

Displacement shock and recovery in Cyprus

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Long-term study of displaced Cypriots suggests that most have transcended the shock of displacement.

In 1974, following nearly twenty years of intermittent violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriot nationalist militias and an attempted coup d'état by Greek Cypriot extremists, Turkey invaded Cyprus and occupied the northern 37% of the island. 170,000 Greek Cypriots left their homes in the north while 50,000 Turkish Cypriots left homes in the south and went to the north. Both communities moved because they feared further violence.

The events of 1974 were a major social and psychological shock to the 1,400 Greek Cypriots living in Argaki village in the now Turkish-controlled part of Cyprus. Displaced to Greek-controlled areas, they were temporarily disoriented and destitute – but political stability, effective state emergency planning, rapid economic growth and their own flexible, innovative recovery efforts allowed them to transcend this shock. Thirty years later, they remain marked by it but most of them believe they have effectively transcended the 'severe life event' of displacement.

My long-term study of Argaki villagers started in 1968 when it was a prosperous community of intensive farmers. Subsequent periods of study were at the time of displacement

in 1974, during the first 15 months of displacement in 1975, and then again between 2000 and 2004.¹

A controlled comparison with the nearest non-displaced village, comparing the cohort of men and women born between 1930 and 1940, suggested no increased mortality among the displaced but higher rates of reported depressive illness, and nearly twice as much reported cardiovascular illness. The particular cohort was selected because they were aged 34-44 in 1974, and thus certain to have young dependent children and to be facing the possible burdens of care for ageing parents and grandparents. The wider comparative implications of the health findings are that in situations where shocks are multiple and continuous, rather than a single severe life event, and/or where there is either 'state failure' or no effective state to meet the needs of the displaced, health outcomes are likely to be very much worse.

My findings suggest that men and women were equally affected, though in different ways, and that the critical issue was not gender but 'life course' factors – age at displacement and number of dependents. Children appeared to be the least damaged

by displacement. The elderly were confused by it but less distressed than their descendants because, in Cypriot cultural terms, they had already discharged their obligations to their descendants and were not expected to make massive new economic efforts. The Cypriot state has had old-age pensions in place since before 1974, and that was an important protective factor.

In the first 15 months of displacement, many Argaki families moved four, five or six times, initially experiencing extreme overcrowding but slowly finding temporary housing which was less crowded. They settled in more than 25 sites in the major towns and villages in the government-controlled area of South Cyprus, where roughly one in every four resident Greek Cypriots was a displaced person. As Turkish Cypriots were leaving the Greek-controlled zone due to their own well-founded security fears, the incoming Greeks sometimes found empty Turkish-Cypriot housing and land – but many other people lived in garages and sheds for up to four years.

The Greek Cypriot government (recognised internationally as the Government of Cyprus) implemented a series of Emergency Plans to meet the challenges thrown up by the displacement and by the

'Generations' and cohorts

Although much writing on refugees and IDPs refers to first, second or third 'generations' this is often done casually, assuming the reader knows what is implied. My work suggests greater analytic clarity and specificity are needed.² If 'generation' means parents and their children, any normal population of displaced people will contain, for example, parents of 75 with children in their fifties, parents of 50 with children of 25, and parents of 25 with children under 5. Reflection suggests that the way in which displacement impacts a 75-year-old, a 50-year-old and a 25-year-old is likely to be sociologically and psychologically different. Those who are 75 years old have lifetimes behind them, and have normally discharged their obligations to their children, whereas a 25-year-old parent has a major task of provision ahead.

If the common sense of 'generation' meaning a 30-year period is implied instead, this still leaves unclear just how much a five-year-old IDP has in common with a 35-year-old mother of four children, beyond the simple fact of displacement. Even if 'generation' is used loosely to divide a population into 30-year age groups these long periods contain people with vastly different social obligations.

