

The IDP problem in Africa: double standards?

by Desire Timngum

IDP debates have focused more on the nature of protection rather than on imbalance between levels of assistance and protection provided to different groups.

Why are certain categories of people excluded? How do the double standards in international refugee law affect Africa's 13.5m IDPs? Can state and non-state actors in Africa work to build a credible IDP protection regime?

The IDP problem-solution model seeks a holistic and a critical examination of issues of the internally displaced as well as participatory solutions methods. It operates on the premise that states, humanitarian agencies, NGOs, non-state combatants, policy makers, researchers and academics may be worsening the socio-economic situation of IDPs by destroying their dignity and self-confidence. Many African states deny the existence of internal displacement. The Chad-Cameroon pipeline project provides an example of how state-driven development projects cause displacement which is ignored: neither government is prepared to acknowledge the displacement it has caused and the existence of IDPs. In Zimbabwe - as in many countries - state censorship constrains media coverage of displacement for fear this encourages human rights critics and tarnishes the country's image. Aid deliveries to opposition strongholds have been hindered.

Among the many complications in protecting African IDPs or providing them with humanitarian assistance are:

- the fact that IDP conferences are organised in settings which deny participants opportunities to live the experiences of IDPs: IDPs are rarely included in conferences that concern their issues and state and non-state actors routinely speak on their behalf
- the role of donors in shaping the academic research agenda
- the absence of clear procedural mandates on the protection and assistance to IDPs

- the failure of researchers to meet the challenge of determining the numbers of IDPs in need of assistance
- the danger that concern for ethics can lead researchers not to ask relevant questions.

Burden sharing is fast becoming burden shifting. Responsibility sharing is gradually becoming irresponsibility sharing and commitment is giving way to non-commitment to protect the displaced. It is essential that:

- African states sign and respect all international human rights and humanitarian laws and incorporate them into national law
- African governments acknowledge the extent of displacement and do more to assess IDP needs and to deliver assistance requested by IDPs themselves
- regional groups cooperate to share resources and improve burden sharing

- more be done to humanise rebel groups and educate them about the human rights of IDPs
- financial support to rebels be blocked
- academics and researchers think beyond donor expectations when developing research aims
- local actors play a greater role in distribution of aid supplies
- IDPs be encouraged to speak for themselves and have input into policy formation
- support be given to programmes which draw on religious faith to promote reconciliation and reactivate a spirit of hope in IDPs.

*Desire Timngum is a Ph.D student at the Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.
Email: timngum142@yahoo.com*

