



What's in a name?

Erin Mooney

Over the past 25 years, Forced Migration Review and its precursor the Refugee Participation Network newsletter have not only captured, but arguably have also contributed to, important evolutions in the thinking and practice of approaches for protecting, assisting and finding solutions for forcibly uprooted people.

Some of the more significant of these changes are reflected in the change of name of this publication, from the Refugee Participation Network newsletter (November 1987-1998) to Forced Migration Review (April 1998 - present). At the same time, it is important to recall the objectives and principles guiding this publication from the outset, which were reflected in its original name and which remain true.

From "Refugees" to "Forced Migration"

As its name suggests, the Refugee Participation Network newsletter focused on persons who were outside their country of origin and met the international (or regional) definition of a refugee. Yet, belied by the emphasis on refugees – which was maintained, with few exceptions, for the lifespan of RPN – was another group of forcibly uprooted persons: those who also were fleeing persecution, human rights abuses, conflict or violence but who had not crossed an international border. At the time, these so-called “internal refugees” were very much the hidden face of forced displacement. By 1990, and for every year since, internally displaced persons (IDPs) constituted more than half of forcibly displaced peoples;¹ today, IDPs from conflict and violence outnumber refugees by a ratio of more than 2.5 to 1.

It was only in its eighth year of publication, in 1995, that RPN featured the first articles explicitly focused on IDPs, specifically regarding Guatemala and Peru. It is noteworthy that these articles on internal displacement appeared in the RPN edition devoted to ‘Burning issues’. By that time, the challenge of how the international community could effectively address the protection of millions of IDPs had indeed begun to become a burning international issue. However, a closer look at the content of RPN in earlier years reveals a growing recognition of the need for an approach, both in research and response, extending beyond refugees. An article by Alex de Waal on the 1984-85 famine in Darfur, Sudan, appearing in the very first issue of RPN, pointed to the phenomenon of people who were uprooted as a result of a slow-onset natural disaster but who remained in their country. Even so, recognition in the pages of RPN of the phenomenon of internal displacement still took some time. For example, an RPN article on ‘The Kurdish refugee crisis’, in March 1989, made no mention of the fact that the same human rights situation that had produced an exodus of refugees had also displaced people inside Iraq.

Almost ten years later, the transition in 1998 from the Refugee Participation Network newsletter to Forced Migration Review was significant because it reflected the recognition that the phenomenon of displacement was much wider than refugees: it also included displaced people who had not crossed an international border and other groups. This has been reflected in several issues of

FMR devoted to internal displacement and in FMR issues focused on trafficking and statelessness, phenomena which often are significant causes or consequences of displacement. Even further from the ‘refugee’ definition, but uprooting millions more people, especially inside of their country, development-induced displacement was the focus of an issue of FMR in 2002. More recently, mixed migration -- complex population movements including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants travelling in an irregular manner along similar routes, using similar means of travel, but for different reasons -- has also been addressed on the pages of FMR.

Participation: from principle to practice

As explained in the first issue of RPN, it was considered essential to include the word ‘participation’ in the name to make clear this publication’s orientation. At the time, there was growing awareness of the need, both in research and in practice, for “greater respect for refugees as people and their more active involvement”. Commitment to the principle of participation has found practical expression in RPN/FMR in a number of ways.

First, and from the earliest days, it has been reflected in the content. The second issue of RPN, in 1988, featured an article entitled ‘Refugee enterprise: it can be done’. Twenty-five years later, there is increasing recognition of the need to do much more – and much earlier – to support refugees’ and IDPs’ self-reliance or, in the current terminology, their ‘resilience’. In exploring the question ‘Who’s in charge?’ (RPN 13, 1992), the articles on management and leadership focused on these themes and practices not by relief workers but among refugees themselves. Over the years, a number of additional articles have analysed the extent to which participatory methodology has been utilised and integrated into programming (see, in particular, ‘Promise and practice: participatory evaluation of humanitarian assistance’, FMR 8, 2000). Another recurrent theme of articles has been the importance of listening to the voices of refugees and IDPs (in particular, ‘Listening to the displaced: analysis, accountability and advocacy in action’, FMR 8, 2000).

