



# Change and continuity in displacement and response

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**For 25 years Forced Migration Review has tracked the disasters and crises, concerns and responses to forced migration, from Vietnamese boat people to Syrian refugees. So what has changed and where do we go in the next 25 years?**

On the FMR website it is possible to see the first edition of the Refugee Participation Network newsletter – the precursor to FMR – from April 1988. At first glance this scanned copy of a hand-typed and photocopied newsletter, complete with hand-drawn graphs, is in sharp contrast to today's glossier FMR which can be read online while readers are able to interact with the journal and its editors through Twitter or Facebook and listen to podcasts of articles.

However, on reading those first articles we are aware that the picture in 2013 is not that dissimilar to 1987. When people are in danger from conflict, unrest and disasters, they flee that danger if they can. The journeys they undertake are hard and expose them to new hazards and uncertainties, and frequently to onwards displacement; durable solutions are slow to materialise and many live in unresolved situations for years. That early edition raises very contemporary concerns about the relationships between refugees and host communities, the socio-economic impact on refugee-receiving countries, the unmet needs of urban displaced, and the lack of educational support for displaced children.

There continues to be a significant shift towards more assertive and exclusive state sovereignty and diminishing space for international humanitarian action. With greater focus on internal displacement in recent decades, the action and inaction of states have been a focus of humanitarian and human rights campaigners across the world, with humanitarians managing a fine balance between the necessity of speaking out and the need to retain the ability to provide aid. With increasing state pressure to limit the actions of external humanitarian actors, and greater recognition of national humanitarian capacity, future humanitarian action will need to look significantly different. International actors working for the better protection of refugees and IDPs will need to rethink their relationship with states, working to build state capacity where appropriate but also to find new models of supporting national civil society.

International aid organisations will shift to a facilitative and influencing role, supporting national capacity for assistance and protection, both state capacity and national civil society capacity. This will have to mean more equal partnerships, based on mutual respect and learning, transfer of technical skills and a network of actors in different roles and spheres of action and influence combining their skills and expertise as a collective international civil society.

FMR has continued to tackle these and many other issues over its history, providing an invaluable resource for policymakers, practitioners and academics alike. A number of well-thumbed issues sit on my desk, two in particular which I have frequently referred to in taking forwards Oxfam's protection work.

## Technology

The world is more connected, disasters and conflict are more accessible, and action to show solidarity, give support and bring about change can be taken at the click of a mouse. In 2011 FMR issue 38 – 'the technology issue' – drew heavily on the advances made in the response to the Haiti earthquake.<sup>1</sup> Since then the speed of change and innovation has gathered pace.

Advances in technology mean that whilst we may have seen grainy photographs of Eritrean or Sudanese refugees in 1987, we now have live feeds from Za'atari camp in Jordan, and Syrian refugees use WhatsApp and Facebook to talk to their families back home and try to assess when it will be safe enough for them to return. Humanitarians have their work cut out to keep up, let alone lead the way.



Technology can be used for multiple purposes, and not just by humanitarians and refugees and other displaced people. In November 2013 the M23 armed group in eastern DRC announced through Facebook that it would end military action, surrender its troops and pursue its goals through political channels. The Al-Shabaab armed group based in Somalia – where conflict has resulted in massive displacement and created the largest refugee camp in the world in neighbouring Kenya – has an active Twitter account.

Technology can also offer great benefits and opportunities for people outside the traditional humanitarian or activist box to contribute, either through the potential for fundraising and campaigning that it offers, or through more direct means. When Typhoon Haiyan caused massive devastation across the Philippines and displaced more than four million people, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs activated the Digital Humanitarian Network<sup>2</sup> to carry out a rapid needs and damage assessment by tagging reports posted to social media. The initial assessment of damage was created by a global network



of volunteer micro-taskers, many of whom have never been and probably never will go to the Philippines.

Whilst technology has enabled faster communication, it has also created high expectations of an immediate response – after all, if cameras can get there, why not aid? Within Oxfam we have seen the time it takes to launch a response reduce significantly but it still takes longer to set up a water system for thousands of people where roads and infrastructure have been destroyed than it does to post an image online or tweet a heart-rending anecdote.

We need to make full use of the technical advances available to us but also need to do so in an appropriate and ethical way that neither further marginalises those without access to the technology nor exposes people to risks. Digital activism has an important role to play but we need to be wary of creating a digital illusion of action where there is limited impact in the lives of those who need concrete tangible changes.

### Sexual violence

Another area that has seen significant change is in relation to gender, gender-based violence and sexual violence in particular. In 2007 FMR issue 27 focused specifically on sexual violence and that issue remains a key reference point for practitioners.<sup>3</sup> In the last 25 years there has been a growing awareness of the scale and impact of sexual violence in conflict, from the war in Bosnia and genocide in Rwanda, through Liberia, Darfur and eastern DRC. There have been several UN Security Council Resolutions, including one that seeks to ‘name and shame’ perpetrators, a Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict has been appointed, and the International Criminal Court has indicted a sitting head of state for a range of crimes including that of rape. However, whilst progress has been made in the policy and judicial sphere (although there is still a long way to go), this has not always resulted in better prevention of sexual violence or more effective and timely service provision for survivors.

It is widely recognised that, given the increased risks for them in displacement, protecting IDPs and refugees from the risk of sexual violence is essential. But more action is still needed to ensure that a commitment in principle turns into real action to prevent and respond to

sexual violence including tackling the underlying gender inequalities that cause and perpetuate gender-based violence. Work to address inequalities within countries needs to tackle not just the violent manifestations of gender inequalities but also the root causes.

### So where next?

What do the next 25 years have in store for us? UNHCR estimates there are more than 45 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Those of us working to prevent their displacement, assist and protect refugees and IDPs, and facilitate and support durable solutions will have much to do in the years ahead.

In 2014 we shall continue to face some of the most difficult challenges of forced migration on a par with the worst situations of the last 25 years. 2.2 million refugees<sup>4</sup> have fled conflict in Syria and a further 6.5 million are estimated to be internally displaced.<sup>5</sup> Conflict continues to wreck the lives of millions of people in Mali, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen and the Central

African Republic, as do more frequent disasters, including Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in late 2013. Challenges such as these will require long-term planning to ensure the resources and skills of a wide range of actors can be utilised effectively and efficiently.

Reflecting on the past 25 years of FMR, it is possible to see an impressive history of individual and collective

thought, action and commitment to supporting those forced from their homes. In the next 25 years we can foresee an expansion of this network to include a greater number and even wider diversity of actors who should be able to continue using the platform of FMR to build relationships, present ideas and learning, and influence policy and decisionmakers.

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Oxfam GB is one of FMR's longest-supporting donors.

1. [www.fmreview.org/technology](http://www.fmreview.org/technology)
2. <http://tirevolution.net/2013/11/08/volunteer-typhoon-yolanda/>
3. [www.fmreview.org/sexualviolence](http://www.fmreview.org/sexualviolence)
4. UNHCR, 1 December 2013
5. IDMC, 1 December 2013



Heal Africa Transit Centre for women victims of sexual violence