

Data and evidence on forced displacement: reflections on progress and challenges

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In recent decades substantial advances have been made by the humanitarian and development communities in terms of gathering and using data to underpin programming. Significant challenges and gaps remain, however, requiring new approaches and partnerships.

When the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 were adopted in New York in September 2015, their ambition to “leave no-one behind and “reach the furthest behind first” reflected a renewed global solidarity around further poverty reduction. While the SDGs themselves contained no specific provisions for displaced and marginalised populations, it seemed clear that their inclusion would be a priority if this specific aim was to be fulfilled. Less obvious was how the generation of data and evidence to demonstrate development progress among such populations would be accomplished. In particular, how could the advances in data and digital technology be harnessed to reach those countries and people seemingly trapped in a protracted spiral of conflict, exclusion and poverty?

The SDGs’ detailed provisions included a helpful, if ambitious, set of targets and indicators to measure progress across Agenda 2030.¹ These were partly inspired by the rapid advances in technology and digital capabilities that had enabled the expanded and more efficient capture of data during the previous two decades. The need for more accurate data and evidence was also given prominence in the two Global Compacts on Refugees and for Migration respectively.

Due in large measure to the efforts of the Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Statistics (EGRIS) established under the aegis of the UN Statistical Commission in 2016, a specific indicator for inclusion of displaced populations has since been developed.² It augurs well for the more systematic inclusion of these groups within national statistical and data collection efforts. It also brings

momentum to much needed reflection on the many definitional issues around displacement that still require resolution.

Notwithstanding progress at the normative level, a number of familiar challenges quickly emerged. Insecurity, conflict and violence inhibited accurate and secure data collection in many of the world’s poorest countries. Poverty was increasingly concentrated in these same States where government capacities to generate national statistics were weak. In consequence, there were insufficient data to allow the analysis that was needed. Among the 1.5 billion people most prominently at risk of exclusion from the promise of Agenda 2030 were the estimated 79 million displaced in and outside their country.³

By their very nature, displacement and mobility produce practical and political economy issues that can inhibit the inclusion of refugees, migrants, stateless persons and internally displaced persons (IDPs) within national census and vital registration exercises. In the case of refugees and migrants, many host governments are unwilling to devote resources to collecting detailed data on citizens of another country. Security, access, mobility and political will frequently impede prioritising data collection on IDPs. And, notwithstanding the efficiency gains associated with technical innovation, there are protection and confidentiality issues that make the collection of information by states on vulnerable and marginalised populations more complex and sensitive.

Traditionally data collection on displaced populations has mostly been undertaken by humanitarian agencies and government counterparts during emergencies. It has

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focused primarily on gathering quantitative information and assessing critical essential needs. Over time, the reach, quality and delivery of these assessments have improved significantly. Disaggregated data on vulnerability has become a standard feature of humanitarian surveys.

The application of digital technology has also had an important impact on agency infrastructure, personnel and efficiency. The rapid collection of data and its more systematic incorporation into programme design and budgeting have benefited implementation and resource use. The use of mobile technology for the efficient delivery of cash transfers is one obvious example. These positive developments represent substantial advances in humanitarian practice.

Risks, challenges and concerns

Yet significant issues and gaps remain, due partly to the proliferation of data systems and applications themselves, and partly to the rise in the number of protracted crises. Claims for the transformative potential have occasionally been exaggerated, while risks related to the collection, storage and transmission of data have sometimes been overlooked in the rush to embrace digital capabilities.

The ready availability of new informatics technology has also produced new and different challenges for both aid providers and recipients. The potential advantages of inter-operable biometric data, for example, may be evident for a country's citizens. But such systems can lead to both legal and security concerns for refugees and represent practical obstacles to inclusion if they are established in parallel to national models.

The potential efficiency gains from using digital technology coincided with an increase in donor States' emphasis on value for money and accountability. At the same time, the more widespread use of data technology requires greater investment in capital and equipment, personnel and specialised training. Larger volumes of available data also imply higher level of effort in processing and reporting. In addition, in the absence of agreed principles and standard operating procedures for data production, collection



A South Sudanese refugee is registered at the Aru transit centre, Ituri province, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

and transmission, there have been growing concerns over data quality and security.