For these reasons, I favour using the demographer's concept of a cohort, defined here by being born within a specified period of years, to examine the health issues of displaced people. Epidemiologists also favour cohort analysis, as more specific than the fuzzy notion of 'generation'.

loss of agricultural land, housing and industrial capacity. Displaced farmers were offered relief from pre-war debts plus unsecured loans to continue in agriculture. Displaced civil servants were employed but on reduced salaries. Businessmen had to repay any pre-war debts but small-scale artisans and businesses were offered re-start loans. The state viewed those who had been displaced as a development resource endowed with human capital, rather than an economic burden, and re-employed them in a number of infrastructure projects – roads, airports and, significantly, refugee re-housing. The displaced Greek Cypriots responded energetically and within three years unemployment was greatly reduced.

Argaki refugees and employment

Some Argaki farmers managed to take machinery – tractors, trailers, cultivator rigs – with them when they fled, which allowed them to cultivate land in the south. Some found abandoned Turkish land; some rented land owned by Greeks; some obtained permission to farm government-owned land. Truck and bulldozer drivers were easily re-employed if they had brought the machines out of the war zone, and if they had not, they still had their skills to sell. Flexibility was a key coping strategy. Farmers switched from long-term tree crops to short-term vegetables, making innovative use of plastic sheeting to make ‘green-houses’ to capture seasonal markets; or moved into intensive live-stock rearing, which needs little land and can be started with modest capital.

Professionals such as doctors and lawyers sought or continued employment. Some have been highly successful, while others have more modest incomes in government service. Some teachers enterprisingly set up private education establishments, working a second shift at the end of their state-paid day job.

Those who needed wages but lacked specialist skills or capital looked in several directions. A number of Argaki women, some of whom who had never taken paid work before, have worked for many years in home-based activities (lace-making, cooked food production) or in

light industry, packing fruit and vegetables. Others have worked in the tourist sector as domestics. Men have worked as chefs, barmen and drivers. More educated and younger men have worked as salesmen.

Many Argaki people started a business of one kind or another – taverns, restaurants, coffee-shops, a car rental firm, or a bakery. Some combine a modest white-collar job with something else at home, such as part-time tailoring. One farming family bought a house plot in Nicosia and later sold it for a handsome profit, which they re-invested in growing flowers. One young college teacher invested in a college ably managed by his wife’s cousin and has seen the investment flourish.

Factors mitigating dispersal

Argaki had been a village where four out every five marriages were between Argaki-born people. People knew their village as a highly inter-related site of dense, rich sociality, although of course conflict and social competition also featured. When people fled the village, their flights were unplanned, uncoordinated. The individual three-generation household was the key unit of flight and re-settlement, and thus married siblings sometimes ended up in different communities, although they sometimes deliberately regrouped close to each other. This dispersal was felt strongly but, over the years, changes in economy and technology helped to mitigate the severity of the social losses. Pre-war, for example, only a handful of families had had a telephone but gradually most families acquired one. The motor car had a similar history – from luxury possession to a standard item in most households. These two developments facilitated social contact with dispersed kin and friends. Thirdly, as the Argaki peoples’ lives became less uncertain, less hand-to-mouth and more economically stable, they were able to meet each other at village weddings and funerals. Lastly, there were several areas

with concentrated populations of former Argaki villagers, creating mini versions of the village.

Although official rhetoric from political leaders and school teachers



Argaki couple with their baby, 1975.

has sought to make school-age children in Cyprus since 1974 take a militant stance over the recovery of the ‘lost lands’, fine-grained research with individuals suggests that those who were of primary-school age in 1974 distinguish clearly between what their parents suffered by displacement and their own experiences. They have made their friends, found work and made homes in the south of Cyprus, and their attitude to ‘return’ is not like that of their parents. Those displaced as adults have shown a greater emotional involvement with the past. Those displaced as very young children or born after 1974 to IDP parents are much more future-oriented. While they share their parents’ sense of grievance, and they talk a ‘human rights’ language which keeps compensation claims alive, they show no signs of trauma.

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1. See Loizos P (2008) *Iron in the Soul: Displacement, Livelihood and Health in Cyprus*. Berghahn Books. <http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=LoizosIron>

2. See *Iron in the Soul* for a fuller discussion.