Political Responses to Dam-Induced Resettlement in Northern Uplands Vietnam

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Dam-induced resettlers in Vietnam manifest their responses and resistances in many different ways. This is a multiple response that expresses itself at many different levels and is spatio-temporally contingent. These actors can be individuals, families, groups of people or communities. Drawing on fieldwork in resettlement sites of the So'n La hydropower dam in the north-west of Vietnam, this paper explores how political responses and resistance among So'n La’s resettlers were produced through resettlement conditions. It examines intensive and violent struggles over the land and resources surrounding dam sites, and aims to understand why rural disputes in resettlement sites were often between villagers rather than with the state institutions and local authorities.

Keywords: political responses, dam-induced resettlement, uplands, ethnic minority, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Political response appears as a ubiquitous, if uneven, facet of physical displacement caused by projects undertaken in the name of development. This dislocation often leads to a spectrum of responses, from passive resignation to outright violence, and even forms of chaos. In the autumn of 2005, chaos ensued when the first villagers of So'n La Province had to move out of their land to make way for the So'n La Dam. Houses were taken down; children stopped their schooling; crops remained unwatched; startled and worried faces were everywhere. Relatives from other villages came to help; these villages along the Da River seemed to be busier than ever. It was hard to capture all of these events at the same time: photographs, news reports and video clips were all insufficient. One needed to be there. I was among a group of researchers formed under the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) to be in the area exploring the effects of the dam construction on the local ethnic minority upland groups. We moved from village to village, trying to cover as many villages as possible and get a sense of the situation in each one. Everywhere we went, the only topic we heard being discussed was resettlement.

We arrived at Pa Ha village late one evening.1 By the time we got to the headman’s house it was dark, and we could not see much of the scene until the next morning. Houses had been taken apart, but not all of them. There were more than ten houses standing scattered in

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1 To assure anonymity, the names of villages in this paper have been changed from their real names.
the ‘ruined’ village. The headman explained to us that those houses belonged to 12 families of a clan that had decided to fight against the move. They wanted to stay no matter what. The rest of the village followed the direction of the local authority and project officers, to move to a resettlement site in a different district. No one wanted to move, but different families chose different ways to deal with the situation, following their particular head of clan.

I went back to the area for my research almost every year after that trip and realized that even though their initial choice to move or not was only temporary – they all ended up having to move out of the submerged area – many of the affected people found ways to express resistance and response to the change whenever possible. What struck me was what I would sometimes call people’s political responses, which very often turned to resistance. For many people, resistance did not happen only during the time of moving. Indeed, it happened before, during and even after the resettlement.

This paper examines the struggles of the ethnic minority groups that have suffered the cost of a dam development project in northern uplands Vietnam. My story explains that their struggle has operated according to a timeline (before, during and after resettlement) quite different from that of other areas. It has also occurred in the entirely different sphere of the northern uplands. The distinction between the lowlands and uplands, as agrarian scholars (Li 1999; Scott 2009; Sikor et al. 2011) recognize, is very crucial: it is generally tied to distinct agricultural practices (intensive/wet rice versus extensive/swidden) and ethnic differences (national majority versus ethnic minority).

People have suffered many hardships in the past, due to war, collectivization, sedentarization and so on. But through development projects such as dam construction, the state and its powerful development apparatus have reconstituted upland society in ways that have challenged the social, economic and political patterns that previously prevailed in that area, in more fundamental ways than with the previous disruptions. The ethnic minority people in the north-west have been mostly self-provisioning, and they have always reformulated their strategies to fit various changing contexts and situations, although there was never an easy path. Nevertheless, the resettlement due to the So’n La Dam can be seen as the hardest blow ever to afflict these already marginalized people, as they were uprooted and displaced, receiving only small amounts of low-fertility land in resettlement sites. As a consequence, there have sometimes been intensive and violent struggles over the land and resources surrounding the dam site and in resettlement areas. Often, rural disputes in resettlement sites have been among villagers rather than with state institutions and local authorities. But that has not been the only way in which resettlers have responded to and resisted changes in their lives and living conditions (Dao 2012).

Wherever dams are located, whether in the northern mountains, the central region or the Central Highlands, they often have a particular impact on ethnic minority people – a group that constitutes the majority of the upland dwellers who are forced to become resettlers. This is common not just in Vietnam, but all around the world, since dams are typically built in upland areas inhabited by ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples (Roy 2001; Baviskar 2005; Richter et al. 2010). The resource base on which the resettlers’ mode of farming was grounded, and the community in which the people were embedded, are degraded by resettlement. Even though in most projects the people have received compensation for the loss of their land and assets, elimination of access to water, a serious shortage of land, the destruction of important institutions such as communal landownership and arrangements – these and other factors have made it difficult for resettlers to secure their lives and livelihoods in the new resettlement areas (Roy 2001; Baviskar 2005; Jeuland 2010; Richter et al. 2010). However, despite the new and difficult situations in which they find themselves, they
continue to actively fight for their survival and to establish their presence and spheres of independence.

Vietnam is a useful place to take up questions of political response and resistance because it is often described as a country where resistance is muted or repressed, and where people resist ‘below the radar’ (Turner and Michaud 2009). A popular view of the ‘powerful, dominating Vietnamese state’ asserts that ‘Vietnam’s system is mono-organizational socialism’, where social forces have too little power or no significant impact (Thayer 1992, 111). Due to the state’s strict surveillance over people’s resistance since its independence, most of the time people have barely been able to openly oppose the state’s policies. However, in reality, people adversely affected by the state’s development policies have not always been muted or passive. As Kerkvliet (2005) points out, there have been different views about the state and the responses of the population in Vietnam. In contrast to the above-mentioned view, there is the assertion that ‘social groups and processes that are resistant to state control have remained, shaping Vietnam’s economy and society as much as or more than state policy and administration’ (Kerkvliet 2005, 399). In many cases, ‘people individually and collectively do things outside the state’s sanctions and controls that contradict official plans and prescriptions and throw monkey wrenches into the state’s ability to implement programs’ (Kerkvliet 2005, 399). People’s responses and resistance can often be seen, as people refuse to be quiet, refuse to simply go along with ‘oppression’. Sometimes these struggles are not overt, and do not consist of fighting back or active opposition, but may exist in ‘enduring, in refusing to be wiped off the map of history’ (Pile and Keith 1997, xi).

This paper argues that people’s responses, in many cases, are in forms of resistance that many people may think are absent in Vietnam. They are not only responses limited to everyday life, or ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985). Such is the case when people gathered money to invest in tree planting and house building on the original sites before resettlement, in order to get higher compensation; or when community representatives took the side of ordinary people against the side of the government and dam builders, as I will illustrate later. My goal is thus to better understand the range and the impact of upland people’s responses and resistance to large development projects in Vietnam, compared to previous studies that focus mostly on resistance against domination and assimilation or to collectivization.

In this paper, I will elaborate through a close examination of resettlement, the multiple types of responses in which people engaged, some of which might be unexpected given how Vietnam is often portrayed. Political responses in Vietnam take diverse forms and refer not only to struggles against the ruling groups: the responses also involve daily life strategies for survival. Response strategies can range from collective actions (Tran 2009) to individual small acts (Scott 1985), reluctance to cooperate and slowness to obey, to everyday acts of neighbouring or self-help organizations (Katz 2004), or other tactics to get the most from the situation (Dao 2012).

