

The Lao resettlement controversy

Recent years have seen a highly elaborated controversy erupt within the development industry in Laos over the merit of what has been termed "resettlement": state or development industry sponsored schemes to move poor people closer to government services or to new lowland fields. While planners argue that settlers will benefit from incorporation with the state and markets, thereby moving Laos closer to the overall goal of reducing poverty, critics argue that resettlement is in fact exacerbating poverty. Reports by international development consultants have suggested that thousands have died in resettlement villages unnecessarily. Critics suggest that all resettlement in Laos is essentially "involuntary" due to the political nature of Laos. What is more, they suggest that the motivations for resettlement include sinister-sounding attempts at "cultural integration" that are related to a fundamental misunderstanding of the value of swidden cultivation and opium production.

In an [important report](#) released in 2005, Baird and Shoemaker argued that development donors should abstain from uncritically supporting resettlement schemes. They instead praised those in the development industry who attempted to reduce resettlement by "anchor(ing)" people in place (2005:34). Baird and Shoemaker have now published a condensed (and somewhat less strident) version of their argument in the scholarly journal *Development and Change* 38(5):865-888 ([baird-and-shoemaker-2007.pdf](#)). This article is especially valuable for its summary of the various positions taken within the Lao development industry on the issue of resettlement. Baird and Shoemaker are particularly - and rightly - scathing of those development workers who claimed to be opposed to resettlement, yet were in fact unwitting funders of resettlement schemes (2007:879). Baird and Shoemaker challenge development workers to shed their political disengagement (either intentional or unwitting) and to face squarely the political implications of their activities.

While Baird and Shoemaker provide a valuable analysis of the development workers of Laos, their understanding of Lao settlers is less thorough. The loaded terms "indigenous", "ethnic", and "minority" are used to describe settler groups, despite the widely acknowledged difficulty of applying these terms to any simple sense in Laos. This language choice is, I think, part of their depiction of settlers as victims. Baird and Shoemaker's ultimate argument is that there is no tenable distinction between "voluntary" and "involuntary" resettlement: all resettlement is essentially involuntary because the political climate in Laos allows the state to "fundamentally influence or coerce villagers to agree to the resettlement option" (2007:881). This is a significant conclusion, because other commentators, such as Rigg (2005) have found that many settlers express a personal desire for resettlement projects, or at least mixed feelings about the pros and cons of resettling. Baird and Shoemaker, by contrast, "caution against the framing of the positions of villagers as being either pro- or anti- resettlement" (2007:885) because, in their view, there is no distinction between voluntary and involuntary resettlement in Laos, no matter what settlers might say. On the back of a very brief reference to Foucault, they argue that expressions of the voluntary nature of resettlement are simply a "rationalization" of the use of power by governments (2007:882).

This depiction does not ring true with my own experiences in rural Laos. As I noted in previous *New Mandala* posts ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), I encountered many resettled Hmong in and around Vieng Say. Their accounts concurred with Baird and Shoemaker on several points: they reported being poorer post-settlement, and they reported having limited choice in their decisions to move. But asked if they would like to move back to their pre-settlement homes, there was a unanimous and animated rejection of the idea. Resettlement had its attractions - particularly roads, schools and hospitals. But settlers felt excluded from fully utilizing these, due to their poverty. Yet, despite this exclusion, these benefits of resettlement still represented for settlers their aspirations for moving out of poverty. Many spoke of their hopes for their children in terms of education, white-collar jobs, and off-farm futures. When settlers looked to the future, their aspirations were turned steadfastly in the direction of modernity. Given this cultural milieu, Baird and Shoemaker's call for "anchoring" such people in their original, and often remote, homes seems to run counter to local aspirations and desires. Is not the move to "anchor" itself a cultural imposition of the kind Baird and Shoemaker decry?

While conducting fieldwork in the south of Laos, I was witness to another resettlement project. This project offered land to landless farmers. Settlers were required to move to a new location. Their new houses built in a straight line beside a new road, with their new rice fields located several kilometres distant. Settlers incurred a debt with the Agricultural Promotion Bank for the cost of clearing the rice fields with a tractor, water pumps, and iron roofing. The first harvest was a disaster as the base pan had been broken by the tractor, and no residents had buffalo or machines to assist with the ploughing or harrowing. Residents were forced to rely on cutting and selling wood from the surrounding forests: an illegal practice that was tolerated by local authorities in this instance on compassionate grounds. I was moved by the suffering that I witnessed in the resettlement village, and I asked residents why they did not simply return to their old homes. Again they were resistant to the idea. They wanted to continue the experiment: perhaps yields would be better next year, and perhaps the government would forgive their debt, and perhaps the development industry would deliver on its promise of charity. Despite its all too evident drawbacks, resettlement taps into deeply held aspirations for poverty reduction and personal transformation among Lao rural residents. Many approached resettlement with a sense of cautious experimentalism, a kind of wary hopefulness. Neither notions of coercion (forced resettlement) nor consensus (voluntary resettlement) fully captures this experimental relationship with state projects. The main complaint that settlers had was not resettlement, but the services and assistance that were on hand once they got there. It was not resettlement per se, then, but the ability of government and the development industry to provide adequate support and services to new arrivals that was found objectionable.

These issues confound any attempt to define resettlement as "involuntary" or "voluntary", and to this extent I agree with Baird and Shoemaker's analysis. Yet, contrary to their conclusion that we must therefore collapse the distinction between the two, so that all resettlement is classed as "involuntary", evidence from the field suggests that much of the attraction and reasoning of resettlement is found in the vast territory between coercion and consensus. In this frame, it is

possible to see that resettlement is not in and of itself inherently problematic. Residents repeatedly indicated that they wanted to move, that they simply didn't want to be "anchored" in place, or in time. They seek change. But resettled people were disappointed with the services and support present on resettlement. The role for development agencies, following this insight, is not to try to prevent change, or to turn back the clock by attempting to "anchor" people in place, but to fight the causes of poverty and inequality. It is poverty, not resettlement, that has led to the shocking rates of sickness, death and exclusion among resettled populations. In this view, the resettlement tragedy in Laos is not a cause of poverty: it is a symptom.