UNHCR, IDPs and humanitarian reform

by Jeff Crisp, Esther Kiragu and Vicky Tennant

UNHCR has undertaken a fundamental reformulation of its IDP policy, with the intention of bringing certainty, consistency and predictability to its involvement.

"Uncertain, inconsistent and unpredictable." Those were the damning words used to assess UNHCR's policy towards IDPs in an evaluation report commissioned by the agency in 2005. Jointly undertaken by an independent consultant and a UNHCR staff member, the report provided a wealth of empirical evidence to support the conclusion that UNHCR had for many years adopted an unfortunate 'pick-and-choose' approach towards its engagement in situations of internal displacement. "While an ad hoc system has advantages," the evaluation observed, "it can also be a cause of tensions between organisations, confusion with governments and false expectations amongst IDPs. Generally, UNHCR has had difficulty justifying its abrupt reversals of position on IDP involvement." In the intervening two years the agency has heeded the message.

Humanitarian reform and IDPs

The humanitarian reform process was based on a recognition that responses to complex emergencies and disasters often failed to meet the needs of IDPs and other affected populations in a timely and consistent manner. A number of measures were introduced to address this situation, including the establishment of an agreed division of labour (the Cluster Approach) amongst UN and other humanitarian agencies. Under the provisions of this arrangement, UNHCR assumed a leading role in

efforts to ensure protection of conflict-related IDPs, provision of emergency shelter to such populations and the coordination and management of IDP camps. In addition, UNHCR agreed to participate actively in other areas

UNHCR trucks brought IDPs from Gouroukoun site to host villages in the area, Eastern Chad, 2006.

UNHCR/H Caux

including health, water and sanitation and to work closely with OHCHR and UNICEF to ensure protection of people displaced by natural disasters.

Having made these new commitments, UNHCR launched a series of initiatives designed to ensure that the organisation's new IDP policy was effectively elaborated, articulated and evaluated. Beginning with a four-day workshop in Nairobi for UNHCR staff members engaged in IDP operations, the organisation embarked upon an internal consultative process which was then extended to external stakeholders, including other UN agencies, NGO

partners and Executive Committee members. At the conclusion of this process, UNHCR issued a policy framework and implementation strategy entitled 'UNHCR's role in support of an enhanced humanitarian response to situations of internal displacement'.[1] This was followed by the publication of a complementary paper on 'The protection of internally displaced persons and the role

of UNHCR'.[2] At the institutional level, the organisation's new commitment to the issue of internal displacement was marked by the establishment of an interdepartmental IDP Support Group and the appointment of a Senior Coordinator for IDP Operations, backed by a dedicated IDP Support Team.

Evaluating UNHCR's IDP response

At the October 2005 meeting of UNHCR's Executive Committee, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, had given a firm promise to make UNHCR "fully engaged as a

predictable partner" in the new approach to situations of internal displacement. In accordance with this, in the course of 2006 UNHCR undertook an important extension to its operational involvement in IDP situations, especially in the five African countries where the Cluster Approach was introduced: Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, Somalia and Uganda. To ensure that UNHCR learned and shared appropriate lessons from this experience, the organisation's Policy Development and Evaluation Service and IDP Support Team undertook Real-Time Evaluations in each of those countries between April and July 2007.

With the exception of Liberia[3], UNHCR had not been significantly engaged in support to IDPs in the five operations reviewed prior to the activation of the cluster arrangements in 2006. In Liberia, the agency had taken on enhanced responsibilities for IDP protection from early 2005, and by the time the Cluster Approach was formally introduced, a highly successful IDP return and reintegration programme was already well under way. In the other four countries, UNHCR's new responsibilities under the Cluster Approach required a much more decisive reorientation of its country programmes, deployment of additional staff and targeted fundraising, so as to ensure that new IDP programmes did not draw resources away from the agency's mandated refugee activities.

Compounding this challenge was an extremely complex humanitarian context in each of the pilot locations. The countries identified for the initial roll-out of the Cluster Approach were precisely those where the failings of the humanitarian response had been most marked. The challenge facing UNHCR and others tasked to steer the Cluster Approach in early 2006 was therefore a gargantuan one.

The decision to undertake an early evaluation of the effectiveness of UNHCR's new IDP programmes was shaped with this context in mind. As with other 'real-time' evaluations, the purpose was to capture lessons and, if necessary, take corrective action at as early a stage in the process as possible. Three-person evaluation

teams conducted extensive interviews with IDPs and the communities hosting them, with NGO, government and UN partners in the Cluster Approach, and with UNHCR staff at headquarters and in the field.

The teams concluded that in all of the operations reviewed, the introduction of cluster arrangements had brought tangible dividends in forging a common vision amongst humanitarian actors and in targeting resources more effectively on the basis of jointly identified needs. The process of cluster activation had nonetheless not been optimal, and many humanitarian actors in the field felt that it had been imposed on them with little consultation, and with little in the way of support or guidance in the initial stages. Buy-in from NGOs had initially been limited but their engagement had increased over time, particularly where funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)[4] had been made available for projects identified through the cluster framework.

