

Foreword

John Holmes

Internal displacement remains one of the most significant challenges facing the humanitarian community.

Twenty-six million people are displaced within their countries due to armed conflict; many more are displaced as a result of natural and human-made disasters and these numbers seem certain to increase as a result of the effects of climate change.¹

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are less clearly identified and protected than refugees but are often particularly vulnerable. They may lose their property and access to livelihoods; they run a high risk of being separated from family members; they may be discriminated against merely for being displaced; they often lack identity cards, which makes it more difficult for them to access basic services and prevents them from exercising their political rights. They are also often more vulnerable than other groups to abuse by others – as reflected in the high levels of sexual and gender-based violence in IDP settings. The most difficult vulnerability to measure, though, is their loss of dignity and, as the period of displacement increases, their sense of hope.

Following the end of a disaster event or a conflict, ending displacement is often our major and most difficult challenge. Typically, in such periods, national and international attention to the plight of IDPs drops and durable solutions can be elusive. IDPs often receive too little support for too short a period of time to allow them to reestablish their lives in safety and dignity, while recovery activities in the areas where they want to live are all too often slow to be completed.

It is vital that our work to ensure the protection of IDPs is based on their human rights. Human rights not only underpin humanitarian action in protection of IDPs but also distinguish right holders and duty bearers. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement² clearly spell out the rights of IDPs and the corresponding obligations of national authorities. Their publication

ten years ago by the former Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons, Dr Francis Deng, and the former Emergency Relief Coordinator, the late Sérgio Vieira de Mello, was a watershed event in protecting IDPs.

As the articles in this Special Issue of FMR demonstrate, we have come a long way in the past decade. The Guiding Principles have become the accepted international standard for IDPs; an increasing number of states have incorporated them into national legislation; and they have become the benchmark for humanitarian and human rights actors – both nationally and internationally – in dealing with internal displacement. Most importantly, they have made IDPs themselves more aware of their rights.

But there is still a long way to go. Most states affected by internal displacement still do not have domestic laws or policies on IDPs; many IDPs are still unaware of their rights; and there are numerous obstacles to their realisation. I therefore welcome the opportunity afforded by this Special Issue to share experiences, learn lessons, identify gaps and plan for the future. And I call on all governments to assume their responsibilities under the Guiding Principles and on

the international community to increase its support to governments and to IDPs themselves.

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1. See FMR's recent issue on climate change and displacement at <http://www.fmreview.org/climatechange.htm>

2. <http://www.idpguidingprinciples.org/>

Eldoret IDP camp, Kenya. January 2008.