As the number of surveys and assessments has increased, so has the need for greater coordination over content and delivery to avoid duplication and interview fatigue. Significant imbalances between the volume of newly generated data and the ability to analyse it in depth or to convert it into policy and programmatic substance have occurred. Greater ownership and access by displaced people themselves to data and information has partly disrupted the relationship with aid providers and prompted new thinking around inequality and accountability.

Yet technology in itself will not necessarily transform inequalities or automatically reduce vulnerabilities. On the contrary, it can reinforce and deepen asymmetrical power relations at organisational, local, household and individual levels. The digital divide has a gender, ethnic and racial dimension to it too. Addressing such imbalances requires political commitments to greater inclusion, to enabling policies and to supportive implementation arrangements.

More efficient and more extensive data capture also raises the stakes with respect to security and confidentiality. The potential escape or leakage, accidental or otherwise, of personal and private information presents particular risks to vulnerable populations and humanitarian assistance providers in insecure operating environments. The convergence of interests between private sector data

companies and States in the area of security and intelligence gathering also raises a number of red flags for humanitarian aid organisations.

Still, the growing number of countries trapped in protracted crises has highlighted the pressing need to reduce vulnerability and dependence on short-term emergency programmes and funding. As is widely acknowledged, these are unsustainable and can discourage the growth of national capabilities. Rising costs have also driven new commitments to support greater cooperation and complementarity among humanitarian, development and peace and conflict resolution actors; an important component of these is a shared interest and commitment to generating reliable data and evidence.

More detailed data on household consumption, assets and income sources are required to plan appropriate policies and programmes to combat poverty and promote socio-economic development. In displacement settings, such surveys should include all affected populations in order to underpin social cohesion and ensure parity. Significantly greater effort, time and resources are required to design and implement such exercises. Yet without this investment, the foundation for more equitable and longer-term support will be missing.

The scale of the Syrian crisis highlighted the need to assess the social and economic impacts not only on displaced populations but also on host country economies and populations. It also revealed important gaps in the global data collection system, definitions and methodologies deployed essentially for humanitarian objectives. Addressing these requires not just increased technical investment in generating data. In many crisis-affected countries, it also involves overcoming many practical obstacles such as poor infrastructure, weak connectivity, restricted access and unpredictable security conditions. Last but not least, converting data into evidence that can drive change in policy and in institutional and implementation capabilities is not achieved through purely technical processes. It must be accompanied by astute diplomacy and political skill that encourage and incentivise change.⁴

When the SDGs were launched, statistics on global displacement were often based on initial emergency registration exercises or derived from secondary sources.⁵ There were almost no individual datasets or instruments that captured the socio-economic effects of long-term displacement on the development prospects of affected populations. Since then, there has been a marked increase in the number of studies, surveys and assessments conducted in a wide range of countries, many of them delivered through national systems.⁶ These still remain modest in coverage so the need to scale up remains pressing. But progress has been encouraging and more countries are recognising the opportunities provided through obtaining accurate and comparable data.

National capacities for statistics and data collection in countries affected by violent conflict are in urgent need of institutional development and strengthening. Expanding digital capacities and installing appropriate infrastructure and connectivity are vital to support broader national and human development objectives. The Global Compact on Refugees specifically highlights the need for greater resources to be mobilised to support such requirements in displacement settings.

In addition, there are still important policy obstacles to the inclusion of displaced people. Beyond practical issues related to access and resources, there are also concerns around ethnic or religious demography and the potential use of data and evidence for political and security purposes. In such contexts, the undoubted development benefits of investing in new digital technology have also to take into proper account the potential misuse of data, especially in regard to personal information. This concern needs to take fuller account of the political and security context, governance framework and methodologies and protocols that data providers are operating. For displaced persons, messaging services can be empowering sources of information and mobile phones can be efficient enablers of cash transfers and provide useful means of sourcing information on welfare conditions for aid agencies when access is constrained. But for governments

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seeking to control or discourage mobility, they can also reveal critical data about movements, locations and intentions.

