

# IDPs: an anthropological perspective

by Birgitte Refslund Sørensen

*I would like to thank the Norwegian Refugee Council, NTNU and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for inviting us all to this seminar on the response strategies of people who are displaced by conflict within the borders of their country.*



policy making can be bridged. NRC, I believe, belongs to this last category. This project is an example of how the agendas and interests of practitioners and policy makers on the one hand and those of researchers on the other can be combined in a joint effort to enhance the understanding and hopefully improve the responses to a particular situation.

This leads me to my own role in the project - and my own agenda. When I participated in a similar

people and actors. More attention must be paid to how IDPs, like other people affected by war, seek to re-construct their own livelihoods - socially, psychologically, economically, politically and culturally.

I believe that what I, and others of similar orientation, said at that conference was an important input into creating the Response Strategies Project. When I was later invited to coordinate with Marc Vincent the present project on how IDPs respond to crisis and displacement we agreed that our starting point would be to see IDPs as actors - even when they were clearly victims. We also agreed that, insofar as possible, our investigation of the issue should be based on field research, interviews and participatory methods that would better allow us to see things from IDPs' own point of view. All are aspects that are characteristic of an anthropological

number of 'needs' that are defined by 'availability and supply'.

I do not claim that we arrived at whole truth and nothing but the truth but I do think that because we did not come to the task with any preconceived ideas we got a broader and more complex picture. If people's responses can be used to make a judgment, it was significant and heartening that so many people expressed their appreciation that "finally somebody has listened to our story".

There were other benefits too. The field studies brought out the internal differentiation of the IDP category. Despite often stressing how important it is to remember this we frequently fall back on the general IDP category. 'IDP' has different histories and social and political meanings in different conflicts. Rather than being an objective universal descriptive category, it is one that is constantly being socially and politically constructed. The project also reminded us that differences in religion, ethnicity, gender, age and

occupation influence not only how and to what extent people are affected by forced displacement but also the response strategies that people develop. In several case studies it became apparent that forced displacement is never the only axis of identity and that in most cases it is far from being the most important one. Religion, ethnicity, gender, age, occupation or other aspects of identity are more important than being an IDP.

This leads to the second point regarding the interpretation or narrative of displacement. Humanitarian thinking identifies conflict and displacement as the main cause of displaced people's current predicaments and often falsely assumes that displacement is then also the most important event in people's lives. There is a further assumption that displacement is a temporary deviation from normal life, that it exists only between brackets, so to speak, and that consequently all displaced people long for return and resettlement. Studies showed, however, that other events, positions and relationships were often evoked

in explanation of a person's current situation. Getting married or marrying off your daughter were, for instance, often seen as more significant events, which changed a person's social identity and status in a more fundamental way.

Another point that was brought out clearly was that in several cases displacement was interpreted within a specific cultural framework that gave it a particular meaning and sometimes even purpose as part of a group's or community's self-realisation. The study showed that the notion of 'home', which is so central in the discussion of displacement and resettlement, was much more ambiguous than we tend to think. The idea that 'home' is your community, your village, the place where you, your ancestors and relatives come from, the soil where your identity is rooted and where you have an almost natural sense of belonging, is only partly true. IDPs' accounts revealed that this was only the case for some. For others, 'home' was something that was always in a process of being created,

depending as much on future opportunities as on past experiences.

This shows us that while we tend to think of displacement as a temporary deviation from normal life, a disruptive event to be corrected, the possibility also exists that some people see displacement as an opportunity for change. People do not only look back; they also look to the future and try to plan for it.

The third point I would like to include concerns the social meanings of social and economic activities. Often when discussing the initiatives of people, or the projects of agencies, we focus on the activity itself in a narrow sense. For instance, when talking about economic activities we simply talk about trade or business, maybe including a description of the items being traded. Our interviews showed that an activity such as 'making baskets and selling them at the local market' could mean very different things to different people. It could be a continuation of a recognised pre-war activity, providing

a guaranteed level of income while also defining the person's social identity as member of a community. It could be a new activity that implied learning new skills, entering new relationships, reworking domestic gender roles and perhaps even risking social stigmatisation and marginalisation. In that case economic gains would have tremendous social costs. The general point here to remember is that IDPs – like any other social group – inhabit particular social and cultural worlds.

We must not lose sight of the capacity of people to analyse their own situation. When we gave IDPs the chance to talk about what they had done prior to, during and after displacement, rather than what their needs were (the standard project needs assessments approach), many of them demonstrated great capacity to analyse their situation and make risk assessments. Their analyses were translated into actions that prepared them for what might come but also informed their constant adjustments of response strategies and learning from past

experiences. In fact, their analyses were often more in touch with recent developments and more precise (containing more variables and concrete details) than those provided by the external agencies.

In conclusion, I believe that the approach taken by this initiative, which has focused on documenting 'conflict and displacement as the IDPs experience it and respond to it', has contributed many novel insights and perspectives. Many issues remain unexplored and not yet well understood. I hope that you, practitioners and researchers, will take this opportunity to identify and discuss possible shared interests, so that in the coming years we will see a number of new initiatives in this direction.

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