How voluntary is poverty alleviation resettlement in China?

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\section*{A R T I C L E  I N F O}

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\section*{A B S T R A C T}

Voluntary resettlement, typically framed by the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), has emerged as a preferred alternative to the heavily criticized forced resettlement approach, but there are growing concerns over whether those “voluntary” programs are genuinely voluntary. In China, the government maintains that its poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR) program is a successful example of voluntary resettlement. Under this national anti-poverty initiative, millions of people living in the poorest parts of the country have been resettled “voluntarily”. However, few studies have critically examined this claim. In this study, we collected empirical evidence through a survey of PAR resettlers. Drawing on a large and representative household survey (1723 resettlers from 30 different PAR projects) and 142 qualitative interviews, we report inconclusive and conflicting findings. On the one hand, the respondents strongly expressed that they willingly participated in resettlement. The perception of willingness was especially high among those who were younger, wealthier, and had off-farm employment. Furthermore, the consent to relocate was mostly free and driven by a desire to improve the quality of life. On the other hand, we observed that consent was not fully informed due to inadequate consultation. The villagers were not given detailed information about the resettlement or time to consider the implications. To ensure genuinely voluntary resettlement and to enhance the effectiveness of the program in poverty alleviation, the government needs to improve the consultation process, offer more targeted assistance to poor households, and provide better post-resettlement support.

\section*{1. Introduction}

Planned resettlement has been a common spatial strategy employed by governments and international agencies to achieve a diverse set of development and environmental objectives (Lyll, 2017; Morris-Jung & Roth, 2010). Most of these resettlement programs have been involuntary or forced (World Bank, 2004). Evidence collected from a diverse set of countries shows that involuntary resettlement is a socially unjust process in which the economic burden and social costs of relocation are mainly borne by the displaced persons, who in all likelihood belong to the most disempowered and impoverished groups of society (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007; Lemenih, Kassa, Kassie, Abebaw, & Tek, 2014; Wilmsen, Webber, & Yuefang, 2011b). Such problems as the loss of land, property, and livelihood, increased morbidity, food insecurity, disruption of sociocultural structures, and social disarticulation and marginalization have been reported in case studies of forced resettlement (Bui, Schreinemachers, & Berger, 2013; Cernea & Schmidt-Soltzau, 2006; Kothari, 2014; Rogers & Wang, 2006). Views on forced resettlement, therefore, have become increasingly critical, shifting from previous perceptions of it being an insignificant side effect of development to a process that should be scrutinized and avoided where feasible (Cernea & Schmidt-Soltzau, 2006; Lyall, 2017; Margolius, Beavers, & Paiz, 2002; Mulugeta & Woldesemait, 2011; World Bank, 2004). International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, which have funded numerous resettlement projects, played an important role in this shift by advocating—but not mandating—a voluntary approach to resettlement (Price, 2015; Wilmsen & Wang, 2015).

The emergence of voluntary resettlement begs the question of what constitutes “voluntary”. At first glance, the answer is clear: resettlement is voluntary when the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is upheld; that is, when communities, households, or individuals have been given the information and right to choose to resettle or to remain (Goodland, 2004; Hanna & Vanclay, 2013). Many concerns, however, have been raised concerning how resettlement projects labeled “voluntary” often fail to uphold the FPIC principle’s dual condition of being “informed” and “free”. Several studies of voluntary resettlement have noted that consent may not be informed because of poorly implemented consultation. Sekar (2016) found that the voluntary resettlers from Melghat Tiger Reserve in India did not understand...
their rights and were unable to picture what life could be like if they relocated or remained. Baird and Shoemaker (2007) discovered that the voluntary resettlees from Laos were deliberately misled by officials who promised benefits of resettlement that rarely materialized. Other studies have illustrated how consent is not made freely because, in most cases, the initiator of voluntary resettlement (typically the government), operating from an advantageous position in a hugely asymmetric power relationship over local communities, can influence local decision-making by applying political pressure, economic sanctions, or the threat of violence (Morris-Jung & Roth, 2010). For example, “voluntary” resettlements in Laos only occurred after restrictions on slash-and-burn agriculture and the suspension of government services made life difficult for the people to the point that they feel relocation was the only option (Baird & Shoemaker, 2007).