I will also show how this resistance was effective in provoking a response from the state. Finally, I will identify and explain the limits on resistance, of which the most important was the lack of a basin-wide response.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from July 2009 to March 2010 and also on a number of trips every year to the north-west region since 2005, I will examine the responses and struggles of resettlers in the northern uplands of Vietnam to the changes imposed on their lives by the state. The data and information include survey responses, interviews (with resettlement officers, authorities at different levels and village informants), legal documents and policy papers. In total, I conducted 54 in-depth interviews with government officials at different levels, 12 with resettlement project officers and 34 with informants at the village.
level, and participated in 25 village meetings. In 2009 and 2010, I undertook surveys in two villages, PB and PN. Questionnaire surveys were conducted in the two villages for a total of 123 households (around 94% of the households in each village). PB and PN are two resettlement sites of the So'n La hydropower project, where resettlers were moved from riverbank sites to new areas without any access to a river. The original PB village is located in a flat area and has been considered by the authorities as a model for resettlement work in So'n La. Its population consists of Thái Đen (Black Thái) people. PN is located in a hilly area and its population is comprised of Thái Đen and La Ha people. Both Thái and La Ha are classified by the Vietnamese state as ethnic minority people. However, Thái people are more dominant and can be considered the majority in the north-west uplands of Vietnam, with about 1.6 million people, while the La Ha are a distinct minority, with about 6,000 people (CEMA 2011).

The structure of this paper is as follows: The first section below examines the concepts of response and resistance in agrarian studies. The following section briefly explores responses and resistance in Vietnam after independence in 1954 and up to the present. Then, in the subsequent section, the focus turns to the multiple responses of resettlers from the So'n La Dam, the largest dam under construction in all of Vietnam.

THE CONCEPT OF RESPONSES AND RESISTANCE IN AGRARIAN STUDIES

‘No moment of domination, in whatever form, is completely free of relations of resistance’ (Sharp et al. 2000, 20). Thus, wherever domination exists, no matter in what form, there will always be resistance. However, as Selbin points out, ‘resistance . . . is commonly bandied about with recognition and cognition but little attention to detail. The very concept is somewhat problematic’ (Selbin 2010, 10). Other researchers identify ‘action and opposition’ as two ‘core elements’ of resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, 547). In terms of action, resistance can come in violent and non-violent forms. In terms of ‘resistance against whom’, Scott’s (1985) classic formulation frames resistance as being in opposition to the state, to large landowners and to capital. In addition to ‘action and opposition to whom’, we also need to understand the reasons for the actions of the various parties. In my research I follow Pile and Keith’s suggestion of looking at two ‘surfaces’ of tactics of resistance: ‘one facing towards the map of power, the other facing in another direction, towards intangible, invisible, unconscious desires, pleasures, enjoyments, fears, angers and hopes – the very stuff of politics (and not just radical politics)’ (Pile and Keith 1997, 16). Thus, my research picks up these three important elements: action, direction and motivation.

Resistance manifests itself in many ways and agrarian scholars have understood it in a number of ways, but there is a tendency to emphasize certain forms over others (Amoore 2005). The more open, direct confrontation usually dominates the study of resistance, while ‘everyday’ resistance makes ‘no headlines’ (Scott 1985, 8). The everyday forms of resistance ‘refer to what people do short of organized confrontation that reveals disgust, anger, indignation, or opposition to what they regard as unjust or unfair actions by others more wealthy or powerful than they’ (Kerkvliet 1986, 108). There has been a common understanding that resistance, no matter whether in the form of ‘everyday’ or more open confrontation, signifies intentions and concrete actions taken to oppose others and to refuse to accept their ideas, actions or positions for a variety of reasons, the most common being the perception of the position, claims or actions taken by others as unjust, illegitimate or intolerable attempts at domination. The primary weakness of the everyday resistance approach, however, as White (1986) points out, lies on its focus on negative manifestations of power rather than the
‘question of how peasants can exercise positive political power’ (White 1986, 50). My research, therefore, aims at addressing this weakness by examining how resettlers are exerting their political power to modify the prevailing contours to get the most out of the situation.

In this paper, I consider response, a broader term than resistance, something that encompasses all of the actions people take ‘in response’ to the dam resettlement – this can include cooperation as well as resistance. I see as political responses people’s efforts to try to live within or modify the state’s sanction; these responses may be either positive or negative. Looking broadly at various processes of political responses may help us to improve our understanding of the situation of the upland resettlers in Vietnam. Contemporary studies reveal new processes of response, with increasing attention being paid to how peasants and farmers in rural areas are facing new and increasing constraints imposed by ‘food empires’ (Friedmann 2004; van der Ploeg 2008). Their struggle for survival is an everyday experience, and being conscious of that daily struggle is important, as it helps us to understand who we are working with and in what context. Van der Ploeg asserts that ‘central to the peasant condition is the struggle for autonomy that takes place in a context characterized by dependency relations, marginalization and deprivation’ (van der Ploeg 2008, 23; emphasis in original). In relation to dam development, as researchers recognize, upland resettlers in Vietnam manifest their responses in many different ways, including refusal to cooperate (Dao 2010), grievance (Cao 2003) or learning new ways to adapt (Thi et al. 2013). And more explicit forms of response (such as demonstration or protest) are increasingly common, despite the power of ‘big players’ such as the state, dam investors or developers (Dao 2012). People fight for new resources and new institutions, and for autonomy. This is a multiple response that expresses itself at many different levels, ‘unfolds along different dimensions, and involves a wide range of different actors’ (van der Ploeg 2008, 265). The actors can be individuals, families and larger collectives. Multiple responses among Són La’s resettlers were produced through the resettlement conditions and the resettlers’ social, cultural and environmental interactions, as I will show later.

RESPONSES AND RESISTANCE IN VIETNAM

Over the past three decades, a growing amount of research has been examining the issue of resistance in Vietnam (White 1986; Thayer 2003; Kerkvliet 2005; Caouette and Turner 2009; Tran 2009). These topics were not well examined before the country was opened to outside researchers during the 1990s.

In Vietnam, discussions of resistance are usually about resistance against state agencies, since the state continues to play a major role in organizing and promoting development, including private-sector development. One of the first works on post-revolutionary peasant resistance in Vietnam is that of White (1986). White illustrates ‘everyday resistance’ in Vietnam as ‘non-compliance with official policy’ (White 1986, 59). This was an important contribution to understanding resistance in Vietnam, even though the same phenomena (resistance to government policy) that White (1986) refers to as everyday peasant resistance could also be used as illustrations for different theories, such as rational economic calculation or, as Scott (1976) and Popkin (1979) put it, a ‘moral economy’ or a ‘rational peasant’. In a similar vein, having examined peasant resistance (to government policy) in Vietnam through different important periods: collectivization (1960s to early 1980) and reform and globalization (mid-1980 onwards), Tran (2009) points out that interactions between structure and agency vary considerably according to the context, through both time and space, revealing the diversity of resistance processes. For example, during collectivization from the 1960s to the 1980s, the
main forms of peasant resistance were ‘weapons of the weak’, articulated through everyday acts, while since the economic reform of the late 1980s, these actions have become more open protests, due to changes in the political environment (Tran 2009). In Vietnam, earlier wars and political contexts as well as cultural and historical conditions play a crucial role in shaping people’s responses. For a long time, the people in the North, who had experienced the era of collectivization from the 1960s through to the 1980s, had expressed less overt reactions compared to people in the South, who had experienced this system for a shorter period, from the later 1970s to the 1980s (Beresford 1988). In the North, people’s reactions in rural areas were mostly related to agricultural policies imposed by the state, especially during the collectivization era. These reactions included restricting the acreage of cooperative rice land, or refusing to harvest some of the collective crop (White 1986). It is worth noting that even though farmers were the main actors in these forms of resistance, in many cases local cadres also resisted the implementation of collective agriculture (Fforde 1989).

Since the economic reform in 1986, peasant resistance has taken a more open form. However, such open resistance has remained localized and has rarely targeted the central state. For example, the extensive unrest in Thai Binh province in 1997–8 rocked the country, as farmers protested in six of the province’s seven districts (Thayer 2003). However, the protesters blamed local cadres’ corruption for causing their difficulties instead of criticizing national policies. Peasants adjust their forms and methods of action according to the context of the political opportunities and their understanding of what effective resistance might entail. Thus, their response and resistance are contingent upon the particularity of the spatio-temporal conditions. These strategies can also be found in situations of upland minority people who were displaced by state development programmes, as we will see in the following sections.

