

Off The Agenda:

The need to refocus the world's attention on internal displacement

Compared to refugees seeking safety across their national borders, internally displaced people receive relatively little global attention. This briefing paper summarizes some of the main challenges, opportunities and recommendations for the way forward.

Two-thirds of all who are forced to flee due to conflict, disasters and development projects are internally displaced people. Preventing and responding effectively to internal displacement requires renewed commitment and action.

The scale of internal displacement

Displacement due to conflict and violence is occurring on a scale not seen since World War II.¹ In 2015, 24,000 people were displaced within their countries by conflict and violence every day, including a total of 4.8 million in the Middle East alone.² There were 40.8 million internally displaced people worldwide as the result of conflict at the end of 2015, the highest figure ever recorded. The number of internally displaced people is now twice as high as the number of refugees and

accounts for approximately two-thirds of the 65 million people currently displaced by conflict.

Disasters triggered by rapid-onset natural hazard events cause an average of 25.4 million displacements each year – one person displaced by disaster every second.³ In 2015, there were more than twice as many new displacements due to disaster compared to conflict. Hundreds of thousands are stuck in protracted displacement following disasters in previous years.

On top of these figures, an estimated 15 million people are displaced every year by development projects and an unknown number are displaced by other causes such as criminal violence and slow-onset disasters. The number of internally displaced people will at a minimum stagnate, if not continue on an upward trend,

¹ UNHCR, Global Trends : Forced displacement in 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>.

² These, and other figures in this summary are drawn from the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2016, released

by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in May 2016. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/globalreport2016/>

³ Based on IDMC data for 2008 to 2015.

unless we comprehensively address the root causes of new and protracted displacement.

In 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit, the Secretary-General called on countries to agree on an ambitious target to reduce internal displacement by at least 50 per cent by 2030. To achieve this, the world must re-focus its attention on IDPs and invest more political commitment to preventing and finding lasting solutions to this global challenge.

Challenges

There is a striking disparity between the scale of internal displacement and the extent of global focus and funding on protecting and assisting internally displaced people.

Dismay at the scale of conflict displacement was one of the drivers of the decision by the UN General Assembly to convene the September 2016 High Level Meeting to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants. But as the formal title of the summit suggests, internally displaced people did not figure on the agenda of the meeting. This overlooks the multiple connections between internal and cross-border population movements, and shows the wavering commitment of governments and international organizations to meeting the needs of internally displaced people.

These are some of the main challenges that repeatedly push internal displacement off the agenda:

Lack of Political Will: The core challenge remains the absence of sufficient political will of national authorities to prevent and resolve internal displacement. No matter the cause, internal displacement is a political problem that requires political solutions. Some governments highlight their IDP populations as a means to regain territory no longer under their control, while others do not acknowledge IDPs in order to divert attention elsewhere. Political will is required to find peaceful settlements of conflicts, reduce disaster risk,

and ensure that people displaced by development projects are not treated as collateral damage. National investments in building resilience before, during and after displacement and to facilitate progress towards durable solutions are essential to preventing and reducing displacement.

Sovereignty as protection against interference:

Another challenge is that of sovereignty. When people fleeing conflict or persecution cross an international border they are eligible for a globally recognized protection regime embodied in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, supported by states parties to the Convention and a dedicated agency, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This ensures that their protection and assistance needs are met. Internally displaced people remain within their country of residence. That government is responsible for taking care of them as it is for any other citizen of the country. Governments that fail to meet this responsibility or indeed cause the displacement in the first place can easily block access to the internally displaced by external humanitarian actors. Even if the government is not deliberately impeding access, non-state actors or the sheer ferocity and uncertainty of the conflict may create barriers.

The current global crisis of impunity for violating international humanitarian law⁴, has harmed the ability of humanitarian actors to reach the internally displaced in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Central African Republic, and elsewhere. Francis Deng, the first Representative of the Secretary General on Internally Displaced People and one of the authors of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement of 1998, frequently invoked the idea of sovereignty as responsibility in his advocacy on behalf of the internally displaced. But the global political and diplomatic environment at present is not conducive to states in conflict fulfilling their obligations to people displaced within their borders.