In Mozambique, the success of voluntary resettlement in the creation of the Limpopo National Park was linked to the pressure created by restrictions on livelihood strategies resulting from park regulations (Milgrom & Spierenburg, 2008). Not all threats are made in such conspicuous forms of coercion and exclusion. Writing on the experience of voluntary resettlement to make way for oil developments in Ecuador, Lyall (2017) argues that the decision for the indigenous community to resettle is culturally embedded in the collective memories of “exclusion, violence, and dispossession in relations with mestizo traders, militaries, and olmén over previous decades and generations”.

What these studies suggest is that resettlement is a complex phenomenon and a purely voluntary mechanism is an ideal that is seldom realized in practice. Furthermore, the conceptual dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary resettlement has been criticized by many scholars, who suggest that the boundaries between the two are not clear-cut because of the complexity of the resettlement process (Morris-Jung & Roth, 2010; Schmidt-Soltau & Brockington, 2007; Wilmsen & Wang, 2015). In response, more complex conceptual models have been developed to better capture the characteristics of voluntary resettlement. For example, Gebre (2002) introduced the ideas of induced-voluntary resettlement and compulsory-voluntary resettlement. The former refers to situations where people resettle elsewhere due to induced movement from outside agents. The latter refers to situations where people resettle because of societal pressure or out of desperation.

In light of the above arguments, this paper takes a critical view on China’s poverty alleviation resettlement (PAR). PAR has long been described as voluntary resettlement by the government and state-run media, but this paper represents one of the first attempts to critically evaluate this claim. PAR is one of China’s flagship programs in poverty alleviation. Through this nationwide initiative, the government aims to improve the living standards, incomes, and access to infrastructure and services of poor rural people living in areas deemed unable to support sustainable livelihoods (Lo, Xue, & Wang, 2016). A typical PAR project involves relocating the rural poor away from their original home to a centralized settlement site with better facilities and a more accessible location (Xue, Wang, & Xue, 2013). PAR was first experimented with in the early 1980s as a decade-long pilot program in the western regions of the Loess Plateau. This program resulted in the resettlement of nearly half a million impoverished farmers. In 2001, the government expanded PAR nationally. By the end of 2015, PAR had relocated more than 12 million people, making it one of the largest resettlement programs in China if not the world (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the implementation of PAR is accelerating. According to the latest official plan, 10 million impoverished people will be resettled between 2016 and 2020, which means that China is about to resettle approximately one-eighth of its total poor population (Zhu & Ma, 2016).

1.1. China’s poverty alleviation resettlement

Most resettlement programs in China have been and continue to be involuntary (Wang & Lo, 2015). These programs include development-driven resettlement such as the Three Gorges Dam (Duan & Wilmsen, 2012; Wilmsen, 2016; Wilmsen, Webber, & Duan, 2011a) and, more recently, the South-North Water Transfer Project (Lin, 2017; Moore, 2014; Webber, Crow-Miller, & Rogers, 2017) and the Upper Mekong dams (Tilt & Gerkey, 2016); ecological resettlements which particularly affect the nomadic pastoralists living in the vast grasslands of Inner Mongolia and the Tibetan Plateau (Du, 2012; Fan, Li, & Li, 2015; Tashi & Foggin, 2012); and urbanization-driven resettlements where farmers on the urban fringe are resettle to make way for urban expansion (Liu, Zhang, & Lo, 2014; Ong, 2014; Tang, Hao, & Huang, 2016; Zhang, Wu, Zhong, Zeng, & Wang, 2017). Taken together, these studies have shown that despite the promises of “resettlement with development” (RvD), the priorities of the state have consistently trumped those of the resettlers, leading to a wide range of negative economic, social, and ecological impacts on the affected communities and their habitat.

PAR in China differs from other forms of state-driven resettlement by its official emphasis on voluntarism. In 2016, the central government formulated four pillars to guide the implementation of PAR programs: precision in targeting the poor, voluntarism, preparation of resettlement sites, and long-term benefits. Under voluntarism, the following guideline has been issued: “fully respect the will of the public with regards to resettlement; do not engage in forced resettlement; do not turn PAR into campaign style resettlement” (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016). In February 2017, Xi Jinping, the president of China, instructed the Politburo that PAR needed to “adhere to the principle of voluntarism” (Xinhua, 2017). However, there is a lack of guideline on how voluntarism can be guaranteed in practice, as much of the implementation details are left to be determined by local authorities. Furthermore, the target of relocating 10 million people by 2020 may pose a threat to voluntarism because it may pressure local officials to encourage resettlement to fulfill the target.