In their case study among the Hmong people in Sa Pa, Turner and Michaud (2009) argue that resistance is comprised of a more or less explicit refusal to cooperate, not a stance against stronger opponents (the state and its apparatus). Turner and Michaud (2009) assert that the resistance of the Hmong in Vietnam is based on centuries of ‘proximity, quarrels, political and economic exploitation, rebellion, invasion, war’ (Turner and Michaud 2009, 58). Thus, it is ‘an attitude of resistance to assimilation and domination, a form of collective self-defence rooted in their knowledge of their comparative political weakness’ (Turner and Michaud 2009, 58). According to Turner and Michaud, upland people’s resistance is not straightforward, as the resisters try to keep it ‘under the radar’. However, what happened with resettlers in the Sơn La project – in a different place and time from those studied by others – shows, as we will see in the following sections, that it is not always the case that people keep their resistance under the radar.

In dam-induced resettlement sites, besides struggle between the rich and the poor, between the state as patron and its clients, and between the powerful and the powerless (Scott 1985), I will show in what follows that there is also struggle among the powerless, at either individual or collective levels. This is very different from the situation in other parts of Vietnam described by the authors cited above. Struggles at resettlement sites involve many other factors, including ethnicity, gender and age.

The situation in the north-west uplands of Vietnam is also different from elsewhere in the region, and from other situations around the world – different, for example, from the case of the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand, or the case of the Kayapo in Brazil. Resistance to the Pak Mun Dam began with informal networking among villagers who opposed both the dam and the state’s process, and then spread to townspeople. In the Pak Mun case, there were counter-hegemonic collective actions that later contributed to the formation of the Assembly of the Poor, a national-level alliance of issue-based and regional groups and networks. By the late
1990s, the Assembly of the Poor had emerged as a distinctive new political actor, which worked successfully to bring about positive outcomes for the people affected by the Pak Mun Dam (Foran 2007), including partial decommissioning of the dam itself. In Brazil, the Kayapo formed an alliance, and called for regional and international support to fight against dam building along the Xingu River in Amazonia. They successfully stopped the dams in 1989 and then continued to build their alliance at local and regional levels in order to protect the river (Survival 2006).

Said differently, resistance in other places, outside Vietnam, has more often taken the form of well-organized collective actions that, accordingly, have brought about significant outcomes. However, it is very important to note that over time, the political responses of people in Vietnam have been getting stronger. These responses include more overt forms of resistance and various effective coping strategies, as will be illustrated in the following section.

THE SO’N LA RESETTLEMENT SITES – GROUNDS FOR MULTIPLE RESPONSES

The So’n La Dam

The National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Decision No. 44/2001-QH10) formally approved the construction of the So’n La hydropower project on the Da River on 29 June 2001. It became the most controversial project in modern Vietnam and required the largest resettlement of people in the country’s history.

The dam itself was built in It Ong town, Muong La district, So’n La Province, 350 km north-west of Hanoi (see Figure 1). The designed power generating capacity for the plant was 2,400 MW; the electricity generated per annum was expected to reach 9,429 billion kWh. According to the government, the So’n La hydropower project was in the ‘national interest’ and it aimed at the following key objectives: (1) to provide electricity for socio-economic development, industrialization and modernization of the nation state; (2) to contribute to flood control in the rainy season and irrigation in the dry season in the Red River delta; and (3) to contribute to promoting socio-economic development in the north-west uplands and narrowing the development gap between the upland and lowland regions (So’n La Province’s People Committee 2006). Since the dam is located in the north-west region, which is ranked as one of the poorest areas in Vietnam and is inhabited mostly by marginalized ethnic minority people, the first and third objectives of the project have been particularly highlighted in the north-west provinces where the affected people reside. Banners and slogans about these two important objectives of the project and the determination to successfully fulfil resettlement work could be found in many places in the three affected provinces: So’n La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien.

Organizing Resettlement

The So’n La hydropower project has displaced 100,000 people (around 19,000 families) in the three provinces of So’n La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien. In So’n La Province alone, portions of

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three districts (Quynh Nhai, Thuan Chau and Muong La), and especially the whole of Quynh Nhai town and a large part of Muong La district, are in the submerged area, with a total of 31 communes, including 248 villages comprising in all 14,993 households (So’n La People’s Committee 2006). The most challenging task for the project has been to organize resettlement. The propaganda for resettlement was to ‘ensure life in resettlement sites better or at least the same as in the old place’.

During the dam construction process, displacement was divided into three main periods: (1) preparation of the dam construction site (2003); (2) resettlement of people who live below the 140 metre water level of the dam (2005–6); and (3) resettlement of people who live above the 140 metre water level but below the 218 metre water level (2007–9). In terms of compensation, each resettled family received 400 m$^2$ of residential land and 2,500 m$^2$ of farming land for each member of the family. Therefore, a family of four people would have only 1 hectare of farming land – much less than the average of 5–7 hectares that they had before resettlement. To support livelihood recovery after resettlement, the first person in each family would receive 7 million VND and each of the other family members would receive 3 million VND (Decision No. 459/QĐ-TTg and Decision No. 02/2007/QĐ-TTg).

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According to the So’n La People’s Committee (2006), the complexity of the resettlement work is due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, the following. First, this is the project with the largest number of displaced people in contemporary Vietnam. Second, the resettlers consist mostly of ethnic minority people, entirely dependent on farming. Third, the area is segmented and divided in terms of topography. Unsubmerged arable land is very limited and scattered. This has seriously affected the process of rehabilitation in terms of agricultural production and income generation for the resettlers. Fourth, inadequate infrastructure in resettlement areas, especially roads for transportation, means that investment in infrastructure at resettlement sites was costly and time-consuming. With a large number of people to be resettled and severe time pressure on the resettlement process, it was very difficult, if not impossible, for the contractors to have the infrastructure at resettlement sites ready before people moved in, as required by the government. Fifth, the legal framework and supporting documents regarding compensation policies, as well as guidelines for implementation, were incomplete and were being amended during the process (2003–9), creating obstacles and delays. For example, Decree 22/1998/ND-CP identifies those assets that are to be compensated. According to these documents, legal land users receive compensation for land and its associated assets, while investors are asked to complete the construction of resettlement sites before people move in. However, this decree was not actually fully implemented: the compensation was inadequate and, as mentioned above, the resettlement sites were not ready on time. Finally, the personnel of the resettlement project units at the district and provincial levels were insufficient in number and limited in capacity (So’n La People’s Committee 2006). Project units at both the district and the provincial levels had to hire a large number of new staff in a very short time. In Muong La district, for example, the numbers of staff of the Project Management Unit (PMU) increased seven-fold within 2 years (2005–7). Most of the staff did not go through any training and had no experience related to resettlement prior to working on this important issue.

Each commune formed a steering committee headed by the commune’s Party secretary. In each village, tens of meetings were held to announce the central and local governments’ decisions related to resettlement, compensation and livelihood rehabilitation. The first commune-level meetings related to moving took place in the late 1990s, but when asked, quite a number of respondents to my survey in 2009–10 (30%) said that they did not know anything about the project itself or about the resettlement until the year 2000. The frequency of these commune-level meetings was increased in 2003 and 2004. In 2005, villagers living under the 140 metre water level were asked to sign agreements to move. They were required to move immediately, during the dry season of 2005; the rest were moved in the dry season of 2006. In the following years (2007–9), the resettlement process was very tense due to the large numbers of people required to move and to the difficulty of completing the basic infrastructure at the resettlement sites. By August 2009, So’n La Province had completed the removal of 10,361 out of the 12,500 households who lived above the 140 metre water level but below the 218 metre water level. The plan was to move everyone out of the submerged zone (in all three provinces) by the end of 2009. However, by the end of April 2010 there were still hundreds of households in Dien Bien province moving out of their homes in a hurry to meet the deadline for sluice closure in May 2010, even though their resettlement sites were still not ready.

