

Teaching About Population Displacement: Reflections About a Collection of Syllabi

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Social science research on population displacement has vastly expanded in recent decades, in all respects: more published empirical investigations; broader territorial coverage; increasing efforts towards theory building; methodological innovations in research; and visibly stronger influence on actual policies and on operational programs. Now, due to the present compendium of University syllabi, we receive convincing testimony about yet another dimension of this growth: the expansion and diversification of academic teaching about displacement and resettlement. This is an important body of research-accumulated knowledge about displacement, not only claiming, but also legitimately staking, its own territory in the academy. Specialized university courses multiply, achieve clearer didactic structure and — most importantly — gain access to more minds eager to learn.

The present compendium of University syllabi, tenaciously collected and organized by Gimena Garzoli-Sánchez for the Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, is indeed a very timely and important academic publication. It makes possible for the first time an intellectual stock-taking of the progress accomplished to date in the academic reproduction and communication of knowledge about population involuntary displacement. It also enables the exchange of experiences, between those at great distance of each other from the US to Bangladesh, from China to South Africa, from India to Norway, and to and from many other countries — who now teach, or would teach these topics in the future. The international community of scholars, researchers and practitioners in this domain therefore owe a debt of gratitude to the Brookings-SAIS Project and its leaders, Francis Deng and Roberta Cohen, and to Garzoli-Sánchez as editor, for undertaking this stock-taking and making the results publicly available. This contributes to intellectual exchange and reciprocal learning, gathers building-blocks for promoting more such courses elsewhere in the world, and helps develop a shared conceptual vocabulary and interdisciplinary exchanges.

Even a brief immersion in this rich collection stimulates many ideas on how this line of teaching can be advanced further. I share some personal thoughts here, in the hope that they may trigger a broader discussion about the substance of educating skilled professionals in refugee assistance, reducing and mitigating development-caused displacement, risk-management, and development and reintegration.

The Typology of Population Displacements

What are the basic concepts and propositions around which these syllabi revolve? To what extent is there a common theoretical foundation to these courses?

The syllabi in the present volume explore various *types* of displacement processes. To define and categorize them, they use, by and large, the same broad concepts, yet not always in the same sense. One

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basic conceptual distinction holds, apparently, throughout most syllabi — the distinction between “refugees”, as forcibly displaced people who have crossed a national border, and “internally displaced populations” who — although dislocated from their places of origin against their will — have not crossed a border and have relocated (temporarily or permanently) inside their own country. The syllabi reveal, however, divided teaching preferences when it comes to subsuming these two categories into one broader notion: the terms employed are either “forced migration” or, simply, “population displacement”. Significant currency has been gained in recent years by the newly coined term “forced migration”, as a big-tent concept able to encompass all forms of involuntary displacement. But there are perceived problems with this concept: the recourse to a qualifier (“forced”) in addition to the noun (migration) and the risk of confusion, of inadvertent overlap and conceptual contamination with the classic concept of “population migration” that is voluntary (such as in “rural-urban migration”, “international migration”, etc.) has made some of the syllabi studiously avoid the ambiguities of the “forced migration” term.

Instead, we can clearly note the visible ascent of the clear and unqualified concept of “population displacement” as the encompassing term of choice, obviously not burdened by any overlap and contamination with “regular” migration. This ascent is primarily due to the expanding use, in teaching as well as in practice, of the UN “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement”² (recommended as reading in virtually all syllabi).³ It is too early to conclude, however, and more scholarly discussion of these two broad concepts forced migration and population displacement will surely lead to more consensus as to which one is more precise, and adequate for both teaching and theory building. Yet clearly, terminology problems remain still acute in displacement research and teaching. The divide between researchers of refugee movements from wars and conflicts, on the one side, and researchers of development-caused displacement and resettlement, on the other side, and the gaps in connections between them are still far from being enduringly bridged, despite positive steps in this direction.⁴ This perpetuates ambiguities in teaching, when the same concept (e.g., resettlement) is used in a certain one-sided sense, without care to at least signal the alternative meanings and uses of the same concept. Clearly, the “resettlement” of refugees, and the “resettlement” of development-displaced people are processes that differ profoundly in their dynamic and content, despite the use of the same term. One would hope that the obligation for stringency in classroom teaching will put constructive pressure towards more terminological precision and closer bridging of concepts used in various sub-areas of displacement research.

