Response strategies: the need to involve the displaced

by Marc Vincent

I would like to start with an overview of the Response Strategies Project. We started with two principal objectives, the first of which was to understand how individuals in communities respond to displacement.

We felt that, while there was a lot of emphasis on institutional dilemmas and issues of sovereignty, we needed to look more closely at how real people respond to displacement. This was particularly important if we were to begin working on our second objective which was to try to see how we can develop concrete recommendations as a humanitarian community to improve our response.

These objectives are not particularly new. Indeed, the refugee field and the anthropology field have been talking about them for a long time. So what exactly have we tried to do that was different?

Firstly, although many of the conditions facing IDPs may be the same as those facing refugees, we know that their context can be very different as a result of their closer proximity to the actual armed actors or potential security and protection threats. In order to better understand the protection issues we wanted to focus some of our attention on that particular area.

Secondly, as many of us who are working in the humanitarian field know, we frequently talk about the need to better integrate and include the displaced in our decision-making processes. This is something which is clearly supported in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Often, however, the difficulty is finding out how best to integrate and

UNHCR / M. Kobayashi

include them. It always seems that when emergencies begin and when we are doing evaluations, it is not until the end of the process or after the so-called 'emergency phase' that we decide to consult the displaced. We need to involve the displaced earlier in the process – indeed, from the very beginning. For that reason we wanted to start from the very beginning, by looking at what the displaced do for themselves and among themselves.

What did we learn from this process? The first lesson for me was to reconsider the lens through which we viewed the problems of internal displacement. As humanitarian workers we tend to see things in logistical terms, in terms of emergencies and delivering assistance as fast as we can, or we think in terms of protection. And so we often see the displaced through a one-dimensional lens: we see them as victims rather than as human beings with various histories and backgrounds, ambitions and resources. As Birgitte Refslund Sørensen has said, there are different axes of identity and all these different axes have an impact on how people respond to displacement.

Narrow perspective on vulnerability

By using the uni-dimensional lens we create our own dilemmas and expectations as well as false dichotomies. I am reminded of a workshop that we recently held in Burundi where there was much discussion about vulnerability. The question was asked whether IDPs are more vulnerable than people living in their own community and whether refugees are more vulnerable than IDPs. First, the question assumed that IDPs must be vulnerable and, second, the ensuing discussion created a pointless categorisation of who is more vulnerable. Some of the chapters in the book *Caught Between Borders* actually tell a more nuanced story.

The research showed that sometimes a person may be displaced yet not necessarily be vulnerable. In fact, it showed that some people even managed to improve aspects of their life during displacement – such as finding access to education which they were not able to do before. In another example the research in Angola and Afghanistan showed that people who

are not displaced may be more vulnerable than those who were displaced, because some were unable to flee because of financial reasons.

The point I am trying to make is that, generally, it is important that we agree that the internally displaced are frequently more vulnerable than other victims of conflict precisely because they have been forced from their homes and communities. However, in order to really understand their situation and what we need to do to respond, we need to look at them as individuals at the family and community level. That is why we have chosen to use the term 'changing the humanitarian lens' for this conference. It is not easy for us to step outside that humanitarian role but I think it is something that we have to do if we are to better understand what IDPs themselves are doing and how we should respond.

It is only when we do change the lens that we get to see both variety and ingenuity among the displaced. And we also get a better view of what we should be doing as a humanitarian community to respond to displacement without upsetting the delicate

IDP children in Sri Lanka

social balance and fabric – or making things worse than they already are.

Preparation for displacement

One area that I found particularly fascinating during the research was the level of preparation for displacement among IDPs. For me, it turned the idea of the displaced as victims on its head and came as a surprise. Comments from Burundi, for example, illustrated that those who survived the first instance of flight had much better chances of surviving subsequent displacements because they became better informed, they were better able to identify the risks and they had been able to identify some contingency plans. There was a clear learning curve. It showed up in the identification of essential supplies. In Burma, for example, those displaced were able to pre-position supplies along potential escape routes prior to the arrival of military patrols. In other countries there was a change in attitude towards goods and belongings; mobile assets – something that you could carry with you – and personal skills became increasingly important.

In another example from Angola, the chapter describes a tailor who had been displaced several times. He always brought his sewing machine with him because it gave him some form of survival capacity after displacement; this was something he had

IDPs in Pavarando Camp, Colombia

learned after the first experience of losing everything.

Another example of the learning processes of the displaced was the development of escape routes and safe havens. One revelation was the number of information networks and early warning systems that existed among displaced communities. These could be based on groups and families, on kinship or community. When displacement occurred regularly these information networks were extremely well developed. In Columbia, for example, the potentially displaced relied on both traditional warning systems – such as cattle horns – or more sophisticated messages hidden within radio programmes to warn of the presence of armed actors and enable those potentially in danger to move to safe areas. However, although this reveals the resources and capacity available, we must be cautious and not assume that these mechanisms always work. Despite all the mechanisms that exist in Colombia, many people still preferred to escape their home areas altogether and move in anonymity to large urban settings.

Learning to listen

What kind of implications does this research have for the humanitarian response? The first implication is clearly the need to listen better. Obviously, the displaced are much

better prepared than the humanitarian community gives them credit for. Humanitarian organisations often prefer to rely on their own analysis of a situation rather than giving credence to local analysis. And this can often have disastrous consequences. Humanitarian organisations need to make more of an effort to listen to and learn from local analysis. They can then support local actors in developing feasible contingency plans should they be displaced again.

Another area of great importance which came out in the research was the area of shifting gender and generational roles. The case-studies clearly underscored the importance of supporting changes in family life and in the extended community. These are the structures that play such an important part in sustaining response but they are also the structures that undergo a great deal of strain. For example, many of the contributors to the book noted that men seemed to suffer more from losing their houses and employment because that loss had a direct consequence on their sense of identity and dignity. These strains were reflected in destructive behaviour ranging from increased alcoholism to violence and direct challenges to women's role as bread-winners.

For women, displacement prompted a wide range of emotions from despair about providing for their family to enthusiasm about their newly-won freedom and their new roles within the family. The humanitarian community frequently looks at women separately or at women and children as vulnerable groups but perhaps we should be looking more closely at the relationship between women and men and children so that we can minimise those strains.

Another area of importance that came out of the research was the question of documentation. We often underestimate the value of documentation but it is incredibly important for freedom of movement and for accessing social services. It would be worthwhile looking at how the humanitarian community could more regularly facilitate access to documentation.

Marc Vincent was until December 2001 the coordinator of the Global IDP Project (www.idpproject.org). He now works for OCHA's newly created IDP Unit. Email: vincent.m@un.org.

UNHCR / J Spaull 1111