

# Living in the shadows: internally displaced people in southern Africa

by Marion Ryan Sinclair



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The Centre for Southern African Studies at the University of the Western Cape has recently begun a research project designed to investigate the extent, conditions and prognoses of internally displaced people (IDPs) in southern African countries.

For decades the southern African region has been plagued by political crises which have generated huge populations of IDPs. The great majority of these populations remain, even today, undeclared and unassisted. But over the last few years, and led largely by the emergence of democracy in South Africa, awareness has grown that the official secrets of the past must come to light. The ending of civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, the growing acceptance of a human rights agenda for the region, and a regional resolution to develop along lines of democracy and participation, have produced a new commitment to an honest appraisal of

past liabilities. While there is growing conviction that the situation of IDPs across the region should be addressed, very little hard information is available to inform the development of intervention strategies. This is a legacy of both a difficult research environment and a largely hostile officialdom.

The problem of IDPs exists across the whole southern African region. In South Africa itself two distinct sources of dislocation have been apartheid policies of forced removal and government-sponsored ethnic violence, which together have created an IDP population estimated by the US

Committee for Refugees to number approximately 500,000 people [1]. Over the years, civil wars in Angola and Mozambique have generated millions of displaced people. In Malawi the burden of hosting Mozambican refugees led to a situation where native Malawians became impoverished and sometimes even displaced because of the burden of accommodating refugees with little international assistance [2, 3]. Tanzania experienced two decades of internal displacement problem following the villagification exercises of the 1970s. In Zimbabwe, the Zanu massacres in Matebeleland generated large but unreported displacement of people, many of whom remain displaced today [4]. The Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) - the newest member of the Southern African Development Community - is recovering from months of civil war which have left uncounted numbers displaced.

While most countries across the region have well defined positions on refugee assistance, none has begun to address the needs of IDPs. The South African refugee policy is considered comparatively liberal in its acceptance of refugees and the rights of asylum seekers, yet ignores those displaced within its own borders. This neglect raises the question of the motive behind guarantees of assistance to international refugees: is this simply political, serving to convince the international community that South Africa does indeed respect human rights and customary international law? The continued neglect of IDPs also suggests that the current government is either unable or unwilling to deal effectively with continuing ethnic violence within the country.

While the problem of IDPs is normally viewed from a regional or even national level, the most profound impacts are commonly manifest at a

local level. In South Africa, the region of Kwazulu-Natal has generated the highest numbers of IDPs over the late 1980s and early 1990s. The vast majority of these uprooted people have fled to the metropolitan areas of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and it is largely in the urban fabric of these two cities that the impact of forced migration is felt. Yet, paradoxically, it is here that those displaced tend to become invisible, partly of their own volition and partly because research and political agendas have decreed that they are not a priority.

In the case of Durban, tens of thousands of IDPs [5] have been absorbed into the city, significantly boosting the homeless population and the level of unemployment and giving rise to conflicts over limited work opportunities, food and shelter. In the absence of official sources of assistance to IDPs a number of small private organisations have emerged from among the people themselves. These offer little more than a common sense of history and experience, though at least one of the organisations offers more technical and practical assistance in the form of skills training and accommodation services. For the newly-arrived IDP, accommodation and work are the two immediate challenges, while

the long-term need to deal with the psychological effects of the violence that

precipitated their flight is left unexplored. For the great majority of these refugees this need remains unaddressed even after many years in the city.

Neglect of IDPs can be attributed in part to the great obstacles involved in gauging the extent of the problem.

refugees and IDPs, this question of government responsibility will need to be addressed, and community costs for past assistance appreciated and, where necessary, compensated.

In almost all cases, IDPs' own governments have failed to provide them with basic assistance and protection,

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There is also, however, a widespread and surprising unwillingness to confront this issue. For the most part, displaced people arouse only temporary interest, with public attention waning fast and extended concern conspicuous by its absence. For those displaced there is almost always a long-term legacy of poverty and loss of family and community, and little or no assistance to deal with the extensive material and psychological impacts. The denial of official recognition of IDPs across southern Africa has meant that the burden of caring for them has tended to fall heavily on local communities. In effect, those displaced have commonly sought asylum with local communities rather than with the state, or have simply struck out on their own. Governments in the region have got away both with creating huge IDP populations and also subsequently with ignoring their material needs - at great cost to many local communities. As the governments of the region move towards adopting international standards of assistance to

either because of a lack of resources or because of the political expedience of ignoring their plight. The situation is compounded not only by the frequent restriction of information in the media, which entrenches their position of international neglect, but also by the fact that no international legislation or customary international laws provide for external forces to come to their assistance.

International recognition of the existence of IDPs in southern Africa, their numerical significance and the human rights abuses that they represent is of paramount importance. Public awareness remains low, primarily because no watchdog organisations have taken it upon themselves to publicise the issue or lobby support. At a global level, however, IDPs are slowly gaining political



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sympathy. There is growing pressure on the UN to redefine the mandate of UNHCR to include IDPs, despite a more conservative lobby arguing for the increased restriction of UNHCR duties to address international refugees exclusively. This debate looks set to continue for the foreseeable future, remaining an academic matter at least until more funds are made available for humanitarian operations. In the interim, and in spite of the lack of a clear mandate for action towards IDPs, the UN and other agencies have occasionally played a highly important role in assisting those internally displaced. Examples include cross-border operations (such as those in Afghanistan, and Sudan [6]), *de facto* extended UNHCR mandates to include IDPs and repatriated refugees (for example in Mozambique and El Salvador), and the interventions of the

International Committee for the Red Cross.

While isolated examples of assistance to IDPs do provide necessary protection and relief, they are neither sufficient nor strategically effective. In the words of Lance Clark "As long as we treat each of these instances as isolated cases and therefore continue to apply *ad hoc* rather than systematic responses, we are condemning millions of people every year to unnecessary suffering" [7]. The call for the UN to establish a body mandated to continue and extend such work is clearly sadly belated.

The major logistical obstacles to providing assistance to IDPs derive from the fact that while international refugee agencies have a mandate to assist the dispossessed and displaced, they

can do so only on request and only where those displaced have crossed state lines. While there have been calls for a common regional position on international refugees within southern Africa - although the political and economic realities of the region make this unlikely and possibly unwise at present - the treatment of IDPs is ultimately a question of domestic policy. This, in turn, depends on the willingness of governments in the region to acknowledge the IDP problem in their respective countries.

South Africa is currently in the convoluted process of devising a Refugee Bill and whilst this does not explicitly address the requirements of IDPs, the associated climate of public interest in issues of displacement in general presents a timely opportunity for the IDP issue to be addressed at both a public and an official level. The ultimate aim should be to enact new legislation to protect and assist IDPs, and to gain commitment from the Government to tackle the problems which may give rise to new flows of IDPs in the future.

In considering parallel legislation to address refugees and IDPs, an important caveat is made - namely that it is necessary to equalise the treatment and consideration of both groups. The idea is not to insist that IDPs deserve more assistance, or that they are somehow more significant because they are local, but to bestow equal status and aid on all who have been forced to relocate, regardless of origin or final location.

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