

Gender and livelihoods in Myanmar after development-induced resettlement

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Research on a resettlement programme in Myanmar underscores the pressing need for policymakers to understand the ways in which gender affects how different groups experience the impact of development-induced resettlement.

International resettlement standards state that developers have a responsibility to improve, or at least restore, the livelihoods and living standards of people who have been resettled because of development projects – yet this is rarely achieved in practice.

Where resettled people suffer physical and economic losses, project developers commonly rely on cash compensation and basic asset replacement. As evidenced in research, this approach neglects the complex processes of livelihood restoration that are intertwined with localised social structures.¹ Cash compensation can exacerbate displaced peoples' already increased exposure to impoverishment risks, as households attempt to manage changed social structures without adequate resources and struggle to rebuild physical and economic assets necessary for survival.

Women face specific barriers in accessing and using compensation to restore household livelihoods and living standards after resettlement. The case of the Upper Paunglaung (UPL) hydroelectric dam in Myanmar's Shan State illustrates the gender implications of cash compensation packages for livelihood restoration and the unique challenges that women face when displaced.

The analysis draws from qualitative and quantitative data collected by Spectrum – Sustainable Development Knowledge Network.² In 2013, 23 villages (9,755 people) were involuntary resettled from lowlands to higher ground to make way for the UPL dam.³ In 2016, Spectrum researchers conducted 66 semi-structured interviews with the resettled women and men, village leaders, township authorities, project implementers (government engineers) and monks.⁴ Two socio-economic surveys were also conducted with displaced

households, the first directly after the resettlement in 2014 and the second in 2016.⁵

By international standards, the UPL dam development followed common practice. Displaced people were provided with cash compensation for their physical and economic losses, and replacement house plots. Survey and interview results revealed that resettled households perceived improvements in access to education, electricity, health care, roads and religious buildings. Despite these improvements, income generation and access to land for subsistence farming in the resettlement sites were a major concern. Households have been struggling to make ends meet, having lost large plots of productive agricultural land. Compounding their livelihoods challenge, the gendered aspects of livelihood restoration were not explicitly addressed by the UPL project team.

Access to information

An initial barrier affecting women related to access to information. Information sharing about the resettlement plan and implementation was top-down and male-dominated. Government officials provided village leaders with project information and updates, and leaders then held village-level meetings with household heads. All government officials and village leaders were men. In Myanmar the eldest male typically assumes the role of household head, meaning that – with only a few exceptions – all participants in the information sessions were men.

Women primarily learnt about the project through their husbands and neighbours. This second-hand information sharing led to a disconnect between information provided in meetings and comprehension of what the

project and resettlement process entailed. In interviews, some women explained that they could not understand how their village could be flooded, expressing disbelief that a dam could be built over their homes and farms. There were no opportunities for any participants (men or women) to ask

are responsible for organising food and other essential supplies for the family. Interviewees said that men did not reliably deliver the full compensation amount to their wives (and were commonly reported to have spent money on gambling and alcohol). Without full compensation, women's capacity to

directly access and control the funds was inhibited, and they were unable to re-establish family living standards and livelihoods post resettlement, which caused stress and feelings of despair.

Access to productive land

In the context of many development projects, the scarcity of productive rural land means that resettled people must often move away from subsistence



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Woman displaced by the Upper Paunglaung hydroelectric dam looks towards the resettlement village and the reservoir that have been created.

questions at the information sessions; people who did so were excluded from future meetings. Women's lack of engagement in the consultation process also had negative consequences for their capacity to negotiate and access compensation.

Rights to compensation

The process of calculating and distributing compensation tends to be biased towards men. Project developers typically pay compensation to land-title holders (generally the male household head), and replacement assets (structures and land plots) are often registered in their names. In the case of the UPL project, women were not involved in conversations about the conditions of compensation and entitlements, and they were not present at the meetings when compensation monies were distributed to household heads. In the villages, women typically manage the household budget and

and agrarian livelihoods and become more dependent on a cash-based economy. Increased expenses associated with the new cash-based economy can strain household relations and increase women's workloads. Men often migrate in search of work, leading to a rapid rise in women-headed households who must find ways to address the immediate income gap.⁶ The lack of access to livelihood activities and assets places an additional burden on women, as they have fewer resources with which to cover their additional household responsibilities.

In the UPL case, affected people were promised land-for-land compensation; however, by 2016, only the house plots with an allocation for small vegetable patches and fruit trees had been replaced. Substitution for the 8,000 acres of cultivation land that villagers had relied on for subsistence living and cash crops prior to resettlement had been promised but not yet provided. Meanwhile,

the land allocated for house plots in the resettlement villages proved reportedly less fertile and productive than in the lowlands.

Furthermore, the importance of common-pool resources was overlooked by the UPL project team. Prior to resettlement, the UPL villagers lived adjacent to forest land which held substantial subsistence value for the households, and especially for women, due to the quality of wild vegetables. Men also used the forests to hunt wild animals for food. In the resettlement villages, women and men still retrieve resources from forest land but the quality and quantity of vegetables and meat are noticeably reduced compared with the lowland forest lands they used to access. With reduced access to food supplies, women reported feeling constantly stressed about finding enough food and resources to feed their families. In a productive sense, women have become less active as a consequence of their reduced capacity to engage in agriculture production, and express hopelessness in the face of fewer opportunities to earn cash or expand their vegetable production.

Social consequences of unequal access to opportunities

In the UPL resettlement villages, family units have been fractured as working-aged men leave the area for jobs elsewhere. Women have assumed leadership positions in their households and have adopted greater responsibilities for the day-to-day functioning of their family and village. This has changed gender dynamics – and has increased women's workloads. With expanded responsibilities and fewer resources, women rely increasingly on men to send remittances. Some feel constrained by the situation and want to follow their husbands to find paid work; those who stay do so because of their dependents and because of established social networks.

In the context of the UPL dam development, simple cash compensation and basic asset replacement have proved insufficient to restore livelihoods for any of the resettled villagers, and particularly for women – and this has been compounded

by lack of access to information. Greater efforts are needed in both policy and practice to address the gendered differences of resettlement impacts and livelihood opportunities. By contrast, the Song Bung 4 hydroelectricity project in Vietnam presents a positive example of gender inclusion for major infrastructure projects in the region.⁷ Its resettlement process empowered women through participatory processes and proactively advanced gender equality in the remote villages. Future projects need to ensure that women participate in consultation and information sharing, and that gender-based livelihood assets are included in compensation and rehabilitation processes.

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This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asian Development Bank or the University of Queensland.

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2. This component of the research was funded by USAID and contracted through PACT.

3. In Myanmar, all land is constitutionally owned by the state, thereby limiting individuals' land rights and capacity to exercise power of choice.

4. The authors thank David Allan and Natalie Fuller from Spectrum and Jenny Hedstrom for their input; Spectrum for project coordination; the Government of Myanmar and Paunglaung Township for access to villages; and the interviewees and survey participants for their time and contributions.

5. The socio-economic survey was designed and implemented by Dr Mie Mie Kyaw at Mandalay University.

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