



Internally Displaced Persons 1998-2013

Khalid Koser

The very first issue of *Forced Migration Review* (successor to the RPN newsletter) in April 1998 was dedicated to internal displacement, just two months after the publication of the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. Since then we have seen the remarkable rise of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the global agenda, as a result of a growing body of evidence and research, the development of national and regional legal frameworks, and the mainstreaming of IDP policy in the UN system.

While there was a growing number of people by the late 1990s who recognised the significance of internal displacement and were actively lobbying for greater international attention, there was as yet very little research on the topic. Since then, a significant body of research has emerged covering all of the major internal displacement situations, including Afghanistan, Algeria, Burma, Burundi, Colombia, Georgia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Turkey and Uganda, and on a wide variety of aspects such as internal displacement in the context of camps, children, climate change, development, durable solutions, education, the elderly, HIV, housing, humanitarian reform, land, legal frameworks, literacy, national policies, natural disasters, peace, profiling, property, reproductive health, return, trafficking, urban settlement and voting rights. FMR has published articles reflecting almost all of this and the growing development of the topic.



In parallel with the emergence of a new field of research and academic enquiry, and a growing evidence base, has been the evolution of a legal, normative and institutional framework for protecting IDPs. The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* – soft law at best – have begun to evolve into hard law, and national IDP laws and policies in well over 30 countries, as well as the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the ‘Kampala Convention’), have been developed. The *Guiding Principles* also apply to, and have increasingly been recognised by, not just states but also non-state actors in conflict, law-makers and jurists, civil society activists and peace mediators.

A third feature of developing a more effective response to internal displacement over the last decade or so has been the mainstreaming of IDP policy into the international humanitarian system, despite there being no UN agency with a specific mandate on IDPs. Specialised projects like the Global IDP Survey, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the Brookings Project on Internal Displacement have grown up, and the interests of IDPs have been promoted

by both the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Coinciding with the last 15 years of FMR’s publication, very significant progress has therefore been made to raise awareness of the crisis of internal displacement, provide an evidence base for policy making, and develop the foundations for a more effective response. Still, as Walter Kälin observed in 2011 in his outlook for IDPs in FMR issue 37, much work remains to be done with regard to the new legal and normative challenges for protecting IDPs that perhaps we had not even envisaged 15 years ago when the *Guiding Principles* were published. These include in particular the risk of large-scale displacement arising from the effects of climate change.

One of the pitfalls of mainstreaming is complacency, and there is the risk of a gradual waning of interest in internal displacement. Especially if international attention is beginning to fade, contributions from local NGOs, scholars and aid workers – providing direct insights into the experiences of IDPs and the everyday successes and failures of IDP

policy – will become ever more relevant. There may also be a case for placing internal displacement in a wider context. It is striking that very few FMR articles on internal displacement over the last 15 years have placed IDPs within the context of other displaced or mobile populations; and only rarely have they compared IDP situations across different countries. One of the strategies for putting IDPs on the international agenda during the last 15 years has been to emphasise their unique situation. Perhaps the best way to maintain attention for the next 15 years will be to view internal displacement as part of a wider crisis of displacement, conflict and state failure.

Khalid Koser k.koser@gcsp.ch is Deputy Director and Academic Dean at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy www.gcsp.ch, Non-resident Senior Fellow to the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement www.brookings.edu/about/projects/idp and one of FMR’s group of International Advisors.