

Improving IDP data: prerequisite for more effective protection

by Elisabeth Rasmusson

Information on the number, locations and demographic characteristics of IDPs is scarce and chronically unreliable. Lack of information is a key impediment to a more effective response to internal displacement crises.

A few governments have registered IDPs in a comprehensive manner, most recently the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina with support from UNHCR. In Turkey the government is expected to release the results of a comprehensive IDP survey soon. However, for most countries affected by internal displacement only rough estimates are available. These often only cover parts of a country, or specific groups of IDPs. The official UN figure for Uganda until recently only included IDPs living in camps receiving food from the World

Food Programme. In Burma reliable estimates are only available for the more accessible east of the country. In several cases – particularly Colombia – there are conflicting estimates from government and civil society sources. In countries like Rwanda and Guatemala, estimates have not been updated for years after the authorities – prematurely – declared internal displacement as resolved.

The nature of internal displacement makes it difficult for governments or international organisations to register or otherwise determine the

number and circumstances of affected people. In the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster or outbreak of conflict, population movements may be difficult to trace because areas where IDPs have found refuge are difficult to access. IDPs who have fled to urban centres may have specific protection needs but are hard to distinguish from resident populations or economic migrants. It is often not easy to determine who is an IDP and who is not, or whether people have ceased to be IDPs. The question of when displacement ends can be particularly difficult to answer in protracted situations where internal displacement has continued for years or even decades. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and a set of benchmarks of durable solutions currently being worked

out by the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement provide useful guidance – but grey areas remain.

National governments have a responsibility to collect IDP data but may be reluctant for political reasons to acknowledge the actual scale of internal displacement. Governments at times use inaccurate figures or even block attempts by international or national organisations to collect and publish more accurate information. Governments may try to hide an IDP crisis which they fear could expose and draw unwanted international attention to human rights violations, unresolved conflicts or erosion of state authority. However, other governments may wish to inflate the number of IDPs to attract more humanitarian aid or to mobilise international opinion against an internal or external adversary accused of being responsible for the displacements.

International organisations rarely see it as a priority to step in where governments are unwilling or unable to get an accurate picture of the scale and scope of an internal displacement situation. As there is no operational agency with a comprehensive mandate for IDPs, enumeration is often patchy. Determining country IDP figures falls within the overall responsibility of the UN's Resident or Humanitarian Coordinators. Under pressure from donors, some have tried but they often lack resources, knowledge of methodologies or agency support to enable them to do so.

Why we need better IDP data

The availability of reliable information on IDP populations is crucial for improving the protection of IDPs. IDPs have particular vulnerabilities resulting from their displacement that distinguish them from other people affected by conflict or natural disasters, and therefore may require specific responses by governments, civil society or the international community. Only if IDPs are identified and quantified can the necessary responses be developed and implemented in a targeted and effective way.

At the very minimum the total number of IDPs and their geographical distribution should be determined in each country affected by internal displacement to the level of accuracy possible under prevailing circumstances. Wherever possible, more detailed demographic data should be gathered, including breakdowns by gender and age, and basic information on humanitarian and protection needs. Reliable country statistics on IDPs are needed in order to be able to analyse trends and better understand the causes and effects of displacement. This in turn is a precondition for effective advocacy aimed at improving responses to the global internal displacement crises, and to support efforts to prevent new displacements. Finally, without better data we will not be able to monitor the impact of the current humanitarian reform process.¹

There are basic principles which should govern all IDP data collection exercises:

- **Inclusiveness:** Reliable information should be available on all IDPs, whether they are in camps, staying with host families or in other settlements or urban areas. Statistics should include those who have been forced to flee their homes by armed conflict, generalised violence and human rights violations, as well as those displaced by natural disasters and development projects. Attention should be paid not only to humanitarian emergencies but also to hidden or protracted displacement situations.
- **Protection:** It is important to remember that the availability of data can have serious implications for the safety of displaced individuals or groups. This can be the case where – as in Colombia – IDPs may choose anonymity to escape persecution by state authorities or armed groups who see IDPs as rebel sympathisers. In other situations it may not be in the best interest of IDPs to be identified as a special group as this could lead to resentment among the resident population. Singling out displaced populations for the purpose of aid delivery can increase their vulnerability to assaults and looting. It is

therefore crucial to conduct a thorough risk analysis at each stage of a data collection process.

- **Collaboration:** Whether organised by governments or the international community, data collection effort should involve all relevant stakeholders, including NGOs. Wherever possible, IDPs themselves should be engaged in the design and implementation of data collection.
- **Sustainability:** Efforts should be made to ensure that the data collected is regularly updated, for example through the establishment of a network of local organisations feeding new information on population movements or protection gaps back into a central database.

Towards better IDP data

In order to improve the availability and quality of basic IDP data, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, with OCHA's Internal Displacement Division, has developed inter-agency guidelines on the profiling of IDP populations. The draft guidelines – currently being field-tested – seek to assist national authorities and national and international organisations to quantify IDP populations and collect other information relevant for improved protection and assistance. They are designed to enable practitioners to decide which profiling methodology is best suited for a given IDP situation. They will thus be an important tool for promoting the establishment of better IDP population data collection. Ultimately, however, the improvement of the availability and quality of IDP data will depend on the political will of governments and senior UN representatives and the extent to which they recognise and prioritise the need to improve responses to internal displacement situations.

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1. See article by Dennis McNamara on page 9-11.