

IDPs: time to move forward

by Kofi Asomani

Governments and the UN believe that the response to internal displacement has often been ineffective.



In order to strengthen the international community's response in situations of internal displacement, a new Unit has been established under the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The Unit will bring together major agencies working for IDPs. In July 2000 the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, a body that groups agencies involved in humanitarian work, decided to establish an Inter-Agency network on internal displacement composed of focal points from different organisations. The network was to be an *ad hoc* body which would look at the questions of internal displacement and come up with recommendations. A special co-ordi-

nator was appointed, my predecessor Dennis McNamara. This group has undertaken a number of missions to different IDP situations, visiting Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, Afghanistan, Colombia and Angola. The network came up with recommendations on ways of improving the response to IDP situations in these countries.

In addition to the missions, one of the tasks of the network was to propose institutional mechanisms for responding to these situations of internal displacement. In August 2001 it was decided to create a Unit. Putting this Unit together is one of the tasks that I have undertaken. The Unit is expected to strengthen the hand of the Emergency Relief Coordinator who heads the UN Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and to find ways of supporting the system when there is an emergency concerning IDPs. The Unit will be small, non-operational and composed of staff seconded from such key IDP agencies as UNICEF, WFP, UNDP and IOM, as well as NGOs. The recommendation to set up the Unit has been endorsed by the UN Secretary-General and we expect the Unit to be fully operational from 1 January 2002.

In addition to the involvement of UN organisations, the Unit will work closely with other intergovernmental organisations and the large range of NGOs working with IDPs. We will also establish close liaison with the Representative of the Secretary-General on IDPs, Francis Deng, particularly in support of his own advocacy functions.

The Unit will have a great opportunity to make a difference in three particular areas where there have been gaps in the way that the international community has dealt with IDPs. First of all we need to have more accountability in terms of what the international system does. There are too many recommendations, too many missions, too many ideas which are not implemented. By ensuring that recommendations are actually followed up, the Unit will add value to present arrangements.

Secondly, we hope to sharpen our response in terms of protection. The missions of the network have concluded that in many cases the protection response was very weak or, in some places, non-existent. One of the first tasks of the Unit will be to establish a small sub-committee of agencies dealing with protection. We want to discover ways of operationalising the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, to come up with ways of dealing practically with protection in situations of internal displacement.

A third area where we need to move forward quickly is that of solutions. There should be a bigger thrust towards finding actual solutions to the problems faced by displaced persons. We have seen this happen in places where it has been possible to get communities together with authorities to come forward with solutions allowing more or less permanent resolution of the situation of displacement.

At times there is a lack of in-depth analysis and a lack of sensitivity towards the communities with whom the UN is supposed to be dealing. This in turn leads to a situation where the desired activities of the UN do not have the desired impact. Capacities exist either within IDP populations or in the wider environment in which they live which could be mobilised to respond effectively to the situations that we are faced with.

We sometimes lack access: the ability to provide IDPs with assistance and protection. Resources available to us are in many cases deficient. We need to stress the importance of promoting empowerment of IDPs and vulnerable populations so that they themselves can recognise possibilities, recognise their aspirations and identify ways of supporting the response strategy for dealing with their own situations. Fortunately, there is a growing understanding that this is a dimension of the international community's efforts on behalf of vulnerable populations which needs to be expanded. I am talking not only about economic empowerment but also about protection. In Colombia and elsewhere, we have seen that IDPs can play a key role in protecting themselves. In situations where communities were aware that they were the objects of displacement, the fact that they were very well organised enabled them to be able to withstand and to foresee the impact of displacement. In some contexts they were even able to avoid displacement, because they were organised. In some situations, they were able to assert themselves as a community and, at the same time, claim their rights.

We think it is necessary to help IDPs to help themselves, particularly in the search for durable solutions. The activities in this regard must have as a starting point support of the capacities of the groups themselves.

They should aim not just at supporting them to be resilient but also at helping them promote in a constructive manner their recovery and reintegration. We have examples of how this has been done. We have examples of IDP communities being helped to help themselves in Georgia, Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the fields of professional training, income-generating activities, credit schemes and so on. As a Unit we will try hard to develop and expand activities in these areas. We are planning a review of activities in Georgia and Azerbaijan in order to draw out lessons which can be applied elsewhere.

We want to broaden the UN response, to make it more effective and more timely. We will also be looking at the wider environment. We will focus on what IDPs can do and what opportunities are presented by situations so that they can respond to their own needs.

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