Is there any substance behind the rhetoric? In one of the few scholarly studies that took a critical look at this issue, Xue et al. (2013), using a local case study from Shanxi, described the process of PAR in great detail and highlighted a number of mechanisms through which voluntarism is guaranteed. These researchers observed that in a typical PAR program, the local government was the initiator by designating villages that satisfied the national and provincial criteria as potential candidates. The local government then approached the village committee, which was a village-level governing body, and the two parties would meet and negotiate details such as resettlement sites and timelines. Resettlement sites were typically chosen based on a number of criteria, such as topography, accessibility, the availability of resources, and ecological and social impacts. If an agreement could be reached between the village committee and the local government, a village-wide assembly was convened to inform the villagers of the plan and to vote on whether the village was to participate in the PAR program. Only if more than a certain percentage of households in the village (over 80% in Shanxi province) agreed to participate could the project proceed to the next phase. If there was more than one possible resettlement site, the villagers could vote for their preferred site. It should be noted that even if the villages as a whole agreed to resettle, individual households were allowed to not participate. Lo et al. (2016) interviewed non-movers of PAR programs and found that the most common reason for non-participation was that they could not afford the costs of resettle-ment. Additionally, unlike most forced resettlement projects, PAR resettlers do not lose their land and original dwelling and therefore can return to their former home if they were unsatisfied with the result of resettlement. Several independent reports from foreign media have provided evidence on this phenomenon of returning. For example, a recent report from Guizhou, Southwest China, observed that many re-settlers were returning because of the high cost of living in cities and the lack of jobs (Financial Times, 2017).

Despite the confirmation from these studies and reports, there remain ambiguities with regards to PAR and voluntarism. First, we know very little regarding the consultation process conducted prior to
resettlement. Whether and to what extent the community is informed and consulted on resettlement matters is unclear. Second, we know little regarding how decisions over resettlement are shaped by authorities using either pressure or inducement. Third, resettlers are often treated conceptually as a homogeneous group in the literature, which tends to mask the diversity of volition. In reality, there are bound to be some resettlers who consider the resettlement voluntary, whereas others may consider it to be involuntary, and the reasons behind these contrasting perceptions should be better understood.

To overcome these limitations, we conducted a theoretically guided large-scale household survey that collects first-hand data from the resettlers. We believe this approach can minimize the influence of official propaganda and enable us to avoid characterizing voluntarism solely at the program level. By comparing and contrasting the different perspectives of the resettlers, we seek to understand who the unwilling resettlers are and why they think it is involuntary, even when their fellow resettlers think otherwise. There are four guiding questions. First, what was the willingness to resettle among the resettlers and what factors affect the willingness? Second, to what extent did the resettlers become informed about the resettlement and participate in decision-making? Third, what were the reasons for resettlement? Fourth, what is the relationship between willingness to resettle and the degree of satisfaction? Addressing these questions not only advances the debate on the meaning and nature of voluntary resettlement but also produces important practical solutions for improving voluntary resettlement.

2. Method

We focus on the Loess Plateau because of the prevalence of severe poverty in the region. The 640,000 km² area is located in the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River in northwestern China, which spans much of Shanxi, Shaanxi, Ningxia, and Gansu provinces. The Loess Plateau has widespread poverty problems due to a number of environmental and human factors, including severe soil erosion, limited arable land, poor soil quality, arid climate, rapid population growth, and unsustainable agricultural practices (Shi & Shao, 2000; Tang, Bennett, Xu, & Li, 2013; Zhao, Mu, Wen, Wang, & Gao, 2013).

A total of 30 PAR projects were chosen to be included in this study (Fig. 1). The selection of PAR projects was based on establishing a representative sample. We avoided choosing the so-called “model” projects because it would introduce bias, as these resettlement sites tend to be wealthier and receive more government support (Rogers, 2014). To enhance representativeness, we conducted fieldwork in two provinces (Shanxi and Shaanxi). This approach was employed because although the PAR is a national policy, there may be significant implementation variation by different local governments. We also visited resettlement projects completed in different years because PAR may have changed over time. We also ensured that our samples include both long- and short-distance resettlements. Long-distance resettlement involves relocating rural people to cities or towns, whereas short-distance resettlement moves people within the existing administrative boundaries of the village or to a nearby village (Lo et al., 2016).

