

# The Project: a replicable model of innovative response?

by Thomas G Weiss

**It is thanks in great part to the Project on Internal Displacement and the determination of Roberta Cohen that IDPs are now firmly on the international humanitarian agenda.**

In 1992 Francis Deng was asked to pursue his mandate as representative of the Secretary-General (RSG) on a part-time basis – a dubious yet common practice in the cash-starved world of human rights. Starting from scratch, and without an official budget, the Project's productivity and output have been impressive. The Project provides a window into the world of normative and policy change at the nexus of ideas, institutions and individuals. It offers an unusual case study of people who have made a difference in spite of the UN's well-known constraints.

Roberta Cohen came to the Project with an already distinguished record. Under her direction, the Project has punched above its weight in filling gaps, an achievement recognised in 2005 when Francis Deng and she received the prestigious Grawemeyer Award.<sup>1</sup> Roberta has also received the Washington Academy of Sciences Award for Work of Merit and Distinction in the Social and Behavioral Sciences and, in 2006, an honorary doctorate from the University of Bern.

The RSG has always had a foot in two camps – a hybrid – taking advantage of being both within the intergovernmental system of the UN as well as outside it, having both official and private platforms. The mandate and the project are so intertwined that it is difficult to say definitively whether the RSG and the Project are outside-insiders or inside-outsiders. Indeed, they collectively wear whichever hat is most convenient in advancing a particular issue.

The Project's base at a public policy think-tank working in tandem with universities has provided needed distance from governments and

diplomatic pressures. Rather than maintaining the status quo, the Project has earned a reputation for extending the outer limits of what passes for conventional wisdom in mainstream diplomatic circles.

The annual budget for direct costs is now around \$2 million but in earlier years was a mere \$500-800,000 – trivial sums, by any standard, for what was accomplished. This is not the only topic on the international agenda for which resources do not match the long list of responsibilities set out in UN resolutions. But internal displacement lies at the far end of a spectrum: an extremely ambitious mandate virtually without any guaranteed regular funds.

However, thanks to Cohen and Deng, the Project found backers. Finance for core costs and in-kind contributions has come from a range of private and public donors. Ten governments have provided support – Austria, Canada, Denmark, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the USA – and five foundations – Ford, MacArthur, McKnight, Mellon and Schurgot. Funds have also come from UN – the Office of the Secretary-General, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNHCR and OCHA and from partner universities and research institutions.

If independent ideas matter, so do people. The Project has provided an unusual training ground for a network of people working on IDPs. The work on the mandate by the Project provided the opportunity to create a cadre of young experts well versed about the phenomenon of internal displacement who have moved on to other positions. The Project has also engaged numerous short- and longer-term consultants from most regions of the world to

work on research, outreach and capacity building. There are very few knowledgeable specialists whose work involves internal displacement who have not worked with or been consulted by project staff and who are not part of their global network.

While 'model' may be too grandiose a description, the Project's operating procedures can help us to think about better ways to change international public policy and performance. Its blend of inside-outsider and outside-insider offers advantages that could be replicated for other controversial issues where independent research is required, institutional barriers are high and political hostility is widespread. For instance, the successful negotiation of the landmine ban contains some of the same elements of independently getting a controversial issue on the agenda and then developing a political constituency around an emerging norm.

It is worth speculating, for instance, whether the work on child soldiers would have advanced far more quickly if Olara Otunnu, until mid-2005 the UN's special representative for children and armed conflict, had been based at a research institute outside of the UN secretariat rather than within it. Ian Levine, who worked on these issues at UNICEF before moving to Human Rights Watch, remarked that one would have expected more movement on the child soldiers front than on IDPs, rather than the opposite, for, as he noted, what can be is easier to sell than banning child soldiers?

A possible replication of the Project experience is under way with the International Center for Transitional Justice.<sup>2</sup> The ICTJ's president, Juan E Méndez, is a part-time UN special advisor on the prevention of genocide. The International Organization for Migration provides another example because of its insistence on maintaining autonomy by being

an intergovernmental institution outside of the UN but which participates in many of its activities.

Financial support from outside the UN has made it possible to act autonomously. Partnerships were forged, not just with other units of the UN system but also with regional organisations as well as with international and indigenous NGOs and associations of IDPs. The RSG and the Project have consistently been more forthright and openly critical than would be the case for 'normal' international civil servants. While this independence is generally accepted and admired at UN headquarters, it is usually misunderstood by international civil servants whose more bureaucratic instincts prevent their appreciating the benefits. As one former foundation official noted in looking back at the decision to make a grant: "The people were

solid. Their research materials were high quality. The Project was really the only game in town."

Starting from a point in the early 1990s when there was a question as to whether IDPs were even a special category, it is no small feat to have brought intergovernmental organisations (both UN and regional) and NGOs to take IDP programming seriously and donors to urge them to do so. There are more general lessons here for international research and action.

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*Conceptualization and its Consequences by Thomas G Weiss and David A Korn, Routledge, 2006.*

1. [www.grawemeyer.org/winners/index.html](http://www.grawemeyer.org/winners/index.html)
2. [www.ictj.org/en/index.html](http://www.ictj.org/en/index.html)

