

# Beyond presence: protection interventions on the ground

by Rosa da Costa

**As concepts and practice change in the context of the new collaborative mandate for IDPs, protection is increasingly understood as a cross-cutting issue affecting other clusters and their lead agencies.**

‘Protection through presence’ has become a popular term to describe a situation whereby an international humanitarian presence provides humanitarian assistance and possibly deters abuses of human rights. However, what does it mean in practice to provide protection in conflict-related displacement situations, including for actors concerned with the provision of humanitarian aid? And how does one continue providing some measure of assistance and protection in contexts where states have shown themselves unwilling or unable to stop human rights violations? The interventions described below highlight the protection impact these activities can have, as well as the particular challenges and risks they pose.

## Family unity and reunification

Humanitarian actors understand that the family is a critical protection tool in crisis situations, and know that unaccompanied children are at risk of exploitation and sexual and gender-based violence. As such, when children cannot be immediately reunited with their family, child protection officers conduct best interest determinations, find suitable care arrangements, continue tracing procedures and ensure follow-up with regard to the child’s welfare and needs.

In the context of conflict-related displacement, protection officers must also be aware of and respond to other protection risks brought about by the separation of family members. For example, men who have been separated from their families are more likely to be suspected of political or military activities, and thus subject to arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment and human rights violations by the different parties to the conflict.

Similarly, unaccompanied boys and girls are vulnerable to recruitment by armed factions as porters, sex slaves or fighters. Protection officers and others working in the field must also remain conscious of the risks their family reunification efforts may entail. Tracing procedures for separated family members demand greater awareness of confidentiality and security issues.

## Protection, data collection and registration

Reliable information on the numbers, location and condition of IDPs – disaggregated by age, gender and other key indicators – is essential for improving the protection of IDPs. However, in conflict-induced IDP situations, even an apparently mundane activity such as gathering information through registration or profiling can hold unexpected challenges and protection implications. IDPs can be difficult to identify and reach, especially when they disperse into large urban areas, are living with host families or have been forced to flee into areas controlled by rebel forces. Persons or communities who have been internally displaced as a result of human rights violations and persecution will often wish to hide their identity and location and thus be virtually inaccessible for the purposes of data collection.

Traditional approaches to gathering data on IDPs, as well as profiling and registration, have to be reconsidered to take account of security risks since the availability of this data can have serious implications for the safety of displaced individuals or groups. IDPs may choose to live in anonymity in order to escape persecution by armed state and non-state actors. Alternatively, IDPs may feel it is not

in their best interests to be identified as a ‘special group’ for fear of backlash from a host population which is not receiving aid supplies. Involving protection officers and the displaced communities themselves in assessing these risks and selecting the appropriate methods for collecting and using this data will help ensure that this information does not inadvertently jeopardise the safety or the longer-term interests and rights of IDP communities.

## Protection and humanitarian assistance

Over the last decade much progress has been made to improve protection through humanitarian assistance activities. Useful approaches have been developed to: help ensure that we deliver assistance better; understand and respond more effectively to specific protection risks; and improve the way we work with communities. Rights- and community-based approaches, age, gender and diversity mainstreaming and participatory assessments are tools which can help us ensure that humanitarian assistance and other services and programmes are sensitive to the specific protection needs and capacities of different groups. Moreover, when implemented through a protection lens humanitarian aid can have an important impact that goes beyond protecting IDPs more effectively from the immediate risks of displacement, such as the lack of food, shelter and other basic human necessities. Significantly, assistance programmes can also:

- protect IDPs from secondary protection risks associated with displacement, such as disease, exploitation and having to engage in undignified or dangerous survival strategies, including various forms of survival sex
- prevent IDPs from having to return prematurely to unsafe conditions or from undertaking dangerous

secondary displacements in search of water sources or other essentials

- strengthen the capacity and incentives of host communities to help protect IDPs by including them in assistance or development programmes.

In addition, humanitarian assistance programmes often provide a convenient entry point for establishing an international presence and for undertaking 'protection' work. 'Presence through assistance' provides an opportunity to assess protection needs, gradually engage the relevant actors on related issues and develop protection programmes specific to the situation. This is especially important when access for explicitly protection-related activities is controversial and initially hard to negotiate.

A rapid intervention through humanitarian aid in the early phases of displacement can also act as a mitigating measure even when it cannot prevent displacement from taking place. It can help ensure safer or more viable camp sites and avoid secondary movements further afield to larger urban areas or more inaccessible areas which might prejudice chances of return to places of origin. When assistance is provided too late into the displacement process, it can mean that IDP communities have already dispersed, are difficult to access and can no longer act together to advocate for their rights or conditions for return. A rapid presence through humanitarian assistance

can provide timely opportunities as well, including to: negotiate rules for co-existence early on; appease tensions with host or neighbouring communities; and help preserve a vigorous and healthy community by ensuring that its stronger members or leadership do not have to leave in search of basic necessities – but can instead contribute to more energetic community-based solutions and initiatives.

At the same time, care has to be taken to ensure that an international presence through assistance activities does not inadvertently prolong the displacement or render it permanent. For this reason, the planning of food distribution in contested areas should be done carefully and with the participation of local leaders. Food can attract attacks by rebels, while situating food distribution points too far from villages can create permanent displacement as populations may be too weak to make the trip back to their village on a daily basis, opting instead to remain near the distribution area.

Similarly, maintaining assistance infrastructure – such as camp structures, medical tents and food distribution points – for too long can extend or consolidate displacement by encouraging affected populations to remain where essential services are available. Cutting assistance, however, may result in premature returns to unsustainable and unsafe conditions, or in secondary displacements. This underscores the importance of carefully coordinating humanitarian relief around areas

of displacement on the one hand, and early recovery, development and livelihood programmes in areas of return on the other.

Providing a legal framework and impetus to these protection activities, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement<sup>1</sup> are an important tool around which we can work with national governments (e.g. national human rights institutions, the judiciary, police forces, the military) as well as domestic civil society and affected communities to raise awareness of the rights of IDPs and strengthen systems to protect them.

It is short-sighted to define protection only or primarily in relation to measures we can take once displacement has happened. IDP protection work should be also about protection from displacement. Displacement is a symptom which is often connected to the key drivers of conflict – disregard for humanitarian law and human rights, poverty and marginalisation.

Initiatives seeking to create conditions which protect both the rights of returning populations and the civilian population more generally, such as investments in the rule of law, governance structures and sustainable livelihoods, should be part of a broader IDP protection strategy.

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1. [www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/gp\\_page.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/gp_page.htm)



IRIN/Euan Denholm

WFP food distribution in Moroto, northeastern Uganda, March 2007.