

The ICRC approach in situations of pre-displacement

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The International Committee of the Red Cross prioritises the need to prevent displacement-triggering events when possible. Their experience from around the world of working in this ‘pre-displacement’ phase – preventing violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), undertaking protection activities and providing assistance – highlights the complexity of the challenges and the central role of working in partnership to serve communities at risk.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) aims to assess people’s needs in all stages of displacement – whether they are themselves displaced, staying behind or playing host to displaced people. A careful analysis of the process and the ability to anticipate how displacement is likely to unfold can help to determine when, where and how best – even whether – to intervene. Although displacement is often a dynamic and unstable process, and rarely unfolds as an orderly succession of phases, for purposes of assessment and analysis the ICRC considers four main phases: pre-displacement, acute displacement, protracted displacement and, finally, durable solutions. This article focuses on those in situations of pre-displacement – in particular, on preventing violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), undertaking protection activities and providing assistance.

Preventing violations of IHL

Violations of IHL are one of the main causes of forced displacement in armed conflicts. IHL – in particular, the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 – seeks to protect individuals from the effects of hostilities and limit the methods of warfare used by parties to armed conflict. Of particular significance are IHL provisions prohibiting attacks and reprisals against civilians, the conduct of indiscriminate attacks, the starving of civilians as a method of warfare, and the destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of civilians.

IHL also expressly prohibits any party to an armed conflict from compelling civilians to leave their homes, and affords IDPs the same protection from the effects of hostilities and the same entitlement to assistance as the rest of the civilian population. States and any other parties to conflict are obliged to provide aid necessary for the survival of all civilians, regardless of whether they have been displaced or not, and to allow unimpeded and rapid passage for relief supplies.

Preventing violations of IHL is therefore an essential means of preventing displacements from occurring in the first place. Clearly, if IHL were better respected by warring parties, much of the displacement and suffering of internally displaced people (IDPs) could be prevented. Preventing displacement – if that gives people better security – is preferable to supporting them in displacement. Yet, as experience has shown, ensuring respect for IHL is a constant challenge.

In accordance with its mandate under the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC reminds parties of their

obligations under IHL both by making formal and informal representations about alleged incidents and by raising awareness of IHL among the relevant authorities and weapon bearers.¹ Moreover, the ICRC helps states incorporate into their domestic legislation their obligations under IHL relating to displacement, and works with international and regional organisations to prevent displacement in times of armed conflict and to enhance protection for IDPs.

The Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), adopted in 2009 by the African Union, contains a number of important IHL provisions that bind both state and non-state actors. Its provisions aim not only to protect IDPs but also to help prevent forced displacement and prohibit arbitrary displacement.² The challenge now for this convention – as well for IHL in general – is to ensure that States Parties incorporate it into their own national legislation and regulation systems, and develop plans for effective implementation and monitoring.

Protection activities

The number and variety of perspectives on displacement make it challenging to provide appropriate responses. While humanitarians tend to regard displacement as a negative phenomenon – a protection problem – and try to prevent it at any cost, those directly concerned may consider it a self-protection strategy or a means of sustaining their livelihood. Also, military forces may evacuate certain areas if they deem it necessary for military reasons or for the population’s security.

Preventing internal displacement must not impede freedom of movement and the right to seek safety. In certain situations, as a last resort, the ICRC evacuates people who are especially at risk. However, preventing problems and stepping in to provide support are not mutually exclusive activities. The ICRC may take action to help prevent the causes of internal displacement even while it works with a community in support of early-warning systems which allow them to plan ahead for possible displacement.

Identifying the right interlocutors and calibrating the messages conveyed to the authorities will largely depend on what humanitarian organisations see as the particular causes of displacement. Internal displacement resulting from direct military orders and internal displacement undertaken by a community as a preventive measure on the basis of rumours (whether true or false) or of

fear arising from past events are clearly different, requiring different responses. ICRC staff aim to use a variety of working methods, such as, for instance, persuasion of authorities combined with mobilisation of other actors, and support for the people who need it.

It is important to consider the characteristics of any particular displacement. Do people move by families or in groups? Where do they go? When do they go – what is the tipping point? Do better-off families go to the same place at the same time as poorer families? Are the movements from urban to urban or rural to urban? Knowledge of patterns is vital. Not only do such patterns provide additional information on the causes of the displacement but they also give valuable insights into whether support for early warnings or evacuations will be necessary.

In most cases, people have put in place collective or individual early-warning systems in their communities. These include the use of special means of communication to warn the community, the preparation of food or other items in case it is necessary to flee, and payments for information on possible attacks. ICRC support may be in the form of conveying lessons learned by other communities in similar situations, or assisting communities in making contingency plans, identifying threats, analysing risks and determining the displacement threshold.

