Profiling urban IDPs

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New methodology used for profiling urban IDPs is enabling researchers to assess and contextualise the particular needs of this group and to address the implications for humanitarian action.

Attempts to estimate the numbers of people who are internally displaced within their own countries invariably come up against the challenge of estimating those who have been forcibly displaced to urban centres. Calculating the numbers and characteristics of IDPs in a country – 'IDP profiling' – is all the more complex in urban settings because the IDPs are not readily identifiable. 'Urban IDPs' comprise a hidden population, and aid agencies and governments have difficulty identifying them and understanding their experiences relative to the host population amongst whom they live. Little is known about their demographics, basic needs and protection problems, yet they are believed to be among the poorest and most vulnerable groups in many conflict-affected countries.

Recognising the need to include estimates of urban IDPs, the Feinstein International Centre (FIC) of Tufts University in conjunction with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) conducted three urban profiling studies between 2006 and 2008 in Khartoum (Sudan), Abidjan (Ivory Coast) and Santa Marta (Colombia).

Urban profiling is significantly more complex than identifying and counting IDPs living in camps, usually in rural areas. Urban IDPs are not formally separated from the local community or housed in easily recognisable regions. They are found scattered across urban areas, making them difficult to distinguish from economic migrants and the urban poor. In addition, they are unlikely to reveal themselves when their security is threatened.

Recognising this, the Tufts-IDMC researchers took into account the need to avoid drawing too much attention to urban IDPs alone. The surveys therefore did not seek out IDPs, nor did they ask respondents if they considered themselves to be IDPs, and this differentiates them from other surveys that explicitly seek to identify a targeted population group. Instead, researchers focused on areas where IDPs were likely to be living (as well as 'control' areas where displacement was considered to be insignificant) and profiled all the residents in a given area; they then used secondary analysis to determine who among the residents were displaced, according to criteria in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.[1]

The studies showed that urban IDPs can be profiled, that the methodology tested is feasible for doing so and that estimates of urban IDPs can be made.[2] But why is all this information needed and who does it benefit?

Why profile urban IDPs?

Firstly, the phenomenon of urban IDPs is too big to ignore: over four million globally, out of a total of some 26 million people displaced by conflict and over 36 million displaced by natural disasters.[3] Other estimates suggest that perhaps as many as half of all IDPs migrate to urban areas, particularly to capital cities, where they blend into the population of urban poor and migrants.[4]

Secondly, without a clear definition of urban IDPs and clarification of the actual target for any new policy, it is impossible to design and implement effective durable solutions. Although it is often difficult to distinguish rural areas from peri-urban areas, and the forced IDPs from regular rural-to-urban migrants, these distinctions are crucial for national and international authorities to be able to provide measured and effective assistance to millions of urban IDPs.

Thirdly, in the context of growing urbanisation, IDPs may be perceived as a brake on development of urban areas where their fear of identification leads them to avoid civil registration and where overcrowding, competition for scarce resources and joblessness provide a magnet for urban crime.[5] Determining who, how many and where these urban IDPs are can translate into helping country authorities manage each caseload through context-sensitive, targeted protection and assistance programmes. By association, such programmes could alleviate the plight of host families who are often reported to be as destitute as the IDPs they support[6] as well as the millions of urban poor who share the scarce resources of the IDPs and suffer similar poor living conditions.

Key findings

The three studies confirmed many assumptions about the characteristics of urban IDPs. Using the most recent population census data in each city, and based on the percentage of IDPs identified in the surveys proportionate to non-IDPs, the studies were able to extrapolate the likely number of IDPs in each city. The findings showed that IDPs comprise a significant percentage of the urban population: 21% in Khartoum, 9% in Abidjan and 15% in Santa Marta. In Abidjan, in some areas of the city almost 8% of non-IDP households were hosting IDPs, and in Santa Marta 2-3% of non-IDP households were in host families. Hosting of IDPs is an important aspect of urban profiling to include in future studies.

Using uniform indicators such as housing conditions, access to potable water, access to social services (schools, health, transportation, police stations, etc), levels of education and employment, the surveys revealed that IDPs and non-IDPs share similar demographic characteristics and experience the same stresses related to urban poverty and lack of adequate infrastructure. However, urban IDPs were found to be poorer, at a greater disadvantage and experiencing more insecurity than their non-IDP neighbours. IDPs arrived impoverished – their land, harvests and other assets (including documents) having been lost, stolen or destroyed, and they were often traumatised from these

experiences. In terms of accessing urban livelihoods opportunities, IDPs are at a disadvantage because they tend to lack support networks, urban livelihood skills and knowledge of the urban setting, and they may not speak the language.

IDPs' key protection concerns included feelings of insecurity, being obliged to move several times within the city due to eviction or to escape detection, liability to forced relocation (Khartoum), inability or unwillingness to return to their former areas of origin (due mostly to continuing insecurity or having lost all their land and assets[7]) and not being in possession of identity documents (marriage, birth certificates, school records). The latter implies difficulties of access to civil rights and social benefits such as education and formal work, making it harder for the displaced to lay claim to their rights as citizens. Findings for the most part confirmed other studies that have reported how IDPs have been deliberately targeted by authorities and subjected to harassment and violence at the hands of security forces and/or the civilian population, and are more likely to be the victims of looting, intimidation and extortion by militia and criminal groups in the urban area.

Eric Levron, June 2007

IDP compound in the Abobo neighbourhood of Abidjan.

Programme and policy implications

What policy conclusions can be drawn from urban profiling and what kind of programmes can be devised to address them? In other words, how can urban profiling findings be converted into conceptual and operational frameworks to assist urban IDPs without causing them further danger or distress?

