The Global IDP Project:
meeting the challenge of monitoring internal displacement

by Andreas Danevad and Greta Zeender

After publishing the first volume of Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey in 1998, the Norwegian Refugee Council – through its Global IDP Project – was encouraged by the humanitarian community to continue the research process by establishing an online mechanism to improve the accessibility of IDP information.

The outcome was the launch of the online Global IDP Database (www.idpproject.org) in December 1999.

The backbone of the database has been a set of comprehensive country profiles which provide users with frequently updated information and direct access to source documents. Initially the database covered only the largest and most acute situations of internal displacement. However, increased funding and improved capacity made it possible to gradually increase the number of countries covered. By the end of 2002 the database monitored all the countries in the world where people have become internally displaced because of armed conflicts, generalised violence or systematic human rights violations and have not – according to available information – durably returned to their homes of origin or permanently resettled elsewhere in the country. As the number of IDP-affected states has risen, the total number of countries covered by the database – including recently added profiles on the Central African Republic and Nepal – has had to be expanded to 52.

This global coverage has positioned the IDP Project to analyse internal displacement nationally, regionally and internationally and enabled the database team to undertake, without external assistance, the research and preparation of the second volume of *A Global Survey* in 2002. While the preparation of the country chapters for the 1998 volume was outsourced to a large number of writers using different methodologies, the latest edition was prepared by a unified
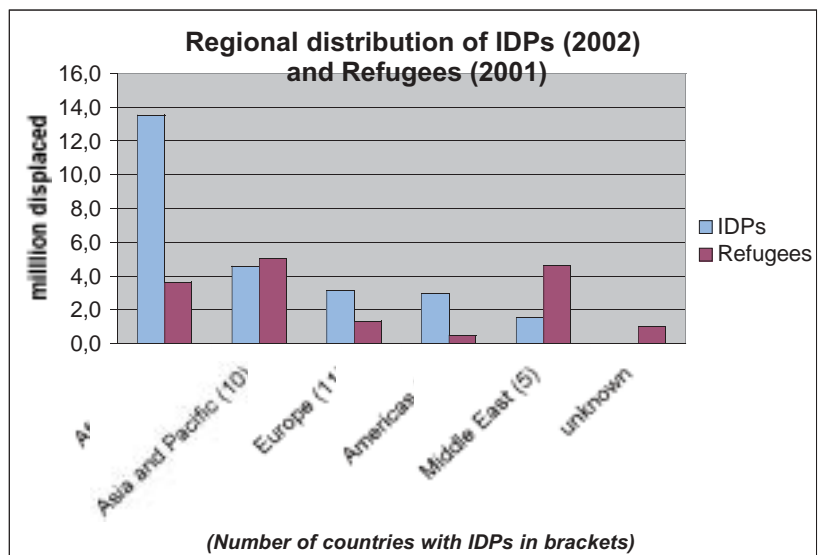
team using a common set of variables and terminology. The book can be used as a starting point for further descriptive research on internal displacement and as a useful tool for more comparative and empirical analysis.

The global analysis by the Global IDP Project aims both to quantify the IDP population and to identify common movement patterns, coping strategies and assessing various response mechanisms. Due to its global coverage the project is now able to publish its own estimates of the size of the world's IDP population. After allowing for various methodological weaknesses, the database team reported that towards the end of 2002 some 25 million people were internally displaced by armed conflicts and generalised violence.

To generate such estimates the Global IDP Project relies on information

made available by a range of public sources. In some countries lack of humanitarian access makes it impossible to compile anything but a rough estimate. In some countries where estimates vary, a median figure using the highest and lowest available esti-

