

15 Displacement and Internally Displaced Persons

Definition: Displacement involves the obligatory or forced movement or removal of individuals or populations from their usual residence to another place within their national territory. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are such persons as recognized by the United Nations and international organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) even though IDPs do not have international status as such.

The number of internally displaced persons around the world has been rising fast. As of 2011, 26.4 million people around the world were internally displaced (far exceeding the 15.2 million refugees); the number of *newly* displaced people in that year was 20 per cent higher than in 2010 (UNHCR 2011). Colombia had the highest number of displaced persons in the world, with at least 3.9 million persons, followed by Iraq, Sudan, Congo and Somalia. The recent uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa have also resulted in massive displacement in those countries (particularly in Syria). The ongoing wars and political conflicts there are the most obvious cause of displacement and, conventionally, wars and conflict have been considered the only or most important causes of displacement. Recent thinking, however, has begun to recognize a much broader array of causes for displacement, including environmental disaster and change (natural and human-made), development (such as the harnessing of natural resources by states and corporations), urbanization, and economic vulnerability and threat.

Although the concept of internal displacement has come to be widely understood and used in international discourse about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, it has also become increasingly clear that the conditions of IDPs are highly complex and that there are broad grey areas between them and other types of migrants who have crossed international borders. Initial attempts to distinguish between refugees (who are protected by a United Nations legal mandate in the 1951 Refugee Convention) and internally displaced persons were evident in the UNHCR's 1992 definition of displacement, which referred to

persons or groups who have been forced to flee their home suddenly or unexpectedly in large numbers, as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights or natural or man-made disaster, and who are within the territory of their own country. (Mooney 2005: 10)

The 1992 definition, however, was perceived as being too narrow in not capturing displacements that were protracted rather than spontaneous and among persons who were obliged to leave their homes as well as those who may have fled quickly. Thus, in 1998 the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* established the category of internally displaced persons as

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border. (Mooney 2005: 11)

This definition expanded the time frame in which persons may become displaced, and accounted for sudden border changes common to situations of war and conflict. These amendments also captured some of the complex realities of the internally displaced. Internally displaced persons may flee or be obliged to leave their homes not only because of sudden war and conflict in the area where they usually live, but also because of protracted conflicts in which threats to their lives or livelihoods may change over the course of conflict. The new *Guiding Principles* also stress that IDPs may be fleeing or have been forced to flee their usual place of residence, which acknowledges that many may no longer have their own homes or a permanent place to which they can return. This condition might be most common for urban residents who have been forcibly evicted from their usual place of residence.

Colombia has well-known and long-standing examples of such evictions. For some thirty years of 'development' in the area, residents of Chapinero Alto in Bogotá have been undergoing forced eviction, usually without warning, compensation or adequate relocation (Everett 1999). The expansion of the city of Bogotá as well as rehabilitation of neglected neighbourhoods has required additional infrastructure and housing, making areas like Chapinero Alto (with its prime location) a victim of 'development' needs. Forced evictions have occurred equally in rural areas like Huila to make room for projects such as the El Quimbo hydroelectric dam. Protest and demonstrations have accompanied these evictions, though to little effect. One interesting and unfortunate consequence of these contentious politics is that the discourse on dislocation and development has connected to the notion of sustainability, with many local governments claiming that poor people stand in the way of environmental preservation and sustainable development when they protest eviction.

Sudden border changes also create complex realities for IDPs or those about to be internally displaced. Borders are meant, in part, to signal belonging and protection as long as one is located within them; here lies one of the distinguishing characteristics of a displaced person as opposed to refugees and asylum seekers (often grouped with displaced persons). Sudden border changes can literally and quickly define whether one might become a refugee or asylum seeker or remain an IDP (whether recognized as such or not). In cases like this, such distinctions are

not meaningful, a point that is not lost on many humanitarian workers. For instance, the head of a delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Khartoum, Sudan, facetiously asked: 'Excuse me, are you an IDP, a refugee, or a migrant? Are you a victim of conflict or another situation of violence? Oh, you are a nomad. Are you migrating because of conflict or because it is your way of life?' (ICRC 2009). His questioning, typical of the kinds of distinctions humanitarian workers must make on a daily basis, underscores the limitations and fuzziness of many migration concepts compared with the overwhelmingly complex realities that make up people's lives. Of course, from a human rights perspective, it is exceedingly apparent that such distinctions are quite irrelevant. On the other hand, the conceptual distinctions, particularly between IDPs and refugees, signal what Francis Deng (who, along with Róberta Cohen, has probably done the most at the United Nations to expose the plight of internally displaced people and to develop normative practices within the international community for dealing with them; see Cohen and Deng 1998) refers to as the 'paradox of national protection' and the difficulties inherent in the principle of sovereignty in the international state system.

