

# A seat at the table for IDPs

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**Excluding IDPs from peacemaking and post-conflict reconstruction means that the issues of greatest interest to them – resettlement, rebuilding of basic social services, clearance of landmines and security sector reform – are often ignored by the armed combatants participating in the talks.**

Early returns of IDPs are often pushed by impatient negotiators seeking good news from stalled processes but the premature return of displaced persons in the absence of security and sustainability can lead to new displacement and further instability. IDPs themselves are best positioned to know when it is wise and safe to return. They know what they need in terms of assistance packages, training opportunities, transport and rebuilding of basic social services.

Sidelining of IDPs means that they often view peace processes as belonging to armed combatants, not to themselves. They thus will not serve as a countervailing force to press combatants to meet their commitments. As the following article by David Lanz shows, the exclusion of Darfur IDP representatives at the Abuja talks was a key reason for their failure.

In the absence of IDPs at the table, too often maniacal combatants – such as Angola's Jonas Savimbi, Sierra Leone's Foday Sankoh and Uganda's Joseph Kony – claim to represent 'the disempowered people' in peace negotiations. Frequently, their first demand is for amnesty for all crimes that they, their supporters and the opposite side committed during the conflict. Such amnesties too often mean that men with guns forgive other men with guns for crimes committed against powerless civilians. Amnesties can put a cynical cancer in the centre of a peace process, ignore IDP rights for compensation and property restitution, and undercut rule of law and justice after the guns go silent.

In addressing these issues, many questions need to be answered.

## ■ Who should speak on behalf of IDPs?

The leaders of the communities from which the displaced came may have been killed, displaced or discredited, and IDP camps do not generally have the stability to elect their own leadership. Those who present themselves as leaders in IDP camps may not be innocent victims but perpetrators of violence – such as in secured areas of Rwanda following the 1994 genocide.

## ■ How can IDPs be empowered to contribute to peace negotiations?

Typically, IDPs from marginalised groups, such as the Afro-Colombian community in Colombia, lack the skills needed to participate in diplomatic negotiations. Training for their participation is essential, and must take place early and in a culturally appropriate manner.

## ■ When is IDP engagement most important?

Issues such as compensation for displacement, accountability and restoration of land rights are particularly tense, and can disrupt fragile peace processes if introduced too early. Some have suggested that these questions should wait until negotiation of a ceasefire and an agreement on the disarmament and demobilisation of armed forces.

## ■ How can IDP engagement facilitate post-conflict civil society?

Innovative programmes to use IDPs as planners, implementers and beneficiaries of resettlement and reconstruction programmes can help strengthen civil society.

The lack of local pressure to include IDPs in these processes means that the international community must often take the lead to ensure their participation. We need not be diffident when advocating IDP engagement in the face of claims that we are meddling in internal affairs. Today, internal disputes invariably represent threats to international peace and security as waves of instability flow easily across porous borders. Today's IDP is tomorrow's refugee, and insecure areas within countries quickly become breeding sites for international trafficking in arms, persons and drugs, and potential training sites for terrorists.

As international mediators press for IDP engagement, they must receive the full backing of the UN Security Council, UN peacekeepers and all UN humanitarian agencies. They must all reiterate that IDPs are not mere victims of conflict but an essential piece of the puzzle in making and sustaining peace. Peace processes must benefit from their knowledge of local conditions, their power to generate civil society support for agreements, their willingness to return and rebuild stable societies, and their commitment to the future of their countries. In the pursuit of peace, we must make them part of the solution, not part of the problem.

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