

Emerging options for durable solutions in Darfur

Zurab Elzarov

IDPs in Darfur continue to face difficulties in securing a durable solution to their displacement. Recent developments may offer new hope for some, but complex challenges remain.

The conflict in Darfur, which erupted in 2003, resulted in widespread human rights violations and the displacement of a large number of people throughout the region. The conflict has destroyed infrastructure, damaged social cohesion and community stability, and seriously curtailed employment and livelihood security. As confidence was eroded, investment in much-needed development of the region also diminished. According to the Sudan 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview,¹ some 1.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Darfur are registered as living in camps. The UN and partners estimate that a further 500,000 displaced people live in host communities and settlements.

Political progress was made with the signing of the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD)² in May 2011 between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and some of the armed opposition groups. Progress regarding return and other durable solutions across Darfur, however, remains limited, given continuing hostilities and insecurity; the resulting protracted displacement of large numbers of IDPs poses a continuous challenge to satisfying their basic needs and maintaining an adequate standard of living, and puts significant pressure on urban infrastructure. Durable solutions to displacement need increasingly to be explored – solutions based on the principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity, and which focus on enhancing communities' capacity for self-reliance, supporting livelihood opportunities in areas of voluntary return, and addressing the burden on urban and rural absorptive capacity.

National authorities have primary responsibility for developing and implementing a durable solutions strategy. In December 2015, Sudan's Vice-President

Hassabo Abdelrahman announced the government's determination to put an end to displacement in Darfur before 2017, suggesting that IDPs choose between two options: either to return to their places of origin or to settle in their area of displacement, with IDP camps to be converted into residential areas. Similar announcements were made by other high-level politicians, including President Omar al-Bashir in November 2017. In August 2016, there had been reports of an intention survey having been distributed by the Humanitarian Aid Commission (part of the government's Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs) among the displaced, providing them with a third option, that of resettling in a third location.³

IDPs across Darfur voiced their rejection of the government's plans regarding the closure of IDP camps, arguing that no voluntary return to their places of origin would be possible in the absence of a comprehensive peace agreement that provides for security, stability, justice and access to basic services, compensation and land rights. IDPs have maintained that the conditions are not in place for them to begin a new life in their areas of origin or to settle sustainably elsewhere. Furthermore, many of the IDPs are now accustomed to living in an urban environment and would expect a similar level of services in their places of origin.

It is important to understand in this context that working towards durable solutions means diminishing gradually the needs and vulnerabilities of displacement-affected communities, while strengthening their capacities, skills and resilience. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs identifies three options to achieve this goal, which are underpinned by the principles of voluntariness, safety, dignity and non-

discrimination: 1) return of displaced persons to their place of origin or habitual residence; 2) local integration in areas where displaced persons have sought refuge; and 3) settlement elsewhere in the country.⁴ However, the mere return, local integration or settlement of IDPs elsewhere in the country are not necessarily durable solutions. The options must be feasible, viable and enduring.

The role of the UN–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and the humanitarian community in the first instance is likely to be to support IDPs to make a voluntary and informed decision about their future. However, displaced people cannot make a voluntary and informed choice unless they have an accurate understanding of the conditions on the ground and understand the implications of each option. Similarly, UNAMID and humanitarian organisations cannot plan for and support IDPs effectively without having some understanding of their intentions. Gaining more information on displaced people's intentions is therefore a key first step in delivering effective support for durable solutions.

Option 1: Return

According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview, about 386,000 returnees have voluntarily returned to their places of origin across Sudan, including Darfur. These returns have been a mixture of permanent and seasonal movements, with some people moving back to areas of origin temporarily for livelihoods purposes.

The experience of those who have returned permanently so far, however, calls into question the overall sustainability of returns. Many people have reported facing significant challenges in rebuilding their lives, including a lack of adequate basic services and livelihoods opportunities. Moreover, for some people, disputes over land ownership have been a critical issue; in some returns areas, land has been settled by others since the original displacement took place.

Option 2: Local integration

The majority of displaced people have resided in peri-urban or urban camps or

camp-like settings since the outbreak of the conflict, and the majority of displaced people (especially young people) have become increasingly urbanised. Local integration has been occurring over the last few years despite the lack of direct external support. Although people continue to receive humanitarian assistance, they also participate in the local labour market, trade in local commercial markets and access basic services such as education or health care for themselves or their children, and use other community infrastructure, such as legal courts. This has prompted local authorities in several locations to include displaced populations in their urban planning, as for example in Nyala, South Darfur.