We conducted the fieldwork between March and June of 2013 when we visited the chosen sites and administered the questionnaires face-to-face to selected households. Households were selected by counting off every other house in each site such that roughly half of the available resettlers were surveyed. We surveyed all household members in a household. Questions included demographics, pre-resettlement income, pre-resettlement occupation, willingness to resettle, reasons for resettling, and degree of satisfaction. Overall, we collected 1723 valid responses, among which 935 (54.3%) were male and 788 (45.7%) were female. Average household size was 4.6 people. Average age was 44.7. In addition, we conducted 142 supplementary interviews with selected respondents. During these semi-structured interviews, the respondents could more freely express their views and concerns over their resettlement experience. These qualitative data were helpful in interpreting the quantitative results. We undertook a pilot study before conducting the household survey and interviews. The design of the survey was based on the answers from the pilot study.

3. Results

3.1. Willingness to resettle

The majority of respondents expressed that they resettled voluntarily, but there was a small minority of unwilling resettlers. Among the respondents, 1458 (84.6%) indicated that they resettled voluntarily, 147 (8.5%) were neutral, and 118 (6.8%) indicated they involuntarily resettled. To understand the differences between the three groups of resettlers, we collected socioeconomic and demographic data of the respondents. We found that the most significant factor was pre-resettlement income. The willing resettlers, on average, had a significantly higher pre-resettlement annual household income (RMB 19,776, 1 RMB = 0.15 USD) than neutral resettlers (RMB 15,884) and unwilling resettlers (RMB 14,795). Statistical analysis by ANOVA gave a p-value of .02, which indicated that the differences were statistically significant. The size of household was also an important factor. The unwilling resettlers typically came from smaller households (average 4.2 people) compared to neutral resettlers (4.7 people) and willing resettlers (4.6 people). The results from ANOVA indicated that the differences were statistically significant (p = 0.00). An analysis of pre-resettlement occupation and willingness to resettle suggested that the two were also related. Farmers, students, and other people without an off-farm occupation were associated with a lower willingness to resettle, whereas professionals, laborers, farmer-laborers, and government officials were associated with a higher willingness to resettle (Fig. 2). Statistical analysis using Pearson’s chi-square test suggested the differences were statistically significant (p = .00). Pre-resettlement income, occupation, and household size were three closely related factors. Taken together, these findings suggested that the most impoverished households were less willing to relocate, which reflected the high financial cost of resettlement. In the PAR projects we studied, while the houses were built by the government, the households paid RMB 64,378 on average. This figure did not take into account the cost of relocation. Given that the PAR targets the poorest people in China, this sum was significant.

Turning to the household position of respondents, the results showed that the patterns between different groups were similar. Analysis using Pearson’s chi-square test suggested the differences were not statistically significant (p = .31). This result was surprising because we hypothesized that the head of households, as the main decision-maker of the household, would on average have a higher level of willingness to resettle compared to other members of the household, but this elevated willingness was not supported by evidence. The patterns between the two genders were also very similar. Of the willing resettlers, there were 791 males (54.3%) and 667 females (45.7%). Of the neutral resettlers, there were 79 males (53.7%) and 68 females (46.3%). Of the unwilling resettlers, there were 65 males (55.1%) and 53 females (44.9%). Analysis using Pearson’s chi-square test suggested the difference was not statistically significant (p = .98).

In terms of age, the willing resettlers had an average age of 44.7, the neutral resettlers had an average age of 43.38, and the unwilling resettlers had a slightly higher average age of 46.7. Statistical analysis using ANOVA indicated that the differences were not statistically significant (p = .21). To look at the results in greater depth, Fig. 3 shows the age composition of three groups of resettlers. The percentage of unwilling resettlers in the 21–30 age group was lower than average, whereas that of the > 60 age group and ≤ 20 age group was higher than average. This suggested that the older generations were less willing to resettle, whereas the younger groups, with the exception of the under 20 group, were more likely to resettle voluntarily.