Weak international framework: A third major challenge is the weak international institutional framework for protecting internally displaced people. The first international post focusing on internal

⁴ See InterAction's policy brief, "Civilians Under Fire: Restore Respect for International Humanitarian Law," <https://www.interaction.org/civilians-under-fire>

displacement was the Representative of the UN Secretary General, created in 1992 at the request of the Human Rights Commission. In 2004, the title of the post was changed to Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, but the vital link to the Secretary General was retained. In 2010, however, the position became Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced People, reporting to the Human Rights Council. This severed the link to the highest office of the United Nations, greatly reduced its visibility and affected access to decision-makers.

Lack of coordination amongst operational agencies:

As for protection and assistance, beyond the access challenges described above, the internally displaced have long suffered from the lack of coordination amongst operational agencies and organisations responding to their needs. Internal displacement deserves a multi-agency response since the issue cuts across multiple agency mandates. The issue has rather been inadequate coordination amongst agencies and national authorities. The cluster response system, the key component of the major UN-led humanitarian reform effort in 2005, was designed to improve the coordination of global humanitarian assistance, including internal displacement.

Yet the implemented system has become another standard part of the humanitarian architecture divorced from specific, dedicated analysis of the particular needs and rights of internally displaced people. UNHCR has accepted the responsibility of leading the protection cluster, which focuses primarily on the protection needs of the internally displaced. But the lack of a clear mandate, member state ambivalence about UNHCR playing a leading role in IDP protection, reluctance to challenge states that fail to fulfil their responsibilities to protect their refugee programs, and a default allocation of scarce resources and staff to refugee needs have severely hampered the overall response to the needs of internally displaced people.

Lack of data and analysis: Lastly, any progress on commitments to IDPs depends on credible, timely and longitudinal data and analysis on internal displacement. The current picture, however, is far from complete. A

2015 UN General Assembly resolution encourages states to “ensure the provision of reliable data on internal displacement”, by collaborating with NRC’s Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). But most countries have yet to designate a specific government agency to systematically collect and share comprehensive data, which is a key benchmark of an effective national response to internal displacement.⁵ This is at a time when IDMC, the only global provider of independent data and analysis on IDPs worldwide, is facing a situation where donors are reducing support to a critical level. The result of the lack of quality data and analysis is that policy-makers and operational partners are left with an imperfect set of tools that are inconsistently used.

In short, at the time of the greatest internal displacement in over 70 years, the inter-governmental structures intended to lead and advocate on behalf of the displaced have either been greatly weakened or have performed at less than optimal levels.

Opportunities

Even in the current challenging environment for humanitarian action, there are opportunities to strengthen the IDP regime. The African Union set a fine example for the world with its Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced People in Africa, informally known as the Kampala Convention. It came into force in 2012 and is the world’s first continental instrument that legally binds governments to protect the rights and wellbeing of people forced to flee their homes by conflict, violence, disasters and human rights abuses. While the continent’s governments have yet to domesticate or fully implement its various provisions, the Convention provides a framework for technical support and advocacy with governments that have ratified it. The UN Secretary-General can call on other regional and national bodies to ensure incorporation of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement into relevant law and develop durable solutions strategies in collaboration with donor governments, international

⁵ IDMC, Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID 2016), <http://www.internal-displacement.org/globalreport2016/>.

organizations, and civil society to work towards resolving displacement situations.

Another opportunity rests in the establishment of the Platform on Disaster Displacement in July 2016 to continue the work started by the Nansen Initiative consultative process and to implement the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda, endorsed by 109 governmental delegations during a Global Consultation in October 2015. The Protection Agenda provides States with a toolbox for preventing and preparing for displacement before a disaster strikes, as well as responding to displaced people's needs, whether internally or across an international border.