3 Interviews with resettlement officers in So’n La Province, 15 July 2009.

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In the following sections, before examining people’s responses and resistance to resettlement in chronological order – before, during and after the resettlement – I will provide a broad picture of people’s livelihoods before and after resettlement.

Local Livelihoods before and after Resettlement

The ethnic minorities along the Da River used local resources (forest and river) to sustain their lives and livelihoods. The north-west upland ethnic people also had customs and regulations for land and resources management. Most of the households used a large area of land for their farming; the average area was around 6–7 hectares per family.

Before being relocated, people were largely self-provisioning, with cash-generating activities including cash crops, providing water transportation along the river and so on. For people (such as those in PN) who used to live near the water (rivers and streams) and had wet rice fields, the methods of growing wet rice were passed down from generation to generation: how to move water from the river or stream into their fields, how to raise fish in the rice fields and so on. Since they had lots of land for farming and the plots were scattered, people usually practiced extensive rotational farming. One year they would grow maize, soy beans, cassava, peanuts and rain-fed rice on some plots and use the remaining plots for grazing. A few years later, when the farmed land was becoming eroded and infertile, they would burn the grazing plots in order to grow crops on them, while turning the former cropland back to grazing. In terms of livestock management, in their old villages people did not have to worry about learning intensive husbandry techniques. They let their cattle (normally 10–15, but sometimes up to 20–25 cows per household) graze freely and only needed to keep an eye on them occasionally.

Before resettlement, 100 per cent of the interviewees in PB and PN earned cash income from cash crops (maize, cassava, soybeans and peanuts), and livestock, while 84 per cent had extra cash income from fishing activities along the Da River, and 54 per cent from waterway transport. Only 4 per cent had to sell their labour for extra income, and most of those worked for wealthier households in their village or in neighbouring communities. They were mostly able to manage their lives without having to leave the area for work. Since many of the families had large areas of land, about 24 per cent leased some of their land to outsiders. Before moving to the resettlement sites, the households that had large wet rice fields (more than half the households in PN) hardly ever had to buy rice, their staple food. Other families who did not have wet rice fields (in PB), or had small plots of wet rice fields (some in PN), used the money they received from selling cash crops to buy rice. Because land was available and they had large areas of land for growing cash crops, most of them were able to buy enough rice to eat all year round. In brief, in the old villages, with sufficient land for rotational farming, people had enough food to eat and were able to provide themselves with their basic needs and also earn some extra cash for savings. Only families that did not have strong in-house labour might encounter food insecurity for a short time every year.

After 4 years at the resettlement sites, the thing villagers claim to miss the most is their loss of riverine land and dry fields, where they could practice extensive farming and rotate crops in multiple plots. One villager in PB village said, ‘When I was in my home village, I could never imagine that one day I would not have enough land to grow my crops. I used to wish to have more strength so I could work harder on my land. We were only afraid of not being strong enough to work, never worried about not having enough land’ (interview, 10 August 2009).
The contemporary shortage of farming land is manifested in land scarcity at all resettlement sites, especially in Sơn La Province, where more than 14,000 households have been relocated. In the rural planned resettlement areas, the most challenging work has been to redistribute land from host communities to resettled communities. Also, both groups depend on farming; the host and resettled communities have no other choice but to rely on the land for their subsistence and livelihood. At a number of resettlement sites, including PN, the farming system is particularly unsustainable because the resettlers have received only infertile hilly farming land with a very steep slope (about 35–40 degrees). The green coverage rate on such topographical gradients is very low, increasing the potential for erosion, landslides and flash floods. Resettlers’ attempts to make a living on this marginal land, therefore, will eventually lead to further land degradation at the resettlement sites.

In Sơn La Province, resettlers were allocated approximately 0.25–0.3 hectares per person, depending on the land availability of different communes. This allotment included arable land and fish ponds. In this upland area, an average family of four people consumes about 700–800 kilograms of rice each year. If they do not own wet rice fields, they grow maize. One family of four people will need about 1.5 hectares of maize in order to buy rice to feed them all year round (by the end of 2009, the price for rice was VND10,000–12,000 per kilogram, while the price for maize was VND3,000–3,200 per kilogram). This means that the amount of land people received as compensation (1.0–1.2 hectares for a family of four) is not enough to sustain their families if they rely only on the land for their livelihood. Babies born after the resettlement date do not receive land in the new village. As a consequence, young couples with two children born after moving to the resettlement site may receive only about 5000 m² (≈ 0.5 hectares) of land. According to my interviews, these young families had complained to the project management board and the local authorities, but had not (yet) received any adjustment. In most of these cases, the husband must go out of the village to be hired as a porter or find some other employment to earn a living. If they are not able to do this, then their families go hungry and are therefore forced to rely on social networks, such as support from kin and neighbours.

Thus, in their new locations, the resettlers have all suffered land scarcity (compared to their old villages), low land quality, and changes in control over and access to surrounding resources. People’s losses associated with displacement have not been insignificant and can be considered as an important dynamic of their subsequent responses after resettlement.

The Effort to Stop/Slow Down Displacement and Getting the Best Out of the Situation

In this section, I analyse the various ways in which the populations to be resettled responded; for example, by resisting displacement and demanding that promises be fulfilled. I start with the situation of the Sơn La project as a whole, and then examine various villages in which I carried out fieldwork.

As mentioned above, since the dam was justified as being in the ‘national interest’, the slogans and propaganda for the project portrayed it as something natural: the country needed the dam for national economic growth and there would have to be some sacrifices at the local level to make it happen (Dao 2012). In Vietnam, once a project was part of the national plan and had been approved by the Prime Minister, the local people and even the local authorities often simply agreed with it. This kind of state ‘hegemony’ (Gramsci 1971) was, in fact, an important contributing factor in keeping the local people from resisting the dam itself, in contrast to the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand or the Kayapo in Brazil. However, even though the local people did not act against the dam itself, they were against the idea of
moving out of the place where they had spent their whole lives and had so many memories, and also because they were about to lose access to the natural resources and local social networks on which their livelihoods were based.

Before the resettlement process started, the PMU administrative system (the district and commune authority) had a very hard time persuading the affected people to move. Information regarding moving and resettlement was delivered to communes by the district authorities. District officers went to every commune to announce the plans for moving. The whole commune authority’s administration attended these meetings to learn about the project. Representatives of the village administrative system (the headman, the village’s Party secretary, representatives of the Farmers’ Association, the Women’s Union, the Youth Union, the Veterans’ Association and the Father-front Committee) also attended these meetings. These representatives then went back to their villages to persuade other villagers to follow the plan. The people in the village administrative system were supposed to set an example by pioneering this moving process. However, in fact, many of these people refused to be the first ones to move.

According to resettlement officers, what happened in many villages was that when the authorities and resettlement officers came to persuade people to sign the papers to move, in some cases they refused to sign, in other cases they signed the papers but then refused to move. Many resettlers even argued that it did not matter if they signed or not. Without realizing exactly what a hydropower plant and its reservoir were and how their homes would be submerged, they believed that if they just stayed, then nobody would force them out of their houses.

