

Is humanitarian reform improving IDP protection and assistance?

by Anne Davies

Humanitarians are slowly developing better systems to profile IDPs and address their protection and assistance. It is still difficult, however, to say with certainty that humanitarian reforms are having any positive impact on the lives of IDPs.

In an article Magnus Murray and I wrote for FMR in 2005¹ on protection and assistance deficiencies of the UN humanitarian programme in Liberia we concluded that, with improved humanitarian leadership, these deficiencies could be reversed. Today, the process of humanitarian reform is slowly taking root in many countries. A key challenge is how to quantify and qualify the realities of internal displacement in order to help decision makers prioritise resources according to greatest need for protection and assistance.

In Somalia and DRC – two of the eight countries in which the Cluster Approach is being trialled – IDP statistics are a moving target. The conflict dynamics in both countries mean that people flee from or within areas where conflict flares up and may remain displaced for different periods of time or move around in search of safety. Tracking their movements and obtaining and maintaining data on their numbers and specific situations have always been challenging; yet without clearer estimates it is difficult to know how to design appropriate activities to alleviate their plight or to advocate for resources on their behalf. Moreover, not all IDPs are equally vulnerable and a mere statistical estimate does not necessarily reveal who among them are in most need of protection, assistance or other support to their coping mechanisms. A logical starting point for prioritising scarce resources is to obtain a more accurate and insightful ‘profile’ of IDPs.

During the last two years the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC)²

has made efforts to improve IDP data collection by working on methods to ‘profile’ them in different country contexts. The process is led by the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.³ IDP profiling involves not just getting more accurate numbers but also obtaining essential information on their particular characteristics. It has entailed obtaining common agreement by the majority of stakeholders on data collection and profiling methodology, how to analyse data and, most importantly, how to update data. With this commonly agreed approach, agencies can formulate more appropriate and coordinated projects and donors can have a more credible evidence base on which to support them.

The cluster system has been instrumental in propelling a common approach to IDP profiling. Prior to its inception each agency counted IDPs in its own geographical area of operations or according to its mandate, leading to duplication in areas where many humanitarian actors were operating and gaps in those where they were not present. Also, double counting took place when IDPs moved back and forth according to the conflict dynamics of the area, so that those who had been displaced due to conflict at a given date were counted again when a new outbreak of hostilities displaced the same people again. This was – and will probably always remain – a recurrent dilemma for Population Movement Committees⁴ who recognise that even when they manage to obtain more credible IDP data, it can quickly

become outdated by new waves of conflict and displacement.

In the case of Somalia, the Protection Cluster, comprising the UN country team based in Nairobi and international NGOs (most particularly the Danish Refugee Council), agreed a common approach to profile IDPs. Agencies embarked on a strategy of first obtaining a historical overview of displacement in Somalia by means of a comprehensive desk review of all IDP statistics gathered during the previous three years. This in turn enabled them to locate the most salient information gaps and to then address those gaps through on-site monitoring and surveying. The fact that every step of these exercises was undertaken with the common consent of interested agencies lent legitimacy to the methodologies chosen for profiling and agreement on the results obtained. Unfortunately timing was bad in the case of Mogadishu and the planned survey was undertaken during the height of the conflict, which led to the results becoming outdated as soon as they had been collected and analysed. Nevertheless, a positive outcome of the survey was a much improved understanding of the dynamics of displacement and the reasons why certain groups had fled and remained displaced. The matrix that resulted from the country-wide desk review provides a common format for agencies to use as baseline data when undertaking new profiling studies in specific areas.

Other profiling studies have been conducted in 2007 using a variety of methodologies in different settings (Khartoum, Chad and Central African Republic, to name a few) and have similarly involved consultation through the Protection Cluster. This has resulted in commonly accepted IDP reports and statistics that form the evidence base on

Displaced people carrying sacks of maize from the distribution centre organised by WFP, Jowhar, Somalia, September 2007.

which to programme targeted responses. It has also demonstrated that IDP profiling is more successful when organised through the cluster mechanism rather than when studies are conducted unilaterally.

How can improvements be measured?

The Cluster Approach – initially considered confusing and a recipe for too many meetings – is slowly becoming instrumental in establishing, by consensus in working groups, agreed standards and principles for protecting IDPs. Not all of these are yet in circulation but the consultative process has involved workshops in different countries to obtain consensus on what they need to improve. The workshops have not only proved useful networking fora to discuss questions of concern but have also given stakeholders a clearer basis for understanding requirements. For example, the forthcoming *IDP Protection Handbook*, a compilation of different chapters contributed by key protection stakeholders, is near finalisation, as is an IASC publication providing guidance on IDP profiling in the field. With commonly agreed frameworks in place, there is now greater certainty about how to proceed in coordination with other similarly informed humanitarian actors and greater confidence in embarking on joint initiatives to profile, protect and assist IDPs. But measuring how all this translates into an improvement in the day-to-day lives of IDPs is not easy. And there is also the question of whether the establishment of the cluster system, measured against impact, is cost-effective. Are funds going towards administrative costs rather than to beneficiaries and, if they are, in what way does this benefit the target population? Donors should insist on a detailed cost analysis of the different clusters in 2008.

The Cluster Approach employed in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake received mixed reviews in terms of its efficiency and coherence in the



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early stages. However, some clusters were successful in streamlining delivery on the ground. One particularly useful initiative set up by the Protection Cluster was the Joint Protection Monitoring System, aimed at monitoring and reporting protection incidents in the IDP camps and gaps in access to services and rights in areas of return. While not without its challenges, the Cluster Approach was reported as successfully building a strong coordination mechanism between partners. This was not only useful for creating a space in which to discuss protection issues but also had other positive outcomes: tackling policy-relevant issues such as landlessness, standard operating procedures for camp closure, serious medical conditions and disability, female-headed households and orphans.

Perhaps it is too early to judge whether improvements in the humanitarian response can be linked to a positive impact on the lives of IDPs. Various reports indicate that success still hinges to a great extent on leadership, both at the humanitarian coordinator and at the cluster levels. In 2006 OCHA led an assessment of the Cluster Approach in the pilot countries resulting in the IASC Interim Self-Assessment of Implementation of the Cluster Approach in the Field⁵. The studies and workshops organised in the four cluster roll-out countries examined

mainly procedural aspects of cluster performance and yielded scant revelation on how any part of the humanitarian reform process has resulted in concrete improvements to IDPs. This was reflected in the report's acknowledgement that "it is not yet clear the extent to which more effective leadership and coordination through the Cluster Approach contributed to successful outcomes."

A more comprehensive external evaluation is currently underway in two phases, with expected completion date the first quarter of 2008. This looks set to take a harder look at outcomes. A fundamentally important aspect of this evaluation will be to develop standard benchmarks by which to judge performance across the board.

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1. www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/IDP%20Supplement/07.pdf

2. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc

3. www.internal-displacement.org – see also p66.

4. Population Movement Committees comprise local officials, NGOs and UN agencies who track the movements of people in crisis areas. In Somalia they produce monthly reports that are consolidated and published by UNHCR, providing indicators such as responses to and gravity of conflict, drought or other catastrophes as well as spontaneous return movements. In DRC they are used more locally but essentially provide similarly useful information.

5. www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/documents