displacement and resettlement policies to avoid violence; select suitable sites; and ensure housing policy and programs are equitable and needs-driven.
- Increase consultations among all stakeholders, ensure transparency and equity when planning dislocation and resettlement projects.
- Ensure gender equity in compensation packages and the needs of girls and women in housing and infrastructure planning.
- Address challenges posed by social, environmental, and cultural changes, such as severance of community support networks and rise in violence and drug use.
Social cohesion includes:
- Common goals and values
- Social bonds
- Shared experiences
- Cooperation and interdependence
- Trust in each other and in institutions
- Solidarity
- A feeling of belonging

While the dislocation and resettlement processes differed between communities, common factors influenced how well communities adapted and thrived.

Being displaced to make way for urban development can be traumatic. The process in both Colombo and Kochi involved a high degree of state violence. For one Colombo community, it included brute force when houses were destroyed by the military. For others, it manifested as government indifference, negligence, or inefficiencies. Residents in one Colombo community, for example, were misled by officials as to where they would move and when new housing would be provided. In Kochi, state violence included threats against protests and of eviction, false promises, inducements to accept poorer land, inefficiency, and delays in delivering on promises.

Grievances also arose over resettlement packages. The “one-size fits all” approach ignored the heterogeneity of households and their previous assets. For instance, only male married members of displaced Kochi families were eligible for compensation. This discriminated against single women, women-headed households, and families with married daughters. In Colombo, those with and without assets were treated equally, which previous owners of land or houses perceived as unfair.

Once resettled, however, residents reported little criminality or violence in the new neighbourhoods, which were also considered to be safe for girls and women. Contrary to expectations, material wellbeing increased with better housing and services, and security of tenure. Most of the resettled experienced little change in incomes although the types of employment varied.

The social picture was somewhat darker. Displacement led to the fragmentation of communities and rupture of social ties, dissolution of social networks, and increased marginalization of women. The effects were weaker when the new neighbourhoods were close to the old: strong social cohesion and the preservation of networks helped counterbalance the challenges of adapting to the new culture of apartment living and blended communities.

Social cohesion was also key to successful resettlement in Jaffna where many had fled conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. These vital links extended to the diaspora who channelled aid to family and friends during the war and after their return. Here, recovering lands and houses, as well as shared occupations, similar interests, devotion to religion, collective suffering, migration, and diaspora connections have played major roles in re-establishing community cohesion.

Research shows, however, that past conflict has been replaced with new as residents experience different challenges, including the rise of alcoholism, drug use, and crime, particularly among youth. This, they share with their counterparts in other cities.

The research
Carried out by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo and the Center for Development Studies in Kerala, the study relied on primary, secondary, quantitative, and qualitative data to draw up comprehensive profiles of communities in the three cities. Data was gathered from individuals, households, government officials, and donor agencies. Households were surveyed using a common questionnaire and in-depth interviews were carried out in selected households. Comparative analysis was carried out on displaced and host communities.

Results have been shared with communities, municipal policymakers, and international agencies, as well as researchers and development practitioners.

Resources


Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.