In some villages in Lai Chau province, people (including headmen and community leaders) persisted in not signing the moving agreements until the provincial government sent in senior officers of the same ethnic group to persuade them. One of the cadres from the same ethnic group who was successful in persuading people to sign the moving agreements described the process:

You need to understand the culture. But above all, you need to put yourself in their situation and talk in their language. This was a very hard job. I have spent many nights drinking with them. We talked about various things, not just resettlement. Everyone cried. They finally agreed the dam was very important and the sacrifice was necessary for the country. (Interview, 20 December 2006)

In a number of village meetings that I attended, villagers admitted that since they did not want to move, they did whatever was possible to delay leaving. My household surveys at the field site in 2009 show that 59 per cent of the people reported that they were worried and were afraid of moving, and 39 per cent felt sad but not too worried, because they believed that the government would do anything to help them resettle and that their lives in the new places would not be too difficult. Only 2 per cent were not concerned about the resettlement. These were young people and they earned their living mostly by engaging in service activities such as trading maize, beans and foodstuffs on the Da River.

According to the government policy, after the project announcement, the affected people were supposed to follow all the instructions given to them by the local authorities and project officials. And once the resettlement officers had finished inventorying the households’ properties (such as the total farming area, the numbers of fruit and perennial trees, fish ponds and

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so on), the amount of compensation for each household would be fixed. However, people responded very differently.

My interviews in 2008 and surveys in 2009 show that in many villages people were telling each other that in order to get higher compensation they should quickly plant more fruit trees and other perennial trees, raise more cattle, build better houses and so on. People knew that this was against the government policy, but they still did it. Villagers used their savings and/or borrowed from relatives and from the Agricultural Bank for these expenses. Even though not every household had enough money or dared to borrow to make these investments, the results of this strategy were seen in a number of villages in Sơn La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien provinces, in the form of more trees, cattle and new houses prior to resettlement. When asked, one villager said, ‘I do not know who spread the word, but many of us tried to do it even though we knew that we were not supposed to’ (interview, 15 May 2008).

Thus, even though these upland people did not have the power to change the decision to build the dam, their non-compliance with official policy made things more difficult for the project and those involved in its implementation. The way they responded to the government policy was to work on strategies to maximize their own benefits and this, in fact, caused limitations on the cost-effectiveness of the project.

When it was close to the time to move, people were allowed to visit their designated resettlement sites. At this time they began to realize the potential difficulties, including the land and water issues. Their reluctance to move became stronger. Even though they had already signed papers authorizing their displacement, they did not pack or dismantle their houses. In response to this ‘foot-dragging’, the government then promised to give an extra VND4 million (US$350) award for any family that moved on time. Resettlers were also promised an advance of 50 per cent of the compensation amount (averaging about VND15–18 million ≈ US$1,000–1,200) to buy durable goods and logs for housing. Some resettlers even refused to receive the advance payment. They did not care about the money. As a village’s Party secretary stressed:

Who would want that amount of money to move early? That is where we were born. Our life is there. Moving out of our homeland was the biggest pain we ever experienced. If you have never been through it, you cannot understand. I would have done anything to slow down the moving process. I would rather have lost my position in order to stay. (Interview, 10 August 2009)

The quote illustrates that sentimental connections with the ancestral land, with the place where they were born and grew up, with the neighbouring communities and kinship were probably key factors creating resistance to moving, alongside the concern about land and water shortages in the resettlement sites. Even after a few years in the new locations, the resettlers still longed for their home villages. One villager said, ‘The thing I miss the most in my home village is bathing in the river. Here I have to use a bathroom, which is small and I am not used to it.’ Another villager indicated, ‘My grandparents’, my parents’ graves were all there. It hurts to think about it’ or ‘Oh, there is no river in the new place. You know, we used to live by the river. We never had to worry about not having fish to eat’ (interviews, 10 August 2009).

People felt these losses at the moment at which they had to move. That was why the closer it was to the time to move, the more diverse were their reactions. In general, people found all kinds of reasons to delay their moving. In many instances, those that delayed their displacement through strategies of resistance experienced more hardship. If the whole village was slated to move to the same resettlement site, it was easier, as people mostly followed
their headman’s instruction. But for those villages that had to scatter to different relocation sites, the villagers held on to each other and tried to remain at their old sites. In some cases, people refused to move even when the whole village was going to move to the same site, because they did not want to move away from their homeland (for example, the cases of the above-mentioned Pa Ha village moving to the Muong Khien resettlement site, or Tra village to Huoi Hao). So they stayed, hoping that in the end the local authority would let them move to a closer site, where they would not have to be so far from their homeland. For these people, the outcome was usually not very good. Prior to the filling of the reservoir, they were forced by the local authority to take down their houses and they were moved to the designated sites. And since they moved after other people in their village, the good sites (both for housing and farming) were already taken. Other villagers did not want to share the scarce resources. They delayed giving land to the latecomers. And since the local authority did not like people who did not obey the rules, the authority was very slow in helping these families settle down. Even though nothing serious happened, it took the latecomers some time to get along with the other villagers as well as with the new local authority. In another case where households delayed their departure past the deadline, hundreds of families in Quynh Nhai district were turned out of their houses at the last minute by the police.

Things became worse when the resettled village (usually the headman and the majority of the villagers) did not want to receive late resettlers in the new village; that is, the early resettlers were reluctant to share the scarce resources. In a village I visited in the fall of 2009, ten families who had not agreed to move together with the rest of the village were left out of the land distribution. These people had nowhere to move to after they finally agreed to relocate. The trouble not only concerned the sharing of resources, but also other issues, such as education and health care. Since their names had been transferred to the new commune, their children were supposed to go to school in the new location and, when they were sick, they were supposed to go to a clinic in the new village/commune. But since they had not actually moved to the new site, and had not registered with the clinic station, when they got sick they had no doctor. Once their home village had been flooded by the waters of the dam, they either moved to relatives’ houses to live temporarily or used compensation money to buy a small lot for housing in the new commune. For these people, having sufficient money to buy a plot for house building was difficult enough, and it left little money to buy land for farming. They became refugees in their new hometowns. In brief, in a number of cases, there were severe negative consequences for people who chose to resist.

However, the consequences were not always negative. In some special cases, through open protests, villagers got what they wanted. For example, in 2010 something happened for the first time among people in the Chieng Lao commune of Muong La district: villagers from two villages went to Hanoi together to protest, refusing to move to a different district as planned. They just wanted to move further uphill within their old commune land, which meant that they could still have access to the reservoir. The authority finally agreed to let them stay in their old commune.

In summary, in the period before and during resettlement, people’s responses were non-violent. All they could do was delay the process, and try to hold out for a better deal with respect to cash payments or the location of the resettlement site. But this, in fact, gave the project and the government at both central and local levels difficulty in dealing with the villagers’ tactics. Sometimes the government responded in ways that made it worthwhile to be part of the resistance story – such as the case mentioned above, where the government finally had to agree with the request from the villagers in Chieng Lao. But sometimes the
protest was unsuccessful and the police were used to keep people under control, as in Quynh Nhái.

**Fighting for Compensation after the Resettlement – More Overt Resistance against Injustice**

The fact that some resettlers who chose to resist in the earlier stage of resettlement suffered negative consequences did not suppress the protests and struggles for survival after resettlement. Since resettlement, the forms of response have varied even more, mostly focusing on problems and injustices in the resettlement process and in the choice of resettlement sites, as I will show later in the case of the PN resettlement site. The responses in some cases have been overt, collective and confrontational.

For example, in Phong Tho district, the resettlers threatened to physically harm resettlement officers because those officers had given them false promises about post-resettlement compensation, especially in terms of land. The resettlement officers had to hide and did not return to the site after that confrontation, the rumour being that they were moved to another location. Another example of overt collective action occurred in Quynh Nhái district, where resettlers dug trenches across the road that went by their village, to demand a timely and higher level of compensation. They did this every night for quite some time, until the local authority finally met some of their demands. People in the same Quynh Nhái district also massively cut down bamboo forests as a way of reacting to what they called ‘unfair resettlement’. Thus, in both cases, the project either had to solve the problem by meeting some of the people’s demands (in the case of Quynh Nhái, the resettlers did not get higher compensation but they received better farming land) or avoiding the conflicts by moving their staff to other sites.

