

How to create a sustainable future in the Absence of Stability.

Grace Anderson, 25.

The noises of the village faded away as she made her way up the narrow, dirt path. Last time she'd trodden this path, it had been little more than a metre wide, with high grasses and rouge tree branches. Today, the path is well established. Cow prints and the wheels of motorbikes and wheelbarrows indicated a busy thoroughfare of returning villages, desperate to retrieve the possessions they had been unable to move in one trip.

She felt no pang of nostalgia as she passed the decaying remnants of her old home. A makeshift extension tacked onto the neighbouring property. Her husband had built the shelter using the small amount of Government resources and whatever they could find in the forest. This had been the fourth time she had been under required reallocated orders. Each time was the same. Shrouded in secrecy, the villagers were told this would be the last time. Officials made grand promises, outlining all the benefits the move would provide. The young people were always quick to embrace the move. Swayed by the opportunity to be closer to the towns, education, and the promise of more jobs. The older people grew warier with age, tired of hollow promises of stability.

An elderly couple had refused to relocate with the rest of the village. Neighbours gossiped, telling tales of the couple scurrying further into the highlands when the officials came to forcibly remove them. Surviving only on what they found or could carry on their backs. The older man waved through his window as she made her way through the empty path. With a cup of ginger tea in his hand, he seemed unbothered by the potential consequences he faced by disobeying Government orders. He has suffered war, bombings, insurgence, and a Chinese dam collapse. He simply would not move again.

"This land is good. Here I can grow enough rice for my wife and me at least, " he told her a month ago, "I am tired of starting new. I want something to leave for my son, and I don't have the strength to rebuild again."

The elders that still remembered a time of stability were long gone now. The final link to the past. A past where each tribe passed their traditions and territories through generations. The elders had been opposed to relocation adamantly. In the new villages, the lowlanders and highlanders were required to cohabitate. To forget their long history of tribal wars and blood feuds. This had been a great problem at first for the Government. Today, however, they lived in relative harmony. They no longer had the time, nor the energy, to stress about the past.

The old man had been right. The new village was overcrowded with those relocated from the lowlands, uplands, and highlanders. They shared plots of land alongside a dried-up river bed, producing far less rice than they ate. A failed harvest and inability to develop a successful irrigation system was the reason her husband asked her to return to the old village today. In the hot afternoon, she wiped the sweat off the back of her neck and carried the vegetables she had dug up from the garden she had nurtured for months in a bundle on her back. Her eye caught sight of an anomaly in the forest. As she neared, she realised it was a sign. White, bright, and new, with big, bold red writing in a language she could not comprehend. She hurried back to the village, eager to share what she had found—hoping for some news about what the sign said and what it would mean for the village.

Her mind was plagued with concern as she completed the long trek home. Their new village might be in trouble if this sign was for another dam project. They were now located downstream from the old village, in a similar position the old man's village had been to Champassak when it collapsed. She recalled how the old man told her of the Government official's promise that the dam would be amazing for his village and that it would produce enough electricity for each house to operate their television simultaneously. They said it would bring jobs to the men and modernity to the households. Instead, it bought death: flooding, destruction, and more false hope.

Her worry only lasted the walk. She was thrown back into reality when she returned to the new village. She did not have the privilege to think or plan for the future. Only to ensure that in the present, her family survived.