

Forced displacement: a development issue with humanitarian elements

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Work on conflict-induced forced displacement is at a crucial moment, at a tipping point. Now is the time to consolidate the shift towards full global recognition that the challenge of forced displacement is an integral part of the development agenda too.

There are currently an estimated 60 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. The related social, economic and fiscal challenges are further amplified if one also takes affected host and return populations into account. In addition, the average length of time that people are displaced has been growing and is likely to increase even further as there is still no peace in sight for many of the ongoing conflicts.

Only a few of the displaced people are currently able to avail themselves of any of the three 'durable solutions'. Resettlement in third countries is limited in numbers and very expensive; voluntary return is hampered by lack of stability and peace, and full local integration and naturalisation are often blocked by policy restrictions. Most displaced are therefore living in 'protracted displacement'. An increasing proportion of displaced people live in urban areas, intermingled with the local communities, but often do not benefit from basic services on a par with the local population and are also excluded from the formal job market and from business opportunities. In large displacement situations the socio-economic and macro-economic impact on host communities and countries can be substantial. In such situations, the needs of the displaced and affected host populations are predominantly developmental.

Challenges, obstacles, opportunities

While there clearly is a continuing need for more humanitarian assistance, there is simply no way that present-day displacement needs can be covered by humanitarian financing and approaches, let alone solved. Given the lack of success by national and international stakeholders in addressing the roots of today's

conflicts, they tend to linger on without any resolution in sight. Yet policymakers, planners and other actors see displacement as a largely humanitarian issue. They ignore its inevitable longevity, and the typical response therefore stays in a short-term mode. However, there is growing recognition that the present system is not working.

Humanitarian agencies are not equipped to address the long-term developmental needs of those in protracted displacement, and yet this has been the default for many years. If the policy framework stays in a short-term humanitarian mode during protracted displacement, there is every potential for this to breed exclusion, poverty, degradation, possible radicalisation, and new conflict



Third-generation refugee children walking to school in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. June 2014.

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and violence as well as significant economic and fiscal pressure on host countries.

The problems in an inherently humanitarian approach are compounded by policymakers who focus on the negative impacts of the arrival of displaced people and ignore the positives. They often blame displaced people for other pre-existing ailments, and they put in place shortsighted and restrictive policies rather than addressing the problem more jointly and holistically.

This reflects a lack of understanding of short- and long-term social, economic, fiscal and security implications of protracted displacement. There is sometimes a deliberate wish not to want to understand these implications out of fear that this would run counter to short-term political views or trends, leading to loss of electoral votes. Thereby displaced people fall victim to local politics. This negative spiral needs to be reversed.

In practical terms this would require recognition of displaced people's right to work and to move freely. Displaced people need to be seen as potential assets for local growth and development rather than always being viewed as a burden. For this to happen,

there is a need for affected governments and their development partners to understand that forced displacement is a core development issue and that, as such, it belongs in national development plans, even if substantial humanitarian needs mean that humanitarian actors must stay engaged.



There is growing analytical and operational evidence of the benefits of innovative, development-led approaches to displacement. A few countries are beginning to include displacement challenges in their development plans and are thus setting the stage for development actors to support national efforts through loans or grants. The World Bank is getting seriously involved in addressing forced displacement in terms of analytical work, policy dialogue, operations and new financing options, and its partnership with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is expanding. An increasing number of bilateral donors are beginning to think more in this way about the issue as well.

The issue is attracting attention in 2016 through a number of high-level events; this increased engagement at the policy level is welcome but also essential if we are to achieve the fundamental change that is needed. It is an opportunity that should not be missed. The challenge will be to find a holistic approach that deals with these crises at the source, for neighbouring countries and for countries further afield, under one comprehensive long-term framework where the legitimate concerns of all parties are addressed.

What is to be done?

The first step towards fundamental change would be for all actors to accept that conflict-induced forced displacement is predominantly a development issue with humanitarian elements – and not the other way around. This change in mindset requires an understanding that, while protracted forced displacement often requires short-term humanitarian action, it is fundamentally about responding to the social, economic and fiscal implications for the displaced people and for hosting countries to the benefit of all affected. Often this may require area-based, targeted investments to boost economic activity, particularly in host areas with high unemployment. Real and substantial improvements for those living in protracted displacement and the affected host populations can only come about by addressing housing, livelihoods and jobs, access to services, inclusion and governance in

ways that benefit both the displaced and their host communities, ensuring that displaced people end up being self-reliant rather than needing continued humanitarian aid.