For education, most respondents were receiving or had received the education...
primary or junior high school education, with very few receiving senior high school and tertiary education. Fig. 4 compares the education profile of the three groups of resettlers. The most interesting pattern is that unwilling resettlers tended to be less educated than neutral and willing resettlers. In total, 41.5% of unwilling resettlers were receiving or had received primary education, compared to 34.7% of willing resettlers and 36.1% of neutral resettlers. In contrast, 39.8% of unwilling resettlers received junior high school, compared to 49.9% of willing resettlers and 51.0% of neutral resettlers. In general, it can be observed that education is positively correlated with willingness to resettle. However, Pearson’s chi-square test indicated that the differences were not statistically significant (p = .197).

In terms of the size of original dwelling, the differences between the three types of resettlers were very small. On average, the willing resettlers had a 105.4 m² dwelling; neutral resettlers 108.9 m², and unwilling resettlers 101.4 m². ANOVA gave a p-value of .64, which indicates that the differences were not statistically significant.

3.2. Communication and participation

We found that only 4.6% of the respondents indicated that they were well-informed regarding the PAR project; 64.9% were partially informed, and 30.5% were completely uninformed. The main sources of information were village assemblies and the village committees. This finding suggested that the local governments were not directly involved in communication with the participants prior to securing their consent, relying instead on village administration (local elites). Our supplementary interviews revealed that the villagers were typically told of the resettlement plan verbally and were asked to indicate their preference in a very short time. The villagers were not given detailed information about the resettlement or time to consider the implications. When asked whether more information would have changed their attitude towards resettlement, the vast majority (85.9%) responded that they would have been more supportive of resettlement if they had better information on location, housing, amenities, and subsidies. This finding showed that the uncertainty created by the lack of information to a certain extent harmed the willingness to move among PAR resettlers.

We also observed that public participation in decision-making over key aspects of PAR was highly insufficient. Only 10.4% of respondents stated that they were fully engaged in the decision-making process over resettlement, whereas 68.4% stated that they were somewhat engaged, and 8.9% stated that they were not engaged. Given that everyone in the village had to vote on the PAR project, this could mean that many respondents did not consider the voting to be meaningful participation.
We asked the respondents if they were given a choice over resettlement location. Only 9% of the respondents indicated positively. In fact, decisions over the resettlement projects were made between the local government and local elites behind closed doors, and the wider community was involved only after all of the details had been worked out. In this “take-it-or-leave-it” approach, the input from villagers on aspects of the resettlement plan, such as site of resettlement, amount of subsidy, and resettlement timeline, was very limited.

3.3. Why resettle?

What enticed the resettlers to move? We asked the respondents to provide up to three reasons that they think were the most important. Nine options were given to the respondents. The full results are shown in Fig. 5. For willing resettlers, the perception that the resettlement site was more convenient was the most important reason (selected by 62.3% of the respondents), followed by the family’s future (48.8%) and the derelict state of the original residence (40.9%). For neutral resettlers, the family’s future became the most important reason (57.8%), followed by that the resettlement site is more convenient (46.9%), and the government’s promise to build a new house for them (31.3%). For unwilling resettlers, all these reasons received far less endorsement, with only 28.0% agreeing that the resettlement site is more convenient, 29.7% moving for the family, and 15.3% indicating that the original
building was too poor. Reasons such as everyone is moving (17.8%) and cannot survive on my own (15.3%) were more common among this group. Surprisingly, few resettlers in all groups selected more job opportunities (8.5%) and increasing income (3.3%) as reasons for resettlement.

Overall, the results suggested that improvement to the quality of life was the strongest motivation for moving. Prior to moving, because of the lack of resources, the resettlers typically lived in very old earthen cave dwellings called tuyao. These cave dwellings were often very derelict or even at risk of collapsing. Furthermore, because these cave dwellings were often located at remote locations, traveling to work or to school was very inconvenient and time-consuming. These problems explained why new houses and convenient location were among the most important reasons for resettlement. The resettlement site was typically built on flat land and close to the main road, which enabled easier transportation to outside the village. Furthermore, modern amenities were built due to the concentration of population through resettlement. The subsidies offered by the government also played an important role in driving resettlement. On average, each household were provided with a subsidy of approximately RMB 15,000.

