

Listening to the experiences of the long-term displaced

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This article offers insights from people who have lived in protracted displacement situations, based on evidence gathered by the Listening Project.

The Listening Project stems from the belief that those who work across borders in humanitarian aid, development assistance, peacebuilding, environmental conservation and human rights can learn a great deal by listening to the analyses and judgments of local people as they reflect on the immediate effects and long-term impacts of such outside aid efforts. The patterns that emerged from Listening Exercises regarding prolonged displacement were specifically about challenges to returning home, who benefits from international assistance, and security.

Challenges to returning

Outside agendas: A number of refugees who had returned after protracted displacement said that their decisions to return were often driven by outside agendas and priorities instead of their feelings of readiness to return or reintegrate. In Sri Lanka at the time of the Listening Exercise in late 2007, displaced people consistently perceived themselves as being at the mercy of either the government's or the international community's agendas. Some IDPs felt access to further international assistance depended on them staying in camps. Others suggested that the Sri Lankan government was asking NGOs to leave and urging people to return home despite their own perception that it was not safe to do so.

In Bosnia and Kosovo, nearly every person mentioned the international community's support for the return of refugees and IDPs, with many saying that they could not have returned without international assistance and that they were grateful for that help. Some, however, commented that since many European donors wanted refugees from the former Yugoslavia

to leave their countries (where they had sought refuge) once the conflicts ended, they prioritised and funded refugee returns faster than people were able to handle. Feeling forced into artificial reconciliation, some people said that requirements that they return to certain areas – often at a faster pace than they were prepared for – in order to receive assistance violated their rights.

In Bosnia, many people also expressed their frustration at the sight of empty houses that they believed were rebuilt for political reasons. In other cases, people were given plots of land, or were resettled by their local governments, and were promised further assistance but then did not receive anything and are barely surviving or have had to leave again.

In Kosovo, people were especially concerned about donors' primary focus on supporting returns and promoting multi-ethnic communities. Asked by a Listening Team member why he was eager for displaced Kosovo Serbs to return to his village, a Kosovar Albanian community council member replied: "because then we could get more things."

Preparation: In several places, displacements that have lasted more than a generation have led to people being unprepared for the life to which they return. For example, a young Angolan woman at a returnee camp spoke perfect English but no Portuguese, having spent almost her entire life in a refugee camp in Zambia where she completed secondary education and had a good job with an international NGO. When her time came to return to Angola, she did so, even though it meant leaving a relatively stable existence in the camp for a life of great uncertainty. She said that she had been unable to learn Portuguese or to secure work as

an English teacher upon her return, so she subsisted by gathering wood and carrying bricks and water for other households in her village.

Among Angolans, many IDPs and refugees felt they had been better off in the camps, and expressed reservations about returning to their places of origin. Some of these people had established new lives in the places they had fled to, such as a woman who said, "I already have children and grandchildren here in Luanda and I have nobody back home anymore." Others were concerned about whether it would be safe to return. Some had built up significant assets during their displacement and were unhappy that they were not able to bring these with them when they returned, making their resettlement even more difficult.

A Cambodian returnee who had been displaced for more than ten years during the war noted how unprepared he was for life back in his village: "In the camps, we don't know how to plant rice, what a cow or buffalo looks like. We eat available meat and have charcoal. We know the fruit but not the tree. When I came back home and saw a cow, I thought it was a big dog. I said, 'Why are dogs so big in Cambodia?'... Life after the camp was difficult. Before, they taught us how to be a king, not how to be ordinary or live without conveniences. They should teach people skills, training skills. NGOs should train how to farm."

A Karen staff member of a local NGO in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border agreed: "Being in the camp long-term is not good. It has already been a generation. The people survive on aid. If we have to go back to Burma tomorrow, the parents are old and won't work. The children don't know how to plant their rice; how can they survive? I understand they don't have land but they need agriculture training because they have to do this straight away when they go

back.... Everyone cannot be a teacher or a student. Some people need to know how to farm, to build houses.”

Economic security: Comments from people in several other locations echo these concerns about the appropriateness and the insufficiency of programmes intended to improve their livelihoods when they returned – often causing them to leave again to find work. In Bosnia, people pointed out that agricultural production has not been a traditional source of income for most people, given its pre-war level of industrialisation and the small size of farms. While they did not see agricultural assistance provided by aid agencies as inappropriate, they suggested different types of training and investment were needed to create more jobs and to enable them to compete with other European producers. In many villages now, only older people remain as the younger people have left for cities and other countries in search of work.

Many people in Kosovo echoed that creating jobs, especially for youth, was among the paramount priorities. They noted current unemployment (over 50%) and poverty (approximately a third of the population), as well as the hurdles of corruption and a lack of investor confidence prior to the settling of the status of Kosovo. One person said: “Some [of the diaspora] want to invest in businesses and to create jobs but there are no rules yet to guarantee their investments.” They also pointed to the scarcity of jobs outside the capital, Pristina, which has led to a new exodus, if not from Kosovo altogether, then at least out of the villages to the cities – making returning to their homes economically unsustainable.

Similarly in the south-east Asian countries affected by the 2004 tsunami, many people said they would have preferred more livelihood support than help in rebuilding their houses, noting that if they had incomes then they could rebuild their houses themselves.

