

Invisibility of urban IDPs in Europe

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Some IDPs in the Balkans, Caucasus and Turkey seek ‘invisibility’ for security reasons. Others become invisible when they are forced to move again within the city by the actions of city authorities or property owners.

Where displacement to towns and cities is itself a coping strategy, IDPs may prefer not to display any features that may differentiate them from other urban inhabitants in an effort to avoid becoming targets. Choosing private accommodation over government-sponsored housing can also contribute to their ‘invisibility’, as can barriers to registration.

Displaced for an average of 15 years, IDPs in Europe, for example, have gradually moved from government accommodation to private accommodation – that they rent, own or share – in towns and cities, or continue to reside in informal settlements at the periphery of urban centres. The fact that they have adopted behaviour similar to that of other urban residents, including economic migrants, are interspersed with them and are searching to integrate has discouraged any effective profiling and monitoring of their needs.

IDPs’ accommodation, in particular when informal or collective, is often precarious; IDPs are more prone to forced evictions on the basis of discrimination or because owners decide to reclaim the space to sell it or use it for other purposes. This accrued risk of intra-urban mobility increases pressure on IDPs to keep a low profile, while evicted IDPs usually disappear even further into the urban landscape.

In some cases, government policies have exacerbated their invisibility by creating legal barriers. In an effort to manage increasing urbanisation, governments in Russia and Azerbaijan, for example, have limited people’s choice of residence, rendering IDPs in many cases ‘ghost residents’. Similarly, Roma IDPs in Serbia must, like other citizens, produce a contract for their accommodation to apply for personal documentation, social assistance and free health care, which they are often



Internally displaced woman preparing a meal in a collective centre that was formerly a tuberculosis treatment centre, Tbilisi, Georgia.



Internally displaced family from Chechnya who applied to the European Court of Human Rights about their eviction from a private apartment, Stavropol, Russia.

unable to do. As they face significant obstacles to changing their official residence from their place of origin to their place of displacement, IDPs join the ranks of urban residents without any formal recognition and struggle to enjoy their rights on a par with their non-displaced neighbours. In other cases, especially in instances of secondary displacement, IDPs may choose not to change their place of residence in order not to lose benefits already secured. Government policies have also created social barriers. For instance, in Turkey, Kurdish IDPs continue to face difficulties with limited recognition of the Kurdish language in public fora and in schools. The societal barrier leads to further marginalisation.

In such circumstances, different groups co-exist with varying degrees of representation in the urban arena but all with the aim of fulfilling their fundamental rights and needs. Invisibility may be an obstacle but it is also a coping strategy. The Tufts-IDMC profiling study of IDPs in urban areas¹ showed how the implementation of a household survey – requiring no IDP self-identification – can not only produce IDP population estimates and patterns of distribution within the city but can also contribute to a valuable understanding of how IDPs and non-IDPs may differ with regard to some key elements, such as housing, education, employment and their experience with forced evictions. Among other considerations drawn from carrying out such a study, three become apparent.

Firstly, the question of who is or is not an IDP needs to be carefully considered – not only in light of the definition provided by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement but also so as to have a common approach among all actors involved for who will and who will not be included in the final count.

Secondly, in order to provide an appropriate response in urban contexts, it is essential to collect information on all the different segments of the urban population affected by displacement – urban poor, migrants, forcibly displaced, returnees, etc – as this will provide a comparative snap-shot of each group's vulnerabilities and highlight how conflicting interests may come into play.

Thirdly, in situations of protracted displacement, such a comparative analysis can provide much needed information on whether IDPs have attained durable solutions and, if not, what the outstanding obstacles are, including the unaddressed needs of the host urban population.

On this last point, the example of protracted displacement situations in Europe is particularly relevant. As donors and the media show decreasing interest in internal displacement in Europe and as most governments still prioritise return of IDPs to their homes, there is a widespread lack of basic information about IDPs seeking durable solutions through settlement options other than return, especially in urban settings. This lack of interest and

information on IDPs settling in urban areas is just another form of invisibility. Though in principle an easy group to collect data on because concentrated in the same location, displaced populations who had found refuge either in collective centres or other forms of gathered settlements in urban areas were not profiled in at least 24 out of 56 situations of internal displacement monitored by IDMC in 2008.

Because of the protracted nature of their displacement, IDPs in Europe are facing increasing challenges as the transition to a market economy continues to change urban landscapes. For example, much social housing has been privatised while the continued occupation of collective centres often conflicts with governments' privatisation policies and owners' interests, leading to the eviction and further displacement of residents.² Governments have made few housing alternatives available to evicted IDPs and very few former communist countries have developed or implemented social housing legislation since their transition to the market economy. While IDPs' needs may not differ, in some cases, from those of other urban residents, their claims for property restitution and/or compensation remain largely unanswered, which still sets them apart from their neighbours.

The influx of IDPs into urban areas has put pressure on services and infrastructure which have not always been able to meet the increase in demand. Experience has shown that these IDPs are unlikely to return to predominantly agricultural areas when they have a chance to do so – but it is certain that they will be more able to make a truly voluntary choice about whether to return if they are able to live a normal life now.

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1. See article pp13-15 and <http://www.internal-displacement.org/urban>

2. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/europe/protracted>