

# Unlocking protracted displacement

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**If protracted – and often forgotten – situations of displacement are to be ‘unlocked’, the international community must circumvent the rigidity of existing solutions and search for new and innovative strategies.**

The concept of protracted displacement situations is built on assumptions of largely sedentary populations waiting for durable (ie permanent and sustainable) solutions, and a regulated and documented existence within defined and accepted boundaries (of state, of official status and of expected behaviour). Merely imposing the label ‘protracted’ implies that they are somehow exceptional, yet over two-thirds (7.1 million) of the world’s 10.4 million refugees are to be found in protracted exile<sup>1</sup> and situations of protracted internal displacement persist in over 40 countries. So these are hardly exceptional situations; rather it is arguably now the norm with few situations of displacement satisfactorily resolved.

‘Unlocking crises of protracted displacement for refugees and IDPs’ is the title of a recent study conducted by the Refugee Studies Centre in collaboration with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The study attempts to develop new thinking and different approaches to help unlock situations of protracted displacement by looking at two current cases (Somalia and Iraq) and one past case (Central America), and addressing four main issues:

- the relationship with state fragility and patterns of governance and conflict
- the perceptions and interests of the displaced people – and the host communities, transnational networks and the diaspora – in shaping the situations they are in
- the more flexible use of the available durable solutions

- innovative initiatives offering alternative ways of unlocking protracted displacement.

While every case has its own particular features, it is also clear that there are many problems common to many protracted displacements. Initial conclusions from the research highlight the inadequacy of the long-accepted three durable solutions. People are unwilling to return as long as high levels of insecurity and weak or non-existent governance persist; host countries resist local integration; and resettlement is an option only for a few because of the entrenched securitisation of entry controls in the West. And the displaced constitute a seemingly intractable challenge to the international community and to the states where they reside as they are immune to this set of ‘durable solutions’.

Prolonged displacement is often accepted, albeit reluctantly, as a semi-permanent state of affairs while durable solutions imply seeking an ‘end-state’ solution. Yet this fits uneasily with the need for flexible, experimental and often politically risky modes of intervention to tackle the fluid and episodic nature of displacement. The coping and mobility strategies which the displaced population deploy under conditions of protracted displacement in order to survive are informal but these initiatives and strategies must be part of the solutions.

The research shows that *de facto* integration and settlement are an inevitable consequence of protracted displacement despite the official, legal or political tactics designed to prevent this. But it also shows that these people are neither static nor immobile and that displacement stimulates new patterns and processes of mobility. Refugees and IDPs who have lived in conditions of

protracted displacement show a propensity to embark on strategies of irregular secondary migration, suggesting that they prefer – or are forced – to seek their own solutions. This is partly risk management and partly a trial-and-error search for other more favourable opportunities. Given the circumstances, such tactics are predominantly both temporary and undocumented, a pragmatic adaptation to explore the grey area between the two poles of displacement and durable solutions.

These findings suggest that for host states and the international community innovative and politically challenging policies and strategies are needed, requiring multi-dimensional



UNHCR/Luca Catalano Gonzaga

Somali refugees at Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, which has existed for more than twenty years.

courses of action which include: more flexible legal regulation (regional citizenship or other forms of more secure residency than is normally made available to refugees, more flexible work permits, internal freedom of movement); new economic and livelihood development policies (sustained development programmes and projects for the displaced and local host populations); strategies which shift the focus from humanitarian to development assistance; innovative regional policies and tools (such as regional mobility agreements); revised refugee policies (increased resettlement opportunities in the West, temporary protection and asylum); and political empowerment and engagement (enhanced modalities for involving the displaced in peace building and reconstruction). This would constitute a radical liberalisation of the orthodox policy paradigm, which is not unreasonable given the obvious need to depart from the failed normal 'solutions'. The suggested strategy would build upon what displaced populations are demonstrably already doing and would thus be based upon their own interests, capacities and aspirations.

Within many protracted displacement situations there exist several waves of people displaced, reflecting the chronic inability of the states involved to function adequately, the outcome being a landscape of recurrent crises, with responses to acute crisis existing alongside protracted exile. Yet there is a danger that, in focusing on state fragilities and the 'permanent crises' of displacement that these provoke, other forms of protracted displacement may be missed, such as those caused by state repression rather than state failure. Understanding these different forms of displacement will help international actors to tailor appropriate policies.

