Looking beyond emergency response

by Patricia Weiss Fagen

International concerns and practical attention (including those outlined in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement) have been weighted on the side of emergency responses to displacement. No matter how effective they are, however, emergency responses are not solutions.

Rather, emergency support creates the conditions for survival and security on which more durable solutions may or may not be built. This article considers the longer-term options for war-uprooted and war-affected populations and the challenges of reintegration efforts through which they can be restored to productive citizenship.

Attempts to bring developmental elements to populations still in need of relief remain small-scale, time-limited and experimental. Therefore, to some extent, international agencies are still 'learning on the job' about the requirements, contradictions and commitments needed to address persistent migration crises and war-to-peace transitions generally. It is troubling, however, that even when the donors and international agencies know what needs to be done, they so often lack the political will to act in accordance with their own oft-repeated recommendations.

Finding a place

The majority of people who have been displaced are all but invisible because they are not found in camps and settlements. In addition to the millions of IDPs living in demarcated locations, there are other millions – impossible to count – who have found their way to villages, towns, the homes of families and friends and, especially, large cities. Although they may receive sporadic outside assistance, their numbers and conditions are little known, much less monitored. These are the people who really fall through the cracks.

Anyone who has been to a typical IDP settlement or camp has probably seen conditions far worse than what would be observed in a typical refugee camp. People need to be helped urgently to leave such places as soon as it is safe to do so. If 'going home' is not possible, either integration *sur place* or alternative resettlement in a safe area is needed. It appears, however, that achieving durable solutions for IDPs is not a high priority either for the respective governments or for international agencies.

The lack of meaningful action derives, in part, from the perception that conflict-induced displacements are temporary phenomena that will be solved by establishing conditions for people to go home. It is due, in larger part, to the fact that to seek stable and productive integration or relocation elsewhere than 'home' is to acknowledge an undesirable political *fait accompli*. In other words, humanitarian relief for long-term IDPs is more easily accepted than are durable solutions, because actions in the latter direction can carry an unwanted political message – from governments, donor agencies and the IDPs themselves – that significant and possibly even permanent changes have occurred in areas of origin, making return in the foreseeable future seem highly unlikely.

Re-establishing productive lives

In the most gratifying situations, crises and conflict are brought to a close and people return to their former homes to take up their former livelihoods. This marks the end of formal displacement but only the beginning of the solution. Depending on what has happened in the interim period, they may find homes and communities destroyed or inhabited by other residents; they may have lost personal documentation necessary to establish their identity, rights and property ownership. Young people are likely to have lost years of education; families are likely to have suffered losses and to have to cope with ill-health, trauma or disabilities. The direct effects of their displacement persist until there are mechanisms in place and resources to address such issues. Ultimately, the viability of returning home depends on rebuilding the local economies in war-torn regions.

The less straightforward situations are those in which the people who have been displaced find it necessary or desirable to remake their lives elsewhere than their places of origin, either because conflict continues or for other reasons.[1] IDPs of rural origin who have lost their own land (or access to land) do best if they are able to settle in similar rural areas where ethnic affinities facilitate local incorporation of displaced families. A review of cases turns up few examples in which large groups displaced from one rural area have successfully resettled in another. Despite resourcefulness and sometimes astonishing survival strategies, rural relocation has rarely proved to be durable. Reports indicate that even where conflict does not disrupt local livelihoods, the arrival of large numbers of displaced combined with generalised poverty in the receiving areas overwhelm absorption possibilities and eventually exacerbate tensions between newcomers and local population over land and resources (e.g. Angola, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Guatemala).

Governments sometimes make public lands available for IDP settlement, proclaiming this to be a durable solution. However, in the examples that come to mind (Sri Lanka, Colombia, Indonesia, North India), the government-owned land comes without the

resources needed to make settlements economically viable, i.e. agricultural inputs, credits and markets. Thus, more often, the rural displaced are obliged to live in camp-like settlements with few opportunities for income generation and are partially or wholly dependent on external assistance.

Sri Lanka illustrates the problems of finding durable solutions for a displaced rural population. A study on displacement in that country undertaken in late 2000 and mid-2001 concluded: "After almost twenty years of conflict and internal displacement, there is a lack of integrated, systematic and systemic analysis, planning and policy on the long-term implications of internal displacement and humanitarian intervention in the conflict zones."[2] Many of the IDPs interviewed had been living in rural welfare and relocation centres for a decade or more. At best, they had managed to replace flimsy shelters with more solid ones, to find casual employment in urban centres or to have temporary access to small plots of land. In Sri Lanka, fortunately, the promising direction of the peace process now seems likely to bring positive change. It will be extremely important to support post-conflict IDP reintegration if peace is to be maintained.

