

Making the Collaborative Response system work

Many proposals are being advanced to improve – or even to scrap – the current international response system to crises of internal displacement. The Collaborative Response is far from ideal but, nevertheless, is still potentially the most viable way to systematically meet the protection and assistance needs of internally displaced people.

While the number of refugees crossing international borders has steadily declined, the number of people displaced by conflict has remained at around 25 million for several years. Some 50 countries are affected by conflict-induced internal displacement. Most IDPs receive neither adequate humanitarian assistance from their governments nor protection from violence and human rights abuses. The Global IDP Project estimates that three in four IDPs cannot count on national authorities for the provision of adequate assistance. In 14 countries, with a total of over 12 million IDPs, governments react with hostility or, at best, indifference towards their protection needs. Even worse, in at least 13 countries the very governments responsible under international law for protecting their citizens are themselves behind forced displacement and attacks on IDPs, either directly or through militias.

Whether they are deliberately targeted by warring parties or randomly caught up in fighting, most IDPs in acute displacement situations face threats to their physical security. The act of displacement itself is often accompanied by violence and the most serious human rights abuses such as arbitrary killings, torture, kidnappings and rape. Women and children are in particular need of protection as they are especially vulnerable to abuse, including sexual violence, abduction and forced recruitment. Sexual violence is reported to be a widespread phenomenon affecting IDPs in at least a quarter of all displacement situations.

IDPs are more vulnerable to malnutrition and diseases than local residents or other war-affected people.

Having been forced to leave their homes, IDPs generally have no access to agricultural land and may have fled to remote areas inaccessible by national or international agencies. Savings may be lost and coping mechanisms cease to function, leaving only limited opportunities to earn enough money to buy food or access health care. Overcrowding, poor sanitary facilities and lack of access to clean water make IDP settlements unhealthy places to live in.

Millions of IDPs remain displaced even though the violence that caused their displacement has long ended. This is often due to deadlocks in peace talks or lack of opportunities for reintegration in war-ravaged return areas, including difficulties in repossessing land and other property. While remaining in situations of protracted displacement, many IDPs are forced to live as second-class citizens, facing discrimination, restriction of their freedom of movement and their political rights, and difficulty in accessing personal documents, social services and benefits.

National governments have the primary obligation to protect and assist IDPs but generally lack the will and/or capacity to do so. In only 19 countries, with some 6.5 million IDPs, do governments make a genuine effort to assist IDPs by framing policies, enacting IDP legislation and enhancing institutional response capacity. Most, however, provide insufficient resources and institutions remain weak.

Collaborative Response fraught with problems

Several studies have identified shortcomings in the implementation

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of the Collaborative Response.¹ The Global IDP Project's *Global Overview 2004* showed that in 29 countries there was no UN strategy to address IDP issues while in others a coordinated response mechanism existed only on paper. In 14 countries the UN had no involvement in providing targeted assistance to IDPs.²

The inter-agency IDP policy – the Collaborative Response – clearly assigns responsibility for developing and implementing a comprehensive response to the UN's in-country Humanitarian Coordinators or, where this position does not exist, to Resident Coordinators. However, many Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators have not fully assumed this responsibility, or are not even aware of the obligation to do so. Citing budgetary constraints and other obstacles, agencies in many situations are reluctant to take on IDP-related responsibilities not strictly falling under their core mandates. In many emergencies, the Resident Coordinator – who is often the head of the UNDP country office – is designated Humanitarian Coordinator, although he/she may have little or no humanitarian background and his/her agency agenda may not be consistent with assuming a proactive role with regard to IDP issues. There are no specific reporting mechanisms and the general reporting line between Humanitarian Coordinators and the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) is often weak. As a result, there are generally no consequences for failure to comply with the policy.

