

The reality of transitions

Silvio Cordova

Attempts to address the drivers of forced displacement and to provide sustainable solutions for refugees, IDPs and returnees need a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of violence and of war-to-peace transitions.

There is a well-known litany of reasons for obstacles to the engagement of development stakeholders in forced displacement and protracted situations. While factors such as differing mandates, institutional arrangements, funding instruments and programming cycles between the humanitarian and development communities have played a role in creating and perpetuating the 'humanitarian-development divide', little attention has been drawn to the weak conceptual foundations of 'bridges' or 'links' between humanitarian and development assistance and their lack of empirical evidence. Barriers to engaging development and political actors in preventing and responding to displacement, and to the design and implementation of joint humanitarian-development strategies, have primarily been conceptual.

Despite growing recognition that transitions from emergency response to development assistance should not be linear, the idea and practice of humanitarian actors 'handing over' to development actors persist. This is primarily due to a lack of understanding of drivers of violence and of how transitions from war to peace unfold. Indeed, analysts and practitioners have rarely questioned the phenomenon at the core of concepts such as 'linking relief to development': namely the transition from war to peace. The idea of 'links' and 'bridges' is based on flawed assumptions about such transitions, assumptions that are not grounded in the complex reality of countries emerging from conflicts and crisis. As a result, interventions based on such an approach cannot provide a response to and address the unpredictability and multiple variables of transitions.

In order to understand why a linear sequencing of humanitarian and

development assistance is unhelpful and counter-productive, it is of paramount importance to look into the drivers of violence and displacement in the first place. This will also allow us to understand why violence often continues into so called 'post-conflict' settings and hence will provide us with a more nuanced interpretation of war-to-peace transitions.

Continuities and cycles

In many conflicts, the aim of armed groups and other actors is the prolongation of violence in order to achieve economic (and political) gains, rather than outright victory. Economic agendas, though, are not enough to explain why violence may continue into 'peacetime'. Greater attention should be given to communities' socio-economic grievances that are often overlooked and that play a critical role in triggering and fuelling violence. The end of a conflict does not necessarily entail a clean break from past patterns of violence: high levels of violence are a recurrent feature of most countries emerging from conflict. Indeed, legacies of war together with new forms of violence explain why transitions are characterised by repeated setbacks and reversals.

Given the reality of the prolongation of violence into 'peacetime' and repeated cycles of violence and displacement, the debate on the relationship between humanitarian and development assistance should therefore move from a focus on 'gaps', 'bridges' and 'links' between the two communities towards a better understanding of transitions from war to peace.

As transitions are not a one-way process neither should transitions from humanitarian assistance to development be. It would be unrealistic to assume that the international community can address such a fluid,

May 2016

www.fmreview.org/solutions

complex and unpredictable phenomenon as transition by providing humanitarian and development assistance in sequential ways, and to plan the timing of when humanitarian assistance should 'hand over' to development cooperation. As transitions are particularly susceptible to repeated cycles of violence and displacement, even in situations of relative peace and stability, it is no surprise that the implementation of early recovery initiatives, the 'handing-over' model and other variations of 'linking relief to development' have proven problematic. There may be a need for humanitarian aid, for instance, in 'post-conflict' environments during relapses into violence and new cycles of displacement, as the conflicts in Colombia and DRC have shown, or there may be room for development in emergency settings and on-going violence as in South Sudan.

Changing the discourse

It is important to point out that most drivers of violence – and resulting cycles of displacement and protracted situations – are structural developmental, economic and political factors. In addition, most issues limiting sustainable solutions for refugees, IDPs and returnees – such as land rights, establishment of livelihoods and employment opportunities, rule of law, and freedom of movement – are developmental and political in nature rather than humanitarian. As a consequence, a linear implementation of humanitarian assistance followed by development would not only postpone – rather than address – these underlying issues but also might contribute to the prolongation of crises and conflicts.

Therefore, keeping in mind the drivers of violence and the multi-faceted nature of transitions, forced displacement and, in particular, protracted refugee and IDP situations should be reframed within broader development, peace-building, economic and political discourses. Indeed, preventing and addressing these issues need societal and economic transformation that go beyond the scope and mandate of humanitarian organisations. The strategies that follow on from this should be broader,

multi-sectoral and multi-year interventions that envisage the simultaneous engagement of development, humanitarian and political stakeholders from the onset of and throughout a conflict and a displacement crisis. This will be likely to contribute to enhancing the human development of displaced populations, their contribution to the economy of hosting countries and communities and, as a result, the quality of their protection during displacement.

Reframing the debate on the 'humanitarian-development divide' around the issue of transitions can result in more informed and evidence-based policy and programming and more sustainable solutions for displaced populations. It has also the potential to open up space for a greater involvement of development and political stakeholders in mitigating drivers and impacts of displacement on host communities and countries. In addition, their engagement from the onset of a displacement crisis would be instrumental in conducting advocacy and political dialogue with countries of origin and asylum for addressing the development needs of refugees, IDPs and returnees.

It may be that the narrow way in which the humanitarian community has contributed to depicting displacement and protracted situations for decades has been in part the cause of lack of interest by development actors, who have not seen these issues as being their concern. It is now crucial to address the tendency – within donor and government circles as well as international organisations – to underestimate the implications of labels and rigid categories for policymaking and for developing innovative and more sustainable approaches to preventing and addressing forced displacement and protracted situations.

Silvio Cordova silvio.cordova@eeas.europa.eu
Programme Manager, European Union Delegation to South Sudan

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.