

Who does what?

by Dennis McNamara

Recent UN reforms aim to clarify institutional responsibilities for internally displaced people and to significantly enhance accountability.

Internally displaced people are particularly vulnerable. Compared with refugees, not only do they have less legal protection but also, historically, the international community has paid relatively little attention to their plight.

It has been suggested that there should be a new UN agency to address the needs of the internally displaced, one that could be held accountable. Even if such a lead agency would not implement all the humanitarian programmes relating to internally displaced people, it would be held responsible for making sure that appropriate programmes were in place.

The international community, however, has opted for a different approach. The UN agencies have been asked to respond to this issue through a process of collaboration. The Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division,¹ located within the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), was established in July 2004 in part to ensure that this inter-agency approach works. Because of its growing experience of what actually happens on the ground, the Division is in a good position to assess when the collaborative approach is working and when it is failing.

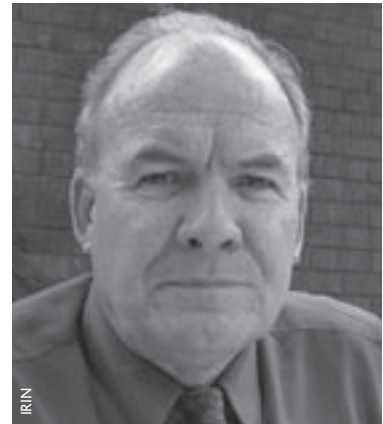
Division of labour

It's all a question of working out who is responsible for what. Our experience has shown that there are certain specific problem areas in relation to the internally displaced that arise repeatedly: emergency shelter, camp management, returning home, restarting livelihoods and, most importantly, receiving adequate protection during all of these phases. The delivery of adequate protection and assistance is severely compromised when it is not clear which UN agency is responsible for each of these tasks.

The lack of a clear division of labour between UN agencies in specific sectors has in some cases increased the suffering of the internally displaced. For example, the UN was slow to respond to the situation in Darfur partly because of initial indecision as to which UN agency was responsible for meeting the protection and shelter needs of internally displaced Darfurians. And it's not just a question of responding to emergencies. The absence of a clear allocation of responsibilities has also hampered humanitarian operations in protracted emergencies such as those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Uganda.

Until now the Emergency Relief Coordinator² and his field-level counterparts, the Humanitarian Coordinators, have had overall responsibility for putting in place the coordinated response to the problems faced by the internally displaced. In practice though, agencies have been taking a 'pick and choose' approach to internally displaced people's needs. The result has been inconsistency, inter-agency competition and a lack of predictable standard setting, monitoring and accountability. On some occasions, short-term commitments have been made and later reversed. While Humanitarian Coordinators have identified problems at the field level and raised them with particular UN agencies' headquarters staff, the response has remained ad hoc and, all too often, has depended on the enthusiasm and drive of individuals.

The General Assembly has addressed these issues. In 2004, in resolution 58/177³, it reaffirmed the international community's commitment to "an effective, accountable and predictable collaborative approach" and spoke of the need "to strengthen further inter-agency arrangements and the capacities of the United Nations agencies and other relevant actors to meet the immense humanitarian challenges of internal displacement." Then, in early 2005,



Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for further action to improve the response to the internally displaced. In his report, *In Larger Freedom*,⁴ he stated his intention to "strengthen further inter-agency response to the needs of internally displaced persons, under the global leadership of the ERC (Emergency Relief Coordinator), and at the country level through the Humanitarian Coordinator system."

In an effort to address these concerns, we have focused on supporting the inter-agency response in eight countries with particularly acute problems relating to internally displaced people: Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Liberia, Somalia, Burundi, Colombia and Nepal. Ultimately, however, it is recognised that meeting the challenges set by the General Assembly and the Secretary-General and ensuring more consistent and effective responses require institutional reform.

Towards greater accountability

In July 2005 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)⁵ – a forum which brings together a broad range of UN and non-UN humanitarian partners – agreed that, in principle, specific responsibilities for the internally displaced in problem sectors should be assigned to particular agencies in order to enhance accountability on the ground. These proposals are now being worked out in further detail as part of the overall reform of the humanitarian system launched in 2005; some conclusions are expected by the end of the year.

In each country, designated agencies will have to answer to the Humanitarian Coordinators and, indeed, to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, if they fail to respond to a particular crisis in an effective and timely manner in line with agreed standards.

This does not necessarily mean that an agency given responsibility for a particular issue would have to undertake all the work itself. One of the tasks given to agencies, for example, should be to ensure that national authorities fulfil their own responsibilities for protecting and assisting displaced people and, where national capacity is lacking, to identify agencies that can assist. The agency, however, would be held accountable for making sure that the necessary work is done, even if by others. The idea is to reverse the current relationship in which the Humanitarian Coordinators and the Emergency Relief Coordinator try to persuade agencies to carry out particular tasks. More will be achieved if agencies feel obliged to take the initiative in raising concerns and putting forward suggestions as to how national authorities, donors and other parties could best address the tasks at hand.

An agency given responsibility for camp management, for example, would be expected to carry out assessments, planning, standard setting, monitoring and advocacy in relation to that activity. The Humanitarian Coordinators, under the leadership of the Emergency Relief

Coordinator, would then be able to fulfil their real function in relation to internally displaced people: overseeing the effective functioning of the collaborative response at the strategic level.

Clearly these arrangements should allow for some flexibility. If appropriate, the Humanitarian Coordinator could advise the Emergency Relief Coordinator that, in some exceptional circumstances, an agency or partner with particular expertise and capacity on the ground should be asked to take over responsibility for one specific area. The important point is that everyone should know who is responsible for what and that, subsequently, the designated organisation should be held accountable for fulfilling the tasks assigned to it.

Such arrangements will increase the likelihood of quick, effective interventions. They will also reduce the risk of the Internal Displacement Division becoming a parallel structure undertaking work that should be done by operational agencies. The Division has recently taken the lead in drawing up plans to protect internally displaced people in various countries. In the long term, this work should be undertaken by operational agencies on the ground. Locally-produced plans are more likely to attract the involvement of operational partners and consequently will often be more effective. Furthermore, if a proper system existed for drawing up plans at a country level,

the Humanitarian Coordinators would have greater control and be better placed to ensure that any programmes for the internally displaced fit in with agreed Common Humanitarian Action Plans.

Conclusion

Internal UN reforms are never easy. Pressure to maintain the status quo is significant in any large organisation. These changes will take time. The Internal Displacement Division believes that its expertise will still be required during the transition period until the issues typically arising from internal displacement are better understood by more people in the UN system. But change is needed. Few can deny that internally displaced people need better protection and that the current arrangements are unsatisfactory. Establishing who is responsible for what could significantly improve the situation of a group of people who need all the help they can get.

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1. www.reliefweb.int/idp/
2. Since June 2003 the post has been held by Norway's Jan Egeland, whose article appears on pages 4-5.
3. <http://ochaonline.un.org/webpage.asp?Page=1736>
4. www.un.org/largerfreedom/
5. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/



IDP camp in western Cote d'Ivoire.