Regional distribution of IDPs (2002) and Refugees (2001)

million displaced

| | IDPs | Refugees |

(Number of countries with IDPs in brackets)

mates is calculated. Having gained substantial experience in the politics behind IDP figures in various countries, the database team is able to critically assess the reliability of the various sources and chose in most cases the most conservative figure among available estimates.
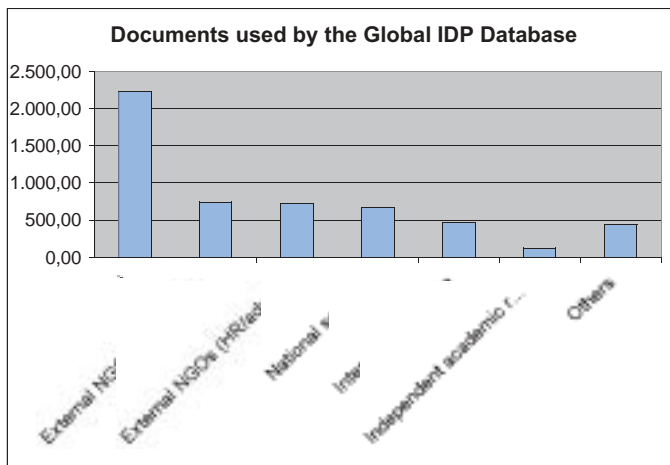
A comparison of IDP estimates at the beginning and end of 2002 reveals large movements of people within countries affected by conflict during the year. More than three million people were newly displaced in 2002 while about the same number were able to return or resettle. In more than half of the affected countries there was movement in both directions: some affected populations were able to return, while compatriots in other regions were forced to flee.

Global analysis further confirms that physical protection remains a major concern. At the end of 2002 around

the urgent need to provide assistance with a more long-term development perspective aimed at moving people out of the poverty trap caused by their internal displacement.

How can researchers improve the availability and quality of IDP information?

The Global IDP Database provides access to about 5,500 documents from more than 1,000 different sources. Used in the project's global and regional analyses, this information base represents almost all publicly available internet-based information on IDPs produced by the humanitarian community, as well as academic research available through the Internet. As demonstrated by the graph below, humanitarian practitioners are the largest source of providers of quantitative and descriptive information on internal displacement.

Most publicly available IDP information is generated in order to help plan and deliver humanitarian assistance, rather than for purposes of academic research. A critical assessment of available information quickly reveals that reporting on internal displacement is often fragmented and that there are major geographical and thematic information gaps. Available information is often difficult to validate with regard to origin and reliability. Daily and weekly updates prepared by field practitioners generally have no medium-term equivalents, leaving observers forced to develop analyses from daily/weekly bulletins and much more non-specific agency annual reports.

Despite the widespread promotion of international human rights instruments, terminology varies widely. Even when terms are commonly used, different actors often ascribe divergent meanings to them. How to define an IDP is perhaps the clearest example – and a reason for caution with regard to IDP numbers. But several other concepts that we often take for granted are not always clear. For example, 'return', 'reintegration' and 'resettlement' are often confused.

Documents used by the Global IDP Database

11 million IDPs were struggling to survive in extremely dangerous environments, unable to leave zones of ongoing conflict and exposed daily to gross human rights violations which could not be observed by humanitarian workers or independent human rights observers.

More encouragingly, we can see that conflicts have stabilised in more than half of the 52 affected countries. Lower levels of lawlessness and chaos open up the possibility of finding durable solutions to displacement as long as there is sufficient political will on the part of national governments and the international community. The fact that people in these countries have on average been displaced for more than a decade underscores

The limited availability of independent academic research appears to reflect the reality that research institutions have limited resources available with which to undertake independent studies of IDP situations. It also shows that the academic world and publishers have been slow to take advantage of opportunities provided by the internet to disseminate and share research findings and publications. However, it should not be overlooked that academics are also often humanitarian practitioners and that much of the information on internal displacement produced by the UN and by non-governmental actors such as Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and Médecins Sans Frontières is of high academic standard.

Researchers must be aware of these weaknesses. 'Humanitarian information' often becomes the only source available and analysis based on one source only may be inaccurate. Comparative analysis may be distorted by differences in the understanding of the various dimensions being studied. Although more independent academic field research is needed, it is even more urgent to develop better conceptual and methodological tools for qualitative and quantitative analysis of internal displacement situations. This is a challenge for academic researchers but also an opportunity for joint efforts between humanitarian practitioners and the academic community.

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