Despite the political focus on returns, local integration is the reality for many displaced people, with evidence indicating that families will continue to integrate further into local communities as they aspire to urban livelihoods and to living nearer to basic services compared with those available in areas of origin. That said, there is likely to be some fluidity between returns and local integration; families may decide to pursue both at the same time. Better information and up-to-date profiling of IDP camps and residents will help to predict future trends and to inform programming.

Option 3: Resettlement

There have been fewer cases of recorded resettlement in Darfur than of either return or local integration. So far, the only major resettlement initiative has been in Sakaly, South Darfur, where the State Ministry of Urban Planning and Nyala South Commissioner were planning to allocate plots of land to the Sakali IDPs currently living in the suburbs of Nyala town. They have also allocated land to 1,614 households from Al Serif IDP camp and integrated them with the Nyala community. A further 1,800 IDPs from the same camp will be given plots of land. In practice, it is probable that some portion of these cases – which on the face of it would appear to be return or local integration initiatives – involves some form of resettlement. Given the

issues over land mentioned above, some returnees have migrated to the general vicinity where they once resided but not to the original house or village. Meanwhile, those displaced people who have pursued local integration often move outside camp settings to other surrounding urban areas.

The government and some bilateral donors have built houses for returnees in what they call 'model return villages', primarily through one-off financial commitments. For example, such villages have been established in Fasha Beliel and Baba Beliel in South Darfur, funded by Kuwait and Qatar; in Karti and Aru in Central Darfur, funded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; and in Habila Kanari and Borta in West Darfur, funded by the League of Arab States and Saudi Arabia. However, the experience of such projects has raised questions around their sustainability, particularly regarding issues of land ownership and continuing investment and maintenance. The alternative concept of 'service hubs' is attracting attention, where common facilities or utilities are built close to several return communities, providing access to basic services in close proximity to where returnees reside, thereby benefiting from economies of scale.

Way forward

Under the 2017–19 Integrated Strategic Framework, UNAMID and the UN Country Team (UNCT) agreed that the planning of durable solutions for displaced people should be conducted through an area-based approach. At the beginning, joint work focused on three pilot areas: Abu Shouk and Al Salam in North Darfur, as a model for durable solutions for IDPs in urban areas, and Um Dukhun in Central Darfur, which has a focus on IDPs and refugee returnees in a rural context. UNAMID and the UNCT/ Humanitarian Country Team's Durable Solutions Working Group helped develop tools for monitoring durable solutions, including the gender and human rights aspects, and the sustainability of the (re) integration of displaced populations. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of UNAMID and UNCT in collaboration with relevant

national institutions, it is the Government of Sudan that has the primary responsibility to address internal displacement by protecting and assisting IDPs and by creating conditions conducive to safe, durable and voluntary solutions in Darfur.

The 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for Sudan⁵ states that about 1.86 million people in Sudan, including Darfur, will either continue to live in a situation of protracted internal displacement or be newly displaced. As in recent years, some returns and local integration of displaced people are expected to continue. In the meantime, in August 2019 high-level officials from the UN and African Union told the UN Security Council that the installation of Sudan's new transitional government presents an opportunity to restore long-term stability in Darfur.⁶ To this end, resolving internal displacement (and preventing future displacement) is inextricably linked to achieving lasting peace and stability. On one hand, unresolved problems of displacement may cause instability and thus threaten peacebuilding efforts. On the other hand, durable solutions, particularly return, cannot be achieved for IDPs as long as there is a lack of security, property is not restored, and conditions for sustainable solutions are not in place.⁷ The new Sudanese authorities will therefore have a difficult and complex task as substantially increasing support for durable solutions in Darfur will require expanding basic services, enhancing security and rule of law in areas of return, enabling sustained access to affected people, and addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Zurab Elzarov zelzarov@yahoo.com

Chief of Joint Operations Centre, UNAMID

<https://unamid.unmissions.org>

The views expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of UNAMID.

1. bit.ly/Sudan-HumanitarianNeeds2018
2. bit.ly/DPDD-en
3. The results of this survey have not been shared with UNAMID or the UN Country Team (UNCT).
4. www.unhcr.org/50f94cd49.pdf
5. bit.ly/Sudan-HumResp-2019
6. www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13929.doc.htm
7. <https://brook.gs/2ktYPwZ>