For their part, several donors have not backed up their declared commitment to the Collaborative Response with genuine political support, funding or measures to hold agencies accountable for uncooperative behaviour. As a recent evaluation documented, donor funding practices may even undermine coordination efforts.³

Reacting to growing concerns over the deficiencies of the international response, the UN and other organisations revised and expanded the existing inter-agency IDP policy. The

new policy package adopted in September 2004⁴ is designed to provide Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators and agencies on the ground with the necessary tools to better implement the Collaborative Response. The Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, has worked to make internal displacement a UN priority, strengthened the UN's Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division, appointed a senior UNHCR official, Dennis McNamara, as its director and focused its work on a few selected priority countries.

More recently, steps have been taken to develop a lead agency system within the Collaborative Response. Plans under discussion at the time of writing envisage the designation of lead agencies for major sectors and cross-cutting issues related to internal displacement, with UNHCR likely to take over lead responsibility for the key area of IDP protection.

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Regardless of the valid criticisms, it would be premature to scrap the new inter-agency IDP policy mechanisms before they have had a chance to prove themselves. Serious efforts should instead be made to fix the structural deficiencies that still hamper the functioning of the IDP response system. The Collaborative Response has a number of advantages over alternative models as it allows the international community to:

- respond flexibly to the different phases and situations of displacement
- mobilise the resources and expertise of a wide range of actors
- ensure that the multi-sectoral challenge of internal displacement is met by a multi-sectoral response
- systematically involve NGOs in the joint international response.

There is strong political resistance by a number of states (and some UN agencies) to creating a new agency or expanding the mandate of an existing one to cover all situations of internal displacement. Given the state sovereignty issues that are at stake, this resistance is unlikely to be overcome in the near future. Even setting political obstacles aside, the sheer scope of the global internal displacement crisis goes far beyond the capacity and expertise of a single agency and thus necessarily re-



quires a broader inter-agency effort. This does not preclude arrangements such as the sectoral lead agency system currently under discussion, which could potentially lead to a strengthening of the Collaborative Response by addressing – at least partially – some of its key shortcomings, including the lack of accountability, predictability and leadership.

For the Collaborative Response to have a tangible impact, NRC recommends that:

- the ERC be requested to report to the IASC on progress made with regard to implementing the policy package
- Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators be required to report regularly on their efforts to develop – in consultation with NGOs – an IDP action plan with clearly defined measurable benchmarks
- only those with a strong humanitarian background be appointed as Humanitarian Coordinators
- Humanitarian and Resident Coordinators be properly trained on IDP issues and Country Teams be supported by a long-term senior IDP adviser
- agencies formally integrate the new policy package into their internal policy and operational documents and ensure that all relevant field personnel are familiar with the policy
- donors develop policies highlighting the vulnerabilities and specific protection and assistance needs

of particular IDP populations, support IDP-related coordination mechanisms and promote cooperation processes by using the political influence they derive from membership of agencies' governing boards in a coordinated and coherent way.

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NRC's position is further elaborated in a longer article by the author in the forthcoming special issue of *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, edited by Vincent Chetail (see p23).

1. *Protect or Neglect – Towards a More Effective United Nations Approach to the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, UN Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division, Nov 2004, at www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/protection_survey.htm; *IDP Response Matrix – Methodology, Data, Analysis and Issues for Consideration*, IDP Unit, 24 Oct 2002, at www.reliefweb.int/idp/docs/references/IDPMatrixPreOct03.pdf
2. *Internal Displacement. A Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2004*, Global IDP Project, Geneva 2005, at www.idpproject.org/global_overview.htm
3. *Support to Internally Displaced Persons, Learning from Evaluations*, summary version, SIDA, 2005, pp 13-14, at www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2005/sida-gen-28feb.pdf
4. *Implementing the Collaborative Response to Situations of Internal Displacement, Guidance to UN Humanitarian Coordinators and/or Resident Coordinators and Country Teams*, IASC, Sept 2004, at www.idpproject.org/IDP_documents/IDPPolicyPackage.pdf