



Communities fatigued by too many surveys

Unnecessary and poorly planned field surveys are hampering resettlement projects

Patrik Lund, 11 October 2017

This article describes how resettlement consultants conduct an unacceptable number of unnecessary field surveys with communities and stakeholders thereby causing serious setbacks for many resettlement projects. The findings described in this article are based on the author's own observations during many different development projects involving international companies with strong internal policies for sustainability and social performance. These companies make it their highest priority to fully comply with IFC Performance Standards, applicable local legislation and any other best practices. Furthermore, these projects committed significant resources for both consultants, and recommended mitigation measures, but still experienced difficulties. This article will investigate the causes of these problems and present recommendations for how they can be avoided.

There is no doubt that resettlement projects are challenging, which means it is crucial for involved consultants to maintain the highest levels of ethics and professionalism. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, and this article will present some serious issues that are frequently hindering the successful outcomes of projects.

To understand the nature of these consultant errors, it is important to distinguish between the following types of interaction with communities:

1. Consultation that provides project affected persons (PAPs) with information, and allows PAPs to raise their concerns and preferences.
2. Survey interviews that aim to collect information required for project documentation.



I have observed an alarming number of resettlement experts fail to respect this important difference in community interactions to the detriment of both impacted communities and the project. These experts simply fail to grasp that although all PAP consultation represents project data, the collection of needed data does not necessarily represent consultation.

Project Affected Persons (PAPs) suffer from survey fatigue

There is no surprise that being exposed to a high number of surveys causes PAPs to become frustrated and sometimes even confused. Due to poor planning and quality control, PAPs are often asked the same questions again and again without any reference to their previous answers. It is unfortunate, but not surprising that many PAPs are reluctant to complain about these activities, since the consultants are always quick to highlight that the surveys are in the best interest of PAPs. However, this frustration and related misunderstandings lead to fully warranted grievances later in the project lifecycle (when the consultants that caused the problems have often left the project).

Even worse, the generated confusion and lack of trust reduces the effectiveness of any future consultation, which also increases the likelihood of errors in any ongoing support for PAPs. PAP suspicions also makes it more challenging for the project to collect the data needed for final outcome evaluations.

Who benefits the most from community surveys?

Obviously, community surveys are aimed towards improving PAP standards of living, and thereby also enabling the project to achieve a sustainable and successful implementation and operation. However,

other parties also benefit from surveys, and this can be a serious problem for resettlement projects.

Field surveys for resettlement projects generate significant revenues for consultant companies (and the consultants). So, there are strong financial



incentives for consultants to identify the next survey during a project. I have first-hand experience of how senior managements in consultant companies 'incentivise' their resettlement teams to increase revenues and this means more and larger surveys!

These financial incentives push consultants to focus on how one survey opens doors to the next survey. For example, I have seen the following sequence of surveys:

- ESHIA / EIA surveys
- Resettlement baseline
- Follow-up Outcome Evaluation surveys (there can be several rounds of these surveys depending on PAP results)¹
- Surveys to identify vulnerable households
- Follow-up surveys to determine specific needs of vulnerable households (and many more such as livelihood training needs)

¹ Outcome evaluation results can also be used by consultants to push projects for additional surveys supposedly focused on livelihood restoration.

- Multiple consultations to identify PAPs needs for livelihood restoration (divided into different surveys for small business ventures / vocational training needs / micro credit assessments etc.
- First round of Outcome Evaluation

All of the above listed surveys do have merit, but the point is that adverse impacts on PAPs and the project costs can be reduced by:

- Combining surveys to minimise disruption on PAPs
- Using innovation and focused sampling – not all PAPs need to be included in all of the surveys
- Using alternative sources to collect data (not all data needs to come from PAPs!)
- Making sure that PAPs do not feel like they are being audited – because this results in guarded answers, low quality data, and failed consultations
- Analysing all existing data to carefully design each survey so that the following is achieved:
 - Questions and topics minimise repetition and build trust with PAPs
 - Interviews collect data effectively, and provide more time for PAPs to ask questions and raise concerns
 - Data reliability is increased, and data uncertainty is measured and recognised

Project proponents need to manage conflict of interests

Consultants increase revenues by conducting more surveys, so project owners need to be watchful and carefully review how consultants justify each survey. Here are some simple questions for projects to ask



their resettlement consultants to ensure that the survey is well planned and optimised:

- What is the survey for?
 - How will the targeted data add value and insights to our existing databases and project operations?
 - Can any of the targeted data be collected from other sources? This will either reduce the timing required for the survey or maybe completely cancel the survey.
 - Can collecting other types of data or doing some research in advance of the surveys improve the survey efficiency?
 - Can surveys focus on other stakeholders who are not PAPs? ²
- What kind of results are expected and how will this help the resettlement process?

And the most important questions of all:

- How will the survey help PAPs and their communities?
- And how will the survey impact PAPs? How much time will the surveys require etc.?

² There are many options for how this can be done – but the approach needs to be handled carefully, and the details of how this is done is beyond the scope of this article.

Experienced resettlement consultants are making these errors

Finally, the errors and poor practices described in this article were not conducted by young inexperienced professionals. These errors were all made by senior and highly experienced consultants, many having PhDs and more than ten years of resettlement project experience. This is always a problem with the value of experience – if the experience is focused on bad practices, and there is no reflection to learn and improve, the same disastrous results will be repeated.

In fact, I have seen junior consultants trying to raise concerns, but quickly discovering that they have no hope of improving the methods, because their project managers and senior management have no desire or willingness to accept proposed changes.

Some concluding remarks

Should project owners be expected to pay high fees for services that not only cause problems for the project, but also fail to help PAPs and other stakeholders? The answer is obviously 'no', but avoiding this outcome is not easy and requires effort.

Project owners need to carefully review consultant proposals, and ask the right questions. As this article has explained, it is difficult to align the consultants' commercial interests with PAP interests. However, once projects begin to focus on these issues, and request consultants to clearly justify their plans then the resettlement performances can quickly improve.

By making these efforts, projects will force consultants to review and improve their practices. This will not only reduce costs for project implementation, but more importantly ensure that PAPs receive better and more efficient support. Improved and more innovative consultant performances will build trust with communities and reduce non-technical risks for the project.

Patrik's brief bio:



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