In worst-case scenarios, States' use of advanced digital technology provides enhanced capabilities for surveillance and intelligence gathering that can be operationalised to apprehend, detain and exclude groups and individuals. Governments' power over the discretionary use of information requires attention to the terms and conditions of data sharing on the part of development and humanitarian partners.

There are important ethical issues around the collection and sharing of personal information extracted from vulnerable populations, particularly refugees and migrants (who may not be protected by national laws on data protection and security). These issues range from gaining consent for the collection and use of such data from the selected individuals, to formally committing to the secure protection, storage and transmission of data, and to the systematic anonymising of all personal identifiers that could compromise the safety of individuals.

Over the last decade, the proliferation and rapid evolution of digital technology has propelled considerable innovation in both applications and equipment. But it has also generated fragmentation around the collection and use of data in humanitarian settings, in part attributable to the increased number of participants. In response, the production of data protection protocols, data-sharing agreements and overall ethical and technical guidance seeking to regulate the domain has also grown appreciably.

Collectively these represent a considerable body of good practice with real potential to extend the essential humanitarian principle of 'do no harm' to the digital space. This itself reflects greater awareness among practitioners of the need to temper enthusiasm for data technology with greater discretion as to its ethical application and its use. Given the dynamic nature of the sector, perhaps what is needed, however, is a distillation of

some core principles into a Code of Conduct or set of Minimum Standards that all stakeholders should commit to upholding.

A joint approach to strengthening capacity

It was in response to the growing interest in socio-economic evidence and in strengthening the global data system related to protracted displacement that the World Bank and UNHCR agreed to combine their efforts and resources to establish the Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (JDC) in Copenhagen. A particular focus was to support complementary humanitarian and development approaches towards the production and use of primary data by a broad range of stakeholders engaged in countries affected by conflict and violence.

Four main objectives for the JDC were established: i) encouraging a more systematic collection of socio-economic data collection on displaced people, ii) enabling open access to forced displacement data while ensuring anonymisation and safeguards that meet legal data protection requirements, iii) supporting innovation to enhance data collection and iv) strengthening the sustainability of global data collection systems.

The initial phase of the JDC's four-year work programme coincided with the current COVID pandemic. Understandably this has restricted efforts to support data collection in the field through face-to-face interaction – a primary aim – but it has also served to reinforce the critical significance of including displaced and marginalised populations in public health and social protection programmes. A recent JDC-supported study offers some important insights into COVID's impact on displaced populations. It also provides an early example of how combining innovative data collection, accurate sample design and rigorous analysis can offer actionable insights even in adverse operating environments.⁷

Through its work and partnerships, the JDC aspires to make the medium- to long-term socio-economic circumstances of displaced populations more visible and accessible and to strengthen the capabilities of interested stakeholders to enable progress

in improving outcomes for them. The articles in this special feature in Forced Migration Review provide insights into some of the main pathways and methodologies that the JDC will pursue and encourage in future.

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1. SDG 17 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17>
2. bit.ly/Eurostat-IRRS

3. World Bank (2017) *Forcibly Displaced : Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and Their Hosts*, Chapter 1 bit.ly/WB-10986-25016

4. See Read R, Taithe B and Mac Ginty R (2016) 'Data hubris? Humanitarian information systems and the mirage of technology', *Third World Quarterly* 37(8) bit.ly/TWQ-37-8-Read-et-al

5. See UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015 bit.ly/UNHCR-Global-Trends-2015 and IDMC Annual Report 2015 www.internal-displacement.org/publications/annual-report-2015

6. See for example, Verme P and Schuettler K, 'The Impact of Forced Displacement on Host Communities: A Review of the Empirical Literature in Economics' bit.ly/JDC-Verme-Schuettler-2019

7. www.jointdatacenter.org