Who benefits?

Host communities or IDPs and refugees? In multiple locations people raised questions about the provision of international assistance for displaced people passing through their communities which did not benefit the host communities as well. For instance, in one area of Sri Lanka only IDPs received international assistance, although they are located in the three poorest Divisions in the country. A Muslim cleric raised concerns about jealousies, saying, “Initially the local community helped IDPs. Later when only IDPs started to get assistance, only their lives started to change for the better. Local communities were neglected, left out, and are now hurt and angry.” A local cobbler concurred, saying of IDPs in his community, “They come with nothing. Then within a year or two they have money, land, and even build houses. And they still receive rations. We don’t get anything even though we are still poor.” Several IDPs talked about these tensions and recognised the need to address poverty amongst the host communities: “We know that locals are not given this assistance and we think they should be assisted. I think locals are not helped because they haven’t lost everything, and because it is felt that we are more deserving.”

Other comments highlighted the positive economic benefits

that came from the presence of a displaced persons’ camp – both a new market for goods and potential for employment (to the extent that aid organisations hire locally). The downside of these effects, however – mentioned in the case of Lokichoggio in Kenya – was that as the refugees return and agencies depart, both assistance and economic opportunities dry up.

The host communities in northwestern Kenya were also concerned about the over-use of their natural resources, especially trees which are now scarce after being cut for firewood, fences, houses and charcoal for the increased population caused by the influx of refugees. While the large Kakuma refugee camp had provided a market for wood, natural resources were depleted, many of the roads and bridges were damaged by the trucks carrying supplies, and there have been few investments that will contribute to the long-term development of the region.

Targeting of assistance: Beneficiary selection and ‘categorisation’ are big concerns in settings of extended displacement and resettlement, and the lines drawn by outside agencies can make little sense to the recipients (and non-recipients), while having huge impacts on their lives. For instance, without the label of ‘IDP’, ‘single head of household’ or ‘tsunami-affected’, many extremely poor and vulnerable people received no assistance in Sri Lanka. As the leader of a humanitarian agency in Colombo said, “[There were] difficulties after the tsunami as so much support was given to the tsunami IDPs as opposed to the conflict IDPs who had been in camps or in displaced locations for years.” In



Aceh, too, people who were displaced by the conflict, who had also lost assets and were unemployed, received nothing – despite widespread post-tsunami assistance – because they were not designated as tsunami victims, which was the priority of the international community.

In Angola, people received assistance if they qualified as ‘refugees’ from the conflict in the DRC, ‘repatriated Angolan refugees’ or ‘IDPs’. If they were classified only as *residentes* – Angolans who abandoned their homes during the war in search of food and security in nearby cities or the bush but who had not gone far enough to qualify as IDPs or refugees – they did not qualify for assistance. A frustrated farmer said, “When the war came, many people went to Zambia and other places but we stayed here the whole time. Today, those who fled receive aid but we who spent the war years here are without any assistance at all.”

Similarly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, many people objected to the fact that returnees were favoured for assistance over people who had not left. In Kosovo, someone echoed this concern: “We asked them [an international agency] to help poor families that were not displaced but we were told that this was not possible. We said, ‘Well, what do we have to do to get assistance – leave Kosovo and come back again?’”

Security and protection: Finally, refugees, displaced persons and returnees in various locations raised concerns about their personal security, lack of protection, and pressures to return. In several IDP camps in Sri Lanka, people said they were threatened if they asked for services or were too demanding. While many abuses are reported, people do not think these get recorded by the camp officers or international protection staff, and many people in the camps expressed disappointment with “[an international agency] failing to fulfill its duties.”

A number of people in Cambodia emotionally discussed the abuses they witnessed or endured as refugees in camps in Thailand during their civil war, including physical abuse, trafficking, rape and sexual



Listening Team Member/Diego Devesa Laux

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harassment. Fifteen years later, this was still an issue that clearly upset them. Most did not realise that there was an international mandate to protect people in refugee camps.

People in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border called for more on-the-ground presence of donors and international agencies, especially those mandated to protect refugees and prevent forcible returns. One new refugee described, “The Thai authorities come into the camp and try to catch new arrivals who have no identification. In Burma, we are afraid of the government and we are afraid in the camps.”

In Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, long-term refugees said they are told to go back to Sudan but that they are concerned about security and they want more assistance to return. International aid workers said they have heard these concerns and know that there is still a lot of insecurity in Sudan but that they just do not have the funding to provide services to refugees now since the priority of donors is for them to return to Sudan.

Conclusion

The Listening Project listens to aid recipients in order to produce lessons, tools and approaches that are broadly applicable and transferable across contexts to improve the effectiveness of international assistance. Many of the issues highlighted in this article are not unique to the situation of people in protracted displacement – far from it. However, heeding the patterns that emerge – the need to help people return home sustainably, to ensure that all in need are supported appropriately, and to ensure that the displaced are secure – should enable those who work with people in protracted displacement to avoid perpetuating mistakes that have long-term impacts on their lives.

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The RSC’s Forced Migration Online project has produced a Resource Summary on protracted displacement situations. This Summary provides access to web-based resources, highlights relevant documents from FMO’s digital library and provides links to key organisations. Online at:

<http://www.forcedmigration.org/browse/thematic/protracted-displacement-situations/>