It is important for governments of affected countries to understand that most, if not all, new forced displacement situations may become protracted, and that they need to muster sufficient political courage to make the necessary long-term policy decisions early in the crisis. This is not easy. International development actors and donors should work closely with these governments to help them weigh up the different policy options; they can do this by providing country-specific context assessments (that include joint stakeholder analysis of the policy environment and the institutional frameworks and capacity), demographic profiling and an analysis of the prospects for durable solutions. Hence it is important to map the direct and indirect economic, environmental, social, macro-economic and political impact of the displacement situation on both the displaced and the host communities. This evidence can then be used as an entry point for policy discussions with the host government and local authorities. These analyses should of course include meaningful beneficiary consultation.

Governments need to have such assessments and policy options available to make the needed policy choices. Multilateral and bilateral development actors should work with governments to shift from short- to long-term policies to forced displacement from the beginning. They should also continue to strengthen the design of multilateral and bilateral sectoral programmes and operations so they include a response to the specific needs of the displaced and affected host and return communities within the wider programme. This will include embracing a new policy concept of 'temporary longer-term economic integration', with return or other lasting solutions being the long-term goal. This is a difficult and slow process but it must be done and there is growing evidence that it can work. If displaced people are allowed to be more self-reliant, thereby enabling them to contribute to the economy

and to pay taxes, it can reduce the need for humanitarian assistance and lessen macro-economic and service-delivery stress. In this way the displaced will also be better prepared for return as they are able to build and retain skills and accumulate savings essential for eventual successful return and reintegration.

For a comprehensive approach to work effectively, governments need to exercise strong leadership and provide the required legal and policy frameworks that set the parameters for development interventions and the timing and space for humanitarian interventions. Hence host countries should play a leading role in policy dialogue from the beginning in order to develop long-term comprehensive planning for all sectors, taking into account country-specific needs and political challenges. All government actors should be clear about the short- and long-term economic, social and fiscal implications. A key host country concern would often be a reluctance to entertain the full durable solution of local integration. An approach of longer-term temporary integration until a lasting solution is found would be more applicable to most situations.

Development actors should also continue to deepen their collaboration with humanitarian actors. First and foremost, this should involve developing a situation-specific, multi-year common programme framework with well-defined lead roles and overall objectives and based on joint assessment and analysis. For this to work, all international and local actors need to work together. Donors need more comprehensive, synergetic approaches to funding, UN development agencies need to establish their roles through a more inclusive and open approach towards larger common programme frameworks, and the international financial institutions need to engage in broad partnerships that also include bilateral donors.

By adopting such approaches, it should be possible for development actors to engage from the beginning of crises and to focus on the long-term development needs of the displaced and their host countries or return communities. In this collaborative approach, it is important that they draw

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on their comparative advantages and resist the temptation to get directly involved in humanitarian work. Humanitarian actors on the other hand need a clear exit strategy built in early, taking into account host country capacity and also the continued need for protection of and support to marginalised groups that are not benefitting from wider programmes.

A key part of this is the importance of a joint context assessment which can provide a joint platform for all actors to work from. The World Bank-led joint assessments of displacement in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa are good examples of how this can be done differently from in the past.¹ Once the needed policies are in place and operations are designed, all relevant financing sources – including new lending tools and grants – must be activated along with inputs from the private sector and the security sector, in order to project a real sense of responsibility sharing supporting a single policy framework. International development partners can assist affected countries in formulating such policy frameworks.

All this serves to show that development actors have a key role to play in mainstreaming the issue of forced displacement, and they must make the best of current opportunities and platforms to ensure that they meet this challenge. These opportunities include consensus around the need to operationalise the Sustainable Development Goals, the World Humanitarian Summit and global and country-specific efforts, among which the Solutions Alliance stands out as particularly promising. In short, it is time for development actors to work comprehensively on their tools and instruments, to scale up their efforts on forced displacement impacts in fragile and conflict-affected countries and to advocate with governments.

Dialogue on all of these issues is most effective if it addresses the concerns of host countries, if it includes a focus on improving conditions of host communities and thereby of the displaced as well, and if it proves that allowing refugees to use the capacity they have is beneficial to the host country. Above



UNHCR/R Hummel

The 67 families of IDPs living in this collective centre in Georgia fled Tskhinvali in 1991. (photo taken 2008)

all we should not forget that this is about respect for other human beings; our objective is to help them secure a dignified, meaningful and safe life while in displacement and to support them in finding a lasting solution.

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This article draws on work on the displacement challenge with UNHCR, NGOs and the World Bank Group. It reflects the views of the author and not necessarily the views of UNHCR, the World Bank or any of the other organisations.

1. World Bank/UNHCR (2015) *Forced Displacement in the Great Lakes Region: A Development Response* <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/21708>; World Bank/UNHCR (2015) *Forced Displacement and Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa* <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/22286>