The litmus test, of course, is whether this solid progress in the reorganisation of humanitarian action translates into immediate positive and lasting improvements in the lives of IDPs and other war-affected communities. On this, the findings were considerably less encouraging. In all of the operations reviewed – with the possible exception of Liberia – the humanitarian effort still falls short of what is needed to ensure that basic standards are met.

Many IDPs interviewed by the evaluation teams were still living under flimsy plastic sheets, forced to engage in exploitative casual labour arrangements, with limited access to basic health care and sanitation facilities. Women in Eastern Chad spoke of the risk of rape when they ventured out of the settlements to seek firewood[5] and in DRC IDPs described how they fell further and further into debt as a result of rents imposed by 'host' communities.[6] In Uganda, the evaluation team observed that many of the IDPs in new sites were "living at the most abject level of subsistence… foraging for food in the bush or engaging in exploitative forms of labour…"[7] IDPs in Somalia who had fled recent fighting in Mogadishu described

how landowners had prevented them from constructing sanitation facilities, forcing them to use a large rubbish dump behind the site at which some women had been raped.[8]

Despite this sobering overall picture, the teams identified many concrete positive developments which appeared to be solidly linked to the introduction of the Cluster Approach and to UNHCR's enhanced role within it. In the area of protection, significant strides have been made in conceptualising some of the key challenges faced by IDPs as human rights issues – which has facilitated the development of protection strategies and effective advocacy campaigns.

In Northern Uganda, UNHCR and its partners played an essential role in unlocking the lingering restrictions linked to the government's anti-insurgency strategy through a successful 'freedom of movement' campaign, backed up by a series of practical interventions to give this concept practical effect. This included opening up access roads, de-mining and rehabilitating water sources. In DRC, the return of almost 400,000 IDPs to their homes in South Katanga was facilitated by advocacy which led to adjustments in the deployment patterns of peacekeeping troops in order to secure key areas of return.

The agency also developed a series of protection-related projects to address gaps identified through enhanced protection monitoring, displacement tracking and IDP profiling. These include legal assistance programmes, land rights projects, assistance to survivors of rape, support to disabled IDPs and community-based reconciliation initiatives. IDPs interviewed by the evaluation teams specifically cited some of these projects as having brought tangible benefits.

The camp coordination and camp management cluster has so far only been formally activated in Uganda and Chad – in part due to concerns by the humanitarian community about the institutionalisation of camps in locations where the trend was towards return and in part because many IDPs are living in host communities. The evaluation teams highlighted the potential

A view of Omiya-Anyima IDP camp, northern Uganda, May 2007.

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for UNHCR and its partners to play a more decisive role in the coordination of support to IDPs grouped in host communities, collective centres and other locations not traditionally categorised as camps. They also pointed, however, to the inequities which continue to persist between standards of assistance to IDPs and refugees, and between IDPs in different locations, and urged a more systematic harmonisation of assistance which meets basic minimum standards for all beneficiaries.

The evaluations also critically examined UNHCR's own staffing and budgetary arrangements, and found that in some locations these had been left wanting. The agency was slow to deploy additional staff with the right profile and experience, resulting in excessive burdens on existing staff and an over-reliance on UN Volunteers and short-term secondments. In some locations inflexible budget arrangements resulted in short-term programming, undermining UNHCR's quest to become a more predictable partner. A strategy to address these structural issues is currently under development,

and proposals for a new budget structure were reviewed by UNHCR's Executive Committee in October.

Since the analysis of UNHCR's engagement with IDPs carried out in 2005, UNHCR has made considerable strides in equipping itself to become a more functional and effective partner within the Cluster Approach arrangement. This commitment has manifested itself in the extensive internal and external consultations, development of a clear policy and strategy and a concerted focus on evaluating and drawing lessons from the implementation process so far.

Be that as it may, the Cluster Approach is clearly a work in progress, and much remains to be done to develop clear benchmarks and indicators which will enable its impact on IDP and other affected communities to be tracked and assessed. Considerable work also remains to be done on engaging more decisively with governments and national institutions; gearing it more effectively towards early recovery; bringing national NGOs and civil society into the process; and ensuring the participation of IDPs and other beneficiaries in assessment, planning

and implementation. The success of the approach will lie ultimately not just in an effectively functioning process but in its ability to bring tangible benefits to the lives of IDPs and other affected populations. In this respect, the indications are that UNHCR's contribution is having a solid and positive impact but that adjustments are needed to enhance this still further and to ensure that it is fully mainstreamed into the work of the organisation.

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2. www.unhcr.org/home/RSDLEGAL/45ddc5c04.pdf

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4. www.cerf.un.org

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