

*Statement by Björn Gillsäter, Head of the Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, to the HLOM.  
December 15, 2021*

*Question: What do socioeconomic data tell us about the consequences on livelihoods/income, food security, health, and education for the forcibly displaced (as compared with their hosts)?*

Many thanks, Assistant High Commissioner. I am pleased and honored to address the High-Level Officials Meeting – many thanks for inviting me.

We are all aware that the pandemic has hit those most vulnerable disproportionately, and that includes those forcibly displaced. I will try to give an overview of the consequences, acknowledging that we do not have complete information, and that this overview is only part of a more comprehensive conversation.

For us to say something about this population, with confidence and precision, we face two principal obstacles: First, forcibly displaced often lives in the statistical shadows, or may even be statistically invisible. Second, the pandemic has hindered the standard way of collecting in-depth socioeconomic data in developing countries: face-to-face interviews. The title of a paper published about a year ago summarized it well: this group is *Highly vulnerable yet largely invisible*.

The good news, however, is that we know considerably more – at country-level – than we would have only a few years ago, as we detail in our second paper, *Answering the Call – forcibly displaced during the pandemic*. This is thanks to new survey techniques and tremendous efforts by national governments, statistical agencies, international organizations and other actors, not least the World Bank and UNHCR.

Improvements in technologies and techniques for geo-spatial data and phone surveys have allowed us to gather a remarkably rich set of data. In fact, my summary today draws on the results of some 100,000 interviews with displaced households and host populations in eight countries conducted over the past year-plus.

While the current data will not allow us to make cross-country conclusions of the socioeconomic consequences, the next step in our work is indeed to harmonize the findings between countries and regions, and hence allow for broader comparisons, and conclusions going forward.

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So, let's get to the analysis. My observations will relate to labor-income, health and education access, and food security.

**In terms of labor-income**, we take note that forcibly displaced tend to be employed in sectors with a high degree of informality, which tend to be sectors that are vulnerable to socioeconomic shocks. In fact, according to one study before the pandemic, refugees are 60 percent more likely than host populations to be working in sectors highly likely to be impacted by the pandemic. Related, the surveys have told us that these displaced populations experienced employment losses at a rate often equivalent to or greater than host populations. And as we analyze the data, it is important to note that employment outcomes were often different for camped and non-camped populations. For example, in Iraq we see that IDPs living in camps experienced significantly higher levels of unemployment than their non-camped counterparts.

**For non-labor income**, remittances and humanitarian assistance were the most prominent sources, and displaced populations were often far more likely to rely on such income than hosts. And while some countries saw those sources decrease, reductions were more heterogeneous than anticipated. In Chad, 59 percent of host-country households and 69 percent of refugee households experienced a decrease in transfers and assistance by early 2021.

**For health**, the surveys have showed that although access to medical care differs from country to country, displaced households typically faced greater challenges than their hosts when looking to access medical care. In some instances, such as in Uganda and Yemen, health access among forcibly displaced follows a similar track to that of hosts. The surveys also tell us that a lack of financial resources is consistently cited as a primary barrier to accessing medical treatment, including in Chad, Djibouti and Ethiopia. Of course, mental health is a critical component of overall wellbeing, and in Uganda, 54 percent of refugees show signs of depression—a rate 10 times higher than for Ugandan nationals.

**For education**, in most countries observed, displaced children's low school enrollment before the pandemic was followed by even lower educational engagement during the pandemic. Looking ahead, the process of reopening schools may be slow and uneven. In Ethiopia, fewer than one in ten refugee households with school-age children indicated that their child's school was open one month after the country began reopening. However, we see signs of recovery in some of the countries surveyed. In Uganda, for example, after an initial dip, the surveyed picked up a substantial increase in the share of refugee households with members participating in education/learning activities.

**Food insecurity:** In times of economic stress, vulnerable groups adopt coping strategies that often result in reduced food security. Forcibly displaced households across Bangladesh, Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Iraq, Kenya, and Uganda reported reducing either food or non-food consumption or both, as a coping mechanism for loss of income and food during the pandemic. Access to food and food security were prominent concerns for both forcibly displaced and host households, though it was often far worse for displaced households.

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From this, may I suggest **four conclusions:**

- The full socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 will play out over the medium- to long-term for developing countries. We are still only able to analyze some of the consequences;
- We need robust tracking mechanisms that collect regular and reliable data for the displaced and their hosts. And we need to be able to analyze the data by gender and by age to capture any particularly vulnerable groups.
- When done well, High-frequency phone surveys can usefully produce robust data in a timely manner. However, there are some dynamics that we worry about that are currently not picked up in these surveys, such as the spread of domestic sexual violence and child marriage, which we fear has increased.
- For humanitarian and development policy, inclusion of forcibly displaced in the collection of population statistics is vital. We want to take this group out of the statistical shadows.

Assistant High Commissioner, Gillian, I have obviously only skimmed the surface of what we – collectively – know about the socioeconomic fallout during the pandemic. I would encourage anyone interested in learning more to visit our website, which has links to relevant sources, including country-specific briefs.