

Preventing displacement

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The figures speak for themselves. As of December 2011, more than 26 million people were internally displaced, forced from their homes by armed conflict and insecurity, while millions more had sought refuge abroad. In addition, an estimated 15 million people were displaced by natural disasters in 2011 alone.

What the figures do not tell us is what displacement means for the people who are affected. Suffering displacement is often just the beginning of a series of challenges including continuing insecurity, further displacement through attacks on camps and settlements, and exposure to threats including sexual violence, forced recruitment and human trafficking. The personal emotional toll is immense.

Despite the efforts of humanitarian organisations, displacement often leads to hunger and illness, both physical and mental. There is a loss of dignity, as individuals and families become dependent on others for survival. Children are unable to go to school and many are not able to get the health care that they need. The effects of displacement can last a lifetime and beyond, damaging the prospects of future generations. For many displaced people in the world, the experience can result in a permanent loss of livelihood or employment opportunities, and can turn into chronic destitution. People lose contact with their countries, their cultures, their communities. It is devastating.

For some, temporary displacement is a way of protecting communities threatened by violence or disaster. After the threat has passed, people are able to return to their homes. But this is only possible if freedom of movement is respected and every effort is made to find solutions to the underlying factors which create the displacement.

Displacement is not inevitable, so what can we do to prevent it?



We can press all parties to armed conflict to respect international humanitarian law and protect the ordinary men, women and children. Fewer people would flee if warring parties took the necessary steps to spare them from the effects of hostilities, and complied with the principles of distinction and proportionality. We can and must do more to compel warring parties to refrain from using forced displacement as a weapon of war.

In situations when it is used in this way, displacement may constitute a war crime or crime against humanity, and must be investigated and prosecuted as such.

The first international legally binding convention on Internally Displaced Persons, the African Union's Convention for the Protection and Assistance of IDPs in Africa, requires states to take preventive measures to protect people from displacement in line with their obligations under international law. It also requires states to designate focal points to deal with the issue. States are legally required to prevent the political, social, cultural and economic exclusion and marginalisation that are likely to precede displacement. They have specific obligations to allocate resources, adopt national policies and strategies, and enact or amend laws to ensure that displacement is prevented, and set up early warning systems in areas where it could pose a problem. The Convention will enter into force on 6th December 2012, and I urge those states that have not done so to sign and ratify it without delay.

We must also do more to prepare for, and prevent, the displacement caused by extreme weather events. For example, in countries where there is drought on a regular basis, we know it is going to happen so it should not result in malnutrition. Regular flooding should not wash away entire villages. The work of the humanitarian and development community should help communities become more resilient. When communities and households are resilient, they are more able to withstand climate-related and economic changes without needing to leave home in search of food, work or shelter. Technical training, effective contingency planning, availability of trained emergency response teams, installation of weather stations, campaigns to raise community awareness and the provision of key emergency equipment can be effective tools to prevent the loss of life and risk of displacement in these circumstances.

We all recognise the importance of infrastructure development projects, like dams for hydroelectric power, and the benefits that these can bring to national economies. But indigenous groups in particular often rely on the land for their livelihood and as a basis for their cultural identity. If displacement cannot be avoided in developing infrastructure projects, the people affected should be part of the decision-making process on how it is to be carried out, and should be fully informed of the rights, choices and economic alternatives open to them.

I welcome the focus of this issue of *Forced Migration Review*. By learning from and building on our experience and by working with a wide range of the people involved, we can do more to prevent displacement and the suffering it brings.

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