### Reshaping the 'solutions'

There is a difficult challenge for international actors seeking to provide for a displaced population who are often intent on not being labelled as 'refugees'. In all three case-studies, migration – including seasonal, permanent and circular migration at a transnational, regional and local level – is a crucial component of populations' responses to their protracted displacement. Migration (a better term may be mobility) can perhaps best be described as the deliberate and strategic employment of movement to maximise access to rights, goods and opportunities. Where the quality of asylum on offer is minimal and access to formal protection limited, the distinction between 'forced' and 'voluntary' secondary movement is unhelpful.

Linking protracted displacement to the declining quality of asylum protection available is also important because it underlines the fact that the quality of solutions often rests on the quality of asylum. The search for 'solutions' overshadows addressing declining standards of protection within asylum, although this research appears to show that there is an urgent need to focus on securing adequate protection during displacement and pending a long-term resolution.

Equally, recognition of the significance of mobility must be accompanied by a parallel acknowledgement that to date the international community has been extremely resistant to supporting displaced people migrating.

Building a framework for regularised, safe and voluntary migration and movement of the displaced after their initial flight is clearly integral to unlocking protracted displacement, without losing sight of the need to enhance the quality of asylum where displaced people actually are. In this way, unlocking protracted displacement is not associated with stopping movement but with facilitating the access of the displaced to rights. For IDPs, it is often even less clear where displacement ends and migration begins. The answer may lie in ensuring that IDPs are not forced to move but are free to move.

Resettlement is a highly politicised process, a political tool used by states to meet political aims. Refugee responses to resettlement opportunities are also highly political. Given the political realities shaping resettlement, how can resettlement policies be better tailored to match the needs of displaced populations and unlocking protracted crises? If resettlement is to function adequately as a means of securing protection for those unable to find this in the country of first asylum, there is clearly a simultaneous need for both more resettlement places and more opportunities for refugees to move as migrants. Developed states could contribute to the opportunities for migration available to the displaced by reforming their own immigration systems to allow refugees to move more easily as 'migrants' rather than through formal channels of refugee resettlement.

Even where *de jure* integration – that is, officially recognised integration – is impossible, it is clear that some measure of *de facto* integration is inevitable, as in the cases of Iraqis and Somalis. It would therefore be advisable for government actors to acknowledge this reality and formulate proactive policy responses in relation to it in order to better reflect the dynamics of interactions between the displaced and the host community.

Particularly for second- and third-generation refugees who are self-settled in the host community, *de facto* integration is already a given. Removing obstacles to labour market access and restrictions on movement would help to facilitate interaction – and through interaction would foster prospects for integration – between displaced and host communities. Encouraging *de facto* integration is a move away from categorising groups as 'displaced' or 'hosts' and instead focusing on community-level engagements. This is not merely a programme or policy strategy but indeed recognises the stimulus that displacement can give to development. In the Central American case-study for example, Mexico offers some key clues about which conditions help to foster integration; these indicators suggest that the best foundations for *de jure* integration is *de facto* integration building on existing cultural affinities and sensitively supported through community-based projects. Host states and the international community must accept that in protracted displacement situations some *de facto* integration will inevitably occur, even when encampment policies are used. Efforts should be focused not on trying to prevent the gradual development of such links but on ensuring that they are productive for communities as a whole and are not undermined by precarious legal status leaving the *de facto* integrated at risk of deportation. In particular, efforts should be

made to encourage recognition of second-generation refugees' obvious links to their host communities.

There is little doubt that a fixation – particularly by states – on permanent return as the only viable solution to displacement has contributed to the political impasse that has created many protracted displacement situations. What is needed above all is a reframing of repatriation as a much more sequential, piecemeal process that involves the gradual remaking of citizenship in a community of origin. Return also appears to be most effective when it can be combined with other strategies such as continued transnational relocation or regional dual residence/citizenship. For refugees themselves, such combined strategies also help to diffuse the risk involved in returning to a site of former persecution and violence. Return and reintegration processes must be addressed in a development context. For example, encouraging self-administration in refugee camps and opening up access to training and experience for the displaced would help to build foundations for sustainable Somali return and governance if and when security conditions allow. Encouraging IDPs and refugees to plan for return and set their own criteria for it can provide the displaced with considerable agency to shape the end of their protracted displacement.