In a number of other resettlement sites, such as Tan Lap commune (Moc Chau district) and PN village (Muong La district), people went back to their old villages for farming and grazing purposes, in defiance of orders not to do so, despite the fact that those villages were now 40–100 kilometres distant from their new homes. The local officials in these areas always tried to conceal this information whenever they were asked by outsiders. According to the local officials, the fact that people were returning to their old villages for farming showed the failure of the government resettlement plan – which, it was claimed, ensured that life at the resettlement sites would be better than, or at least the same as, in the old village. The news spread, and resettlers at a number of other sites followed these people in doing the same – going back to their old land to farm. When people came back to their old villages, they did not have places to stay and so they slept in the fields, and they did not register with the local authorities as required by law. Fights, related to land and to other issues, happened from time to time at both old and new sites. District and commune authorities complained that the ‘going back to old villages’ made it difficult for them to control the population, security and economic activities in their localities, and they were criticized by the provincial government for being unable to control their people (interview with local officials in Moc Chau, 10 June 2008).

At most of the resettlement sites, there were delays in compensation for lost assets and property. The resettlement officers usually blamed complicated and lengthy administrative and disbursement procedures as the main reason for the delay. However, there was a rumour that the resettlement officers had simply put the money into the bank to earn interest, although no one knew this for sure. In some places people could not wait for so long, and they decided to fight for their money. For example, in a village in Muong La district where resettlers were mixed with the host community, after more than a year of waiting, the
resettlers marched down to the district centre together, to ask for their compensation money. Before that, the resettlers had sent their representatives to the district centre to ask for their compensation. The representatives had gone twice to talk to the district-level Resettlement Board officers, but nothing had happened, so the third time the whole resettler group went down together. Their demonstration was not violent, but it was extremely upsetting for the district authorities. The commune chairman and Party secretary were criticized for being unable to control their people. The money that the resettlers were demanding was brought to them on the following day, indicating how these collective actions were often effective in provoking some kind of state action to address grievances. From the villagers’ point of view, they were not asking for something unrealistic: they just wanted what belonged to them.

As shown by the above examples, upland resettlers’ resistance in the Sơ’n La resettlement project as a whole has not been invisible or without any productive results. As a result of this resistance, resettlers have often been successful and achieved part of what they were promised. The above examples, where villagers went to the district centre to express their requests or to demand what was due to them, were not just everyday actions. They were carefully organized at the village level and the resettlers took reasonable steps to achieve what they fought for. Even though these examples may be viewed as only resistance at the micro level, they illustrate the villagers’ strong collective resistance against the unreasonable ways in which the development projects have been implemented.

The cases of PB and PN, where I conducted my study, will demonstrate yet other varieties of response at resettlement sites in Sơ’n La. Even though these two sites lie only 3 kilometres apart, their ways of responding were not the same. The responses to resettlement ranged from violent reactions (fighting among resettlers, threatening of resettlement officers) to non-violent marching and demonstrations. In PB village, the resettlers’ responses were less overt and more cooperative compared to PN village, where the resettlement conditions were more difficult in terms of the village location, infrastructure, water and quality of farming land, as I will explain in the following sections. The responses in PN village sometimes became confrontational. In these cases, resistance can be seen as the politics of everyday spaces, through which political identities constantly flow and are fixed. However, more importantly, in both cases, resistance was not limited to ‘population versus state’. Local authorities at the village level, such as the Party secretary in PB or the headman in Hon hamlet of PN, were on the population’s side and were very supportive of ordinary people’s responses and resistance. We will see more details in the section on each village.

PB village

Resettlers from PB were among the first people to move out of the area below the dam’s 140 metre water level in 2005. In PB, the resettlers encountered false promises made by the resettlement project officers at different levels (district, provincial and central) before and even after the resettlement. Many promises were not fulfilled, including the amount of subsidy for livelihood rehabilitation and an irrigation system for wet rice farming. In PB village, resettlers were assigned some small plots of land that they were told would be used for wet rice farming after the project had provided an irrigation canal. These plots were very dry and far from any source of water. A few times, the village’s Party secretary and the headman, together with the village management board, wrote letters and went to the district centre, where the resettlement project management board was located, to ask for the irrigation scheme to be implemented. They also constantly asked the staff of the commune’s administration to help channel their claim to the district level. The canal was finally constructed in 2012 (see Figure 2).
Figure 2 The Phien Bung 1 resettlement site
While the promise of an irrigation system was one important target that the resettlers aimed to achieve, they also had to deal with other issues related to resettlement. The compensation was slow, especially compensation for livelihood rehabilitation. The amount was also much lower than had been promised before relocation. Just as with the irrigation canal issue, and all other issues related to the resettlement and compensation process, the headman and the village’s Party secretary organized the villagers and together they wrote letters to the authorities and the project management board, or went to see the local authorities and project officers. Sometimes this met with success, but the resettlers often came back with no positive outcome. However, this did not stop them from making repeated attempts. The village’s Party secretary was very keen to continue the process and press for results. He affirmed, ‘We will keep doing this until they give us what they promised, or at least most of it. We have been fighting for our compensation for the last four years. It is OK if we still have to continue doing it in the future’ (interview, 5 August 2009).

**PN village**

The situation in PN village was different from that in PB. Since the old site consisted of two hamlets: Pa and Hon (the old villages’ names), and the population consisted of mixed Thái and La Ha people, the complexity of the situation was doubled. The resettlers’ concerns were mostly with compensation for the lost land, the construction of the new road and a bridge, access to a cemetery, water scarcity and so on. The village’s administration, especially the headman of Hon hamlet, was very active in going to the district authorities and the Resettlement Project Management Unit (RPMU), to enquire about the resettlers’ issues. The cemetery designed for the village was on the opposite side of a stream from the village, a stream that floods during the rainy season. The project promised to build a bridge for the resettlers before they moved in, but after more than 4 years of resettlement, nothing has happened. When the wait for the bridge that would give them access to the cemetery became very long, the headman went to the district government and announced that if someone in his hamlet died during the raining season, he would bring the body to the district centre. He went back and forth to the district authorities and the project office many times, to demand that they fulfil their promises. But it was not until early 2011 that many of these problems were addressed by the project management board and the local authority. They allocated a new plot of land for the cemetery, fixed the water pipe and started reconstruction of the roads to the two hamlets.

The way in which the headman and other members of Hon hamlet responded to the new situation was not just through ‘weapons of the weak’ or ‘everyday resistance’. As time went by, they strategized their responses better, so that they could bring about more positive results. For example, they studied the government’s resettlement policies very carefully. They understood the policies very well and used that knowledge when they went to the district authority or the district’s RPMU with grievances. For example, the headman memorized most of the compensation items and the rate for each type of compensation, in both the original and the revised policies, including the key legal documents for the So’n La resettlement programme, such as Decision No. 196/2004/QD-TTg, Decree 197/2004/ND-CP and supplementary policies including Decision No. 459/QĐ-TTg and Decision No. 02/2007/QĐ-TTG. The headman also realized that if the villagers simply marched down to the district authority, this might not bring about the hoped-for results. So, as well as leading a march, he sent many complaints to the provincial government, requesting that a supervisory team should come to check the project’s activities in the village. He contended that combining these
strategies would help the villagers to get results, because simultaneous top-down and
bottom-up pressure was likely to push the district’s PMU to process the villagers’ requests
quickly. They were successful with regard to the issues of road construction, the cemetery and
farming land, among others. However, sometimes the PMU just ignored people’s requests,
which led to the villagers taking quite confrontational measures to deal with the situation.

