

Including refugees and IDPs in national data systems

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The recent endorsement of international statistical recommendations on refugees and IDPs will help systematise the inclusion of these vulnerable groups in national policy and development agendas. Much work needs to be done, however, to move the recommendations from paper into practice.

In March 2020, days before COVID-19 put New York into lockdown, the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) unanimously endorsed the world's first International Recommendations on IDP Statistics.¹ These recommendations provide a framework to help countries to better define IDPs and to capture higher-quality, more comparable, nationally owned statistics on this vulnerable population.² They reflect years of hard work by the UNSC-mandated Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics (EGRIS) and build on the success of the 2018 International Recommendations on Refugee Statistics (IRRS).³

The drive to improve the quality and comparability of, and trust in, data necessarily involves tackling several basic challenges such as establishing clear definitions, transparent methodologies, political will and national capacity. This is especially the case when it comes to population groups such as IDPs who are often excluded or inadequately captured in national statistical systems. The two sets of recommendations represent significant achievements for policymakers and practitioners addressing forced displacement as, although purely technical in focus, they include several ground-breaking steps forward from a policy/political perspective.

The IRRS provide clear definitions and a complete statistical framework for refugees and related populations (that is, encompassing persons in need of international protection, persons with a refugee background, and persons returning to their country after seeking international protection abroad). If countries and other stakeholders can align their own definitions with the IRRS, data between countries can be more easily compared and confusions between different reporting systems will be

significantly reduced. The IRRS also give advice to countries on how the (re)integration of refugees into society should be measured and analysed, providing a framework for this purpose. A further achievement of the IRRS pertains to the agreed recommendations for coordinating official statistics on refugees which in practice can be a complex matter that misses many opportunities for better inclusion of refugees.

Equally, the International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS) are a potential game-changer. Following a similar structure but tackling a topic where no definitive legal framework exists, the IRIS faced a more difficult challenge but succeeded in providing a statistical framework that standardises key terminology and classifications. For example, they clarify that children born to IDP parents after displacement should not be included in the definition but instead classified as an 'IDP-related' population category, and recommend that the total IDP population is divided into three sub-categories (IDPs in locations of displacement, locations of return and other settlement locations).

Regarding the complicated issue of determining when an IDP should no longer be defined as such, the IRIS also makes significant headway. They build on the eight criteria outlined in the widely accepted IASC Framework for Durable Solutions for IDPs as well as on work undertaken by another inter-agency group of experts⁴ to distinguish between two measures: firstly to judge progress towards durable solutions and secondly to determine when key displacement-related vulnerabilities have been overcome so that displaced persons can be taken out of the official population statistics. The IRIS provide

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a clear framework for these measures but more work is needed to complete the development of these measures – work which is currently being undertaken by EGRIS with support from the WB-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (JDC).

The IRIS also provide recommendations for how to enhance statistical coordination efforts at the national and international level. These include recommendations to strengthen connections to national statistical systems, establish technical coordination platforms and ensure quality control of IDP data. They take into consideration the role of both national and international stakeholders in this process.

Taken together, these recommendations tackle both politically sensitive and operationally challenging issues that reoccur in many displacement-affected contexts that are frequently beset by incoherent definitions of durable solutions, competing reports on displacement figures and limited transparency on data production methods.

Progress across the world

Since the IRRS and IRIS were endorsed, support and recognition within and beyond the statistical community have been growing. For example, the Global Compact on Refugees includes a few paragraphs on data and evidence that reference the IRRS directly.⁵ The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement has explicitly included data collection, analysis and use in its scope of work and is increasingly interested in the achievements of EGRIS.⁶ And at the institutional level, many organisations are actively identifying opportunities to integrate the IRRS and IRIS into their own data workstreams and efforts to support country-level implementation. At the JDC, for example, we are working with governments and National Statistical Offices to incorporate specific elements of the recommendations into data collection activities and have made this an explicit criterion for funding.

Numerous countries are also taking steps to implement the recommendations, though there is still a long way to go. A brief look at some of recent examples helps to identify learning and inform/prioritise further action and support needed.⁷

Data collection: In **Kenya**, refugees were included in the 2019 national census, and the National Bureau of Statistics is setting up a technical working group to advance practice and monitor progress made on both refugee and IDP statistics in the country. In **Morocco**, as part of the government's national strategy on migration and forced displacement, data on refugees and related populations are collected through a specific survey; additionally, however, question modules from the IRRS on identifying refugees are being included in thematic surveys, such as the labour force survey. In **Ethiopia**, the Central Statistics Agency is working to align and integrate the Socio-economic Survey on Refugees in Ethiopia into the national Household Welfare Statistics Survey and to incorporate key elements of the IRRS in the process. Similar efforts are ongoing in the **Central African Republic** with regard to the IDP population being included in the sampling strategy for a planned national poverty survey, building on several parts of the IRIS. In Europe, **Georgia** is also planning a series of activities to implement the recommendations, including an assessment of various administrative data sources to identify their potential to produce IDP statistics and enable linkages between them.

