

# Permanent impermanence: dilemmas of long-term displacement in Sri Lanka

by Cathrine Brun

*As researchers, one of our roles should be to challenge taken-for-granted attitudes and policies related to internal displacement.*

**H**ow can we contribute to discussions about the formation of categories and definitions by deconstructing, questioning and changing their meanings and contents? My work in Sri Lanka looks at the common understandings of the IDP category and how it affects policies and the lives both of the internally displaced and their hosts.

In Sri Lanka there is a visible discrepancy between the intentions behind the IDP category and the way the displaced are labelled on the ground. The IDP category was established to secure rights and protection for those displaced who have not crossed an internationally recognised boundary but are living as displaced in the countries where they are citizens. However, ascribing someone the status of an IDP may also separate the displaced from their co-citizens and, far from preventing discrimination, may actually give rise to it.

The paper of which this is a summary explores the outcome and unintended consequences of applying the IDP category in situations of prolonged displacement in Sri Lanka. It particularly discusses the situation of the northern Muslims who were expelled from their homes in the north by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990 and who have since lived as IDPs in the North Western Province.

There is a myriad of institutions, committees and organisations working with displacement and assisting groups of IDPs in Sri Lanka. There are two dominant understandings of what an IDP is: firstly, IDP is understood as a 'category of need' and, secondly, IDPs are regarded as being only temporarily present at the place of displacement.

These two understandings have implications for the situation of the internally displaced and their hosts. They contribute to making stereotypes and standardised images of the people connected with the IDP category and express power relations that lead to processes of exclusion and inclusion. In contrast to many other impoverished people, those included in the IDP category are entitled to assistance.

However, host populations, who are closely affected by forced migration, are often overlooked. They may not have had to move but welcoming large groups of forced migrants may create considerable burdens and bring dramatic change to their lives. The IDP category contributes to the conceptual and actual separation of host populations from forced migration processes and their non-recognition by humanitarian agencies. The exclusion of some groups strengthens identities and consolidates differences between those who are included and those excluded from a category. Such identity formations may give rise to the kind of anti-IDP antagonism or hostility which is often expressed by host populations in Sri Lanka.

Another process of inclusion and exclusion is related to the securing of rights for IDPs. Categorising someone as an IDP tends to exclude her or him from some citizenship rights. In protracted situations of displacement the IDP status of displaced populations seems to create a state of permanent impermanence: they are out of place and only waiting to return to their home place – an attitude often advocated by Sri Lankan authorities wanting to return the displaced in order to restore the apparently pre-existing ethnic balance. However, during this waiting game IDPs are not



regarded as local citizens of the place where they live and consequently are excluded from rights enjoyed by their co-habitants – their hosts. In the case of Sri Lanka, these include rights to property, political freedom and employment.

Of the many dilemmas involved in working with protracted internal displacement, a crucial one is the making of the category of internal displacement. Clearly, we do need categories and definitions of internal displacement if we are to assist people. Categories are vital to avoid the normalisation and passive acceptance of forced migration, to distinguish between forced and voluntary migration and to highlight the injustice meted out to the millions of forced migrants in the world. As researchers on internal displacement, one of our key roles should be to discuss the unintended consequences of categories and the way labelling affects people's lives and to work to improve systems of categorisation.

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