Second, listening to the voices of the displaced is reflected in FMR’s approach to authorship. RPN, in its first issue in 1987, expressly encouraged refugees as well as researchers and practitioners to write for RPN “as a means of communicating and sharing your experiences and views”. From the outset, RPN/FMR has regularly featured contributions from refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs. These have taken various forms: poetry; illustrations and other artwork, including serving as the cover page (for the Indian Ocean tsunami special issue in 2005); and many articles by refugees and IDPs, addressing a wide range of issues. Among the collection of pieces for this 25th anniversary collection is an example of this.



Third, accessibility is a critically important dimension of participation. Currently, FMR is disseminated in more than 160 countries. That FMR is available both online and in print free of charge -- unusually for a journal coming out of a university -- greatly facilitates its accessibility by refugees and IDPs. Indeed, the majority of FMR's readers live in the 'global south'. On a personal note, I once received an email from a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo living in Namibia who wrote to me to express appreciation for an article I had written for FMR ('GP 10' issue, December 2008) on the linkages between the doctrine of 'Responsibility to Protect' and situations of displacement. The greatest indicator of FMR's relevance surely is its resonance with forced migrants themselves.

FMR is regularly published in four languages: Arabic, French, English and Spanish. On an ad hoc basis, specific issues have been published in additional languages, e.g. Bahasa Indonesia, Sinhala, Tamil, Burmese, Hebrew, Portuguese and Russian. Readers have taken the initiative to translate articles into languages including Armenian and Korean.

Moreover, in a groundbreaking innovation, beginning with FMR issue 35 in 2010 on 'Disability and displacement', articles have also been available online in audio versions. FMR thereby not only raised awareness, through the published collection of articles, of the particular challenges faced by refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs with disabilities; it led by example to do its part to facilitate the accessibility of its content to persons with disabilities.

Fourth, also relevant to the theme of participation, is the way in which individual refugees and IDPs are visually portrayed in its pages. Beginning in 2010, FMR decided to refrain, to the extent possible, from publishing recognisable faces of persons of concern. In an explanatory note entitled 'Facing facts' the editors set out the rationale for the decision. On the one hand, it was undeniable that "real people's faces are important to bring to life the words – facts, thoughts, ideas and feelings" and to "show the personal reality of forced migration, trafficking and statelessness". On the other hand, there was recognition that there may be:

"...cases where individuals would not wish their image to be used in such a way that they might be identifiable for ever in a situation that is, in all likelihood, a temporary one that catches them at a low point in their lives. We cannot be sure either that showing their image will not – at some time and in some way that could not be foreseen – damage them or undermine their dignity."

Erring on the side of caution, FMR has since then taken steps, wherever possible, to protect the identities of the refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, IDPs, stateless persons and migrants shown in FMR by ensuring that the photos used appear in such a way (e.g. photographed from behind, faces cast in shadow, obscuring of facial images, etc.) that they generally cannot be identified. At a time when the visual remains as important as ever and in an age of telecommunications where the boundaries of protections of personal identity are constantly being

tested by advances in technology, this decision was a bold move. The fact that the editors, in taking this decision, also considered the downside for the persons concerned, who may feel this decision "robs them of their full identity; they may feel that we are playing into the hands of those who would typecast refugees as second-class citizens or as 'undesirables'", demonstrated sensitivity to the range of possible views held by the persons concerned. Further, acknowledging that this dilemma undoubtedly was being faced also by other publications and agencies, feedback was solicited on others' approaches to managing this dilemma, thereby encouraging an exchange of ideas and good practices on this important matter.

From 'Network' to 'Review'

The objective set out in the first issue of RPN was "to establish a link through which practitioners, researchers and policy makers can communicate and benefit from each other's practical experience and research results." At the time, in 1987, such a forum for the exchange of ideas was found to be missing, in particular because "[t]hose working for host governments, voluntary agencies and international humanitarian agencies acquire invaluable experience but are often too busy to record it; those doing research publish in places and in a style which often make their findings inaccessible or irrelevant to practitioners". RPN sought to bridge this gap. In fact, the idea of RPN had first arisen at a workshop convened by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and UNHCR in December 1985, which had identified "an urgent need to devise a method of rapid dissemination of information in the form of short, easy-to-read articles of common interest to those involved in refugee assistance".²