Coordination: Through more effective coordination between national and international stakeholders, linkages between forced displacement statistics and national data systems are being clarified (or created); meanwhile, connections with National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) and new legal frameworks are being cemented. In the **Ukraine**, the State Statistics Service is working with members of the Technical Working Group on IDP Statistics and UNHCR to develop a joint roadmap for the roll-out of the IRIS; this will include improvements to the national IDP registry, incorporation of complementary data sources, and inclusion in the national framework for monitoring progress towards the country's SDG targets. In **Cameroon**, a new statistics law and the NSDS for 2020-25 were endorsed in 2020; the strategy aims to

strengthen statistical capacity and includes for the first time an explicit focus on forced displacement in the country. Meanwhile, in **Colombia**, coordination between the Victims' Unit and the national statistical office has been enhanced in order to improve the quality and usefulness of IDP statistics, and statistical methodologies are being improved (informed by the EGRIS process).

What next?

Momentum is building but much more needs to be achieved if refugees and IDPs are to be more systematically and effectively included in national data systems. Experiences shared by members of EGRIS highlight a few priority areas:

Awareness raising and strategic advocacy:

Many countries hosting refugees or IDPs have adequate statistical capacity to start implementing the recommendations. However, they need to be encouraged – through more awareness-raising and advocacy efforts (including showcasing early signs of impact) – to make progress.

Investment in national statistical capacity:

Where statistical capacity is weak and/or overburdened, sustained investment is needed, such as in developing national capacity to monitor progress towards the SDGs and to include refugee (and when relevant IDP) data in broader migration statistics.

Improved financing for forced displacement data:

The most accessible funding for data on forced displacement is still largely derived from humanitarian aid budgets which are, by design, short-term and focused primarily on informing humanitarian interventions. This pattern must change in order to support both sustained capacity development and longer-term development data initiatives, including national household surveys and enhanced administrative data systems.

Embracing new methods and alternative data sources:

Although both the IRRS and IRIS include recommendations on appropriate methods and data sources, they focus

less on new methods or alternative data sources. Rapidly advancing technologies and alternative approaches to collecting data offer opportunities that should be pursued. These efforts have become even more urgent due to the COVID-19 pandemic which has fundamentally challenged traditional data collection methods.

Many of these avenues are currently being explored as part of EGRIS's third phase, 2020–24. A UNSC-endorsed term of reference commits the Group to supporting implementation of the IRRS and IRIS in a coordinated fashion over the next three to five years.⁸ With financial support from the JDC and growing interest from countries and institutions, this platform has huge potential. If the international community can combine efforts towards this common goal, significant progress can be made in the space of a few years. Improved official statistics on refugees and IDPs will bear fruit relatively quickly, furthering the inclusion agenda. The challenges are many but the building blocks are there.

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1. bit.ly/Reliefweb-IRIS
2. For background, see Levakova D et al 'Using collaborative approaches to improve internal displacement data', *Forced Migration Review* 65 bit.ly/FMR65-Levakova-et-al
3. bit.ly/Eurostat-IRRS
4. See <https://inform-durablesolutions-idp.org>; see also Beyani C, Baal N K and Caterina M (2016) 'Conceptual challenges and practical solutions in situations of internal displacement', *Forced Migration Review* www.fmreview.org/solutions/beyani-baal-caterina
5. www.unhcr.org/5c658aed4
6. www.un.org/internal-displacement-panel/content/what-we-do. See also EGRIS written submission to the HLP: bit.ly/EGRIS-submission-HLP-Feb2021
7. All examples were presented by representatives of national organisations during the JIPS-EGRIS conference in 2020 on statistical capacity building: www.jips.org/jips-publication/jips-egris-conference-2020-report/. Two exceptions are Ethiopia and Central African Republic which are activities supported by the JDC: bit.ly/JDC-filling-data-gaps
8. *Terms of Reference for the Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics (EGRIS): Third Phase/Implementation of Recommendations (2020-2024)*: bit.ly/EGRIS-TOR-2020-24