Internally Displaced Populations

To the observers of what Universities have been offering over the last 10 to 15 years on population displacement issues, one important new trend is fully obvious in the present compendium. Ten or more years ago the dominant theme was “refugees”, while the populations internally displaced by the same causes did not come under the lens of research and teaching. Gradually, however, the research community realized the huge magnitude of internal displacement and its distinct status and charac-

² Francis Deng, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, Addendum to the Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 1997/39, February 1998, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2.

³ See in particular, Cohen, R. and Deng, F.M. 1998. *Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement*. Washington, DC: Brookings Press; and Cohen, R. and Deng, F.M. 1998. *The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced*. Washington DC: Brookings Press.

⁴ Cernea, Michael. 1996 “Bridging the Research Divide: Studying Refugees and Development Oustees”. In T. Allen, ed. *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight, and Homecoming*. London: James Currey.

teristics, compared to cross-border displacement. Over time, this led to changes at Universities as well. Currently, the academic landscape is enriched by many courses about just such *internal* displacement, parallel with courses on trans-border refugees. This compendium did not propose to collect courses on refugees, even though refugee issues are far from absent and are included in the numerous academic offerings on conflict, war, and related issues. Yet definitely the multiplication of *internal* displacement courses, dedicated to the different forms such internal dislocations take, are a new trend.

Sure enough, there are many ways to tailor course content. Some faculty choose the intensive, focused approach, and offer well circumscribed courses on one or another type of displacement, while others prefer the broader approach, offering integrated courses that condense in one syllabus information on both refugees and internally displaced persons, promoting comparative examination. What seems to me novel and significant is primarily the distinctiveness acquired by internal displacement as an object of study. I think that this trend mirrors growing specialization within the field and portends the orientation for the future, without reducing the intrinsic importance of refugee studies.

Development-Caused Displacement

Another novel trend reflected in the present compendium is the presence of courses and sections of courses devoted to development-caused displacement. The subject is not new in academia. It has been, and continues to be, present in numerous courses dedicated to development in general. But in the area we consider, courses specially dedicated to development-imposed dislocations are gaining independent status. Obviously, this is not by happenstance. Available statistics indicate that development-displaced groups are massive and, in totality, represent the *single most numerous subcategory* among all internally displaced categories. This is well documented particularly for the most populous, and relatively politically stable countries, such as India, China, Brazil, and others. Research into development-caused displacement has also crafted in recent years a set of important new concepts apt to capture the inner typology of these processes: their characteristics by sector of displacement, by extent of dispossession, by type of resettlement, etc. However, this refined conceptual apparatus is still not fully reflected in most syllabi, and this may suggest an area of needed improvement.

In substance, the content of the development-displacement syllabi is heavily weighted toward the paradox that some of the development projects designed to achieve poverty reduction end up impoverishing (compensation payments notwithstanding) the populations they displace and relocate. The connection between the impact of internal displacement, on the one hand, and impoverishment risks, on the other hand, highlighted in a number of syllabi, proves instrumental for linking the theme of displacement to what is currently the most powerful paradigm in contemporary policies and politics: the poverty reduction paradigm. The inner links between the two are objective, inherent, and intrinsic. Yet they need to be made explicit and obvious in teaching about involuntary displacement as a controversial issue on internal and international agendas. That an increasing number of courses make this link with poverty and impoverishment bodes very well, in my view, for the relevance of this teaching and for equipping students intellectually and morally.

Ethics and Human Rights

Remarkably, ethical issues and human rights issues come up frequently as explicit themes in the syllabi and, in my value-laden view, this is indeed how such courses should be taught. The knowledge generated by research on displacement and communicated through teaching is never just knowledge

for knowledge, but is knowledge for action. This knowledge should inform measures to avoid or reduce displacement, and mitigate impoverishment and other perverse effects. The moral argument is germane to this orientation. Courses that emphasize it educate and better equip their students for practical operational work in this domain.

