on Protracted Refugee Situations for 2009. As of August 2009, however, it was unclear whether agreement could be reached on the text. Differences remained on questions relating to definition, international cooperation and responsibility, approaches to durable solutions, and the place of refugees within the broader UN system. It would be important for an ExCom conclusion to resolve these issues and help bridge the divide between host countries in the global South and donor and resettlement countries in the global North.

Discussions on protracted displacement should also take into account new international opportunities that could facilitate more holistic and sustained discussions linking refugees, peacebuilding, migration and development. Recent developments within the UN system, namely the establishment of the UN Peacebuilding Commission and the UN Peacebuilding Fund, may provide additional opportunities for such integrated and sustained responses. There is also growing international support for the ‘One UN’ pilots which require the different UN development actors to function in a more integrated manner at the country level, with a common programme and budgetary framework. At the same time, the UN has become increasingly committed to the establishment of integrated missions in war-affected and post-conflict situations. These missions bring together the UN’s humanitarian, human rights, development, peacekeeping and political functions.

Important innovations are also taking place in individual donor countries, largely motivated by increased awareness of the changing dynamics of the global refugee population, especially as they affect planning for resettlement programmes, and recent thinking on the importance of ‘joined-up’ and ‘whole-of-government’ responses to peacebuilding in fragile states. For example, Canada has established an Inter-departmental Working Group on Protracted Refugee Situations to develop a ‘whole-of-government’ response to the issue.6 Similar initiatives in other states would make important contributions to the formulation and implementation of a more effective response to protracted refugee situations. The success of such an approach will, however, depend entirely on the sustained engagement of a wide range of actors.

While such responses are challenging and will not be achieved easily or quickly, they are essential. Comprehensive solutions to protracted displacement situations are the best way to address the concerns of Western states, meet the protection needs of refugees and respond to the concerns of countries of first asylum. As such, concerted effort to resolve these situations is in the interest not only of refugees and the displaced but of all actors in the international system.

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1. Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, Protracted Refugee Situations, Standing Committee, 30th Meeting http://tiny.cc/UNHCR_ExCom
3. See endnote 1.
6. See article on pp28-29.

Doubly forgotten

The plight of over four million people displaced by the conflict in Colombia fits into the definition of a protracted situation regarding numbers, duration, chronic character and lack of adequate response by local governments and the international community. However, the Colombian situation has not been included in official documents, papers, meetings, presentations or publications about protracted refugee situations either by international organisations or by scholars.

Colombia is portrayed as a stable middle-income country rather than a failed state, which is the focus of present work developed on protracted displacement. Misrepresenting the causes of displacement in and from Colombia – as that of a democratic state threatened by terrorist groups and drug traffickers – hampers the recognition of forced migrants’ rights. Responses to displacement caused by the Colombian conflict are also affected by regional political and security considerations which are often at odds with humanitarian interests.

The consequence of playing down the conflict and humanitarian crisis is that Colombian displaced people receive little attention from the international community in terms of diplomatic efforts, financial resources and specific policies. As this situation continues over time and no specific initiative on protracted situations is implemented in the region, IDPs and refugees live in an ever-deteriorating situation of limbo, with decreasing possibilities of finding protection, assistance and durable solutions to their plight.

The study of neglected protracted situations such as in Colombia draws attention to the complex political processes at different levels that are behind the perception of a protracted situation and its inclusion – or not – in studies and policy-making efforts. Most scholarly work and international organisations’ initiatives on protracted displacement have been geographically limited, focusing on Africa and Asia and, very recently, on the Balkans. The study of neglected protracted situations such as Colombia can shed new light on the problem, especially regarding internal displacement, urban displacement and regional/local responses. The Colombian case can help to broaden concepts and efforts not only regarding protracted displacement but also forced migration in general.

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