Thus, although the concept of internal displacement has many similarities with and is much broader than the concept of refugee, the distinction is one that depends entirely on the notion of state sovereignty and the political construction of the state system. The term internally displaced person or IDP does not carry any special legal status as does the term 'refugee'. Here we are confronted with the tension between state sovereignty and the international human rights regime. In principle, IDPs have not lost the protection of their own country and might not be of international concern as long as their needs can be met by their own governments. However, in most instances, this is manifestly not the case, and we would struggle to believe that governments of countries in which individuals and populations have been internally displaced will treat the displaced with the full range of citizenship rights that they should be afforded. Many governments are in fact the perpetrators of violence that results in displacement in the first place. On the other side of the coin: if IDPs are denied protection and aid by their own governments, which is more commonly the case, then they may indeed become objects of concern to the international community.

Although there is no international legal sponsor for IDPs (the UN has no legal mandate concerning IDPs) and no international legal framework for them (see Weiss 2003), some international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have incorporated assistance to IDPs into their mission and mandate. Even so, for most organizations, such as the UNHCR and ICRC, their mandate focuses almost exclusively on displacement that results from war or protracted conflict, even if they also acknowledge the broader definition as articulated in the *Guiding Principles*. Global statistics on IDPs or displaced persons also tend to count only those who have been displaced as a result of violence or protracted conflict. Displacement owing to environmental disaster (whether natural and man-made) or development is more difficult to account for when so many organizations do not focus their attention and services on those affected persons.

Women, children and the elderly constitute the populations most affected by displacement, and many of the pressing issues related to displacement are specific to these populations (Mooney 2005). Forced from their homes and lacking in the most basic protections and resources, displacement endangers their ability to survive and to help their families survive. The losses of the displaced include not only material goods but also social networks composed of family, friends and community, not to mention cultural heritage and a sense of belonging. Under these circumstances, social relationships break down and the displaced are often forced to fend for themselves. When this happens, they also become vulnerable to violence and abuse by an array of others, including other civilians, even, sadly, humanitarian workers whose role is to help them. The constant need for shelter and food often creates such exploitative conditions for women and children that they sometimes resort to previously unimaginable acts to survive. High rates of prostitution and sexual exploitation are common and lead to severe problems with health, especially sexual health. Women and children are also vulnerable to trafficking for sex and forced labour. Children have been forcibly recruited from IDP camps to become soldiers in internal wars and conflicts (Achvarina and Reich 2006). Suicide rates in IDP camps are also higher than national averages, as are death rates in general from malnutrition, disease and despair.

Although IDPs in many ways are not (or should not be) distinguishable from refugees and asylum seekers, one nagging question more specific to IDPs than to others who are forcibly displaced is: When do IDPs stop being IDPs? Because the status of an IDP is not a legal one, there is no clear way to determine when and under what conditions that category no longer applies. Are they no longer displaced when they are able to return 'home' or to the place they lived before being displaced? Safe return is often not possible for most IDPs, not only because of protracted conflicts that may span generations but also because their 'homes' might no longer physically exist or might have become occupied by others. Do they stop being IDPs when they are relocated into sufficient, permanent housing? How should we consider the loss of their former homes, communities and cultural environments? Furthermore, who decides when IDPs stop being IDPs – governments, international agencies? Governments may hasten to declare that IDPs are no longer displaced in order to demonstrate that internal conflicts have ended. Or they may maintain IDPs in displacement camps and other difficult conditions for longer than necessary, out of continuing discrimination or oppression of certain populations. The plight of IDPs remains extraordinarily complex and difficult, most unfortunately for the internally displaced themselves.

See also: *Borders; Forced migration; Internal/domestic migration; Refugees and asylum seekers*

KEY READINGS

- Cohen, R. and Deng, F.M. (1998) *Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
- Deng, F.M. (2006) 'Divided nations: the paradox of national protection', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 603: 217–25.