

Older people and displacement

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At all phases of the displacement cycle – flight, displacement and return – older people are exposed to specific challenges and risks which are not sufficiently taken into account.

As the world population is ageing at an unprecedented rate and displacement is on the rise, increasing numbers of older people are forced from their homes. Whether they remain in their own country or cross an international border, they face a range of specific and very significant risks. The fact that it is virtually impossible to say how many is a manifestation of the first of such risks – invisibility. Often already marginalised before a crisis, older people are often not factored into assessments of need and fall between the cracks of registration systems. Of the 50 countries reviewed by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) for its 2011 global IDP survey, only 11 had up-to-date sex- and age-disaggregated data; in only six of the 50 countries did national policies make specific reference to older people; and only three of these six had gathered any information on older people.

Failure to understand the socio-cultural dimensions of the definition of ‘older person’ (which in many countries does not only depend on physical age) and the fact that older persons have quite different levels of vulnerability and capacity may

further exacerbate invisibility, and often exclusion, during displacement.

At the onset of a crisis, older people are often left behind when the rest of their community is displaced. One major reason is the physical incapacity of many older persons to move, whether real or perceived by their family. Also, older people may have personal reasons for remaining at home. They may feel particularly tied to their home and lands, or they may have resisted pre-emptive disaster evacuations and thus experienced and managed similar situations before – that is, ‘ridden out’ previous disasters. Moreover, the prospect of starting again elsewhere may be too overwhelming for an older person. Lastly, the older person or the family may decide that it is important for someone to remain at home to secure their assets.

Older people who stay behind may be subject to violence, intimidation or secondary impacts of natural hazards, such as aftershocks or rising flood waters. In Darfur, for example, older people who did not leave were terrorised and then killed by Janjaweed militia; and during the 2008 crisis in Georgia, militias

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Mania, 70, with her daughter and four grandchildren in the Zugdidi Hospital Collective Centre for IDPs in Zugdidi, Georgia. All four children, their mother and their grandmother sleep in this one small room.

looted the houses and tried to extort money from older people who had been left behind, beating up some of them severely. Furthermore, those who do not leave their area of origin often lose assistance and support mechanisms they rely on. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in the US, for example, older people who were unable to leave residential homes were exposed to grave risk as their carers left New Orleans, abandoning them to their fate. Seventy per cent of those who died as a result of the disaster were over 70 years old.

Support in displacement

During displacement itself, the support that older people receive from governments and international or national organisations can be minimal or non-existent as it is frequently merged into programmes targeting displaced people as one homogeneous group. This results in assistance programmes which are not adapted for and/or are inaccessible to older people. For instance, while the known consequences of displacement on

the health of the general population can be devastating, an almost exclusive focus on communicable diseases misses the fact that much excess morbidity and mortality among older people result from exacerbation of existing non-infectious conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and cancer.

Similarly, access to adequate food is often a major problem for older displaced people. The way humanitarian operations are generally organised, focusing on bulk distribution of undifferentiated dry rations, may suit the needs of aid organisations better than the needs of the population, particularly those with special needs. Older people often have problems with the way the food rations are distributed as much as with the nature of the food itself. In a nutrition survey undertaken by HelpAge in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya in 2011, more than 500 older persons were found to be in need of nutritional support. This need was attributed to exclusion from or lack of access to the general food distribution, low diversity in their diet and infrequent meals.

Contrary to common belief, often older people in displacement cannot count on a safety network, as they find themselves marginalised – and at times excluded – by their own families and communities in a situation of competition for scarce resources. Following the devastating 2010 floods in Pakistan, for example, and in stark contrast with the prevailing religious and cultural values, older people were simply abandoned. Pakistan's Ministry of Social Welfare estimated the numbers of older people living without family support at as much as 10% of the older population.

Displacement often brings about devastating loss of social status for older people as well, with the huge contribution they normally make to society being ignored. This is particularly apparent in the case of their support role vis-à-vis children being replaced by some of the very practices of the humanitarian community. Older persons in the developing world tend to work into their late seventies, whether in formal or informal employment. As with younger generations, the lack of employment brought about through displacement can be extremely demoralising. In an extreme example, in Lira district of northern Uganda, in the absence of an alternative strategy to support older people's needs, the local government declared Fridays begging days for older persons living in IDP camps. Yet older people do really suffer from the transition from a rural to an urban environment that is often associated with displacement. Many of the skills they have may not appear relevant in the new situation, and aid agencies rarely consider them as part of programme planning for livelihood work – a form of age-related discrimination, even if unintentional.

Return

Many older persons are among the most willing to return home to their places of origin because of their strong historical ties to their land. Yet, regardless of whether they are particularly vulnerable, older people may require assistance to be able to get back home or to carry return packages or assets with

them. These challenges are especially difficult for older people who are without family support or who are caring for dependent children whom they are reluctant to take away from where they can receive services.

The prospect of having to build or reconstruct housing can also be a great obstacle to older people's return after displacement. Many older people, especially the very oldest, are physically unable to rebuild their houses. Furthermore, access to land for return is often fraught with complex land tenure and ownership issues. Population growth in many developing countries is placing ever-greater pressure on good land and priority will most likely be given to younger people, even when many older persons are capable and willing to resume agricultural activities.

As the ageing dimension of displacement becomes ever more relevant, development and humanitarian agencies, local and national governments and human rights organisations need to pay much greater attention to the needs and rights of older persons at all stages of the displacement cycle. Every effort should be made to ensure that vulnerable older people are identified and that all actors with protection responsibilities have the capacity to fulfil these responsibilities.

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See also the 2011 report online at <http://tinyurl.com/HAI-NeglectedGeneration> published by HelpAge International and IDMC entitled *The neglected generation: The impact of displacement on older people*. See also FMR 14 (2002) on 'Older displaced people: at the back of the queue?' online at www.fmreview.org/older-displaced-people

