

Narrowing criteria cannot solve IDP problems

by Greta Zeender

The case of Rwanda demonstrates significant differences among leading agencies and policy makers working with displaced people in their understanding of displacement and resettlement concepts.

At the heart of the problem is the UN agencies' and NGOs' struggle to agree on whether Rwandans relocated into new villages should be considered permanently resettled or still displaced.

Over the last decade, Rwandans experienced repeated waves of displacement, the latest in 1998 when several hundred thousand people in the northwest were moved into supervised camps. The government justified this action as a protection measure against insurgent actions but many observers saw it primarily as a way to deprive opponents of support. At the end of that year, the government ordered these camps to be dismantled and the displaced to be relocated to new villages.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UNHCR, the UN Special Coordinator on Internal Displacement and the US Committee for Refugees (USCR) used different criteria to decide when displacement ends. Differences centered on whether resettlement was permanent, if basic humanitarian needs were met and how voluntary and durable the solutions were.

Changing criteria

Some agencies, by changing their criteria, appeared to write off thousands of IDPs. In mid-1999, OCHA counted some 500,000 IDPs previously displaced in northwestern camps and then resettled in villages. That year, OCHA narrowed its criteria and counted only 150,000 people who received direct humanitarian assistance in the resettlement villages. In mid-2000, OCHA adopted an even more restrictive approach, excluding the newly relocated people on the grounds that

they had all been moved to their final location: either to former homes or new villages. OCHA then used the term 'newly relocated' instead of 'resettled', noting that "a number of sites are lacking basic infrastructure and a large number of families are under plastic sheeting."¹

At the end of 1999, UNHCR talked about an intermediate category – some 625,000 returned IDPs – calling them 'people of concern' to the agency. In fact, rather than having 'returned', the majority of Rwandan IDPs had been resettled. The following year, IDPs in Rwanda ceased to appear as a category of concern to UNHCR.² Thus in UNHCR's eyes resettlement seemed to have ended displacement.

By 2001, OCHA announced that there were no more displaced people in Rwanda. OCHA's Senior Adviser on IDPs, in December 2000, undertook a mission to Rwanda at the request of the UN Special Coordinator on Internal Displacement. He estimated that the resettlement was permanent and that durable solutions had been found for the IDPs. "While conditions of return and resettlement are often yet inadequate, governmental and international efforts to stabilise the situation through durable solutions have advanced beyond the threshold of what still could be called internal displacement," he concluded. The Adviser also looked at whether the process of resettlement was voluntary, deciding "there is no evidence today that [the resettlement policy] is implemented with a degree of compulsion which would warrant the label of 'forced displacement'."³ His criteria for ending displacement seem to be: permanent resettlement, a durable solution and a reasonable degree of voluntariness.

The UN Special Coordinator on Internal Displacement disagreed. He said that it was politically problematic to say that there were no more IDPs in Rwanda when, in Burundi, people who had been resettled for decades were still counted as IDPs, although they lived in acceptable conditions. At this point, both turned to the Representative of the UN Secretary General on Internally Displaced Persons for guidance.

A leading NGO meanwhile considered humanitarian needs and permanent location to be criteria for the end of displacement. USCR concluded that about 150,000 Rwandans were internally displaced at the end of 2000, primarily people at villagisation sites without proper shelter or land allocations. USCR reasoned that people lacking essentials such as proper shelter and farming opportunities at government-designated sites could not be considered permanently resettled. The following year, however, it counted no Rwandans as internally displaced, noting only that unknown displacement might still exist due to the government's resettlement policy.⁴

Resettlement should be voluntary and durable

Permanent resettlement was the only criterion that all actors viewed as necessary to end displacement. Some organisations considered other criteria as necessary but came to different conclusions on whether they had been fulfilled. It was only in 1999 for OCHA and end of 2000 for USCR that fulfilling basic needs became an explicit criterion to end displacement.

The forced nature of resettlement, however, was widely overlooked. Despite numerous UN and NGO reports of coercion during the resettlement process, none of the relevant organisations viewed the forced aspect of resettlement as serious enough to continue to consider the resettled people as displaced people.

Also, the durability of solutions was generally not seen as a decisive factor in ending displacement. The need for durable solutions is derived from the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement 28 and 29, which state that competent authorities shall endeavour to facilitate the reintegration of resettled IDPs and assist them to recover their property or appropriate compensation. But only OCHA's Senior Adviser on IDPs stated that efforts to stabilise the situation through durable solutions had advanced beyond what could still be called internal displacement. Complicating matters, durability is

highly debatable in a country where close to one million people still live in inadequate shelters lacking basic services, three-quarters of them in the northwest.⁵

The case of Rwanda shows the importance of agreeing on when displacement ends, and to consider how voluntary and durable resettlement has been. Narrowing definitions is no way to make the problems of displaced persons disappear.

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1. OCHA 19 August 1999, and 24 December 1999. Affected populations in the Great Lakes region (displaced - refugees); August 2000, Update on IDPs in Rwanda
2. UNHCR, June 2000, *Global Report 1999*, p.96; June 2001, *Global Report 2000*, p.111
3. UNOCHA, 18 December 2000, 'Mission Report: Displacement and Resettlement in Rwanda'.
4. USCR, June 2001, *World Refugee Survey 2001*, p.99; June 2002, *World Refugee Survey 2002*, p.90
5. Brookings Initiative in Rwanda, November 2001, Land and Human Settlements, 2.3.1