

Implementation of the Collaborative Response in Liberia

by Anne Davies and Magnus Wolfe Murray

With no single organisation mandated to assist and protect IDPs, a Collaborative Response is a necessity. The Liberia experience, however, shows how unworkable it has been in practice.

Fourteen years of conflict in Liberia culminated in mid 2003 when massive numbers of people fled their homes, swamping the capital, Monrovia. Over 500,000 people were displaced (with a further 350,000 fleeing to neighbouring countries). Hostilities ceased with the abrupt exile of Liberian president Charles Taylor in July 2003, opening the way for sustained peace efforts, international accords and the deployment of the United Nations Mission to Liberia (UNMIL),¹ including 15,000 peacekeepers. A great many of those who had fled returned spontaneously to their homes nearby, while others moved into camps, mostly located within 75km of the capital.

The most pressing task was to provide the IDPs with food, clean water, sanitation and emergency health facilities. International agencies assisted those in pre-existing 'organised' camps while IDPs whom the national authorities had evicted from public buildings congregated into 'spontaneous' camps in the hope of receiving aid. IDPs were treated as a homogenous group, mainly because this was the easiest way to target aid to people whom the international community considered as among the most vulnerable. Inevitably, less vulnerable people also made their way to the camps for opportunistic reasons.

A 'lead agency' role was assigned to UNHCR to direct the IDP relief effort through collaboration with other agencies, such as WFP and UNICEF, as well as with NGOs and ICRC. However, in March 2004 this strategy was changed to embrace a more collaborative approach, mainly due to resource problems faced by UNHCR which left it unable to coordinate the relief effort alone. OCHA took over the lead role for 'horizontal' coordination with mechanisms that

included a national IDP Committee and an IDP Camp Management Forum that it chaired jointly with the national Liberia Refugee, Repatriation and Resettlement Commission (LRRRC).

A national policy framework to address all aspects of the country's rehabilitation – the Results-Focused Transition Framework – was formally adopted in February 2004 by the international community and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL). This framework established a transition strategy leading to national elections in October 2005 with a series of key activities clustered under 13 headings. Cluster 3 dealt with Refugees, Returnees and IDPs, detailing a number of priority outcomes and laying out strategies on how to achieve them. To move forward with operational planning for IDP return, the Minister of Internal Affairs (chair of Cluster 3) and the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) approved the establishment of a Joint Planning Team made up of relevant UN agencies, LRRRC and various INGOs, local NGOs and ICRC attending on a regular basis.

The Collaborative Response in theory

In the absence of any one organisation with a specific mandate to protect and assist IDPs, the Collaborative Response is about working as a team using available national and international resources in a specific country context. This requires:

- leadership and the presence of actors with the requisite expertise, capacity and resources to respond to the different needs of the displaced
- consultation with the UN Country Team and international and local NGOs, to decide on the division of labour, addressing gaps and

avoiding overlap in apportioning roles and implementing activities

- participation and consultation with the IDPs themselves in the return planning process
- development of a Strategic Action Plan by relevant local and international stakeholders – to address key IDP issues (maintenance, return, assistance, protection).

Implementation in Liberia – a reality check

Leadership – with the designation of clear roles and responsibilities – is essential. Without strong leadership, implementation gaps remain unfilled and duplication of effort can easily occur. According to a number of reports in 2004 and 2005, effective leadership has been consistently lacking in Liberia. An NGO consortium observed in June 2004 that the dual function of the HC as Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General raised the question of his "ability to fulfill his role on behalf of the wider humanitarian community" given the evident demands that both roles made on his time.² On the government side, the NTGL's capacity limitations meant that it was unable to lead the RIMCO process effectively. The Minister of Interior was often unavailable to chair scheduled RIMCO Working Group meetings which consequently took place only sporadically. The Head of the LRRRC's contribution was not always constructive and often combative.

Unclear division of labour and a lack of consultative planning were both direct results of the leadership deficit in Liberia. In 2004 many NGOs became increasingly critical of the HC for failing to carry out such basic coordination tasks as deciding who should be responsible for IDPs in Liberia. Some NGOs observed that the collaborative response had turned into a competitive approach between UN agencies.