We were concerned that many people decided to move because of pressure from the local elites or the government, but we did not obtain strong evidence to support this. Few respondents chose “everyone is moving” and “cannot survive on my own” as their reasons to move. This finding suggested that the respondents were not overly concerned that they would be left isolated by the community if they did not resettle. However, one expression from the respondents at the interviews was that they felt inclined to support a government initiative, which suggests that to a certain extent, the authoritative position of the Chinese government shapes the public’s willingness to resettle.

Fig. 4. Willingness to resettle and education.

Fig. 5. Reasons for resettlement.
3.4. Satisfaction

The degree of satisfaction of the respondents was expressed on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = very unsatisfactory, 2 = unsatisfactory, 3 = neutral, 4 = satisfactory, and 5 = very satisfactory. The average score was 4.31, which suggests that most resettlers were satisfied with the resettlement results. However, significant differences can be observed among the different types of resettlers. Willing resettlers had a significantly higher score (4.50) compared to neutral resettlers (3.37) and unwilling resettlers (3.51). Statistical analysis using ANOVA indicated that the difference was statistically significant (p = .00). This finding suggested that there was a strong positive correlation between willingness to resettle and satisfaction.

Fig. 6 details what resettlers were most satisfied with. The responses from the three groups of resettlers were quite similar. Many respondents were satisfied with the better facilities and amenities at the resettlement site (selected by 58.0% of the respondents) and the new house (48.3%). Few respondents were satisfied with the help and subsidies provided by the government (24.4%), convenience in going to school (24.9%), and convenience in traveling to work (17.9%). Better income (3.3%) and more job opportunities (2.3%) were among the least common options. Participation in the consultation process was the least commonly chosen option (1.5%), which indicated that most resettlers felt that they were not consulted in a meaningful way.

Fig. 7 shows what the resettlers were least satisfied with. The most common answer was increased cost of living, selected by 41.5% of unwilling resettlers but by only 28.6% of neutral resettlers and 27.4% of willing resettlers. The higher cost of living can be attributed to urban lifestyles and debt repayment. Debt incurred from resettlement was the second most common response from unwilling resettlers (28.0%), but it was less common for neutral (17.7%) and willing resettlers (11.2%). Also relevant was that 11.9% of unwilling respondents indicated their income decreased, compared to 6.1% of neutral resettlers and 3.6% of willing resettlers. Complaints about the new living environment were also common across all groups of resettlers, especially about the lack of gardening space. Very few resettlers chose discrimination from locals, inability to adapt to new lifestyle, and insufficient job opportunities as reasons for dissatisfaction.

These results reflected the fact that unwilling resettlers typically came from poorer backgrounds, and therefore were not only more sensitive to increases in the cost of living but also had to take on more debt to finance the resettlement. Many dissatisfactions were also linked to the lack of pre-resettlement communication, and as a result, many resettlers, especially those relocated to the cities, were ill-prepared for the rising cost of living and the challenges in securing urban jobs. Furthermore, complaints over design of the garden reflected the failure of the government to consult the communities and to understand their needs.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we presented new but inconclusive evidence on China’s PAR from the perspective of voluntarism. On the one hand, the surveyed resettlers stated strongly that they relocated willingly under PAR, and they were free to participate and free to return to their original dwelling if they were not satisfied with the resettlement. Furthermore, consent was mostly free and driven by a desire to improve the quality of life, and we did not find that the resettlers had been pressured by the government and the village leadership to participate in resettlement, although the authority of the government and the inducement of government subsidies do play a role in driving consent. On the other hand, our examination on the resettlement process and the perceptions among the resettlers revealed that the resettlers were uninformed over many aspects of the resettlement project. The consultation process was rushed and there was no meaningful input from the villagers. This was problematic not only because it undermined the FPIC principle but also left resettlers ill-prepared for post-resettlement challenges, such as rising living cost, difficulties in finding off-farm jobs, and debt from resettlement.

We also found that willingness to resettle contributes to satisfaction of resettlement, with willing resettlers expressing a more positive attitude than neutral and unwilling resettlers. In general, the aspect with which PAR resettlers were most satisfied was the improvement in living environments, and the aspect with which they were most dissatisfied was the increased cost of living and debt.