The Argument Against Teaching Displacement

While the interest in teaching and studying population displacement processes is measurably expanding, I have heard also — from some colleagues in the broader social science community — an odd argument against courses dedicated to this subject. This argument contends that refugee crises or internal population displacement are not “anthropological” enough to qualify as subjects for full-fledged academic courses. These would be rather topics “suitable for classes on social work”, rather than for higher-level graduate courses in sociology or anthropology.

I couldn’t disagree more with such an argument. It only reflects the detachment of some of our professional colleagues from major processes indelibly imprinted on today’s world agenda, that which development, civil wars and environmental disasters posit for resolution.

In fact, population displacement resulting from violent conflicts or from “routine” development programs represents a *strategic window* into our societies and into the construction of our lives and future. Perhaps even more than some other topics, they allow students to understand profoundly the contradictory facets of progress, the good and the bad, the desirable and the undesirable, what is worth supporting, and what must be prevented or mitigated. It is surely necessary, for instance, for anthropologists to understand the structure of kinship systems, cross-cousin marriage patterns or funeral rites in various cultures, in order to grasp the architecture of social systems and how people live. But it is no less important, or less prone to intellectual endeavor and to theorizing, to study the thorny processes of civil wars and their causes, or the adverse displacement effects of some major development programs, which at the same time help secure energy, drinking water, transportation, health services, and other benefits. The intrinsic intellectual content of all syllabi in this compendium convincingly refute any contention that these issues are not a legitimate subject for academic endeavor.

Reaching Beyond the Immediate

Another observation along the same line, in light of the many provocative syllabi in this collection, is that population displacement courses, when taught to graduate students, offer many possibilities for reaching into intellectual areas that at first sight may seem unrelated. Yet the connections are deep and easy to make.

Speaking from the experience of my own course on development and population displacement, I’d mention that both its students and myself as instructor enjoyed opening wider “windows” into development issues, and into the contribution of related disciplines, like economics, geography, or even legal doctrines. Of course, the time for lectures is limited, but there are ways of involving graduate students themselves in developing the topics which the lecturer can only mention fugitively because of time limitations. In my course, I invited the students to choose topics for their final term papers among a wide range of themes which would require them to do independent library study beyond the intellectual territories that we managed to cover in the classroom. Such difficult topics proved

challenging and attractive. The subjects for term papers ranged over a vast spectrum: for instance, the relevance of Rawl's theory of justice to resettlement policies; or Amartya Sen's entitlement theory and the deprivation of displaced people of their income-earning capacities; or a comparison between India's original and revised Land Acquisition Acts of 1894 and of 1984 or a comparison among European, American, and African approaches to establishment of Natural Parks/Protected Areas, with or without the forced displacement of their resident populations; or the secondary analysis of findings reported in the anthropological literature about displacement caused by biosphere reserves in Latin America; or the origins of the doctrine of eminent domain law and its adequacy, inadequacy and effects today in expropriations done for development programs; and so on. Of course, the range of displacement topics is unlimited, and so is the potential for intellectual gain.

Learning for Practical Work

Some of the most interesting syllabi about internal displacement reproduced in this compendium clearly aim to equip students with concepts, methods, and knowledge potentially useful in practical work, during or immediately after completing their degrees, in assistance programs of people internally displaced by civil wars, development programs, or disasters. This gives more confidence to many students who love studying sociology or anthropology, for instance, but don't quite know exactly what kind of jobs they can perform, other than teaching, when they finish their studies. In light of the reviewed syllabi, it may be worth emphasizing this practical orientation within this family of academic course-offerings. While these are definitely not courses in social work, absorbing information and concepts usable as professional tools can only enrich students' preparation for value-oriented humanitarian work and for negotiating fickle job markets. Surely, not all students who take courses of the kind described will do practical work in this field. But those of them who would be much better prepared for such work, while those who won't would have gained an understanding of important processes buffeting our societies.

