Researching internal displacement:
what is our field and what is our goal?

by Birgitte Refslund Sørensen

As researchers strive to make their work policy-relevant, is there a danger that we may inadvertently adopt the perspectives and language of international and state actors and disregard the perspectives and experiences of those people we refer to as the internally displaced?

How can we develop research problems that are grounded in the perspectives and experiences of people affected by displacement, but whose findings remain relevant to policy? In other words, how do we identify, not only the right solutions, but also the right questions?

An immediate observation is that that the main debate on internal displacement remains dominated by the actors that 'invented' the IDP category in the first place. Many international actors concentrate on sharpening their policy and legal instruments in a process that shapes the issue in a particular fashion that is both selective and biased. While such efforts must be acknowledged for their attempt to provide security and protection, one problem with the dominant language of humanitarian and human rights actors is that it generalises, objectifies and decontextualises so as to omit much of the social, cultural and historical circumstances that make events imaginable and meaningful to the actors involved. Humanitarian agencies transform the individual stories of IDPs into stereotypical accounts of the 'typical internally displaced person', devoid of his/her particular history and identity. One task for the critical researcher is to reveal and problematise underlying assumptions such as the following:

IDPs are invariably seen as localised, a view that is reinforced by their tendency (at least in some places) to flee and settle in community-based groups and thus to re-invoke a sense of village and community. There are, however, remarkably few tests of this assumption or assessments of which kinds of networks – local, national and global – that IDPs create and mobilise in order to rebuild their livelihoods as IDPs and citizens.

Most studies evade discussion of the future and IDPs' longer-term aspirations. This may partly be explained by the limited mandate of most organisations to meet basic needs and not engage in long-term development. Clearly agencies' perspectives are at odds with how IDPs regard themselves and plan their lives.

Most programmes for IDPs are also based on the assumption that IDPs always want to go home (a badly understood notion in itself). Though many indeed do want to, we need to work against standardisation of experiences and the taking for granted of supposedly 'universal' and 'natural' strategies.

A second major influence on our way of thinking about and acting in relation to IDPs is the project discourse and practice that informs the work of humanitarian and development actors. Projects are taken for granted as the way to address problems and needs. However, one concern is that projects often de-politicise underdevelopment and convert it into a

technical problem that masks power relations and patterns of inequality and exploitation. Another concern is that the project culture is also a highly bureaucratic one, and when local organisations (NGOs and community based organisations) are selected as partners for humanitarian agencies they are altered by the partnership. Under the guise of 'capacity building', so-called partners and beneficiaries are involved in a process of bureaucratisation where they have to learn different kinds of accounting, reporting, monitoring, evaluation and regulation. One could of course argue that this enables people to attract funding for betterment of their situation, but at the same time such training may also be interpreted as a means of introducing further control through standardisation of lived experiences and self-monitoring as suggested by French philosopher Michel Foucault.

A pertinent, but relatively unexplored question is how the introduction of a project culture affects social relations and who assumes leadership, how do they legitimise their position and which networks and alliances do they develop and rely on. To address this is to acknowledge that humanitarian assistance to IDPs and other conflict-affected groups does more that meeting basic needs, it alters and shapes the structures, relationships and moralities of societies and communities emerging from conflict.

To summarise, researchers should acknowledge:

- the heterogeneity of populations with different identities and positions that is obscured by the homogenous category of 'IDP'
- that IDPs – like all other social groups – consider their options and act strategically to achieve their individual goals
- the importance of not merely explaining 'why' and 'how' IDP populations have come to their present state but also asking 'what next?'
- that IDPs are not necessarily rooted to home: many wish to move on to other places, other possibilities and new lives
- the need to better understand who assumes leadership positions in post-conflict communities, how they legitimise their position and which networks and alliances they develop and rely on
- the importance of analysing development of new leadership structures and understandings of authority and what these say about ideas of community and society
- the need to think about differences between policy-directed research and basic research.

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