With the name change in 1998, this 'network' transformed into a forum for 'review', reflecting the word's definition as "a formal assessment or examination of something with the possibility or intention of instituting change if necessary." The range of issues which RPN/FMR has covered over 25 years of publication is far too extensive to summarise. The direct impact of these articles in affecting change on these various issues also is difficult to trace in terms of direct attribution. What is certain is that FMR poses questions – Who's in charge? (1992), Who protects refugees? (1996), Humanitarian reform: fulfilling its promise? (2007), September 11: has anything changed? (2002), When does internal displacement end? (2003), Home for good? Challenges of return and reintegration (2004) – that practitioners and researchers want to discuss, and provides a forum for a wide range of views to be voiced, exchanged, and often debated, towards advancing the search for answers.

In addition to broadening the scope of persons of concern, RPN/FMR has also often been at the forefront of acknowledging a broader set of causes of forced migration. A number of recent issues of debate about how best to respond to protecting and assisting refugees and IDPs in fact were raised within the pages of RPN/FMR years, if not decades, ahead of contemporary discourse. Natural disasters as a cause of displacement featured in the very first issue of RPN in 1987, as mentioned above; in 2005 an issue of FMR was devoted to analysis of the response to the Indian Ocean tsunami. Debate around



the terminology and possible category of ‘environmental refugees’ was aired in RPN in 1995. Climate change and displacement was first explored in RPN in 1995 and in 2008 an entire issue of FMR was devoted to this theme. Chemical weapons attacks as a cause of displacement were discussed in RPN in 1989. Development-induced displacement was the theme of an issue of FMR in 2002.

Moreover, RPN/FMR has consistently emphasised that any review of responses to forced migration must include attention to the specific situation, vulnerabilities and capacities of different groups of affected people: women, children and youth, older persons, and persons with disabilities. Specific attention has been given to issues of gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, sexual violence, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health.

The recurrence in RPN/FMR of certain thematic issues is noteworthy; education has been the focus of four RPN/FMR issues over the years as well as addressed in many articles in other issues of the magazine. The search for durable solutions for refugees and IDPs has been the most frequent thematic focus and a subject addressed in numerous other articles in RPN/FMR. This reflects and underscores the persistence of the challenges in how best to support refugees and IDPs to rebuild their lives.

Contemporary issues of concern often appeared years earlier in RPN/FMR. In recent years, there has been growing awareness of the need to broaden the focus of response in recognition of the fact that many – often most – refugees and IDPs live outside camps; ‘Avoiding camps’ was the title story of RPN 10 in May 1991; in 1998 FMR’s ‘People in camps’ issue critically examined the emphasis on and experience in camps, and in 2009 FMR 34 focused on urban displacement. ‘Partnership’, which has been given renewed emphasis in recent years, for example in the Structured Dialogue on Partnership recently initiated by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees provided the theme for RPN 17 in August 1994 and the role of NGOs and host states in RPN 19 in May 1995. That not only states but also non-state actors have a responsibility to protect and assist refugees and IDPs was a focus of FMR in 2008. ‘The role of the military in humanitarian work’ (RPN 23, January 1997) remains a topical concern, in particular in discussions about integrated missions. The question of ‘Who’s in charge?’ posed on the cover of RPN 13 in June 1992 resonates with ongoing efforts to ensure effective response through the three pillars of the 2011 Transformative Agenda of Humanitarian Response: improved coordination, empowered leadership, and enhanced accountability, both institutionally and towards affected people. ‘Accountability’ – a key emphasis in contemporary discourse and ongoing reforms of the international humanitarian response system – was the focus of FMR 8 in 2000. As we approach the tenth anniversary in 2015 of the international reforms of the humanitarian system, it will be timely to return to, and reflect anew

upon, the question posed by FMR 29 in December 2007: ‘Humanitarian Reform: Fulfilling its Promise?’

For now, reflecting on the past twenty-five years of RPN/FMR, it appears to this reader that FMR has remained faithful to its founding principles, and continues to live up to its name.

Erin Mooney erin.d.mooney@gmail.com has been a member of the Editorial and International Advisory Board of FMR since 2000.

1. “IDP and refugee numbers from 1989-2011”, IDMC, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/IDP-and-refugee-numbers>

2. Refugee Participation Network, Newsletter No. 1, November 1987, p. 1.