Undertaking regular risk and needs assessments with communities is the key to providing snapshots of an often rapidly changing situation. Needs assessments identify the particular threats in a given context at a particular time, their causes and various perceptions of them, while risk assessments focus on the likelihood of threats in the future. Together these assessments help reveal whether affected communities see internal displacement as a threat, a consequence or cause, or a coping strategy, and they can help humanitarians anticipate developments.

Anticipating internal displacement movements is the core of the ICRC's protection approach to pre-displacement. This approach helps ensure that context-specific factors are taken into consideration, and enables the ICRC to work in parallel with communities on preventing the causes of internal displacement and providing support for better early-warning and contingency plans. Finally, it enables the ICRC to take action earlier to prevent certain possible causes of internal displacement.

Assistance pre-displacement

Not only do people react promptly to violence and threats but they are also affected by factors other than violence and threat – factors such as poverty, the effects of climate change, scarce resources and economic crises – which can also serve as a catalyst for conflict-induced displacement. People may be forced into displacement through losing their livelihood or access to basic services, for example.

The ICRC's assistance programmes aim to ensure that access to essential health services and medical facilities is maintained, that shelter, safe water and adequate sanitation are available, that people are protected from explosive remnants of war, and that income and means of production are preserved. Achieving these aims may

require the direct involvement of ICRC staff working with, and building on, existing local capacity. It may entail encouraging the authorities and other actors to fulfill their responsibilities, or a combination of both approaches. Assessment of context and close consultation with the affected communities are essential to formulating the response.

By ensuring access to safe drinking water either directly or by supporting other providers, one of the possible causes of displacement can be removed. The same is true of health care. Livelihood support programmes help households to be self-sufficient and less vulnerable to displacement. Providing people with the means to produce their own food again, or to generate a regular income, directly improves the standard of living of households. This in turn can help people to cope with the various threats posed by an armed conflict or other violence.

In Colombia, for some 2,000 children in 14 schools, the renovation or rebuilding of schools and provision of lessons on health and hygiene meant higher attendance rates, less exposure to weapon contamination, recruitment and fighting, and better hygiene. Meanwhile, communities in the Alto Guapí area enjoyed improved water and sanitation thanks to a Colombian Red Cross/ICRC project that ended in June 2011. In this way, boosting economic security can prevent impoverishment that might lead to displacement.

Beyond the 'push factors' described above, an important cause of internal displacement in crises is the 'pull factor' created by the local concentration of services provided by humanitarian organisations – in places such as camps – at a level that is significantly higher than in the surrounding area. This is particularly common in underdeveloped regions, where a severe absence of economic opportunities and services characterises environments in which armed violence occurs. The basic standard of living, even of those who are not directly affected by violence, is often dismally low. Aid provided to people suffering the effects of violence in accordance with internationally accepted standards often far exceeds what is available to much of the resident population and, as a result, IDP camps typically create a significant pull factor.



Dissemination session on international humanitarian law for the Israeli Defense Forces, in Nablus



While food distributions in Somalia can help relieve immediate suffering, the ICRC also provided seed and fertilizer for 240,000 farmers ahead of the planting season to give the population the means to sustain their own livelihoods.

Humanitarian aid often aims to meet needs stemming from an immediate humanitarian crisis without meeting the needs arising from a crisis of under-development. Although this extremely complex dilemma requires solutions that stretch far beyond the humanitarian sphere, actions taken to counter the ‘pull effect’ of humanitarian aid – particularly IDP camps – should nevertheless be considered within the design of a project. Although humanitarian actors tend now to be more aware of the potential pull effect of their assistance, there may be security reasons, logistical challenges or political decisions that prevent their access to affected communities. Relief centres are therefore set up in more accessible areas. However, it is essential to provide assistance as close as possible to affected populations’ region of origin and, if possible, to support them with relief that is flexible enough to facilitate return and restart economic activities. Restoring access to basic services such as water, electricity, schooling and medical care may also prevent long-term displacement.

Gaining a foothold in vulnerable communities – where disaster and conflict preparedness is often weak, and local actors have few resources – is key to preventing displacement. In its report on the implementation of its policy on internal displacement, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement recognised that the various components of the Movement face several

challenges in preventing displacement in accordance with their mandate. The lack of understanding and implementation of the rules governing the protection of civilian populations, the gaps in knowledge of domestic laws and policies adapted to displacement issues, the lack of analysis of the impact of long-term discriminatory measures regarding housing, job opportunities or land tenure are all elements that complicate anticipating displacement. All components of the Movement have recognised the need to make substantial efforts to better acquaint themselves with documents such as the Movement’s policy on internal displacement which tackles these issues. The need to translate principles into operational agreements or refer to them in operational dialogue at all levels with all actors is also essential. Working together more strategically and in better partnership can only better serve communities at risk.

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1. See Olivier Bangerter, ‘Talking to armed groups’, FMR 37 www.fmreview.org/non-state/Bangerter.html

2. See Maria Stavropoulou, ‘The Kampala Convention and protection from arbitrary displacement’, FMR 36 www.fmreview.org/DRCongo/stavropoulou.htm