Non-University Training Courses

The Brookings-SAIS collection of syllabi brings us also a section containing training modules on internal displacement designed for non-University courses. This brought to mind a situation that I observed initially with surprise, but which I noticed again and again during my field work on development projects entailing displacement and resettlement. Frequently, the responsibility for implementing these components are entrusted to an operating "Resettlement Unit" or "Resettlement Cell". Having met many managers of such resettlement units, I discovered with astonishment that in the majority of cases it was for the first time in their professional careers that those individuals were called upon to conduct such multisided, complex social processes. Most had no prior experience, whatsoever. Nor was access to management training made available to them before being given their demanding managerial jobs. In the organizational structures of projects that are dominated primarily by technical expertise, the social content of managing resettlement tends to rank low on the totem-pole of project skills.

The inordinately high proportion of resettlement project managers who are in first contact with this kind of work is partly explained by a high rate of turnover. Many who had previously held such responsibility in a prior project, and failed, prefer to take on a different job in a subsequent project rather than continue in the same kind of work — so that even that hard accumulated experience is being lost. There isn't yet, in this kind of work, a professional "career line", which would encourage

and reward continuity, while also building lessons of past work into confronting similar challenges elsewhere. This situation is unfortunately compounded by the availability of only a few options for specialized, regular long term study of resettlement issues, or of sporadic opportunities for intensive short-term training on displacement and resettlement⁵. Good management, able to help improve the disrupted livelihoods of forcibly displaced populations, demands a combination of skills and knowledge that is neither possessed by many nor easy to acquire “on the job” without professional training. It is not surprising that inexperienced management turns out to be, as many project evaluation studies have revealed, one of the main causes of failure to achieve resettlers’ socio-economic redress and development⁶.

In sum, my empirical observations find that countless “managers of resettlement operations” practice their managerial jobs while being handicapped by unsystematic or absent training and preparedness for managing either the socio-cultural *substance* of such risky and complex processes, or their hard *logistics*. I see here a vast opportunity for those teaching academic classes on displacement and resettlement, and for Universities to consider extending their range of offerings, adding courses responsive to the needs of project managers, aid workers, volunteers in humanitarian assistance and so forth. Innovative institutional venues would need to be found, of course, but surely the teaching experience and knowledge embodied in the present compendium suggest that such expanded reach is feasible.

In conclusion, the above observations address only a few aspects of the many experiences revealed by the Brookings-SAIS compendium of syllabi. Further discussion can be expected to take place around this important publication, towards continuous improvement of academic teaching on population displacement issues.

⁵ Universities across the world, in both developed and developing countries, offer only very seldom training to practitioners (non-regular students) on issues of population displacement and resettlement. One important exception is China, where the National Research Center on Resettlement (NRCR) at the Hohai University in Nanjing does offer regular courses to project managers on resettlement issues. In turn, development agencies such as the World Bank or Asian Development Bank have organized short-term ad-hoc courses for project officials, very useful but providing only a drop into the large bucket of needs because established Universities do not aim yet to train full-time specialists in resettlement for work as planners, managers, project officers. In India a remarkable initiative was recently taken for facilitating “learning-at-distance” on resettlement: the India Ghandi Open University (IGNOU), and with assistance from the World Bank, has introduced postgraduate courses on resettlement by development projects. IGNOU currently offers an online “Post graduate certificate Program in management of Displacement, Resettlement and Rehabilitation”, developed by the Sociology and Economics faculties of IGNOU’s School of Social Sciences (see Kumar, Kapil and Swarankar, R.C. 2002 Evaluation Report on the Post-Graduate *Certificate Program in Management of Displacement, Resettlement and Rehabilitation*. IGNOU — New Delhi).

⁶ Cernea, M. and Guggenheim, S. 1996. *Resettlement and Development. The Bankwide Review of Projects with Involuntary Resettlement, 1986-1994*, ESSD, The World Bank: Washington, DC. See also Picciotto, R. van Wicklin, W. and Rice T. 2001, *Involuntary Resettlement, Comparative Perspectives*. Transactions Publishers, New Brunswick — London.