

A road map to the end of displacement in Sri Lanka?

by Jeevan Thiagarajah

The Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) is a non-profit agency representing those working in the humanitarian sector in Sri Lanka. Our work on internal displacement, the knowledge we have gained and the capacity we have developed owe much to collaboration with Roberta Cohen and her Brookings colleagues.

Internal displacement is a major obstacle to development in Sri Lanka. At times up to two million have been displaced. The current number of IDPs – the long-term displaced and those recently displaced both by the tsunami and the resumption of conflict – hovers around 450,000.

In 2001 CHA, in collaboration with UNHCR and the Brookings Project on Internal Displacement, began an ambitious undertaking to operationalise the Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement via an

awareness and training project. The project sought to synthesise the Guiding Principles, Modules on Internal Displacement developed by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Annotations to the Guiding Principles*¹ by Walter Kälin and a *Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*² developed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Brookings.

The resultant *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: a Toolkit for Dissemination Advocacy and Analysis*³ was practice-oriented. It recognised that the Guiding Principles can be an unwieldy tool of analysis. To add to the practical nature of the toolkit, discussion and analysis components were included with pages allocated for notes and questions. Activities to publicise the toolkit and train practitioners in its use sought to encourage participants to think, understand and reach their own conclusions – rather than conform to the rules and non-participatory techniques of traditional workshops. The toolkit was user-friendly, interactive, transparent, educational and reflective. It targeted politicians, military officers (both from the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – LTTE), donors,

local and international NGOs, IDPs themselves and the general public.⁴

Our partnership with Brookings contributed to our understanding of the end of displacement. CHA further collaborated with Brookings to produce a *Practitioners Kit for Return, Resettlement and Development*⁵ which focused on realisation of Guiding Principles 28, 29 and 30 relating to the three Rs of return, resettlement and reintegration. Drafting involved intensive consultation in order to ensure the document was practical and reflected a field perspective. At a stakeholders' meeting, consensus was reached prior to the Practitioner's Kit being released. Roberta Cohen noted that the kit adapted the Guiding Principles to the Sri Lankan experience. "Returns," she wrote, "must be voluntary, based on informed decisions about conditions in return and resettlement areas. They must take place in safety and dignity with the displaced given the opportunity to participate in their planning and management. IDPs must enjoy full access to public services, equality before the law and not be considered 'enemies'. They should have the right to recover their property and possessions or receive compensation, and should be assisted in transporting to their areas

of origin assets required for their livelihood... Although light enough to carry around, the Practitioner's Kit bears a heavy message. It should help not only the Government of Sri Lanka but all governments and major actors to find the right solutions to ending mass displacement."⁶

With Brookings assistance we also launched an IDP newsletter – in English, Sinhala and Tamil.⁷

End of displacement in sight?

In early 2006 the Sri Lankan government appointed a committee to look into displacement and suggest solutions.⁸ The draft legislation before Parliament at present would, once ratified, create for the first time a unitary body in charge of IDP policy – the Jathika Saviya Authority. It would have powers to formulate national policy and plan, implement, monitor and coordinate the resettlement of IDPs and refugees. The presence of CHA in the committee that influenced the legislation owes much to the knowledge we gained as a result of our relationship with the Brookings project.

Displacement has been the most visible impact of Sri Lanka's protracted conflict. An end to displacement would be the most visible progression to peace in the country and a lasting tribute to the value of our collaboration.

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1. [www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/KKEE-6DDSGX/\\$FILE/Guiding%20Principles%20on%20Internal%20Displacement.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/KKEE-6DDSGX/$FILE/Guiding%20Principles%20on%20Internal%20Displacement.pdf?OpenElement)
2. www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/resources/HEnglish.pdf
3. www.humanitarian-srilanka.org/eResources/PDFdocs/GToolkitfull.pdf
4. For more information about the Toolkit and the process of its preparation and dissemination see Danesh Jayatilaka and Robert Muggah 'Where there is no information: IDP vulnerability assessments in Sri Lanka's borderlands', FMR20, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR20/FMR2019.pdf. See also: www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/syllabi/34-CHA-Danesh-d2-1.pdf
5. www.humanitarian-srilanka.org/Pages/Call%20fo%20a%20English.pdf
6. R Cohen, 'A recipe to end internal displacement', FMR 21, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR21/FMR21brookings.pdf
7. www.humanitarian-srilanka.org/Knowledge_Centre/Publications.php
8. Thiagarajah, J & Dinusha Pathiraja (2006). Human Rights and Humanitarian Laws in the Face of Continued Displacement in Sri Lanka - [www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/KKEE-6DDSGX/\\$FILE/Guiding%20Principles%20on%20Internal%20Displacement.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/KKEE-6DDSGX/$FILE/Guiding%20Principles%20on%20Internal%20Displacement.pdf?OpenElement)