

Introduction

by Francis Deng and Walter Kälin

After twelve years as Co-Director of the Project on Internal Displacement at the Brookings Institution, Roberta Cohen retires at the end of 2006.

Roberta recounts that she arrived at the Brookings Institution in 1994 to an empty desk, wondering how to define an IDP. Today internal displacement is a fully-fledged field of study and operations. Roberta's contribution to this transformation cannot be underestimated.

Roberta has worked tirelessly to support our respective mandates as Representatives of the UN Secretary-General on Internal Displacement (Deng) and the Human Rights of IDPs (Kälin). She played a key role in steering the preparation of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.¹ She has been at the forefront of applying the Principles through fundraising for their translation and dissemination, organising and speaking at countless seminars, conferences and workshops and lobbying within the UN system and with governments. She has placed IDPs on the agendas of national human rights institutions especially in Asia, hosted numerous meetings with NGOs and worked directly with IDPs themselves.

Roberta can be credited with defining a field of academic and intellectual study. She and her Brookings colleagues have established the case for IDPs as a category of concern, elaborated the concept of 'sovereignty as responsibility' and conducted research on topics ranging from peace processes to mortality rates. She has edited and authored or co-authored seminal academic texts on internal displacement, most significantly *Masses in Flight*² in 1998.

As befits a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, Roberta has written numerous op-eds

and policy documents on issues around displacement, humanitarian interventions and aid. In recent years she has been at the forefront of Brookings work on Darfur and North Korea. Referring to



Roberta Cohen

Roberta's retirement and new status as non-resident Senior Fellow, the Brookings president, Strobe Talbott, insists that the 'retired' remains in quotation marks and the 'non' in non-resident be diminished. "Roberta's contribution to Brookings and the world is immense and must continue."

That so many of the senior policy makers and leading academic thinkers in the field of internal displacement have contributed to this special issue of FMR is in itself testament to the far-reaching impact of Roberta's work. But it is also indicative of the scale of internal displacement. Today, there are at

least 24 million people internally displaced by conflict alone and many millions more have been displaced by development projects and natural disasters. It also reflects the new willingness of the international community to consider intervening to protect the rights of IDPs, confirming the principle of the 'responsibility to protect' agreed by 192 governments at the World Summit in 2005.³ Another reason is that an increasing number of countries are now developing their own national laws and policies on IDPs and significant institutional changes are underway within the UN system.

This special issue therefore provides the opportunity not just to commemorate Roberta's work but also to take stock. The articles explore lessons learned from trying to apply the Guiding Principles, the implications of institutional changes for the protection of IDPs and opportunities and challenges for putting the protection of IDPs into practice. The authors remind us how much progress has been made and the importance of Roberta's contribution. However, they also warn us how much remains to be done. In different ways the two of us continue to

advocate for the rights of IDPs. We count on Roberta's continued support and look forward to working with her successor, Elizabeth Ferris.

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1. www.brook.edu/tp/projects/idp/articles/guiding.htm

2. www.brook.edu/press/books/massflgt.htm

3. www.un.org/summit2005/