

Propaganda mill at full tilt

Monday, 02 July 2012 Natalie Bugalski



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A woman carries part of a door at a relocation site in Trapeang Anch Chanh village for evictees from areas that have been affected by Cambodia's railway rehabilitation project. Photograph: Pha Lina/Phnom Penh Post

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has [posted a short video on its website](#) about the resettlement impacts of the Cambodian railway rehabilitation project it is financing.

Rattling off numerous improvements to people's living conditions, the three-minute video portrays the resettlement process as a resounding success, benefiting poor Cambodian families who are now, or will be, better off than they were before the railway project came along.

Although the soothing voice of the narrator fleetingly mentions that there have been a few criticisms and grievances, the Asian Development Bank's country director for Cambodia quickly assures the audience that the ADB is working with the Cambodian government to ensure all the remaining grievances are addressed.

This is a piece of propaganda that would make Goebbels blush.

Last month, as the ADB was busy working on this elaborate piece of public relations, the human-rights

group Licadho was making itself infinitely more useful by providing families affected by the railway project with emergency humanitarian aid.

Many of the families now living at the remote Phnom Penh resettlement site are struggling under the weight of debilitating debt burdens and are simply no longer able to make ends meet.

The bungled resettlement process has driven many of these families below Cambodia's poverty line because of lost employment or drastically reduced income.

Sovanna, a 46-year-old mother featured in [Sahmakum Teang Tnaut's](#) new report, *Losing the Plot*, has seen her family's monthly income drop from \$225 prior to resettlement to just \$32 at the Phnom Penh relocation site in Trapeang Anch Chanh.

Like most of the affected families, Sovanna (not her real name) borrowed money from an informal money lender to pay for the construction of her new house because the \$750 she received in compensation was not enough. She is now overdue on the repayments of \$72 a month and may soon lose her plot of land to the creditor.

Five families in Trapeang Anch Chanh have reported they have already lost their plots of land and have been left homeless as a result of the "development" project.

These families are not alone in facing the debilitating effects of poorly executed resettlement in the name of development.

In February, the international non-government organisation [Bridges Across Borders](#) released a report titled *Derailed*, which describes in detail the harm suffered by families who have been resettled because of the Cambodian railways project.

This report documents repeated failures to comply with Asian Development Bank's own safeguard policies, resulting in a high risk of prolonged impoverishment for affected people across the country.

Although no doubt some families have enjoyed benefits from resettlement, there is no question that many others have been harmed.

The Asian Development Bank is well aware of this. It has been copied on complaints from hundreds of affected people, and its staff have attended numerous meetings during which community representatives have described in detail the extremely difficult conditions people are facing at resettlement sites.

Relocated families have sent letters to the ADB asking for loans so they can feed their families.

A long complaint, setting out a litany of policy violations and harm suffered as a result of the railway

project, has been submitted to the ADB's internal accountability mechanism by 150 affected families.

Despite this mounting evidence, rather than acknowledging the re-settlement disaster and accepting some degree of responsibility for the damage done to people's lives, the ADB's propaganda machine has kicked in at high voltage.

This Potemkin village video is an appalling use of public funds to whitewash human-rights violations that have been inflicted on some of Cambodia's poorest families by a grossly mismanaged development project financed by an institution with a professed mandate to fight poverty in Asia.

Natalie Bugalski is an associate of [Inclusive Development International](#) and a co-author of the *Derailed* report.

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