A second broad area of work involves finding ways to highlight the plight of internally displaced people and advocate for solutions. The IDP mandate holder for now remains a special rapporteur linked to the Human Rights Council, an achievable political goal is to restore the linkage with the Secretary-General through a Special Representative appointment. If provided with an office, this will enhance the political clout of the appointee and underscore the importance of protecting internally displaced people. Within existing UN procedures greater effort can be made to highlight particular IDP situations through regular briefings to the Security Council by the Emergency Relief Coordinator and through Arria Formula special sessions.

A third area of opportunity lies in the increasing recognition of the protracted nature of internal displacement and the need to engage development actors in a coherent effort to address the needs of the displaced. In order to do this, analysis of the underlying drivers of displacement has to underpin all future efforts. While international attention tends to focus on countries affected by refugee flows and how to strengthen host governments' ability to provide basic services, countries with large and persistent numbers of IDPs face similar challenges. Even allowing for the access challenges due to conflict or deliberate obstruction, governments, donors, and international organizations need to consider the structural factors at play in driving these displacement patterns, and the development needs of the long-term displaced. They need to plan and implement prevention and response programs accordingly when conditions permit.

Education, housing, primary health care, infrastructure and economic development, as well as core protection activities such as measures to protect civilians and prevent gender-based violence, should be joined up in a collective approach to displacement. Global development policy processes such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Agenda promise to leave no one behind, including IDPs, and their concrete targets and indicators offer a unique opportunity to ensure that IDPs' displacement-related vulnerabilities are more actively addressed over the next 15 to 20 years.

Looking ahead, a new report commissioned by OCHA calls for a high-level conference in 2017 under the auspices of the UN Secretary General to "promote and reach consensus on a new outcome-oriented approach to protracted internal displacement." This could in effect be a precursor for IDP-specific political commitments, as well as a ground-laying exercise for events in 2018 to mark the 20th anniversary of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

NRC key messages

- **There is a need to refocus and increase global attention to internal displacement:** The striking disparity between the scale of internal displacement and the extent of global focus and funding has to be addressed.
- **The key challenge is that of political will:** Ultimately, internal displacement requires political solutions and that states muster the political will to address the plight of IDPs and prevent new displacement. National governments and regional bodies should adopt strategies and policies with clear targets and indicators in consultation with the internally displaced themselves to find durable solutions and prevent further displacement.
- **Coordination of operational responses must be improved;** In the absence of a single agency mandated with IDP protection, a multi-agency cross-cutting approach to IDP protection is most appropriate. Humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and human rights

actors should respond to internal displacement together with local civil society, the private sector and governments. This will most effectively ensure a sustainable resolution on internal displacement. .

- **Better data and analysis are needed:** More comprehensive, up to date and disaggregated data on the number and state of IDPs is needed to improve understanding and response to internal displacement. Moreover, analysis of the underlying drivers and risk of new displacement must move to the centre of decision-making in countries with high numbers of internally displaced people.
- **Internal displacement must be taken into consideration in the work on the Global Compacts:** The 2016 High Level Meeting to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants missed a key opportunity by not including internal displacement in its agenda, and thereby overlooked the multiple connections between internal and cross-border population movements.
- **2018 is a crucial year for IDPs:** In addition to the two Global Compacts, 2018 will mark the 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles, an opportunity that should be seized. This is an opportunity to bring more policy attention to internal displacement, linking it explicitly to wider displacement and migration flows, and calling for renewed commitments by national governments to uphold their responsibilities towards IDPs.
- **The world needs an SRSG on the human rights of IDPs:** Restoring the link with the Secretary-General through the appointment of a Special Representative on IDPs can work towards addressing the lack of political appetite to prevent and resolve internal displacement. This position would complement the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs through high-level diplomacy and sustained engagement with relevant member states on access and addressing the root causes of internal displacement.
- **Global policy processes present an important opportunity:** Implementation of commitments made on preventing and addressing internal displacement at the World Humanitarian Summit can go a long way towards addressing internal displacement. This is the same for the Agenda for Humanity, 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Member states should uphold their commitments by reporting back to the General Assembly on a regular basis on implementation and follow-up with regard to internal displacement in all relevant frameworks.

Links to other relevant information:

NRC's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is the leading source of news, data and analysis on IDPs worldwide, see: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

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