Getting the compensation money for livelihood recovery in Hon was a dramatic story:
after a long period of sending complaints and enquiries without success, in late 2010 the
villagers of Hon went down to the district centre and captured one local official, who was a
member of the district’s Resettlement Board. They took the official to the office of a deputy
head of the Resettlement Board and put both the official and the deputy head under lock
and key. The villagers took turns to guard the locked office while sending demands for their
compensation back to the district authority. They refused to accept the promise made by the
vice-chairman of the district’s People Committee that compensation would be paid after 10
days. They asked for their money back in 2 days, and they finally achieved that outcome.

In brief, more open forms of resistance can be found at many of the resettlement sites of
the So’n La hydropower project. The upland people – the ethnic minority resettlers – have
learned how to use different tactics to get what belongs to them in the unbalanced fight for
livelihood reconstitution and autonomy. They have also been willing to take risks, even going
so far as to capture and lock up local officials. Support from community leaders, such as the
village’s Party secretary or the headman, has played a very crucial role in people’s resistance
and response. It has helped to unite people and make their fight more successful.

However, their resistance has not been ‘counter-hegemonic’ and has not involved strong
collective opposition to the state. The resistance has also not necessarily been coherent, and
has not happened at a larger scale (De Goede 2005), as in the case of the Pak Mun Dam in
Thailand or the Kayapo in Brazil discussed above. Yet resistance has taken place in multiple
forms and has been a powerful force of change in its own right (Kerkvliet 2005).

Relationships among the Affected People and Coping Strategies in the New Places – A Typology
of Response

At the resettlement sites, affected people’s (both host and resettled communities) responses to
resettlement are refracted through local conditions and politics. We will examine these diverse
responses/coping strategies in more detail through the cases of the PB and PN resettlement
sites. The resettlers’ responses crossed multiple levels and were intertwined among different
actors. They were not confined to opposition to the state or to other ruling groups, but the
responses to resettlement also affected how people interacted among themselves. The nature of
their responses was shaped by gender, age and ethnicity, among other factors. Local struggles
created by the state development projects may sometimes be among the poor themselves, or
sometimes between the poor and the authorities or the government development apparatus.
These struggles also shape the implementation of development projects. The local responses
can be constructive (as I will show in the case of water sharing in PB – and the example of
resettled women cooperating with host families, also in PB) and fruitful, but they can also be
frustrating. People who are negatively affected by development projects are usually depicted as
victims of domination, but in fact are sometimes able to work out strategies for themselves for
their autonomy and survival.

Similar to the above illustrated case, the rumour was that staff of the district PMU put the compensation
money into the bank to earn interest, and that this caused the delay in payment of the money to the resettlels.

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The PB Resettlement Site

The site is located in a mango orchard of the host community. It is a flat area with good infrastructure (roads, schools and water supply to the houses). Vehicles are able to drive straight to the village centre. When resettlement took place in 2005, the orchard was beautiful and the host community was just about to reap its first harvest. Therefore, when the resettlers came, the host community was very upset and angry. At the same time, my interviews indicate that the host community understood that the resettlers were also victims, as the resettlers had lost their houses, their land and everything else attached to their old villages.

The host community had its own way of resisting the dam and resettlement process. It resisted the request to share land with resettlers by refusing or delaying the process of giving up its land. As a consequence, it took 2 years for the resettlers to get all the allotted farming land from the host community. The host community could not be openly angry with the state for taking its land away, even though in some cases it could express its anger with the state officials. Instead, it directed its anger towards the resettlers, whose presence as close neighbours made them more convenient targets. Some in the host community tried to chop down mango trees, as they did not want the resettlers to harvest the fruit that the host community had grown. The district and commune authorities and the PMU made the host community formally organize welcoming activities to receive the resettlers, including folk song and dance events, food support, house building and moving assistance (the host community actually helped resettlers to move their houses, furniture and belongings to the designated sites). However, tension between the two communities was still high, albeit mostly among young people. The host community had lost the productive land that had been given to the resettlers and at the beginning did not see any resulting benefit: for instance, it did not have a new water supply system, although the resettled people did. Young people in the two communities fought many times. The commune’s police and the commune authority often had to come to solve problems.

The relationship between the two communities did not go well for more than 2 years, from the end of 2005 until mid-2008. The problems culminated when the host community, which did not have access to running water, destroyed a water pipe that ran to the resettlement village. In April 2008, when I visited the village for my pre-dissertation fieldwork, I witnessed a group of young people with knives threatening to cut down mango trees that had been their property. Other villagers were standing nearby, but no one dared to interfere. The ‘village policeman’ came, and then the headman, to solve the problem. The representative of the village’s Women’s Union told me that the young people of the two communities fought quite often. They could get into fights for any reason: a dispute over a tree, a girl, a place for grazing, buying things and so on. Even though the conflicts between the two communities may not be seen as a type of resistance, they were people’s ways of responding to change. They delayed the resettlement process, and caused many difficulties for the local authorities and the project.

If we see some of these responses as negative manifestations of power in everyday politics, other responses can be seen as ways in which resettlers actively participated in the building of new communities and livelihoods. Stated differently, some responses illustrate the way in which people exercise positive political power. The way in which resettled women built new reciprocity relations with women from the host community is a good example.

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6 This person was not a regular policeman. He was appointed by the villagers and the headman to be the person dealing with security problems in the village.

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Although, in the early stages of the resettlement, young men from the resettled village reacted quite confrontationally and often blamed the host community for their problems, women and older people from PB village responded to the changes in their situation in a quite different way. Many women resettlers went to the host community families who had helped them move, and offered their labour to these families. So, in 2 years, before they had received any land for farming, they helped these families in the host community undertake a variety of types of farming task, including preparation of the land, sowing of seed, weeding and harvesting. At the same time, they learned how to practice the new intensive upland farming. One woman said:

*We know we will have to live here probably for the rest of our lives and then the next generations too. This is our new home. So, what is the point of fighting with the host community? We are neighbours. For what happened, it is not their fault and not our fault either. We did not want to leave our ancestors’ land at the first place. But now we are here. We need to learn how to survive.* (Interview, 5 September 2009)

Then she laughed, as if to say that this is an obvious thing that does not need to be talked about. When I asked why they chose to go to offer their labour to the host community families, a number of them said, ‘Oh, they helped us move. That is one thing. The second thing is, what do you think we should do? Just sit home and do nothing? No, we need to have something to work on. Doing nothing has bad consequences. When we came to help them, it was fun, we made friends, and we learned new things.’ This illustrates gendered differences in strategies of responding to change, both within households and at the village level.

The conflicts over drinking water were also finally solved in a positive way. In mid-2008 the resettlers in PB decided to share their drinking water pipe with the host community. They sat together and worked out how to manage the water supply. Every village assigned two people to join a water management team. They installed water meters for every household. People in the management team were put in charge of reading the meters, collecting the water fees and using the fees to pay for pumping, electricity and repairing the pipe as necessary. These managers also received monthly support, taken from a portion of the water fee. This way of managing water was totally new to both the host and the resettled communities. Over time, the people in the two communities got to know each other better. Their relationship changed for the better and there were even cross-marriages between the two communities. Some of the resettlers were able to buy fish ponds or wet rice land from the host community.

**The PN Resettlement Site**

The site is located on a hilly area, near a bamboo forest and a state forest enterprise that grows teak wood. Similar to the situation of PB, when the resettlers first moved in, people in the host community refused to give the newcomers farming land. But by the end of 2008, after a few years of negotiating between the local authorities, the project and the host community, the resettlers received their farming land. However, these plots were dry fields, not wet rice farming land.

It is worth noting that, unlike the PB resettlement site, the PN resettlement area was heavily affected by landslides. In 2005, when I first went to this village, the main road to the centre of the village was in good condition and it was easy for any kind of vehicle to go up to the village centre. However, 3 years later, the road had been seriously damaged by
landslides, and had become very uneven, with large potholes, such that cars could not reach the village centre. During my visits in 2008 and 2009, the only way to reach the village was to walk. The road was never repaired. In 2008, five houses (three in Pa and two in Hon) were partly destroyed by landslides.