A vibrant and dynamic resource base of experienced agencies and

organisations existed in Liberia, all willing to collaborate. Although the record of assigning clear roles and responsibilities was not always spotless, there existed a climate of inclusion, debate and attempts to resolve difficulties that were raised at the national IDP Committee and its various sub-groups. Intractable problems were passed to the Humanitarian Action Committee (HAC) chaired by the HC, for resolution at higher levels, but in reality difficult decisions were deferred week after week.

As an integral part of the Collaborative Response, the Country Team is supposed to develop a system-wide strategic action plan. However, two return plans – one strategic and the other operational – set up in 2004 have since fallen into disuse. There have been no alternative plans or updates to incorporate emerging realities and challenges. Several recent reports have pointed to the lack of strategic and operational plans to achieve the goals set out in the RFTF.³

By August 2004 it was clear that return planning was suffering from

a lack of momentum. To address this, the Joint Planning Team (JPT) was asked to prepare a realistic IDP return plan, central to which was the launching of a major public information campaign to ensure that IDPs and the general public were aware of the plan. IDP consultation was held extensively in camps and in counties of return, in order to help guide and inform the process. In October, however, the HC decided to replace senior staff, including those leading the JPT, with people who had almost no experience of the recent Liberian IDP context. In early 2005 former coordination structures – which had represented a reasonably collaborative and inclusive approach – were replaced by a new IDP Consultative Forum on Return (ICF). According to various international NGOs and national NGOs, most of whom have been allowed little say in IDP-related matters, the ICF became little more than a ‘closed’ consortium of UN agencies, LRRRC, donors and one INGO representative. Decisions emanate with little discussion and often no consensus. The collaborative response had been sacrificed for expeditious, ‘boardroom’ decision making.

Consequences of flawed implementation

The combination of weak leadership, lack of workable plans, an insufficiently broad consultative process and inter-agency competition has had unfortunate consequences.

Lack of effective coordination and the closure of former IDP camp coordination fora resulted in some camps being under-served while duplication and overlap occurred in others. Recurring problems in assuring the provision of essential goods and services, such as shelter materials and sanitation, led to unacceptably poor conditions in the camps. One UN agency repeatedly promised to provide sufficient non-food items (NFIs) to IDPs but, when unable to do so, declared that it could not be held accountable for “gaps and delays”. Abnegation of responsibility is possible because there is no formal responsibility apportioned to agencies under the Collaborative Response, and thus no accountability when agencies renege on their promises. Similarly, inability to provide sufficient NFIs for return packages has led to delays in return operations.

The restricted nature of the ICF means that policies can be adopted without a majority of stakeholders being aware of what is being decided in their name. For example, a policy decision to provide return packages in UNHCR-constructed transit centres and various other district-level drop-off points in counties of return was taken last year in the JPT forum with the agreement of all stakeholders – but this policy was reversed by the ICF. Instead, a proposal by government representatives to provide return packages in the camps prior to departure became a fait accompli without consensus. The LRRRC maintained this was the preference of the IDPs, without regard for the wider implications, particularly protection concerns.

Insufficiently broad discussion has led to the adoption of flawed policy decisions that are contrary to both the spirit and letter of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Return should be voluntary, yet the decision to hand out return packages in the camps while warning beneficiaries that their huts would be demolished ten days after receipt

Two children in Monrovia look at posters of children who have been separated from their parents in the years of fighting in Liberia.



of these packages amounts to a bribe and a threat. Giving IDPs little choice but to hire sub-standard local transport vehicles which are often dangerously overloaded and unroadworthy does not promote return in 'safety and dignity'. Furthermore, having return packages provided in the camps prior to return leaves the beneficiaries open to robbery and assault, risking the loss of newly-acquired assets that were supposed to tide them over until the next harvest. Many have opted to consume or sell the goods and remain in the camps. All down the line, from camp to home, returnees are facing logistical and protection problems that risk jeopardising their successful reintegration into home communities - a difficult enough process without their exposure to added vulnerabilities.

The absence of a proper plan has led some donors to indicate that they may not continue funding until they can agree upon the plan's strategic direction and understand exactly what they are contributing to. It is deplorable that no organisation or individual can be held accountable for violation of rights and principles set out in the Guiding Principles. Earlier NGO fears that humanitarian principles would become subservient to political expediency have been shown to be justified.

Problems down the road?