Sooner or later, most war-induced displaced, along with other forced migrants, flock to cities where they hope to find work or receive help from family members. Urban growth throughout the developing world has far outstripped the ability of poor governments to provide adequate services or to control crime. Cities expand at accelerated rates during periods of conflict.

The predominantly rural IDPs are likely to be among the most vulnerable and least protected of urban dwellers. They are often considered as temporary residents who will leave when peace is restored – or their arrival is barely noticed because it seems simply to be an acceleration of normal rural-urban migration patterns. Newly-arrived IDPs are likely to receive attention – often hostile – only when they are seen to negatively affect services and safety for other city

Internaly displaced woman from Pavarando in Mutata Municipality, Uraba, Colombia

dwellers. Urban improvements that may be put in place rarely take into account the particularly dire situations faced by those whose presence is the result of forced migration and flight rather than choice. Programmes on behalf of displaced persons in urban areas, it appears, are uniformly weak.

In Colombia at least 50% of its IDPs end up in major cities, usually after a progression of moves further from their places of origin. They may register for government-provided emergency assistance soon after displacement. Assistance is made available for a three-month period but only once – no matter how many times they are, in fact, obliged to move. Following the three months, IDPs are considered to have moved to a 'stabilisation phase'. The state, which has proved unable to provide the protection needed to prevent displacement in the first place, has proved equally unable to provide security for urban and semi-urban IDP settlements, even those outside of conflict areas. The state bureaucracy has largely failed to provide the education and health care to which IDPs are entitled. A minority of IDPs presently benefits from international programmes of various kinds and these too receive only short-term funding. In the new UN Humanitarian Action Plan for Colombia 2003,[3] international agencies in Colombia have prioritised longer-term reintegration and institutional strengthening.

The goal of reintegration

The twin assumptions that IDPs can and will return to their places of origin and that advocacy should be focused solely on this solution not only are misleading but also have reinforced the tendency to bypass opportunities for supporting integration. This observation is not meant to underestimate the importance of advocating the right to return and the need to support return movements. Rather, it is intended to advocate support for multiple solutions, in both rural and urban settings, designed to absorb and integrate IDPs in the places where they are and/or to help them to find alternative places to live and work. Even if they may eventually

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return to their places of origin, their lives in the interim should not remain in limbo, in an unhappy holding pattern with few if any options.

It is possible to reach the long-term displaced through programmes and projects that seek to improve conditions and foster integration in places where war-affected populations abound. Supporting local integration includes measures to provide war-uprooted people with access to schools and to national health care mechanisms, jobs and titles to their property, including the temporary makeshift homes and the bits of land they have acquired where they are living. International assistance is essential and could be far more effectively channelled than is now the case.

How international assistance is channelled will strongly influence whether or not there are durable solutions for IDPs and other war-affected populations. The state has the primary responsibility for resolving displacement and for re-integrating the displaced but it does not necessarily have the wherewithal, capacity or will to do so. So long as assistance to IDPs and other vulnerable groups is limited to direct emergency relief and

administered by international agencies, local governments will continue to look to international humanitarian action and funding for this purpose. National governments are more likely to make reintegration a national priority if the international community supports the process materially and through capacity building and institution strengthening in areas producing and receiving displaced persons.

International support for ending displacement should aim at strengthening the capabilities and the will of local and national government structures to work with IDPs to find solutions to their problems. It is essential to develop working relations between international assistance and development agencies and national and/or local structures and actors at the earliest possible stage. There are situations in which this is neither possible nor desirable when governments have harmful, even murderous, intentions towards IDPs and divert humanitarian assistance for military purposes. Nevertheless, early efforts to overcome local distrust and hostility toward the displaced and, where necessary, to start work in non-government areas can bring positive results over time. Under the best circumstances, rebuilding war-torn societies and integrating war-affected populations are long and complicated processes. Despite the inevitable tensions and diverging agendas among the actors involved, however, international support remains critical to rebuilding the social and economic fabric so that former IDPs will have a place within national society.

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1. The examples here do not include discussion of forced displacement such as the government-induced regroupment centres in Burundi.
2. 'Sri Lanka Case Study Project', Part 111, unpublished manuscript, MacArthur sponsored project on Forced Migration and the Humanitarian Regime. 2001.
3. UN Humanitarian Action Plan, 2002-2003, 27 November 2002. See www.reliefweb.in (go to Colombia and download 14.2.03 doc).