



www.rsc.ox.ac.uk

Refugee Studies Centre  
 Department of International Development  
 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK.  
 Tel: +44 (0) 1865 270722  
 Fax: +44 (0) 1865 270721  
 Email: rsc@qeh.ox.ac.uk

## Another talkshop or seeds of an effective southern African IDP policy?

by Graeme Rodgers

A seminar on internal displacement in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region was held in Gaborone, Botswana, 24-26 August 2005. Sponsored by UNHCR and the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, it brought together a wide range of actors, including representatives of southern African governments, sub-regional, regional and international organisations, civil society organisations, donors and academic researchers. It yielded a challenging and thought-provoking discussion, which was, understandably, occasionally heated, given such diversity of perspective and points of departure. But the discussion also showed promising signs of a cross-fertilisation of ideas, and the beginnings of a potentially important debate on the specific regional dynamics of internal displacement in southern Africa.

Amongst other themes, the meeting explored problems related to the identification of the internally displaced, challenges in generating reliable information on the scale and nature of internal displacement and the development of effective mechanisms, at various levels, which might address current crises and prevent future ones. Predictably, countries deeply affected by conflict, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Mozambique, received considerable attention. Presentations also highlighted those displaced internally through food insecurity and urban renewal programmes. However, academics and advocates also urged participants to think of the problem of internal displacement more broadly and to recognise the unresolved massive 'backlog' of those who have been internally displaced through apartheid, colonial dispossession, disastrous post-colonial experiments in social engineering and privatised forms of large-scale development that cur-

rently impact the developing world so profoundly.

In general, participants endorsed the repeated suggestion that the plight of IDPs can only be addressed through a tightly coordinated national, sub-regional, regional and international response. Participants also emphasised the need for the international community to support states and for states to grant humanitarian access to their IDP populations. National governments were recognised as the necessary lynchpin around which an effective response should be organised and the support of donors, regional and international bodies was acknowledged as crucial. The Guidelines on Internal Displacement enjoyed widespread acceptance and repeated endorsement.

But despite an overall enthusiastic commitment to alleviating the plight of IDPs, occasional references to specific cases revealed significant cracks in this apparent consensus. State representatives were quick to underscore their sovereign right to govern the settlement of their populations, when confronted with suggestions that specific state-sanctioned initiatives had degenerated (or threatened to degenerate) into situations of internal displacement. They justified this defensive stance with reference to international campaigns to discredit their governments or inhibit their development, pursued either by foreign governments or international NGOs. Their responses exposed an important, though unspoken, tension over the politics of recognising forcibly resettled populations as 'internally displaced' or not. The stakes behind such diplomatic silences are high. For example, despite the government of Zimbabwe's refusal to recognise those affected by Operation Murambatsvina as 'internally displaced', a number of critical African voices echoed Walter Kälin, the Secretary-General's Representative

on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, in describing Zimbabwe as a "situation of massive internal displacement."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder to what extent the generally positive sentiment of the seminar would impact the lives of the masses of landless and socially marginalised post-colonial and post-apartheid southern Africans. Is it realistic to expect southern African states to take the bold political step of acknowledging their ongoing (and, perhaps, historically inevitable) complicity in displacing (as opposed to 'resettling') the most vulnerable sections of their constituencies? Is some degree of 'internal displacement' an inevitable cost of development in a region like southern Africa, given the institutional weakness of states, constant struggles over political legitimacy and entanglement in the strings that will always be attached to international support?

From the regional perspective, the seminar has sown the seeds for a vibrant and potentially productive debate on the very nature of internal displacement. The extent to which these will germinate into an effective set of responses will, however, depend on the ability of those involved, particularly governments, to acknowledge and confront the politics of internal displacement head-on.

**Graeme Rodgers is a Research Fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre. Email: graeme.rodgers@qeh.ox.ac.uk**

This is written in a personal capacity and does not reflect the perspectives of the seminar's organisers or sponsors. The seminar report will shortly be published by the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement at [www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/conferences/contents.htm](http://www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/conferences/contents.htm).

1. [www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/MIRA-6EU96Y?OpenDocument](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/MIRA-6EU96Y?OpenDocument)