### Dealing with the contexts

The three case-studies clearly demonstrate the links between protracted displacement and endemic weaknesses in formal state-citizen relations. However, they also document the presence of other alternative citizenships. The emergence of federal and regional governance structures – for example in West Africa – may offer other, more functional forms of citizenship, unlocking protracted displacement by creating conditions for return. One important insight is to recognise that new citizenships – either below or above traditional or formal state-citizen structures – may unlock elements of protracted displacement situations.

The fundamental cause of protracted displacement is very often a crisis of citizenship or governance in a community or state of origin. It is therefore clear that protracted displacement must be framed by broader peace-building or state-building discourses, and that the eventual resolution of protracted displacement is generally contingent on the (re-) building of viable state governance structures.

While this research offers some general conclusions such as these, and provides some fleshing out of the obvious truth that there needs to be some re-thinking of

## From the case-studies...

### Central America

More than a decade has passed since the conclusion of formal efforts to resolve Central America's protracted displacement situation. During the 1980s and early 1990s, more than three million Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Nicaraguans were displaced internally and throughout Central and North America, many of them for more than ten years. The struggle to resolve their situation has often been hailed as a success, characterised by cooperation between actors and innovative practices.

A re-examination in the light particularly of the recent history of irregular migration in the region prompts a re-assessment. Among the issues that come out of the analysis are:

- the value of choice and flexibility in implementing durable solutions
- the potential of coordinated regional approaches linked to states' other interests
- the advantages for the displaced of local organising, international networking and Northern solidarity
- the difficulty of securing truly durable solutions in the absence of fundamental state reform.

### Iraq

As instability persists, the situation of Iraqi IDPs and refugees in the Middle East manifests the evolving characteristics of protracted displacement. The migration of displaced Iraqis is often circular across a wide area as a result of a strategy of managing life risks by dispersal of family members along pre-existing social networks. Understanding and building up this 'transnationalism' and mobility could create safe and sustainable strategies to address the fact of long-term displacement. It is also important to make the analytical shift from the current focus on emergency assistance to fostering inclusive local assistance. The three classic durable solutions are largely unworkable for most of those in exile but inevitably some informal local integration is taking place, which calls out for regularisation.

Overall it seems important to reconceptualise 'solutions' as 'frameworks' and 'processes' and to move from searching for end-states to instead seeking progress and acceptable current conditions.

### Somalia

Displacement in and from Somalia is not only protracted but also made up of successive waves, each with their own characteristics. IDPs manage to integrate themselves through clan ties to varying degrees, while international assistance tends to emphasise the separateness of IDPs. Somaliland and Puntland are ripe for policy approaches dealing with displacement within the context of development interventions, and relocations may offer IDPs opportunities for more secure settlement.

Resettlement is at puny levels but looms large in the imagination of refugees, influencing their behaviour. Return for refugees seems very unlikely but there should be scope for constructive participation of refugees in Somali politics. The situation of refugees in Kenya is increasingly securitised and local integration – though ongoing informally – is officially blocked. Support through wider development efforts looks like the best way forward for them.

The displaced cannot themselves resolve their crises of citizenship and access to rights; this remains the pressing responsibility of Somali political actors and the international community.

what is meant by ‘solutions’ to protracted displacement, the particularities of each situation are also important features in unlocking particular situations. This implies that:

- the re-thinking should include some loosening up of narrow or fixed thinking about what constitutes a solution
- the paths to achieving any such solutions should be more various and multifarious
- the realities of the actual activities and movements of displaced people while they are ‘in protracted displacement’ can be usefully built upon in unlocking their protracted displacement.

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Final report, case-study reports and workshop reports online at [www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/governance/unlocking-crises](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/governance/unlocking-crises) See also the RSC’s thematic website on protracted refugee situations at <http://prsproject.org/> and FMR issue 33 on ‘Protracted displacement’ at [www.fmreview.org/protracted](http://www.fmreview.org/protracted)

1. Defined by UNHCR as a refugee situation where more than 25,000 refugees have been in exile for more than five years and by definition displacements for which there are no solutions in sight. UNHCR *Global Trends 2011: A Year of Crises*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2012 [www.unhcr.org/4fd6f87f9.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4fd6f87f9.html)