

Internal displacement beyond 2018: the road ahead

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The statistics and the challenges around internal displacement are daunting. However, much has been learned since the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement were launched in 1998. What is needed now is a concerted effort and sustained momentum to build on that awareness and meet the evolving challenges.

Twenty years ago, the launch of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement marked a high point in international recognition of the need to prevent internal displacement and to provide protection and assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs). The Guiding Principles laid out a normative framework that has subsequently informed efforts to develop regional and national policies on internal displacement, and as such they represent an important achievement.

However, political instability, conflict and violence, extreme weather and disasters are driving some of the highest rates of internal displacement the world has ever seen. 30.6 million new displacements by conflict and disasters were recorded in 2017; at the end of that year, 40 million people were estimated to be living in internal displacement as a result of conflict (with an additional, unknown number of people still displaced as a result of disasters).¹

These are shocking and disheartening numbers. Given data challenges, they are also, sadly, likely to be an underestimate. It is estimated that around 8.5 million IDPs who were reported in 2017 as having returned, been resettled or relocated across 23 countries may not have found truly durable solutions

and can therefore be considered still to be living in displacement. Including them would bring the total number of people currently living in internal displacement to 48.5 million.

What can be done?

As conflicts drag on, as climate change exacerbates the intensity of sudden- and slow-onset disasters and as the rate of global urbanisation increases, there is no reason to believe that the rising trend of internal displacement will be reversed. However, there are a number of steps which can be taken in order to shift policy and action on internal displacement, building on current approaches.

Primarily, we need to acknowledge that, despite the rising numbers and the contribution the Guiding Principles have made over the past 20 years, internal displacement has been neglected in recent years, and must therefore be pushed up the international policy-making agenda. Calls to ‘leave no one behind’ and to find solutions for internal displacement, including those made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, appeared to be a promising re-engagement on the issue and a recognition of the need for concerted action. But while dedicated actors continue to work tirelessly to find



NRC/Engelulish Azad

Kharestan IDP settlement, located some 6km from Qala-e-naw city, Afghanistan, September 2018.

solutions at the national and regional levels, the collective international will required to address internal displacement has been largely absent. Since late 2016, international attention has been focused on the two global compacts, on refugees and on migration, neither of which substantively addresses displacement within national borders.²

The 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles has undoubtedly generated new momentum on this issue in 2018 but it is **sustained** high-level engagement that will be required to ensure that this momentum does not fade away. Most importantly, any high-level processes or negotiations must secure the substantive and continued engagement of those States which are most affected by internal displacement and which have experience in addressing it as a reality on the ground. Without their engagement, the political buy-in and concrete implementation that are required simply will not happen. To be genuinely inclusive, the perspectives of internally displaced people themselves also have to be sought, understood and accounted for, rather than treated as an afterthought.

We must also reinforce the understanding that internal displacement

crises are often underpinned by problematic development trajectories, and have consequences beyond immediate humanitarian ones. To fully address the drivers and impacts of displacement, and deliver the kind of policy making and operational actions needed to prevent and reduce displacement, we need to better understand and improve ways to respond to: the long-term economic and developmental impacts of displacement on IDPs and the communities they live in, and on States; the links between internal displacement and cross-border flight; the specific characteristics of urban displacement; the effects of climate change; the interplay of slow-onset disasters and conflict; and the role of development projects and criminal violence in driving displacement.

This will require States, humanitarian organisations, peace-building agencies and development actors to think creatively about the way data are collected and analysed, in order to track and assess how IDPs' needs and vulnerabilities evolve over time, and what works and what does not work in addressing internal displacement in different contexts. There are no one-size-fits-all

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Cycles of displacement

Recent research by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) among Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Sweden (which will be complemented shortly by further research among returned refugees and IDPs in Iraq) highlights the relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movements. One core preliminary finding is that high numbers of refugees have previously experienced internal displacement, with multiple movements exacerbating vulnerabilities and exhausting limited coping strategies.

Sara³ and her family, for example, fled their home in Baghdad when a local militia attempted to forcibly recruit Sara's teenage son. They escaped to Babylon, where they lived undercover for a few months before being discovered once more by the militia. Afraid for their son, they fled to Erbil; unable to remain in Kurdistan due to reported sponsorship requirements, the family crossed into Turkey and then made their way to Sweden.

Akram, also from Baghdad, left his home after an armed group threatened to kill him if he refused to sell them his house. He fled to his sister's home in

Qaraqosh. When Qaraqosh was captured by ISIS, Akram returned to Baghdad to seek refuge at his former place of employment; shortly after returning to the city, he received a threatening phone call from the same armed group, and fled to Jordan in search of safety.

However, safety is not always sufficient. If refugees are unable to sustain themselves in their host countries, many will return prematurely to their countries of origin, where they may end up internally displaced. The risk is particularly great in the case of involuntary or premature returns. While more than 560,000 refugees and undocumented migrants returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran in 2017, many of the returnees are unable to resettle in their place of origin and face challenges reintegrating elsewhere due to insecurity and lack of services or livelihood opportunities.⁴ Just as – in the absence of progress towards durable solutions – IDPs risk becoming refugees, today's returning refugees run the risk of becoming tomorrow's IDPs.

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solutions to internal displacement crises but there **are** common assumptions which can underpin policy making and action.

Where governments are themselves the cause of displacement, the international community needs to better coordinate operational responses while at the same time working at the political level to support initiatives such as peace building, conflict resolution, access to justice, and accountability for human rights violations. However, whenever possible, governments must take the lead, with the support of the international community and regional bodies and in close coordination with local authorities. In doing so, they will need to integrate internal displacement into long-term development and climate change adaptation planning, and invest in disaster risk reduction efforts. Humanitarian responses should account for the needs of IDPs without neglecting the communities they live in. And returning refugees, particularly in insecure contexts, should be supported to ensure they do not find themselves internally displaced in the absence of durable solutions.

There are significant hurdles to overcome. These include concerns over sovereignty, institutional inertia and the allure of familiar business-as-usual approaches, low capacity and lack of resourcing faced by countries with large protracted crises, and the difficulty of fully measuring and understanding the phenomena. But this is not an impossible challenge, and it is one that we must try to meet.

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Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
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1. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2018) *Global Report on Internal Displacement*
www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2018

2. This is perhaps not surprising, given how internal displacement directly touches on sovereignty issues. To some extent, it also reflects the lack of a clear leadership mandate on the issue within the UN system.

3. Names have been changed.

4. See endnote 1, p36; see also article by Majidi and Tyler in this issue.