

BACKGROUND GUIDE

Addressing Internal Displacement

The Challenge

When we talk about people fleeing their homes, we often talk about refugees. Refugees are people who flee persecution, war, other forms of violence and human rights abuses and cross an international border to find safety in another country. But did you know that a much higher number of people flee their homes but stay within their country? When this happens, these people become “internally displaced”.

Internally Displaced Persons, or IDPs, are people who have been forced to flee their homes because of persecution, conflict, violence or disasters but have not crossed an international border. Some stay hoping the situation will get better; others don’t have the means or the physical strength to undertake dangerous cross-border journeys.

Unlike refugees, IDPs remain citizens or habitual residents of their country. They can invoke their rights as citizens but they do not have a special status under international law. IDPs account for the majority of people forced to flee. In the future, we expect climate change to be a major driver of internal displacement.

Why It Matters

IDPs remain under the protection of their government, even if that government is the reason for their displacement. They are sometimes stuck in conflict areas where violence or other threats cut them off from reaching the border. They often move to areas where it is difficult to deliver humanitarian assistance. Many lose property, jobs and loved ones. While both refugees and IDPs are vulnerable, refugees tend to be more in the public eye while IDPs get less attention from the media and decision-makers.

Challenges That IDPs Face

SHELTER

IDPs need to find some form of shelter to protect them from the elements and give them a sense of physical and emotional security. The majority of IDPs live in urban areas with host families and in private houses, or in the worst cases in damaged and unfinished buildings or urban slums. When conflicts are “protracted” - meaning that they last more than five years - IDPs remain in limbo. It is crucial to find them more permanent homes - either by relocation to somewhere else in the country, integration in their new community, or by facilitating their return home if it is safe to go.

ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE

Providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs can be a challenge. IDPs are often widely dispersed. Some continue to move from place to place. Others might be afraid of being found by the authorities or armed groups, and are thus harder to identify. As a result, humanitarian organizations struggle to monitor the number of IDPs and provide assistance.

DOCUMENTATION

Identity documents are essential for keeping or gaining access to many services such as education and health-care. Yet, IDPs face obstacles to obtaining or replacing lost documentation because going to government offices is costly or dangerous, or because they cannot pay the fees needed to obtain these documents.

ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Unlike refugees, who can face legal barriers to accessing work, IDPs remain citizens of their countries and have the right to work. However, they still struggle to make a living. Indeed, they have probably lost their previous source of income, having left behind their businesses, jobs, farms and so on. They also need to recover from the trauma of fleeing, adjust to a new place and in many cases learn new skills. Their new community, even if they are from the same country, might also perceive their presence as a threat and exclude them from the labor market. Livelihood programs that include training or financial support can help IDPs start anew.

CHALLENGING RETURNS

Many IDPs hope to return to their place of origin but they cannot do so if it is too dangerous. Their homes have often been destroyed or damaged, alongside other infrastructure such as schools. Rebuilding and restoring normality is important so that people who return aren't forced to leave again.

Responses and Solutions

UNHCR, THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY

- **UNHCR helps coordinate** the work of international actors to improve the response to IDP situations. For example, UNHCR leads the Global Protection Cluster, and is also one of the organizations leading on the Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.
- **UNHCR provides shelter.** With the help of others, UNHCR provides shelter to IDPs. This involves providing the right kind of materials (e.g. plastic sheeting, timber, bamboo, brick), products (e.g. tents or shelter kits), tools, experts (e.g. builders, technical advisors), etc.
- **UNHCR helps manage IDP camps.** While UNHCR discourages the establishment of formal settlements and prefers alternatives, camps are sometimes necessary in the event of largescale arrivals of IDPs or refugees.
- **UNHCR supports the voluntary return of IDPs to their place of origin.** If IDPs wish to return and if the conditions are safe, UNHCR can support the return and reintegration of IDPs.
- **UNHCR also encourages states to create laws and policies** supportive of IDPs.

GOVERNMENTS

States are first and foremost responsible for ensuring the protection of persons on their territory. Furthermore, there isn't one lead entity within the UN system leading on the response to internal displacement. Instead, various organizations work together, each of them part of a different "cluster" focusing on different aspects (e.g. shelter).

- **Governments need to acknowledge their responsibility** for the protection of IDPs by agreeing with and implementing the standards set out in the Guiding Principles on internal displacement. If they do not have the capacity to protect IDPs, they should accept the help of the international community.
- **Governments can put in place laws guaranteeing the rights of IDPs.** such as allowing them to vote from any location or accessing education and training to better integrate locally.
- **Governments can improve IDPs' access to documentation** like the issuance of birth registration and national identity numbers.
- **Governments can address the root causes of internal displacement** by finding solutions to the conflicts that drive it. They can make sure to include IDPs in dialogues and negotiations.

NGOS

- **NGOs can help IDPs in emergency contexts**, such as welcoming newly arrived IDPs and providing them with food and hygiene products.
- **NGOs can support IDPs who do not get access to official services** like providing IDPs with education, health-care, psychosocial care and documentation assistance until they are able to access and integrate with national systems.
- **NGOs can help reduce potential tensions between IDPs and their host community.**

Questions to Guide Debates

- How can we mobilize the international community to take more actions for IDPs?
- How could the response to IDP situations be better coordinated?
- How can we better address the root causes (violence, conflict, disaster) of internal displacement?
- How could we improve the identification of IDPs to improve assistance programs?
- How could we help IDPs access safer shelter, both temporary and in the long-run?
- How could we support the economic inclusion of IDPs?
- How could we make sure IDPs can access documentation?
- How could we make sure that IDPs have a say in programs designed to help them?
- How could we include IDPs in local dialogues and peace negotiations?

Useful Resources

- [UNHCR Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)
- [UNHCR Storymap: Uprooted in their own land](#)
- [UNHCR Global Trends Report - Chapter 3, p41 Internally Displaced People \(IDPS\)](#)
- [Internal Displacement Monitoring Center \(IDMC\) - Website](#)
- [UN Secretary General Action Agenda on Internal Displacement](#)

Contact Us

If you have any questions about this background guide, please visit our [webpage](#) or contact lindner@unhcr.org.