Another key message from the study is that a differentiated view on volition in resettlement is important in building a more nuanced understanding of voluntary resettlement. Willingness to resettle varies from person to person. Our analysis suggests that whether people want to resettle is related to a multitude of factors at the household and
individual levels, but economic factors are key. Resettlers from poorer and smaller households were less willing to move because they were particularly sensitive to the negative financial impacts of resettlement. While PAR is supported by funding from the government, resettlement is not free. In fact, the majority of the cost of building a new house had to be shouldered by the resettlers themselves, which significantly affected the willingness to resettle among poorer households. Furthermore, living in the resettlement site resulted in an increase in cost of living, especially long-distance resettlement because resettlers had to give up farming and paid for food and fuel. Relatedly, pre-resettlement occupation is also an important factor. Farmers were less willing to resettle because of the inconvenience of farming post-resettlement, which was due to both longer traveling distances and the lack of space in the resettlement communities to raise livestock and store farming equipment. Conversely, laborers typically welcomed resettlement because they can more easily travel to urban centers to find work. Business owners also welcomed resettlement because the resettlement sites were better equipped to attract potential customers. Also worth noting is the generation gap in resettlement. Older generations were less willing to resettle compared to younger generations, primarily because older generations are more attached to the traditional ways of living and are less able to adapt to new environments. This generation gap phenomenon has been reported elsewhere, such as in Laos (Evrard & Goudineau, 2004). Overall, it can be concluded that the unwilling resettlers were typically the ones who are the most marginalized and disempowered in the community: the poor and old with farming-only occupations.

In sum, it is difficult to determine whether PAR should be classified as voluntary or forced, not only because it contained elements of both but also because of the presence of differentiated views on volition among the resettlers. These findings paint a less rosy picture of PAR than the one presented by the government. By better understanding the resettlers and their concerns, this paper highlights the limitations of PAR as a voluntary resettlement program, and offers a number of policy recommendations broadly oriented to increasing the degree of voluntarism and satisfaction of PAR.

First, PAR needs to improve the community consultation process by better soliciting input from villagers and making sure that they receive sufficient information to give informed consent. Extra efforts need to be made to include marginalized or minority voices, which would involve a number of significant changes to the current consultation practice: (1) present the information about resettlement to villagers not just verbally but also visually in more permanent form. In keeping with internationally accepted guidelines (Hanna & Vanclay, 2013), at a minimum, informed consent requires that resettlers be notified about their rights, given an opportunity to see the resettlement site, accurately told about the compensation they will receive, and be educated on foreseeable challenges they may face upon relocation; (2) allow for sufficient time for villagers to digest the information and to formulate their own opinion; and (3) instead of a “take-it-or-leave-it” approach, allow for more comprehensive community input on a broader range of topics.

Second, given that the poorer and older households are less able to afford the relocation and are more vulnerable to the increased costs of living, the government should provide them with more targeted assistance and subsidies. If the government can fully cover the cost of relocation and the building of the new home, the marginalized households would certainly be more willing to move. The government can also provide subsidized loans and encourage companies and philanthropists to become more engaged in supporting marginalized households.

The third policy recommendation is to focus on improving income and job opportunities post-resettlement. Currently, the government considers the resettlement project completed once the villagers have moved to the resettlement site. This approach neglects the importance of post-resettlement support, which is especially crucial for long-distance resettlement, where resettlers need to adapt to a very different lifestyle and the challenges of finding a new livelihood in the city. The government can sponsor workshops that offer skills training to resettlers, organize job fairs, and ensure older people find employment. The government can also develop industrial zones at the resettlement site to attract businesses and create job opportunities for the resettlers.

While we have taken a critical standpoint throughout this paper, we agree with Xue et al. (2013) that compared to other forms of resettlement in China, PAR is a step in the right direction. The level of satisfaction among the resettlers was notably higher compared to involuntary resettlement, such as land appropriation due to urban expansion, which results in numerous conflicts between the resettlers and the government (Song, Wang, & Lei, 2016; Tong, Zhang, Lo, Chen, & Gao, 2017). The lessons from this study therefore have broader policy relevance. Voluntary resettlement can be an important instrument beyond poverty alleviation, but meaningful improvement needs to be made before it becomes an ethical and effective policy.
References


