

Uganda's response to displacement: contrasting policy and practice

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An often overlooked aspect of northern Uganda's protracted conflict is that the main driver of displacement was the Ugandan government's decision to force civilians into 'protected villages'. Peace may be in sight but more must be done to make a reality of Uganda's mould-breaking national IDP policy.

Conflict between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has displaced an estimated 1.8 million people. The government argued that it had to separate civilians from insurgents in order to reduce the LRA's ability to recruit civilian collaborators and in 2002 the displacement crisis worsened when the Ugandan army, in the course of an offensive against the LRA (Operation Iron Fist), ordered all civilians remaining in 'abandoned villages' to move to 'protected villages', i.e. government camps.

Forced encampment dramatically increased vulnerability. Repeated LRA attacks succeeded because soldiers were often garrisoned in the middle of IDP camps, rather than on the outside as intended. When the LRA attacked a camp, the soldiers' base would be the last point reached by the LRA – meaning that the IDPs themselves bore the brunt of the fighting. The failure of the 'protected villages' policy and the appalling humanitarian conditions in the camps entrenched the feeling of the Acholi people – the main victims of the LRA as well as suppliers of its cadres – that they were politically and socially marginalised. In 2003 lack of national and international response to the massive humanitarian needs in Uganda's IDP camps led the then UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Jan Egeland, to describe the humanitarian crisis in northern Uganda as the "biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today."

Uganda's National Policy for IDPs was adopted in 2004, following a visit by Francis Deng, former Representative of the Secretary-General on Internal Displacement. Uganda became one of the first countries to adopt a national policy derived from the Guiding Principles, which:

- holistically addresses protection against displacement, during displacement and during return, resettlement and integration
- states that IDPs "have the right to request and receive protection and humanitarian assistance from national and district authorities"
- gives IDPs "the right not to be discriminated against in the fulfilment of any rights and freedoms on the grounds that they are internally displaced"
- urges action to enable IDPs to attain the same educational standards as other Ugandans
- highlights the importance of consulting IDPs, especially displaced women and youth
- has been translated into three local languages – Acholi, Ateso and Lango
- represents a commitment by the government and an endorsed set of standards to which actors can hold the government accountable.

Implementation of the IDP Policy got off to a slow start. Rushed

decentralisation reforms did not give lower tiers of government sufficient resources. Little allowance was made for the fact that local government was in tatters. Local governments came under further pressure as a result of the large influx of humanitarian actors and the subsequent decision by the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – the main humanitarian coordination mechanism¹ – to make Uganda a pilot country for the implementation of the cluster approach.² Many go-it-alone international actors failed to consult with local authorities. The roll-out of the cluster approach set up parallel structures for the coordination of humanitarian activities. Local governments were sidelined as the international community did little to build government capacity. There was lack of communication between national and local authorities, little consultation with IDPs and failure to allocate resources to implement the policy.

After protracted negotiations brokered by the newly established Government of Southern Sudan, the Ugandan government and the LRA agreed to a ceasefire in 2006. While the LRA has yet to be persuaded to sign a final peace agreement – in part due to the International Criminal Court's indictment of LRA leaders – the security situation in northern Uganda has improved, allowing hundreds of thousands of IDPs to leave the camps. There is much talk about the transition from humanitarian emergency relief to recovery and development but there is confusion about the roles and responsibilities of national and local governments, UN agencies, donors and NGOs.³ The multiple coordination mechanisms created in the earlier phase of the crisis must be streamlined to allow handover of responsibilities to national authorities.



A displaced girl cares for her younger sibling in an IDP camp in northern Uganda.

Paul Jeffrey/Action by Churches Together

With the benefit of hindsight, it would have been better for the international community, having encouraged Uganda to develop a national IDP policy, to strengthen and support government bodies. This might have encouraged a longer-term perspective and helped prepare local authorities to assume responsibilities given them by the National IDP Policy.

Huge efforts are required to guarantee durable solutions to IDPs and all those affected by conflict. Failure to address the root causes of the conflict and to conclude a final peace agreement with the LRA – one of the key conditions for the return of many IDPs – would attest to the government's failure to prevent displacement and create conditions conducive for durable solutions.

The peace process has created an opportunity for the government to

find sustainable solutions for the displaced. While the government has begun a process of closing down IDP camps, it needs to take measures that will enable IDPs to make voluntary and informed decisions on whether to return, integrate or resettle.

In 2005 the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement convened a workshop in Kampala – hosted by the Ugandan government – to identify the challenges to the implementation of Uganda's IDP policy and work towards practical solutions. The workshop's recommendation are still valid.⁴ The Ugandan government must facilitate IDP returns by removing landmines, increasing police presence in return areas, building infrastructure, making social services available and establishing judicial mechanisms to address criminal offences and land and property disputes. Above

all, the government should tackle the root causes of the conflict and allocate more resources to implement its innovative IDP policy.

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1. <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc>

2. See FMR 20, <http://www.fmreview.org/humanitarianreform.htm>

3. Oxfam, 'From Emergency to Recovery: Rescuing northern Uganda's transition', September 2008. <http://www.oxfam.org/files/bp118-uganda-from-emergency-to-recovery.pdf>

4. Joy Miller, 'Uganda's IDP Policy', FMR 27, January 2007. <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR27/53.pdf>