

Urban IDPs in Uganda: victims of institutional convenience

Hilde Refstie, Chris Dolan and Moses Chrispus Okello

The reluctance of some humanitarian actors to address the needs of IDPs inconveniently located in urban areas – in contrast to those in camps – belies their commitment to a rights-based approach to assistance and protection.

The largest wave of displacement in Uganda occurred in 1995-96, when the government forced civilians in northern Uganda into so-called ‘protected villages’ using mortars and helicopter gunships in the process. The ‘protected villages’ were later turned into IDP camps¹ which received little assistance from the government. The humanitarian community in Uganda limited its food distribution to IDPs registered and residing within the camps.

People scattered and fled from the war in northern Uganda to many locations and it is estimated that between 300,000 and 600,000 people went to urban areas.² IDPs in urban areas are most often perceived as either economic migrants, or IDPs who have reached a durable solution. Consequently the urban IDPs in Uganda are not given much attention, and assistance is seldom provided for this group.

The gap in policy and practice between encamped and non-encamped populations stems partly from the government’s focus on control rather than rights in the course of the conflict in northern Uganda. It also stems from humanitarian actors being guided by convenience rather than the rights of the population they are mandated to assist. Protecting and assisting urban IDPs involves challenges on three levels. On the practical level is the difficulty of identifying IDPs in an urban setting, which is exacerbated by a lack of registration and information. On a more conceptual level, the neglect of urban IDPs can be explained through two on-going debates within the field of migration: voluntary versus forced migration, and when displacement ends. On a connected, more ethical level,

there are also concerns linked to singling out IDPs from other people experiencing similar hardships.³

IDPs among other urban poor

IDPs that live outside camps are not registered, and there is not much information available about them. Such challenges in identifying urban IDPs make it difficult for the government and the humanitarian actors to address their needs. Whereas IDPs in camps in Uganda have at times had ration cards indicating their entitlement to assistance, urban IDPs have no corresponding form of documentation with which to ‘prove’ their displacement and therefore they often disappear into the larger population of economic migrants.

In addition to problems with identifying IDPs in an urban context, it can also be complicated to assist them. Favouring IDPs over the local host population can lead to friction between the two groups. Consequently, a more integrated approach of development that

includes both the IDPs and the host population is often promoted. However, it should also be recognised that many urban IDPs will have the displacement-specific need for assistance with return as well as compensation for loss of property and assets that do not apply to their non-IDP neighbours.

A third challenge in identifying and assisting urban IDPs is related to people’s mixed motivation for moving to urban areas. The formal IDP definition distinguishes clearly between forced and voluntary migrants. In reality, however, the distinction is quite blurred. IDPs, like everyone else, search for both protection and livelihood opportunities. Many countries, including Uganda, face a failing rural economy and rapid population growth. In such a context, people may have mixed reasons for migrating to urban areas.

A durable solution?

Actors who recognise that people often flee from conflict to urban areas frequently consider such individuals to have reached a durable solution and therefore to no longer be displaced. According to the Framework for Durable Solutions,⁴ IDPs are considered to have reached a durable solution when they have either returned to their places of origin, have locally integrated in the areas in which they initially took refuge, or have settled and integrated in another part of the country and no longer have displacement-specific needs.

The few studies conducted on whether urban IDPs can be considered to have reached a durable solution point to relative material and psychosocial vulnerabilities of urban IDPs. A recent study from the Refugee Law Project suggests that while urban poor and IDPs face similar challenges, they are exacerbated in the IDPs’ case by psychosocial vulnerabilities stemming from their conflict-related

“What About Us?”

http://www.refugeelawproject.org/video_advocacy.php

What About Us? is a 32-minute video about displaced Acholi people in Kampala and other urban centres. These displaced Acholi share their stories, their feelings on being treated as foreigners in their own country, and their hopes of returning home to northern Uganda despite the return to armed conflict. The video also addresses the inability of government and humanitarian agencies to design appropriate interventions for those displaced to urban areas. (A seven-minute version of the video is also available.)



Meeting of IDPs in Jinja, Uganda. They have been organising themselves over the last two years (together with IDPs in Kampala, Entebbe and Masindi) and are advocating for being included in the return and resettlement framework and activities developed by the government and its partners.

experiences, weak support networks in the urban areas and – in some cases – language differences between the IDPs and the local communities. The study indicates that the ramifications of displacement for urban IDPs, as for IDPs elsewhere, often go beyond the mere change of location. The displacement signifies a loss of one's land and of means of support, cultural loss and subjective feelings of exile.⁵

Many of the recent methods and tools developed for identifying urban IDPs seem to focus exclusively on how to determine whether or not the IDPs are worse off than the surrounding population. In an urban setting people settle according to their income, effectively reflecting the status of people around them. IDPs therefore often end up among the very poorest in the cities. It may be worth asking the question whether being part of the urban absolute poorest

population can be considered a durable solution for IDPs.

Conclusion

In recent years UNHCR has expanded its role and responsibilities to include IDPs. In the case of Uganda, UNHCR supports the government in addressing internal displacement. However, while advocating for freedom of movement, UNHCR has been complicit with the government's policy of encampment by limiting assistance to IDPs residing within camps.

It must be recognised how government interests, supported by the tendency of humanitarian actors to act according to institutional convenience, can limit forced migrants' access to durable solutions. Restricting the movement of refugees and IDPs for reasons of control and convenience undermines their rights and opportunities

to create viable livelihoods for themselves and their families.

When protection and assistance are limited to IDPs living in camps, alternative solutions are difficult to pursue. While most agencies have adopted a rights-based approach on paper, financial constraints often lead to needs-based strategies in practice. Considering the challenges in working with urban IDPs, many find it more convenient to focus on the IDPs placed before them – namely, the camp-based IDPs. We argue that by focusing exclusively on encamped populations, the government, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have effectively extended what might be termed an 'institutional convenience syndrome' into the area of IDPs.

The protection cluster in Uganda⁶ led by UNHCR has recently attempted to gather more information about urban IDPs, which is a good first step. However, further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to assess the specific needs of IDPs outside camps, including those in urban areas. The life and future of these IDPs should not be determined by institutional convenience.

Hilde Refstie (hilderefs@gmail.com) is a Former Research Associate, Chris Dolan (dir@refugeelawproject.org) is Director, and Moses Chrispus Okello (research@refugeelawproject.org) is Head of Research and Advocacy Department, at the Refugee Law Project, an autonomous organisation under the Faculty of Law at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda (<http://www.refugeelawproject.org>).

1. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Refugee Law Project (2006), 'Only Peace can Restore the Confidence of the Displaced', Geneva <http://www.refugeelawproject.org/others/RLP.IDMC2.pdf>

2. Urban IDPs are not registered so the estimates are mere guesswork. Refugee Law Project (2007): 'What about us? The exclusion of urban IDPs from Uganda's IDP related policies and interventions', Kampala http://www.refugeelawproject.org/briefing_papers/RLP.BP09.pdf

3. Refstie (2008) 'IDPs Redefined – Participatory Action Research with Urban IDPs in Uganda', NTNU, Trondheim. <http://www.tinyurl.com/NTNURefstie08>

4. <http://www.unhcr.org/3f1408764.html>

5. Wyrzykowski Paulina & Okot Kasozi, Benard (2009): 'Violence, Exile, and Transitional Justice: Perspectives of Urban IDPs in Kampala', RLP Briefing Paper, August 2009.

http://www.refugeelawproject.org/briefing_papers/Psychosocial_Briefing_Note.pdf

6. <http://www.ugandaclusters.org/protection.htm>