IDPs as a Category of Special Concern: Don't Dim the Light

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Imagine: While you were sleeping, your home was hit by a missile, burst into flames, and you had seconds to grab your young children and run out the door, watching your apartment building crumble into rubble. Your husband was killed in the attack. The bombardments continued, so you and your children, with nothing but the clothes on your backs, joined the masses of people desperately trying to flee the city.

Imagine: You're fleeing because last night men with guns turned up at your door and gave you 24 hours to leave; otherwise, they threatened to kill you.

Imagine: You survived the big storm and flooding, but your home and entire village was destroyed and everything you owned was washed away. There is no one to treat your child's wounds, no clean water and no food, and it is still raining and getting cold. The small local hospital and all the roads are all submerged under water.

And now what? You urgently need to reach a safe place, find shelter where you can stay and, hopefully, at least some emergency assistance provided by your Government and possibly also humanitarian organizations.

Imagine: Two years have passed and you're still living in an irregular settlement together with other displaced people. While some humanitarian assistance initially was provided, it has dwindled to a minimum. You desperately need a job. But even for the most menial work, you are turned away and told you are one of those people 'who should go home'. However, you can't return because the place you once called home is still too dangerous for you or even no longer exists.

The newly elected mayor is one of the loudest voices telling everyone that all internally displaced persons (IDPs) must go back to where they came from. You and your friends have no political voice and are not allowed to vote as, according to the law, you can only exercise your political rights back where you used to live. You want to press the local authorities to stop the armed thugs coming into the settlement at night and harassing the young women and girls, including your daughter.

When you go out to look for work, the police regularly harass you because you lost your identity card while fleeing. They tell you it can be replaced, but only in the city where you lived – a place you cannot return to. Your children haven't been to school since you fled because their birth certificates were stolen when you had to sleep on the side of the road the first few nights. They have nothing to do all day and your son still has nightmares about when you all fled your home.

Imagine: By chance, you overhear a journalist visiting your settlement who asks a humanitarian worker what percentage of her organization's budget is spent to assist IDPs. You're surprised to hear the humanitarian worker reply that such information does not exist because "distinctions between displaced and non-displaced people in need of humanitarian assistance do not make sense." And that "both are just vulnerable and IDPs are often not worse off than non-displaced people and therefore should not be privileged." At least, that's what you hear.

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Unfortunately, these scenarios are all too real. They, and so many stories like them, are the lived experiences of the many IDPs we meet through our respective work in countries around the world. Another disturbing reality we encounter is the view by some in the international humanitarian and development community that IDPs should not be a focus of attention in response.

This is an old debate from over 20 years ago, which we thought was now obsolete, but still pops up, including in certain humanitarian circles. Strikingly, it is sometimes the same organizations whose fundraising brochures feature glossy photos of IDPs who question why they should give particular attention to IDPs in their programs.

We are puzzled by how evident, often stark, realities of the numerous protection risks and assistance needs faced by displaced persons can be overlooked and even outright dismissed. We are puzzled how those calling for attention – as we also do – to the specific needs of women, children and persons with disabilities, cannot extend that same logic to people forced to flee their homes.

We ask ourselves why scepticism regarding IDPs as a group with specific needs persists at the same time as there is acceptance of humanitarian coordination clusters for camp coordination and camp management or for emergency shelter, which predominantly focus on helping IDPs.

At the same time, we are concerned that the international humanitarian community is unable to report how much aid across all sectors is spent in support of IDPs and the communities hosting them – and whether this assistance works to address IDPs' specific needs.

Certainly, not all IDPs experience displacement in the same way or from the same starting point: some will have financial resources, assets, and social capital such that they do not require humanitarian assistance at all – or at least not beyond the initial emergency phase, when they suddenly have to find safe new shelter and ways to meet basic needs for food, water, clothing, etc.

Once the situation stabilizes, in terms of material needs in low-income countries, IDPs are not necessarily worse off than non-displaced people who may also need urgent support. There is, however, ample evidence that IDPs are often the most poor, marginalized and vulnerable among the communities hosting them and suffer the worst health outcomes in humanitarian emergencies.

Further, while high levels of food insecurity might be seasonal or a one-off event for local rural or peri-urban populations with land, lack of food might become permanent for IDPs, who have lost access to their land and often cannot access arable land while displaced.

Apart from assistance needs, displacement tends to heighten exposure to protection risks. Indeed, the very fact of becoming displaced may constitute an abuse of rights. Additionally, displacement is supposed to be a temporary situation, resolved as soon as conditions allow.

Therefore, looking at IDPs as a special category of concern makes sense because the simple fact of being forced to flee your home creates specific needs.

IDPs suddenly need to:

(1) be able to **leave the danger zone** and reach a (relatively) safe location;
(2) **find a place to stay temporarily**, whether in a camp (if they exist), with a host family, or on their own;
(3) **avoid and be protected from discrimination** on the grounds of being displaced;
(4) be able to **have lost or destroyed personal documentation restored and documents issued to children born during displacement** where the law stipulates that this can only be done at the place of (former) habitual residence;
(5) be able to **register as voters and participate in elections and referenda** with the same civic rights as non-displaced people;
(6) **have real estate and other immovable property left behind protected and at a later stage restored or compensated** where restitution is not possible; and in particular
(7) **achieve a solution that is sustainable and allows them to rebuild their lives**, regardless of whether they return, integrate locally or settle in another part of the country.

Of course, it is not the task of humanitarian actors to address all these needs: protecting, assisting and creating conditions enabling solutions is the responsibility foremost of the internally displaced peoples' government, while humanitarian and development actors can complement these efforts. However, without understanding and taking into account displacement-specific needs, short-term humanitarian action over months and years risks contributing to the protractedness of internal displacement, even in situations where first steps towards solutions could be taken early on.

This requires seeing IDPs not just as an incidental part of a bigger humanitarian caseload but as a group of people with particular needs to be addressed through specific measures, as is the case for children, women, and persons with disabilities, for example. It requires ensuring attention to displacement-specific needs in all phases of programme design, from needs assessment and analysis through to monitoring and evaluation. The importance of doing so is long recognized by States. They have been requesting the UN's help in assisting IDPs for over 50 years.

Since the early 1990s, a growing number of countries – more than 90 as of 2024 – have adopted specific laws, policies and strategies on internal displacement.[1] In 2009, the Heads of State of every country in Africa jointly adopted the world's first legally binding Convention for protecting and assisting IDPs. They were driven to do so by both "the gravity of the situation of internally displaced persons as a source of continuing instability and tension for African states" and by "the suffering and specific vulnerability of internally displaced persons."

Regional inter-governmental organizations in the Americas and Europe also have adopted specific recommendations and established mechanisms for monitoring IDPs' human rights. In all regions of the world, States and non-state armed groups have signed peace agreements containing specific obligations towards IDPs.

That the issue of internal displacement warrants specific attention also has long been recognized by the international community. It

[1] See the UNHCR IDP Law and Policy Dashboard for details and updates

has been over 30 years since UN member states established and continued to endorse the need for a UN independent expert on the human rights of internally displaced persons to advocate for the rights of IDPs and support States and international and regional organizations to address internal displacement.

Since 2005, resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council continue to reaffirm the recognition of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as an important international framework for the protection of IDPs.

In 2021, the report of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement established by the UN Secretary-General called for "shining a light" on the global crisis of internal displacement.

The ever-growing number of IDPs – now some 79.5 million worldwide – and the increasingly protracted nature of their displacement underscore the urgent need for continued focus on their plight and finding safe and durable solutions.

It is not time to dim the light.

**The views expressed are those of the individual experts*