Disregard for the Collaborative Approach and the Guiding Principles may have more serious implications for the ultimate security of the country. The successful reintegration of almost one fifth of Liberia's population is at stake. According to UN statistics, a total of 190,557 IDPs had received return assistance by mid July 2005, representing 76% of the RFTF target caseload. But handing out return assistance does not necessarily mean that people have actually returned. A total of 50,173 people have been transported to areas of return since November 2004, fair proof that return took place. The remaining figures are either given as spontaneous returnees (45,279) or people having received assistance in the camps (101,852) but in both cases it is extremely difficult to monitor whether or not they returned. The return picture may not be quite as rosy as it seems.

During a number of return planning discussions held during 2004 with

a wide range of international and local NGOs, the concept of preparing communities to receive the returning IDPs was considered critical. It was known that these communities were in most cases devoid of those basic public services that camp-based IDPs were benefiting from, such as clean drinking water, basic education and health care. It was therefore agreed that a process of investing in communities that would host the returnees should begin, running parallel to the return, which was scheduled to begin at the end of the rainy season (around October 2004). This process started in the latter part of 2004 focusing on the counties of Bomi and Grand Cape Mount from which over 120,000 IDPs were registered. A process of mapping the areas where returns would occur, overlaid with existing or planned NGO and UN activities, was started but did not receive the support of the HC's office and other UNMIL departments working in the counties - such as the RRR section (for Relief, Recovery and Rehabilitation). This lack of collaborative planning effectively meant that there was little connection between rehabilitation and development activities and returns at the district level.

Seen from the perspective of the returnees, whatever they bring back with them - a complete or incomplete return package - is probably more than what the local community has. They may thus be perceived as the fortunate ones and expected to share their return packages within the community. But if returning IDPs, some of whom have not lived in their communities for over a decade and have become dependent on aid, find themselves with few or no coping mechanisms and, rather than representing a useful resource to the community, are seen instead as a burden, this could disturb the delicate survival balance and sow the seeds of renewed conflict within these very communities.

According to local government officials many IDPs are not returning all the way home but are relocating to 'midway points', areas near the camps that would allow them to easily move back should renewed fighting break out, or perhaps to remain close to economic opportunities in Monrovia - a serious indictment of how Liberians themselves view the future. Returning refugees benefit from

much better services than IDPs. This is because there is one mandated agency for refugees, UNHCR, which would be held accountable for failing to undertake its role to assist beneficiaries in accordance with international standards. In stark contrast to IDPs, refugees are transported by reliable means, pass through transit centres with facilities for overnight stays, and receive their full repatriation package on time. Crucially, there is an effort to link 'community empowerment projects' to their return, thereby enabling host communities to re-absorb their displaced neighbours. Their return is thus likely to be much more successful and sustainable. Returning Liberian IDPs do not share in this joined-up programming and fall victim to a partial, ad hoc arrangement where agencies and organisations will only be able to cater for the recovery needs of a certain return community if they happen to operate there.

What can be done?

In the absence of a single organisation responsible for the world's estimated 25m IDPs, and given the difficulties of taking collective responsibility for them through a collaborative approach, what other options are available? If no single agency holds specific responsibility, it follows that no one has accountability either. Yet collective responsibility often leads to lack of accountability, confusion, duplication and inefficiency.

Recognising this, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee is considering a refinement of the humanitarian response. Details are still being worked out but, when in place, the new system assigning clear responsibility and accountability for specific sectors should lead to improved implementation of the Collaborative Response. Agencies taking a sectoral lead will be able to improve planning and delivery, raise funds and deploy sufficient resources to ensure a response that is commensurate with international standards - and be held accountable for it. The donor community would be asked for its support in allocating necessary and timely funding.

Such improvements may come too late for IDPs in Liberia. Yet, imperfect though the current system may be, Liberians may prove adaptable

and resilient enough to make do with what they have, as they have so often in the past. If the international community is to be spared the embarrassment of seeing its efforts result in a setback to the peace process, they must place their faith in the resourcefulness of the Liberian people.

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For further information on Liberia, visit the Humanitarian Information Centre, Liberia [\[info.org/liberia\]\(http://info.org/liberia\) and AlertNet \[www.alertnet.org/thenews/emergency/LR_CRI.htm\]\(http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/emergency/LR_CRI.htm\)](http://www.humanitarian-</p>
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