

# Development-induced and conflict-induced IDPs: bridging the research divide

by Michael M Cernea

**The single most important idea promoted by the project which Roberta Cohen has co-directed is the concept of sovereignty as responsibility. This provides a theoretical and legal platform for supporting all those displaced within their own countries – including those displaced by development projects.**

Surely, internal displacement as a concept owes its ascent to the Guiding Principles. But it also gained worldwide circulation because these principles landed on policy makers' tables accompanied by the audible thud and impressive calibre of two heavyweight volumes by Roberta Cohen and Francis Deng: *Masses in Flight* and *The Forsaken People*. The wording of the books' common title was haunting: *The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement*. The volumes made many think, pay attention, absorb. At long last, the tragedy of massive internal displacements was receiving its overdue, documented, penetrating recognition and indictment.

When she arrived at Brookings in 1994 Roberta brought to her role several decades of militancy and experience in human rights battles. Ideas she generated started to move around the world, engaging institutions, governments, minds and hearts. Roberta joined

energies with Francis Deng and the world's current awareness of the global tragedy of the internally displaced owes much to them.

## **Sovereignty as responsibility**

One crucial concept developed to defend IDPs' rights is the concept of sovereignty as responsibility. In my own work on behalf of those displaced by development projects, and during the years I represented the World Bank, I have often had to contend with the spurious invocation of sovereignty. It was, and still is, misused and misconstrued as a shield for denying the rights of development-displacees violently deprived – by their own state! – of basic entitlements and property. The sovereignty concept continues to be abused by officials of states which have defaulted on their obligations to their citizens. In *Masses in Flight*, Cohen and Deng gave a crystal-clear formulation of this concept:

“the concept of sovereignty cannot be dissociated from responsibility: a state should not be able to claim the prerogatives of sovereignty unless it carries out its internationally recognised responsibilities to its citizens . . . Failure to do so would legitimise the involvement of the international communities in such protection and assistance.”

The historical record shows, sadly, that even today the ‘sovereignty as responsibility’ argument remains an indispensable tool, a “most powerful idea that has emerged in the international arena in the last decade”.<sup>1</sup>

## **Unclear taxonomy of forced displacements**

We still struggle against a major dichotomy between research focused on development-displacees and research focused on conflict-displacees/refugees (or a three-way divide, if we consider also the studies on disaster-caused displacements). Research specialisation is fully warranted but excessive research separation or weak inter-communication cannot be justified. By bridging the research divide, these distinct bodies of literature about displacement stand to gain:

theoretically, they could broaden and refine their conceptualisations by exploring similarities and differences between their sets of variables. Politically, they could influence the public arena stronger by mutually reinforcing their policy advocacy and operational recommendations.

The substantive homage we are collectively offering to Roberta Cohen must surely emphasise that, at the steering wheel of Brookings' IDP programme she has steadily been among the few scholars who acted practically to help bridge the research divide between conflict-induced and development-induced displacement. Through writings and advocacy, she has linked the opposition to the madness of ethnic cleansing and conflict displacement with staunch opposition to impoverishment through state-(mis)guided development-displacements.

Roberta Cohen's signal step that embodied best this purposive bridging orientation was the organisation of an international conference on Development-Induced Displacement and Resettlement (DIDR), convened by Brookings in 2002. Bringing together scholars from both research communities, representatives of international financial and development agencies and NGOs, it outlined ways in which experiences and policies emerging from the different types of internal displacement are mutually relevant. The background paper for the conference and the participants' discussions<sup>2</sup> yielded a key conceptual gain, breaking new ground: the common conclusion that the concept of internal displacement is not limited to one sub-type of displacement only – war or conflict-displacees – but embraces all populations forcibly displaced, either by wars, civil wars, persecution, or by development projects, who are uprooted from their lands yet do not cross a national frontier. Throughout the conference, Deng, Cohen and Kälin emphasised that the Guiding Principles were written for all categories of IDPs, and thus were germane also to IDPs resulting from development projects – regardless of whether these projects are justified, beneficial and lawful development projects, or are unwarranted or legally flawed. As Walter Kälin aptly stated: “the

causes of displacement could be legal or illegal, but the legality did not alter the factual state of being internally displaced.”

### Burgeoning numbers of development displacees

These, and other, conceptual clarifications remain highly relevant today as the number of people displaced worldwide by development is still on the increase. By now, development-displacees represent the single-largest sub-category within the global totality of IDPs. They also are by far more numerous than the world's current refugee population. The figures for China, for instance, were recently revised upwards by China's National Research Center on Resettlement and indicate that the number of people displaced and resettled by development programmes during 1950-2005 are now estimated at 70 million. In India, recent research indicates that over 60 million people were displaced by the country's development programmes during 1950-2005, and that the overwhelming majority were left impoverished. Worse, a large number of people have been displaced but not also resettled, and were simply left to fend for themselves without assistance from the state that displaced them.

On the global scale, the World Bank estimated that up to 200 million people were displaced by development projects during the last two decades of the 20th century. The pace is now accelerating as 15 million are now being displaced each year. The crisis of development-caused displacement is an integral and distinct part of the larger, massive and encompassing global crisis of internal displacement.

While the types of forced displacements differ profoundly in their causes, their impoverishing consequences on people's lives are largely similar. The international efforts for protecting the human rights and welfare of displaced people are expanding in intensity and gaining in political clout. However, it must be recognised that both the current policies on involuntary resettlement of major development agencies – such as the World Bank Group,

the Inter-American Development Bank and others – and the Equator Principles adopted by private sector banks<sup>3</sup> insufficiently highlight the human rights dimensions embedded in development-caused displacements. These documents eschew explicit human rights terminologies, mistakenly assuming that such language would somehow politicise displacement/resettlement issues and that proposed policies would be countered by aid-recipient governments arguing they infringe their sovereignty. But such avoidance has simply reduced the effectiveness and influence of these policies rather than increase them.

Certain development processes inherently pose risks to the human rights of those adversely affected, and tensions arise. Explicit risk analysis becomes therefore indispensable in order to identify, counteract and mitigate risks materially. Walter Kälin has rightly stressed that “such tensions must be acknowledged” and that the basic principle of ‘do no harm’ is as relevant for humanitarian as it is for development work. He has explicitly stated that development-induced displacements are an integral part of his mandate:

“Resettlement as a consequence of development projects, particularly if it is not voluntary, is one area where such tensions often arise and it is the area I am concerned with in my capacity as Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons . . . The notion of displacement as used within the framework of my mandate includes instances of involuntary resettlement in the context of development projects such as dams, roads, airports, industrial or tourist complexes and other infrastructure projects”.<sup>4</sup>

Walter Kälin's statement builds on the successful body of work carried out over the previous 12 years by Deng, Cohen, Kälin and the dedicated teams around them. It also expresses the international commitment to link and integrate closer the efforts on behalf of populations internally displaced by conflicts and by development under the joint flag of human rights and livelihood protection. Strengthening the world's commitment to human rights and

secure livelihoods is the best homage that can be offered to Roberta and the other architects of this cause.

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*A fuller version of this article is online at: [www.fmreview.org/pdf/cernea.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/pdf/cernea.pdf)*

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