# What is the place of IDP research in refugee studies?

by Howard Adelman

*The search for an answer gives rise to further questions.*

What political agenda lies behind the definition and the mode of institutionalising IDP studies? Why has it taken more than 20 years for studies of internal displacement to mirror the trajectory of growth of refugee studies? What power factors and research interests shape development of a discourse about displacement? Why has the UN chosen not to place responsibility for IDPs within a self-standing international regime or UNHCR-type institution but instead taken the soft option of promoting guiding principles – rather than a convention with international legal weight?

The terms 'IDP' and 'refugee' carry a weight of historical and political baggage. The interrelationship between the two terms is even more burdened. The second clause of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines internally displaced persons or groups as those "forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border." I suggest that this definition of IDPs and the restriction of the use of the term 'refugees' to individuals who cross state borders are determined by a political agenda.

The definition and the Guiding Principles applied to IDPs are intended to give citizens the idea that they have rights and to empower them. The definition is integral to a nation-building exercise to foster a nation of equal citizens in which sovereignty resides with the people and government is responsible for protecting all its members without favour. Such a liberal republican definition of a state can be used to set in place the moral and normative machinery to justify

intervention in a state in order to protect those being persecuted or relocated.

I do not claim that displacement studies should or should not be separate from that focusing on refugees. I merely point out that knowledge systems and how they are organised are part of, and often reflect, the politics and priorities in dealing with a problem. Knowledge production is not divorced from history and politics. As displacement research centres and networks are established across the globe, it should be remembered that academic development will not be independent of, and will at least partially reflect, the historical and political status of displacement in the political firmament of our time.

History shows us that we need to be aware of the forces of realpolitik behind the new soft IDP regime. It is the duty of scholars to unpack the interests and power concerns that lie behind the creation of regimes, quasi rights and moral agendas. We need to clarify the nature of the concepts in

policy approaches as distinct from, though overlapping with, research results. We must undertake research to uncover any political agenda that may be behind their development. The debate over norms may be fought over independently of group interests but can also be a reflection of disputes over power. That does not mean that the legal and moral normative debates and regime structures could be reduced to power issues but only that they may complement and reinforce a power struggle.

Current efforts to define displacement studies separate from refugee studies, while emphasising only horizontal displacement and neglecting vertical and internal displacement, may reflect similar underlying power struggles. One of the major tasks of a self-conscious research effort is to use critical theory, structural and historical analysis to try to discern what that power struggle is about.

***Howard Adelman is Professor of Philosophy, Centre for Refugee Studies, University of York, Canada. Web: www.yorku.ca/crs Email: howardadelman@rogers.com***

*Howard Adelman and Astri Suhrke at conference session chaired by Nick van Hear.*



Tim Morris