

# New approach needed to internal displacement

by Joel R Charny

*The Collaborative Response is not working. In countries experiencing large-scale crises of internal displacement the international response remains characterised by lack of planning, failure to address critical protection gaps, inter-agency squabbles and inability to apply lessons learned.*

**R**ecent examples abound of the chronic difficulties of the Collaborative Response:

- **Darfur:** The UN's failure to cobble together an effective response to the massive internal displacement crisis led to unclear arrangements for camp management and allowed the Government of Sudan to cut a side deal with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – a non-UN agency with no protection mandate or experience to monitor voluntary returns to home communities.<sup>1</sup>
- **Liberia:** After fierce inter-agency battles OCHA withdrew in frustration, leaving the UN Mission in Liberia and UNHCR to work out arrangements for supporting IDP return. The resulting process has alienated NGO partners, created avoidable logistical breakdowns and generally ignored the needs of the displaced. Tens of thousands of IDPs remain stuck in camps, waiting for transport and return assistance kits but not knowing whether they will receive them.
- **Côte d'Ivoire:** In a tinderbox of potential ethnic and political conflict, the UN Country Team has

no adequate plan – as required by the procedural 'roadmap' of the Collaborative Response – to respond to internal displacement. When 10,000 people fled a massacre in Duékoué in June, the local Catholic Mission had to cope with the situation without external support. UNHCR refused to get involved and OCHA lacked the authority to ensure that UNHCR and WFP responded to the Duékoué displacement.

These examples are well known to OCHA's Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division. The IDD has been conducting assessment missions and issuing hard-hitting reports, apparently to no avail. In a background paper prepared for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group meeting of 22-23 June 2005, the IDD readily acknowledged "the absence of operational accountability and leadership" and that a "pick and choose approach" by operational agencies had led to "significant gaps, inter-agency competition, short-term commitments, and a lack of standard-setting, monitoring, and accountability."

The Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) and the leadership of the IDD

are proposing to assign 'operational accountability' for specific sectors or areas of activity – such as camp management, emergency shelter, water and sanitation and protection – to particular agencies. These assignments would be standard across internal displacement crises but the agencies assigned would not be solely responsible for implementing activities in the relevant sector. Rather, they would take the lead in ensuring that relevant activities are planned and carried out and bring gaps and concerns in the particular area to the attention of the Humanitarian Coordinator and the Country Team.

Operational accountability is not meaningful if it does not carry with it actual responsibility to implement effective programmes. Agencies will have to cajole others to join them and in the event of further failure will once again be able to deny responsibility and maintain that donors and peer agencies failed to support them. Sectors vary widely, from discrete activities such as camp management or water supply to broad activities – particularly return and reintegration – that require the mobilisation of the entire UN Country Team.

The Collaborative Response remains deeply flawed. It epitomises the maxim that no one is responsible when everyone is responsible. Developing new conceptual frameworks is a futile exercise as long as the Humanitarian Coordinators fail to lead,

leaders of UN Country Teams fail to contribute and the post of Humanitarian Coordinator continues to be filled, as is so often the case, by UN career staff without humanitarian response experience who prioritise building cooperative relations with the very governments that may share responsibility for the displacement crises. The collaborative response relies on voluntary cooperation in a UN system riven with institutional rivalries over influence and scarce resources, rivalries that are exploited by agency staff, donors and host governments.

### Tweaks are not enough

Summoning the cash and political will to create a new dedicated IDP agency seems an insurmountable challenge in the current international environment. And even if the political will could be mustered, the more logical move would be in the direction of consolidating existing emergency response and protection capacities into a single overarching humanitarian agency rather than creating yet another separate institution. However, the UN Secretary-General has passed up an opportunity to offer a comprehensive restructuring of the UN's humanitarian capacity. His far-reaching report on reinvigorating the UN for the 21st century<sup>2</sup> has bold initiatives such as the Peacebuilding Commission and the Human Rights Council but merely promises new measures to address the problem of internal displacement. The subsequent proposal of sector accountability within the framework of the Collaborative Approach lacks vision.

One way to accomplish unifying responsibility for the protection and material needs for internally displaced persons is to designate a lead agency for each major IDP crisis. The ERC would appoint a lead agency in consultation with the Resident Coordinator or the Humanitarian Coordinator in the country, with the heads of the operational agencies and, in especially urgent or politically sensitive cases, with the Secretary-General. The lead agency model has the major advantage over the Collaborative Approach of clarifying from the outset which agency is primarily responsible for meeting the protection and material needs of IDPs. This agency would also be expected to be the leading advocate within the Country Team and with

donors for a joint agency response to the crisis.

While designating a lead agency does not in and of itself guarantee an effective response, it greatly enhances the possibility that IDP needs will not be overlooked, as is too often the case at present. The lead agency model could be seen as a variation of the Collaborative Approach in the sense that collaboration would still be essential to mobilise the strengths and capacities of individual operational agencies within the UN system. The lead agency model is easy to undermine, however, as agencies unwilling to cooperate with lead organisation would have the option of pursuing programming outside the joint framework proposed by the lead agency. Strong overall leadership and management of the process by the ERC, figuratively banging heads at the country level if necessary, would be critical for the lead agency model to be effective.

### UNHCR's pivotal role

Within the UN system only UNHCR has the requisite combination of protection experience and operational capacity to make a significant contribution to addressing IDP needs. The new UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, has already made it clear that he is willing to prepare his agency to be more aggressive in meeting the protection challenges presented by all displacement. Donor governments, the ERC and the leaders of the other operational agencies in the UN system should accept the logic of this development and agree to make UNHCR the centrepiece of the global response to internal displacement.

The great benefit of mandating UNHCR to be primarily responsible for this task is clarity. Empowered with this new mandate, the agency would proactively seek out opportunities to respond to the plight of IDPs, while donors would be expected to allocate necessary funds. While the funds available for IDP response would be unlikely to increase, they would be more concentrated within the management structure of a single agency and over time this would result in more effective programming. Furthermore, offering UNHCR the global mandate for IDP response might also be tied to an effort to shape the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement into a formal convention

on internal displacement along the lines of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Problems with this alternative centre on the sheer size of the IDP caseload (there are about twice as many conflict-induced IDPs as refugees), the potential for undermining access to asylum for refugees and the difficulty that UNHCR is already experiencing fulfilling its protection mandate for refugees. Despite UNHCR's institutional weaknesses, and the undermining of its effectiveness by host governments increasingly reluctant to adhere to the tenets of the Refugee Convention, the fundamental issue is whether placing the global mandate for IDP response with the agency would at least incrementally enhance IDP protection. This subject merits renewed discussion within the international humanitarian system, a discussion that should be open-minded and separated from questions of narrow institutional interest. Only the Secretary-General has the authority to organise such a debate.

With so much experience and analysis available on the failings of the Collaborative Response, the burden of proof is on its defenders. The continued failure to respond effectively to the needs of 21.3 million IDPs would be condemned as a global scandal if the public knew more about the plight of some of the world's most desperate people. Like climbers on a crumbling rock face, the Secretary-General, the ERC, the leaders of the operational agencies and donors cling to the Collaborative Response. Their position is untenable and a new approach is essential. The immediate way forward is to position UNHCR as the agency able to respond to the protection and material needs of displaced persons in most situations and organise a comprehensive system-wide response to IDP needs with UNHCR in the driving seat.

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1. See the critique of IOM in FMR22: [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR22/FMR2224.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR22/FMR2224.pdf)  
2. In *Larger Freedom*, [www.un.org/largerfreedom](http://www.un.org/largerfreedom)