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The importance of monitoring internal displacement

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges the link between internal displacement and development, and States should therefore be including internal displacement when monitoring progress towards their development goals. The reality is disappointing.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises that forced displacement is one of the main threats to development. It states that internally displaced persons (IDPs) must be empowered and their needs taken into account by governments, and it commits all governments to ensuring safe, orderly and regular migration, respecting human rights and providing humane treatment to displaced persons.¹ Several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included in the 2030 Agenda have targets and indicators that relate to internal displacement. Among these is a target to encourage the production of data disaggregated by migratory status, including internal displacement, and an indicator which refers to disaster-induced displacement.²

Nearly every SDG is relevant to internal displacement, and vice versa. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda's overarching principle of 'leaving no one behind' is clearly relevant to everyone affected by internal displacement. Depending on national context and government priorities, the issue can be included in goals on poverty reduction, health and well-being, human settlements, climate change and many more. Internal displacement affects, directly or indirectly, every socio-economic indicator, from security to education, and from work to the environment, and the level of advancement in each of these indicators can multiply or reduce the risk and the impacts of displacement.

Monitoring: overlooked and varying

Despite all this, internal displacement remains largely overlooked in national strategies. The 2030 Agenda includes provision for progress monitoring through Voluntary National Reviews, reports published by governments on their efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030.³ Between 2016 and 2018, 100 countries submitted Voluntary National

Reviews. However, few of the countries most affected by internal displacement submitted a review, and only one in four mentioned internal displacement; just one in 10 includes even limited consideration of its consequences for development and how this could be addressed.

Those reviews that do mention internal displacement do so in relation to a variety of goals. Afghanistan's review highlights internal displacement as an impediment to economic growth and poverty reduction, linking it to SDG 1 (poverty reduction). Azerbaijan's review calls for data disaggregation by displacement status and shows that it monitors internal displacement under SDG 1 but also under SDG 5 (gender equality), and indicates that, in its efforts to reduce poverty, the government intends to focus on the most vulnerable, which include IDPs. El Salvador's review mentions disaster-induced displacement and its cost to the economy. Nigeria's recognises conflict-induced displacement as a major obstacle to the achievement of the SDGs and discusses it under SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). Cyprus, meanwhile, anchors internal displacement under SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), reflecting the fact that its urban areas have hosted many IDPs since the 1970s. Egypt mentions it under SDG 13 (climate action) and refers to the anticipated displacement of millions by sea-level rise, flooding and erosion. And Uganda has adopted a displacement-specific indicator under SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation).

Practical options for progress monitoring

This variety shows that possibilities exist for all countries affected by internal displacement to incorporate specific efforts in their national

development strategies and SDG monitoring frameworks. Where they have not, it may be due to the assumption that internal displacement is a humanitarian rather than development issue, or it may be due to an unwillingness to recognise the phenomenon or dedicate resources to solving it.

Another reason may be the complexity of the global SDG monitoring framework. The very large number of global SDG indicators (232) places a considerable burden on countries' statistical institutions. Most countries, including high-income ones, have reported their current inability to provide data on each of these indicators. This burden on national statistical offices may well push them to dedicate all their resources to SDG monitoring, thereby reducing their ability to collect data on anything else over the next 12 years. If internal displacement is not included in these processes, it may well become statistically invisible until 2030. However, with increased awareness of the need to collect such data and with some additional resources, it should be possible to ensure that the issue remains visible.

Most data on development comes from internationally standardised household surveys which make use of administrative registers to identify heads of household to be interviewed. This automatically excludes many IDPs, because they are not registered with the authorities of their host community, or they live with relatives or friends and are therefore not the head of household, or because they are often on the move. Some countries have attempted to address this issue by conducting specific surveys with 'invisible' groups such as pastoralists or slum dwellers, and a similar approach could serve to better represent IDPs. Another option would be to include an additional question in existing household surveys (such as UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys) to identify the interviewee's displacement status. This would mean other information – including about income, education level and health status – could be analysed separately for people who have and have not been displaced, in order to see whether IDPs fare worse.

Collecting such information through a government-led survey may be difficult in countries where IDPs consider, with good reason or not, that the authorities will discriminate against them. This should be recognised as a potential cause of under-reporting and under-estimates. Another issue is in the common assumption made that the displacement status of a head of household reflects the status of the whole household. The Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics recommends data be collected to avoid overestimates as the spouse and children of an IDP may not have been displaced themselves; it recommends instead using two categories – 'IDPs' and 'dependents of IDPs' – or to ask each member of the household separately.⁴

Monitoring internal displacement is essential for several reasons. One is to draw attention to the phenomenon by highlighting its scale and severity. Another is to inform development and humanitarian actors so that they can tailor their efforts and programmes more efficiently. Lastly, monitoring internal displacement should help ensure national governments' accountability by presenting them, their population and the international community with the results of their actions – or lack thereof. Failing to include internal displacement in SDG progress monitoring could be a major oversight and, as the 2030 Agenda warned, a significant impediment to development.

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1. See article by Zeender in this issue.
2. United Nations (2018) 'Global indicator framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' bit.ly/SDGs-GlobalIndicatorFramework
3. The Voluntary National Reviews Database compiles information from participating countries. The reviews referenced in this article are all from 2017, with the exception of Egypt and Uganda which are from 2016. Reviews available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/>
4. *Technical Report on Statistics of Internally Displaced Persons: Current Practice and Recommendations for Improvement Prepared by the Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics*, UN Statistical Commission background document to the Forty-ninth session 6–9 March 2018 bit.ly/EGRIS-technicalreport-IDPs-2018