



TEHRI DAM PROJECT
IN THE SERVICE
OF NATION

Development, displacement and ethics

Panos/Chris Stowers

by Peter Penz

One of the social costs of development is that dams, roads, ports, railways, mines and logging displace people. In all cases displacement raises important ethical questions. What is owed to people who are displaced? Under what conditions can development that includes displacement be justified? What kind of ethical analysis can provide justification for displacement-inducing development?'

Three ethical perspectives

Three broad theoretical perspectives can be used to test the justification of development-induced displacement. Their respective central values are the public interest, self-determination and

equality. The public interest perspective is given concrete expression by cost-benefit analysis. The criterion is that of net benefits to the population as a whole. Negative side effects, including displacement, are treated as costs and the question is whether the benefits of the project or policy

exceed such costs. Questions of compensation and distribution are treated as separate, political matters. It is possible for those displaced to become worse off, for these costs to be taken into account, and yet for the project or policy to generate positive net benefits. Such a line of reasoning lay behind the statement of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, that people displaced by dams had to make such sacrifices for the good of the country.

Self-determination, on the other hand, is more an issue of freedom and control. In its libertarian form, which focuses on the self-determination of individuals, displacement – at least of property owners – is necessarily immoral. There is also a communitarian interpretation of self-determination, which is violated by the coercive removal or forced migration of whole

communities. This can be a promising antidote to heavy-handed and business-privileging development from the top. However, it is also too crude on its own. It ignores broader public-interest considerations, such as improved living conditions resulting from the electricity and irrigation provided by dams.

One way out is for public authorities to convert opposition to consent by those required to move by offering them sufficient compensation to move voluntarily, so that they are, ultimately, not displaced. There is much to be said for this approach. But it cannot be ignored that such an approach gives to those required to move the power to capture some of the benefits from the project by demanding much higher compensation than is needed to merely not be worse off. This could make the project too costly to finance or at least deprive others of a fair share of the benefits.

Moreover, development projects and policies can also be justified on the basis of reducing poverty and inequality, the concerns of the third perspective, egalitarianism. Development-induced displacement can conceivably reduce inequalities if it primarily benefits the poor and puts the burdens on those who are better off. However, horizontal equity among the poor will be violated when some disadvantaged groups benefit while others are harmed by being displaced. This can be partly resolved by adequate compensation but equal sharing requires also that those displaced share in the benefits of

development, not simply receive compensation. At the same time, equality requires that displaced communities are not the only ones to benefit from development.

Can these three perspectives be brought together? One way of doing this is to require self-determination by resettling populations only on the basis of negotiations and consent but not as an unqualified right to veto development activities. Public-interest and distributive-justice considerations are ethically relevant. When, however, such considerations override consent, full compensation is required (if necessary, determined by fair adjudication). If a certain development proposal cannot meet these requirements, it must be deemed unjustifiable in terms of the ethical considerations employed here.

Indirect displacement and sovereignty

Two further matters, which introduce complications, are those of indirect displacement and sovereignty.

Displacement is indirect when primary causal agents cannot be identified due to environmental, economic and other kinds of systemic interaction. In such a case, the burden of ethical responsibility falls on state authorities. State sovereignty is another complication in the equation of causal agency with ethical responsibility for displacement. One plausible position is to say that responsibility for managing development falls entirely on domestic development agencies and that foreign development actors (whether businesses, other states or NGOs) merely have a responsibility to abide by the laws and directives of the host state.

Such a limited interpretation of the responsibilities of external actors can readily be challenged. Development NGOs and national and multinational development agencies normally have

a mandate to assist only ethically justifiable development. Such mandates require them to apply ethical conditionality when assessing projects. The business community is similarly obliged to exercise ethical conditionality. The ethical responsibilities of the business community do not change when enterprises cross borders. When under-resourced, fallible or corrupt development authorities permit displacement-inducing development, foreign participants, even when their mandates are to make profits, are morally required to attend to the displacement effects of development and assess them in terms of the ethical justifiability of such development.

Conclusion

Applying ethical analysis to displacement-inducing development moves the treatment away from simple moralism. It recognises ethical complexity, including the possibility that such displacement may be justified if certain conditions are met. The public interest and poverty reduction, on the one hand, and self-determination and individual rights protecting against harm and coercion, on the other, stand in tension with each other. The former ethical considerations may justify certain development activities and policies even when they displace people.

Against this prescriptive pressure, self-determination and individual rights act as counterweights but do not make all displacement unjustifiable. They do, however, serve as more than simply compensation and resettlement requirements. They may be sufficient to reject development proposals and plans, even when approved on public-interest grounds.

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¹ These questions are being addressed by two research projects based at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Toronto. The research projects are analysing the ethical responsibilities of authorities concerning development-induced displacement specifically in India and exploring general international responsibilities in the development process when foreign states, businesses and NGOs are involved. For details, see www.yorku.ca/crs/edid.htm.



“If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country.”

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, speaking to villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud Dam, 1948.