

# IDPs and mobile livelihoods

by Finn Stepputat and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen

*A recent research project has examined the relations between internal displacement and migration in the Peruvian Andes in the second half of the 20th century and the difference that the introduction of the IDP concept has meant for understanding mobile populations.*

Findings suggest that programmes for assistance to IDPs should take into more account the degree to which mobility forms part of people's livelihood strategies before, during and after violent conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

## 'Tourists' or returnees?

Back in 1999, in a migrant neighbourhood in Huancayo, a city of 1 million inhabitants in the Central Andes, a government official meets with a group of IDPs. A couple of teachers among them have organised a group of 40 families for their return to the villages they left between 1983 and 1992, when the war between the army and the Maoist guerrilla movement, the Shining Path, wracked the region. By the mid 1990s, between 300,000 and 600,000 people had been internally displaced. In general, people left their rural villages to seek refuge in towns and cities, although these too were affected by the conflict.

*IDPs, Peru*

In Huancayo, the group discusses the procedures and criteria of return with the government official. He represents the Programme for Support to the Repopulation of Peru (Programa de Apoyo al Repoblamiento, PAR<sup>3</sup>) which was formed in 1994, partly in response to pressure from international and national organisations that wanted the government to recognise the problem of forced displacements in Peru. The rapid deterioration of living conditions in the cities is a driving force behind the urge to organise assisted returns and PAR is the only potential source of support in this process.

The main subject of discussion is the government's condition that only families who leave in order to settle **permanently** in the village and become 'active *comuneros*' (members of the peasant community) will receive support. In several return destinations, returnees have been characterised as 'tourists' because

they did not stay in the villages but returned to the cities. At the meeting, the mothers argue that they have to stay in the city where their children attend school. Everybody knows about the inferior quality of the village schools and secondary schools are hard to find. The men want to be able to leave the village for different tasks.

However, the official insists: "Father, mother, children, the entire group — that is what we call a family. ...this is the objective." Thus, he argues, the returnees will not be successful in developing their village livelihoods, nor will they receive governmental support for this, unless the families settle permanently and together exert pressure for improvement of the school and other services. The official asserts that more returns will follow. "Yeah," the women giggle, "returns to the city".

## Mobile livelihoods

The discussion reveals different problems in the perception of IDPs and delivery of assistance to them. Return to villages with poor services, no electricity, struggles over access to former land and communal pastures with low productivity is very difficult for people who have spent up to 15 years in the city. A less obvious problem, however, is the common underestimation of the degree to which mobility forms part of livelihood strategies in general, and in particular in the Andes.

Historically, the population has lived highly mobile lives. During the 20th century, temporary migration to the jungle, coastal plantations, mines and Lima enabled an increasing number of the villagers to establish themselves in the city of Huancayo and combine rural and urban livelihoods. Today only the poorest families do not engage in seasonal migration and most influential families have dual residence. Thus, *comuneros* may live in the village as well as in the city. They just have to attend the general assemblies and present themselves or a substitute for the general work turnouts in order to keep up entitlement as members of the peasant community.



In line with this long tradition, many of those planning now to return do not intend to do so on a permanent basis. Rather they would strive to re-establish and incorporate rural elements into their livelihood strategies, while maintaining their links and bases in the city.

### Forging an identity as IDPs

Only a few of the people planning to return had previously been organised as IDPs, and most had only recently identified themselves as such — if at all. As in most other situations where displacement takes place, it has been dangerous to be associated with the armed conflict in Peru, and to be

## *mobile livelihood practices are common ways of dealing with the conditions of life in the Andes*

'desplazado' meant to be poor, destitute, marginal, uneducated and rural. People who were eager to become socially mobile, and particularly those who had previous urban links and experience, would therefore not readily identify themselves as *desplazados*.

However, on the basis of the assistance to needy people in the marginal neighbourhoods in Huancayo during the violent conflict, organisations of 'migrants' did emerge, usually around soup kitchens. Until the early 1990s, the churches and NGOs did not use the concept of IDPs although they were looking for ways to distinguish conflict-related from pre-conflict migration.

Learning that elsewhere some international agencies and NGOs were using the IDP concept was a revelation. The sense of international and juridical backing and the resources that came with the internationalisation of the assistance contributed to the growth of activity of IDP organisations in Peru in 1992-93, producing a "fever of organisation", as leaders tell with hindsight. For them, the recognition and ensuing resources meant that they gained new experience, training and knowledge.

However, it was difficult to maintain IDP organisations. Membership dwindled as they did not deliver substantial material support. NGOs had problems keeping people in income-generating projects since they — and in particular the younger men

— tended to migrate to a variety of destinations in Peru in search for employment. For the NGOs that were most deeply committed to the cause of the IDPs, the 'dispersal' and 'instability' of the members were detrimental to the attempts to forge a strong political claim for recognition of the IDPs and the massive human rights violations to which the displaced population bore witness.

### The contradiction of mobility and assistance

These cases of IDP organisations and IDP returns in Central Peru point to a contradiction in the institutionalised attention to IDPs (and refugees as well) that developed during the 1990s. State agencies and

NGOs dealing with these issues emphasise the organisation, stability and place-boundedness of IDPs as a precondition for recognition, support and development. However our research suggests that mobile livelihood practices are common ways of dealing with the conditions of life in the Andes and many other regions at the edges of the world economy. These practices are sometimes valued and appreciated, at other times deplored, but they are almost always necessary. Thus, rather than regarding displacement and return as absolute, one-directional moves in people's lives, a focus on networks and mobile livelihoods may be a better way to help people affected by violent conflict to move beyond emergency relief.

The post-conflict dynamics in rural Peru, as in many other regions, are highly complex; the assisted returns of IDPs add to this complexity and risk provoking new social conflicts. To avoid this, it may be a better idea to support IDPs, impoverished migrants and 'stayees' not as separate categories but as part and parcel of a common process of recuperation and reconciliation. Confronted with serious conflicts in return villages, the PAR programme offered token support to the rural communities to which IDPs returned but with little or no reflection as to how the extended social networks spanning rural and urban sites could be supported and strengthened as a means of increasing production in the area.

Thus, the most serious problem of the whole recovery process has been the lack of support for production and development of productive potentials in rural areas of the Andes. In the words of the Peruvian analyst Carlos Monge, the Fujimori government considered the region as a 'giant soup kitchen', where only relief programmes and some social infrastructure were provided. Under these conditions, the idea of linking relief and development is rendered meaningless.

### Conclusions

The research project has pointed to some problematic conceptions regarding IDPs. As has been pointed out elsewhere, it may be difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between compulsive and voluntary migration.<sup>4</sup> People may leave as IDPs but *en route* and over time they may become difficult to distinguish from other migrants as their choices of destinations are shaped by economic or livelihood considerations or by previously established migration patterns. Others may leave as migrants but are caught away from home, becoming displaced *en route*. In any case, analyses of the conditions and prospects for displaced people should consider the importance of mobility before, during and after violent conflicts, as mobile livelihoods and extended social networks seem to hold opportunities for development in fragile ecological zones such as the Andes.

**Finn Stepputat and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen are Senior Researchers at the Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, Denmark. Emails: fst@cdr.dk; nns@cdr.dk**

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2. See the PAR website: [www.promudeh.gob.pe/PAR/index.htm](http://www.promudeh.gob.pe/PAR/index.htm)

3. See the PAR website, as above.

4. See for example Nicholas Van Hear *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal, and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, 1998, London: UCL Press.