

Protection versus promotion of IDP livelihoods in Colombia

by Antonio Hill

The widespread trend in the past decade towards a broader model of humanitarian relief has included 'livelihoods protection' as a preventive strategy to save lives. In Colombia, Oxfam GB and many other humanitarian agencies have pursued this strategy over the past five years in the form of productive packages – income-generation schemes – for displaced people.

This article assesses Oxfam's experience with productive packages and the longer-term contribution of such assistance to sustainable livelihoods of displaced people. Cautioning against easy assumptions that livelihoods protection necessarily furthers livelihoods promotion, it raises the possibility that the use of livelihoods terminology detracts from the sustainable livelihoods approach and the realisation of other human rights. Finally, it argues that realising the right to a sustainable livelihood is a proper and necessary humanitarian objective in a context like Colombia. Pursuing this objective requires an explicit commitment on the part of humanitarian donors and NGOs.

Productive packages

If productive livelihood assets can be preserved by preventing their sale in times of distress, the theory goes, then households can continue to use livelihoods strategies to cope with external shocks and avoid or postpone malnutrition, destitution or worse. In Colombia where displaced people may be rapidly stripped of most of their assets, rapid provisioning of productive assets can help individuals and households recover (or develop new) viable livelihood options. Rapid and well-conceived

income-generation support following displacement helps people avoid illegal or unsustainable strategies and is key to restoring human dignity. Furthermore, productive packages may help build long-term self-sufficiency – a first step towards sustainable livelihoods.

The productive packages that Oxfam provides to IDPs consist of once-off or consecutive donations of tools, supplies and/or other assets and start-up inputs in a six- to twelve-month project period. The exact content of the packages is determined on a case-by-case basis through a livelihoods self-assessment undertaken by the beneficiary families or collectives in consultation with Oxfam staff. This allows beneficiaries to decide which strategy they believe will be most successful based on recognition of their existing knowledge and skills and on their assessment of the conditions and opportunities in their new environment. For monitoring purposes, Oxfam divides the packages into two categories, according to the strategies pursued: 'agriculture and livestock' (typically including a mix of tools and equipment – seeds, fertilisers and other inputs; chickens or pigs; fishing nets, boats, motors and related equipment) and 'other' (often including initial commodity purchases for petty trading – wholesale crates of

fruits or vegetables for re-sale or tools, raw materials and other inputs for handicraft production or production of prepared foods for street vending).

In 2002 to 2003, 385 productive packages were distributed amongst 550 families, and average cost of inputs provided was approximately 500,000 Colombian pesos (US\$165) per family. Beneficiaries have used these to launch income-generating activities, drawing on previous skills and experience wherever possible to maximise possibilities for success. The packages have been provided to individual households as well as groups (predictably with greater difficulties experienced with the latter) and in rural as well as urban settings. Wherever possible, distribution of these packages is accompanied by relevant training, for example in basic accounting and gender roles in productive activities. In some cases, weekly grocery baskets (food aid) is also distributed to reduce the chance of recipients having to immediately sell productive assets to meet consumption needs. The productive package component is generally provided to those also receiving shelter/housing, health, hygiene, water or sanitation assistance. The programme primarily targets people within the first year following displacement, although up to 25% of programme funds are available to include community members not meeting this criterion.

Short-term versus long-term benefits

Our evaluations show there is no doubt that productive packages have a clear, direct and demonstrable short-term impact on people's lives. Their longer-term contribution to livelihoods is less clear. By and large, beneficiaries have failed to maintain,

let alone expand, levels of livelihoods assets. In the few cases where the initial investment had enabled a long-term process of accumulation this was clearly due to special skills or training that the individual/household had gained before displacement – showing that transferable human assets are a determinant of successful coping with displacement.

Concluding that productive packages do not contribute to longer-term welfare would be premature, since such a judgement would be based on limited data. We have realised the need to collect data to help establish a picture of the livelihoods status of beneficiaries several years after displacement.¹ A statistically significant comparative study between productive package beneficiaries and other displaced people in similar conditions would also be required in order to make meaningful judgements about the effectiveness of livelihoods protection strategies.² But the question of whether or not current interventions really promote sustainable livelihoods for IDPs is only relevant if this is an express goal of the intervention.

Current efforts that claim to support the livelihoods of IDPs and refugees – including many in Colombia – are often ambiguous about their overarching purpose. On the one hand, protecting livelihoods is expressly presented as a means to an end: saving lives or reducing food insecurity. In this view, protecting livelihoods is instrumental to an overriding ‘humanitarian imperative’. On the other hand, since the divide between protection and promotion becomes artificial on the ground, livelihoods protection is touted as a first step to longer-term self-sufficiency – and sustainable livelihoods. Ambiguous goals result in ambiguous outcomes.

