

Learning lessons from IDP resettlement: villagisation in north-west Rwanda

by Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt

Analysis of how the international community provided uncritical support for Rwanda's controversial villagisation policy highlights the need to improve protection for resettling IDPs, think more seriously about sustainable integration and improve inter-agency cooperation.

Following the rapid return to Rwanda of over one million refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the end of 1996, soldiers who had been responsible for genocide launched an insurgency in northwest Rwanda. The Rwandan army used brutal tactics to fight the rebels, killing, torturing and arbitrarily detaining hundreds of civilians. Violence employed by both parties led to a humanitarian crisis and extensive internal displacement. By the end of 1998, some 630,000 people – half the population of north-west Rwanda – were displaced.

By late 1999 security had improved and attention turned to solutions for the displaced. As most were unable to return home, international agencies and donors decided to invest massively in the implementation of a policy of collective resettlement or villagisation (*imidugudu* in Kinyarwanda).¹ This required tens of thousands of rural families to relocate into newly-established settlement sites scattered throughout the region, rather than return to their traditional hillside abodes. The government saw the sites as a solution to insecurity and a way to deny insurgents contact with civilians. For four years international agencies led by UNHCR, WDP and UNDP and with support from NGOs provided massive support to villagisation, helping to build over 250 communities with 85,000 houses.

Starting as an emergency project, *imidugudu* was plagued by problems, several of which resembled those of earlier villagisation experiments in Africa:

- The authorities failed to achieve their stated objectives and unrealistically applied scientific criteria to the neglect of local realities.
- Authoritative and top-down directives often amounted to coercion and involved numerous cases of forced relocation.
- Families were unwilling to relinquish former land and livelihoods but the authorities required them to abandon and even destroy their dwellings.
- The programme lacked legitimacy: villagisation's legal status was unclear as it was implemented by two Rwandan ministries without legislation or parliamentary discussion.
- International agencies failed either to adequately protect the rights of IDPs in the return and resettlement phase or develop a coherent inter-agency approach to the crisis.
- Opportunities to advocate for the implementation of international standards regarding shelter, land access, protection and consultation were not taken.
- Villagisation did not link relief with development as it failed to provide adequate water, sanitation, health and education services.
- Agricultural productivity and food security were undermined by the distance between villagisation sites and cultivated fields and the relocation of communities on flat, fertile areas – thus forcing them to use environmentally precarious hillsides for farming.

- Most fundamentally, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (GPs)² – and the wide range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights they articulate – were not used to guide policy and practice.

These shortcomings were quickly highlighted in a series of evaluations commissioned by donors, UN agencies and NGOs. Yet, despite their findings, widespread international criticism of villagisation and its lack of a legal basis, the international community continued to offer significant support to its implementation. Their reasons for doing so were:

- a sense of responsibility and guilt for their inaction during the genocide and the resources they had unwittingly channelled to *genocidaires* using refugee camps in Zaire to launch raids into Rwanda
- the previous experience and expertise of many agencies in providing housing, a highly tangible and visible output
- the relatively straightforward process of raising funds for building accommodation in an increasingly competitive donor funding market.

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At the end of 1999, international agencies finally became concerned enough about villagisation to develop a policy paper on the programme. This exercise presented an opportunity to articulate international standards relating to government-induced displacement. However, the final document released in February 2000, Common UN Framework for Assistance in the context of the Imidugudu Policy, was bland and vague – simply calling for more studies and

research. Most importantly, it failed to consider, much less apply, the relevant international norms, including the GPs.

UN inconsistency

In December 2000 Thomas Linde, the Senior Advisor on IDPs of the UN's Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), visited Rwanda. Linde's mission resulted in controversial and contradictory findings which were not endorsed by relevant UN officials charged with IDP responsibilities and which generated significant debate within UNHCR and OCHA. The most contentious finding involved the status of persons resettled by the government. Linde's report praised Rwanda for making efforts "in good faith" to establish a durable solution for formerly displaced people. Bizarrely, Linde claimed that only 6,340 persons could still be considered internally displaced but also estimated that up to 370,000 recently displaced families remained in a "situation of vulnerability".