The Tufts-IDMC studies suggest that, given the subtle differences between IDPs and the urban poor amongst whom they live, programmes should not only target IDPs but also encompass poverty alleviation of the poorest and most vulnerable societies in which they live. IDPs' physical and social proximity to their neighbours means that their wellbeing and security are closely tied to their relations with their host community. Under these circumstances it is important to design IDP programmes with a great deal of care, so that they help IDPs but do not antagonize the host community, which ultimately provides their most direct assistance and support. On the other hand, specially targeted initiatives can be designed to address their unique protection issues.

Specific programmes can therefore be divided into a) activities that address the urban poor in general, of whom IDPs constitute a major but diffused group, and b) those that target the particular concerns of IDPs.

a) Urban revitalisation programmes – targeting pro-poor urban planning and municipal reforms – include improving urban infrastructure such as building safer housing; providing safer and more accessible water and sanitation, schools and health services; and creating child-friendly spaces, sports areas and community centres. **Livelihoods programmes** could help IDPs as well as the host population to build up their livelihood capacities, providing them with greater resilience to cope with future shocks and promoting their physical security. Such programmes might include micro-finance schemes to boost income generation and vocational adjustment programmes as a strategy for learning and applying new ways to build household income. In two of the cases examined, Sudan and Colombia,[8] the former vocations of IDPs either made them targets of violence or failed to provide them with the means to save enough to give them more options in their families' strategies. Vocational adjustment initiatives can help them learn new skills and capabilities relevant to their urban settings, improving their chances of employment or creating new businesses.

b) Protection measures: The greatest possible service to IDPs would be to help them obtain identification

documents. This would reduce their vulnerability to a range of threats and provide them with greater equality of opportunity with respect to their economic development. Assisting with legal problems or helping them fight discrimination by landlords or employers are other potential programming areas. Targeting resources should be done in a strategic way to ensure that they address those vulnerabilities specific to IDPs only, while avoiding IDPs being seen as receiving special treatment. IDP vulnerabilities vary in each city, depending on the political and displacement context. While many urban IDPs are unwilling or unable to return home, those who wish to do so should be assisted by all means possible. Registering for organised return or providing individual families with the financial means to return would be small but significant factors in promoting durable solutions. Finally, where possible, it is important to reinforce the response of the state, not replace it, in identifying durable solutions – whether this is return, integration or resettlement to different parts of the country. In the case of Colombia, the international community has supported the government with constitutional reform that aims to protect the rights of IDPs. In Ivory Coast, government initiatives are starting to help IDPs retrieve or replace lost documentation that will allow them access to their full civil rights.


IDMC, November 2006

Informal dwelling in Khartoum.

Involved actors

IDPs are the responsibility of the state and most initiatives should emanate from national authorities, who may nevertheless need to call upon the international community to assist with financial and technical resources. The state's fundamental role is to ensure effective application of the rule of law and, specifically, to develop national legislation that protects the rights of all its citizens including the internally displaced.

Emergency action through humanitarian agencies may be necessary in cases of crisis, for example in rapid onset emergencies that cause large numbers of people to flee to urban centres for temporary protection. By and large, however, it is the role of development actors to design and implement the longer-term municipal planning, urban revival and livelihoods programmes through participatory approaches involving local authorities, civil society and the targeted population groups. Humanitarian agencies may intervene in areas where IDPs are clustered to provide or enhance basic amenities such as water, sanitation, health and shelter programmes but these should be durable interventions that assist development, not just stop-gap measures. International NGOs also have a role to play, for example in implementing legal aid programmes specifically targeting the protection concerns of IDPs, while training and building the capacity of local authorities and civil society.

The three urban profiling studies demonstrate that it is feasible, at reasonable cost, not only to obtain better estimates and characteristics of urban IDPs but also to gain a greater understanding of a whole range of contextual issues that concern them: the host communities with whom they share living conditions and resources, the similarities and differences of their vulnerabilities and capacities, and future aspirations and intentions. Such information, taken alone or located within the broader context of urban migration and poverty, can help governments and aid agencies develop better-informed strategies to assist and protect IDPs. They provide a wealth of information for designing appropriate programmes adapted to each specific context, in support of government efforts to implement whatever durable solutions may be required.

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1. http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/7/b/principles.htm Article 2

2. Reports of all three studies (which include details of methodology) are online at: http://tinyurl.com/TuftsIDMCprofiling

3. Estimated by IDMC, cited in 'Ignored Displaced Persons: the plight of IDPs in urban areas', (p.1) UNHCR 2008. http://www.unhcr.org/487b4c6c2.html

4. Karen Jacobsen, 'Profiling Urban IDPs: How IDPs differ from their non-IDP neighbors in three cities', Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2008 (prepared for book chapter in *The Migration-Displacement Nexus: Concepts, Cases and Responses*, edited by Khalid Koser and Susan Martin, forthcoming 2010).

5. See Richard Black and Jon Sward 'Migration, Poverty Reduction Strategies and Human Development', UNDP Human Development Research Paper, 2009/38, p12: http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/papers/HDRP_2009_38.pdf

6. This finding was particularly noted in the Santa Marta survey.

7. Except in the case of many IDPs interviewed in Abidjan who wanted to return home but were unable to, mostly due to lack of resources.

8. Richard Hill, Kari Jorgensen Diener, Sue Miller, and Thomas White 'IDP Livelihoods: IDP Livelihoods and Personal Security: Case Studies from Colombia and Sudan', 2006. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 25: 40-59. http://rsq.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/25/2/40.pdf