Further contributing to ambiguity is confusion regarding what, exactly, we mean by the term ‘livelihoods’. Significant effort and resources have been expended in the past decade defining, analysing and communicating the sustainable livelihoods approach, including principles, frameworks and a grab bag of tools and methods to improve the effectiveness of development practice. Underlying all this is an important attempt to put poor people at the centre and in (greater) control of development practice. This livelihoods approach has



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suffered the same fate as countless other conceptual frameworks in that understanding of the subtleties of the issues involved and relevance of its methodology are highly variable across different institutional contexts and communities of practice. In the humanitarian domain, a livelihoods approach “simply means emergency programming aimed at supporting livelihoods, as well as saving lives.”³ Assertions that “simply” providing certain commodities (food, cash, livestock, etc.) can promote livelihoods and/or self-sufficiency in the longer term can easily appear facile from the perspective of the sustainable livelihoods camp.

Apart from this (significant) conceptual difference, the difference in practice between livelihoods protection and promotion of sustainable livelihoods relates more than anything else to whether it is considered an objective in itself.

Naturally, the time-scale for programme planning, approaches used and ways of working also matter. But in the end, these depend on the decision to raise support to sustainable livelihoods to the level of a programme objective, on a par with saving lives, public health and/or other goals.

So what’s the hold-up? Three factors appear to conspire against elevating the right to a sustainable livelihood to the status of a legitimate humanitarian objective in contexts of protracted conflict: (i) the perception that such a commitment goes beyond the scope

of legitimate humanitarian concern, (ii) the idea that long-term support and capacity building are impractical in emergency contexts, and (iii) the complexity of simultaneous programming for relief and development. In the Colombian context, at least, only the last of these stands up to scrutiny.

Although a dominant interpretation of humanitarianism revolves around “...an essentially materialistic concern for physical welfare, manifested in the provision of a range of commodities such as food, water, shelter, and medicine”⁴, the most widely accepted principle of humanitarianism – humanity – includes a fundamental concern for all types of human rights, not only the right to life. Most Colombian IDPs suffered serious socio-economic deprivation and marginalisation long before they were forced to migrate. Many observers also point out that IDPs suffer most

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after the first year of displacement, since it is then that they are cut off from state- and internationally-sponsored support, disillusioned by the prospect of extended displacement and/or re-settlement and affected most by post-traumatic stress and depression. A commodified humanitarianism that attends only to their right to life and security in the months after displacement ignores the wider violations of social, economic, civil and political rights that IDPs suffer and thereby risks depriving

them of their full rights. The right to life is meaningless without the right to a livelihood.

When the spectre of Plan Colombia was raised in the late 1990s, aid agencies braced themselves for a humanitarian crisis. With one of the world's largest populations of IDPs, Colombia is in undoubtedly in crisis. Vast numbers of civilians and non-combatants are in need of humanitarian protection and relief. But it is difficult to characterise the situation as urgent (or as an emergency) in the sense that large numbers of people will lose their lives if action is not taken soon. Given the complexity of the conflicts in progress, there is no set of practical interventions that will clearly save lives on any meaningful scale in the short term. And, tragically, few people in Colombia – aid workers included – believe the conflict will end soon. In this context, humanitarians do have one thing going for them: time. Time

to analyse and plan what kind of interventions will provide relief and succour to IDPs over the medium and even long term. This is not to say that attention to immediate short-term needs is misplaced but rather that longer-term commitment to capacity building and empowerment is a practical option in the current context.

Even if livelihoods protection is instrumental in securing people's lives and security, promoting IDP livelihoods ultimately requires an approach rooted in the sustainable livelihoods tradition. IDPs in Colombia have humanitarian needs that can and should be addressed by both relief and development approaches. In the end, tackling the relief/development conundrum is the biggest challenge to a serious commitment to IDP livelihoods in Colombia. That is, **how** can relief and development approaches be linked to maximise the rights that IDPs enjoy? To be effective in max-

imising the realisation of people's rights, each of these approaches requires recognition as a programme objective. We need greater clarity about the multiple objectives of our interventions and the most effective approaches for realising them.

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1. For an example of such a long-term research initiative, see 'Listening to the Displaced: Action Research in the Conflict Zones of Sri Lanka', Oxfam Working Paper, 2000. See: www.id21.org/society/S10bkd1g1.html

2. To the best of the author's knowledge, no such studies have been undertaken in Colombia.

3. Young H *et al* 'Food-security Assessments in Emergencies: A Livelihoods Approach', ODI/HPN Network Paper 36, June 2001. www.odihpn.org/documents/networkpaper036.pdf

4. Slim H 'Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Neutrality, Impartiality, and Solidarity', *Development in Practice*, 1997, Vol. 7, pp345-352.