At the beginning of the resettlement period, the relationship between the two hamlets went well. The host community (in Sang village) helped resettlers from PN build houses and settle down in a new place with a strange environment. However, the difficult conditions in the new location may have affected this friendly relationship. In addition, the historically unequal relationship between the Thái majority and the La Ha minority ethnic groups in the north-west seemed to make the La Ha people less assertive. At this particular site, Thái resettled families somehow received better land and adapted faster to the new environment. While all of the Thái families stayed at the resettlement site, many La Ha families ended up going back to their old village for farming and grazing purposes before the land was submerged. The La Ha people were quieter and did not usually fight openly for their interests. I attended several of their village meetings and realized that even when they were members of the village’s administration, they did not usually voice their opinions.

As settlers at a single resettlement site, the people in the Pa and Hon hamlets had to share their community hall. Things did not work out very well when both of the hamlets wanted to use the hall on the same date. As a result, the two groups requested another building, so that each hamlet could have its own hall. Sharing the cemetery was also a problem. As I have mentioned above, the cemetery designed for the village was on the opposite side of a stream from the village and the stream floods during the rainy season. During the period in which there was no bridge, several people died — all from Pa and none from Hon. Since there was no bridge, the villagers from Pa were unable to cross the stream to the designated cemetery, so they decided to temporarily bury their dead on the village side of the stream. Unfortunately, the location on the village side where the dead were buried is upstream of the origin of the main water source used by the host communities (see Figure 3). The families concerned knew this, but they argued that it was the project’s fault that they had to bury their dead in the wrong place. This burial also made it possible to create a problem for the district and commune authorities, as an indirect way of forcing the project to fulfil its promise to build the bridge or give them a new plot of land for a cemetery.

For the host community, this was an unacceptable situation. An area serving as a source of water should be strictly protected and be free from contamination. Villagers are not even allowed to graze their animals there, because of the risk that cattle manure might contaminate the water. It was a consequence of this perceived contamination of the water source that someone (the rumour was that it was people from the host community) broke the water pipe to the resettlement site, as mentioned above. From that point on, the whole resettled village began to struggle with water shortages. Villagers had to use water from dug ponds for bathing and washing. There was insufficient water for drinking and cooking, not to mention water for gardening and livestock. Hon people blamed Pa people for the burials that were the cause of the water pipe being broken. The commune authority had to intervene many times, trying to settle the disputes between the villagers, but the result was unsatisfactory. Both headmen were stubborn and did not want to compromise. By the end of 2009, the disagreement was enmeshed with many other issues: from rebuilding the road to the village centre, to the location for the bridge to the cemetery, to the use of the community hall, land allocation and more. The tension occurred not only between the two
Figure 3 The Pu Nhuong resettlement site
hamlets, but also between the resettlers and the host community, mostly among young people. The district and commune authorities and the project management board had no other choice but to address these issues.

It is clear that the resettlers and the host communities had various ways to respond to changes, and they learned to negotiate to get the most out of the situation, depending on gender, ethnicity and age. But can all of these responses be called resistance? Maybe not – in a direct way. But as I mentioned earlier, the concept of resistance itself is problematic and contingent. Any action under domination cannot be entirely separated from resistance, even when it may seem as though it was not intentional – and especially when these activities take place in the northern uplands of Vietnam, where one does not usually find that local people will openly criticize the government. Sometimes, the resettlers’ reaction was just to simply refuse to go along with injustice and ‘oppression’. But even actions to provoke conflict among villagers, such as those described above, can be understood as a kind of indirect resistance, to the degree that provoking conflict was intended to create problems for the authorities and thus to try to force them to address the villagers’ demands. These different forms of positioning and agency by resettlers, together with spatial complexities, insert new threads into our thinking about the entangled geography of resistance.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a comprehensive picture of how resettlers have responded to and resisted the pressure created by the ruling state and its development apparatus, and how they have found ways to reconstitute their lives in an alien environment. The resettlers’ agency was strongly articulated in various contexts. They have the capacity to resist and challenge state development pressure, and to create different strategies in order to meet family needs. Importantly, we notice in the stories recounted above that where the resistance was more at the individual or family level, the consequences were often negative – the families refused to move, teenagers fought and so on – and where the resistance was more organized and the participants acted as a community, with the active support of community leaders and authority representatives, the outcomes were often positive. Thus, it was only if the mobilization was well organized, and not just at an individual or small-group level, that the result was likely to be successful. In summary, the multiple responses of the affected people in Sơn La did not just fall into the category of ‘weapons of the weak’; they also included overt resistance and coping strategies. One of the local officials I interviewed stressed that

This resettlement process is extremely hard work. It hurts almost every single resettler. The thing is, there were only certain people or small groups of people overtly resisting the displacement. They did it differently in different locations and the actions were not collective. If half of the resettlers had collectively resisted the moving, the project scenario would have been way different. (Interview, 10 July 2011)

Given the political context in Vietnam, where the state’s surveillance has been very strict, especially in the uplands, organized collective resistance above the village level was not likely to happen in the upland regions. There was never a project-wide network and mobilization against the Sơn La Dam. The dam was a top-down national strategic development project, and fighting against it would be like ‘an egg trying to crack a stone’ (a Vietnamese saying about the weaker trying to confront the stronger). For the majority of the resettlers, the reaction to the development apparatus has been largely but not entirely non-violent. They eventually agreed to move, and were forced to find ways to survive at the resettlement sites.
Their responses at some points were acts of daily resistance that required little or no coordination or planning (Scott 1985). But these responses were multitudinous and active (van der Ploeg 2008). At times, however, their responses went beyond ‘weapons of the weak’ to collective action at village level, and the use of force, as in the capture of local officials. The villagers understood what they could do and how they should do it in different situations. Women suffer the most, as they must always take care of their family’s daily needs. But they have also taken positive action to repair and build relationships between the resettled and host communities. Besides the difference in women’s and men’s attitudes towards the situation, the difference in intensity of hardship/impact was probably another reason for ‘cooperation’ between women from the two communities.

Their strategies reveal how resettlers have been able to deal with different situations, depending on their social and political contexts. Sometimes, resistance was not explicit, but on many occasions it was straightforward and overt. The situations described in these case studies show that it seemed impossible for the resettlers not to be in trouble with the authorities if they tried to resist the development machine run by the state, which is to say that they could not resist the building of the dam. But they still did resist, collectively or individually, in one way or another, in the contentious journey towards autonomy.

For the host communities, the way in which they reacted to the presence of resettled communities in their midst might also be understood as a form of ‘daily politics’, such as non-compliance with the government policy in terms of giving land to resettlers. As the very popular Vietnamese proverb ‘Giận cá chém thớt’ (literally, ‘Mad at the fish, chop the cutting board’) says, the conflicts between resettled and host communities may not just be struggles among the powerless after all. First, these people do have some level of power that enables them to respond/resist in some ways. Second, because the agents of the state present in the area (policemen, local officials and so on) are often too powerful to fight against, the host communities thus displace the blame from the state on to the resettled communities, provoking conflicts with them. But in doing so, they also draw the attention of the authorities to the problems the resettlement has created for them.

In brief, the multitude of responses is embedded in different social, political and economic contexts that can alter the space for resettlers to exercise their agency. As Schneider and Niederle suggest, ‘Building autonomy is part of a social process in which agency is not taken for granted, rather it depends on the capacity of the involved actors to gain power and mobilize resources’ (Schneider and Niederle 2010, 400). The multitude of responses by resettlers in northern upland Vietnam reveals broader processes at a larger scale. It shows what resettlers can achieve even though they are forced to operate in a very new and difficult context. It especially shows that ethnic minorities have been able to mobilize collectively with significant results – not perhaps at the scale of the dam itself, but at least at the village level.

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