At the same time, other evidence (from the US Committee for Refugees, a joint Rwandan Government/Brookings Institution study and the UN) concluded that at least 150,000 IDPs relocated to villagisation sites were in a situation of total dependency and that the Rwanda still had around 600,000 IDPs. Observers noted that many vulnerable displaced families were woman- or child-headed households, that coercion was still being employed to move individuals and that difficulty in reaching fields and insecurity over land tenure had caused a decline in agricultural production. Prematurely considering these individuals "resettled" was therefore not only erroneous but also minimised their acute needs and undermined their ability to access already dwindling emergency resources available as donors switched from humanitarian to development budget lines.

Relevance of the Guiding Principles

The most significant omission in the Linde report was the failure to refer to either relevant international law or the GPs as the legal framework for IDPs. This was all the more surpris-

ing as OCHA headquarters decided in 1998 to disseminate the GPs to all field staff and to support their use.

Villagisation violated many of the GPs:

- Principle 6(3): that displacement may last no longer than required by the circumstances - had there been UN advocacy on this principle, IDPs might have been allowed to return to their homes instead of being forced to remain in shelters without basic amenities.
- Principle 7: guarantees to be met in the case of decisions requiring the displacement of populations - advocacy would have supported criticism of the hasty and non-consultative manner used to implement villagisation.
- Principle 12: that IDPs shall not be interned in or confined to a camp; and if in exceptional circumstances such internment or confinement is absolutely necessary, it shall not last longer than required by the circumstances.
- Principle 14: that every IDP has liberty of movement and freedom to choose his or her residence.
- Principle 15: the right to be protected against forcible return to or resettlement in any place where their life, safety, liberty and/or health would be at risk.
- Principle 18 : that competent authorities are obliged to provide food and potable water, basic shelter, appropriate clothing and essential medical services and sanitation.
- Principle 28(1): that competent authorities must provide means whereby the internally displaced can return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or resettle voluntarily in another part of the country.

Conclusion

Rwanda offered a golden opportunity to actualise the Guiding Principles. This was a case where a government had acknowledged the GPs as a legitimate set of international standards. International advocacy efforts would have been politically feasible and likely to produce results. International agencies provided much of

the material support for villagisation and had field staff working near and within sites who were well placed to monitor and ensure respect for the rights of the displaced.

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Use of the GPs as the benchmark of international law stipulating the obligations of the government vis-à-vis IDPs would have strengthened criticism of villagisation and thereby possibly stimulated action to render it more humane. It may also have assisted in the development of a more coherent inter-agency approach to the crisis.

While steps have been taken since 1999 to strengthen the international response to situations of internal displacement, we must continue to draw lessons from past protection and sustainable reintegration failures. There is an urgent need to:

- disseminate the GPs more widely and ensure they are actually applied by policy makers
- provide government officials and UN and NGO field staff with GP training
- train headquarters staff to provide better support to field colleagues responding to internal displacement crises and sensitise them to the issues involved in internal displacement
- give headquarters staff in UN country teams sufficient authority to instruct agencies how to proceed and to support them when obstacles are encountered
- refrain from sending numerous UN envoys and missions to the same country or region and offering different recommendations.

As resources dwindle, the UN must enhance its effectiveness and credibility by better coordinating its responses to humanitarian crises. Internal displacement is likely to continue as one of the most pressing humanitarian, human rights and security issues confronting the international community for the foreseeable future. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement must serve as the lynchpin of every response to internal displacement.

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The views expressed in this article are purely personal.

For a comprehensive analysis of villagisation and flaws in international responses to internal

displacement, see Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. *The protection gap in the international protection of IDPs: the case of Rwanda*, Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, March 2004. Available online at: <http://heiwww.unige.ch/publ/workingpapers/04/wpaper1.pdf>

1 See FMR 7, Jon Bennett 'Forced relocation in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi: emerging policy': www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR07/fmr7.9.pdf

2 See www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html

The Forced Migration Online team at the RSC has produced a resource page on **Challenges of return and reintegration** to complement this feature section. See: www.forcedmigration.org/browse/thematic/return.htm

HOME FOR GOOD?

Arrival of return convoy at UNHCR transit centre in Byumba, Rwanda

