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Protracted displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile

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Key messages

- A record 60 million people were displaced from their homes at the end of 2014. Once displaced for six months, a refugee is likely to be displaced for at least three years, and protracted displacement is also a major phenomenon among internally displaced people.
- Most displacement crises persist for years: fewer than one in 40 refugee crises are resolved within three years, and most last for decades.
- Governments and aid agencies must recognise this protractedness from the outset, accepting that options for 'durable solutions' are often closed and weaving humanitarian assistance quickly into broader national and regional poverty and development investments.
- Displaced people themselves often find paths to sustainable livelihoods: aid agencies need to better understand how to support these initiatives.

Forced displacement has grown rapidly over the last decade, increasing on average by 1.6 million people a year between 2000 and 2014, when it reached 59.5m. Five countries accounted for over half of this displacement, while a similarly small number bear the burden of hosting large populations: four countries – Syria, Colombia, Iraq and Sudan – host more than half of the world's internally displaced people (IDPs), while seven – Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, Turkey, Palestine and Jordan – host more than half of all refugees. Forced displacement is, in other words, a major and growing global concern.

Most displacement crises persist for years, and most refugees and many IDPs living in these situations can expect to be in exile for many years, with little or no prospect of achieving a durable solution – that is, of returning to their homes, integrating with full rights in their place of exile or settling elsewhere.¹

The 'stickiness' of many of today's displacement crises raises profound challenges for displaced people themselves,

¹ For refugees this is third country resettlement, for IDPs resettlement in a different location in their own country.

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who struggle to improve their economic lot or contribute to the development of their host communities or countries; for host countries and communities, which incur real and perceived costs that in turn result in policies that push solutions for displaced populations further away and incur even greater costs; and for international donors and aid agencies, which struggle to keep afloat expensive, open-ended humanitarian assistance packages that offer slim prospects for the longer-term well-being of displaced people.

This HPG Policy Brief summarises the findings of an HPG/Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) study on protracted displacement for the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It sets out key common themes in protracted displacement, explores how responses to it have evolved and outlines a pilot tool to begin understanding the opportunities for self-reliance and livelihood assistance afforded by displacement.

The dimensions of displacement

Drawing an exact picture of the global state of protracted displacement is an approximate and incomplete exercise. Even so, some key general features can be described.

First, the majority of refugees and IDPs have been displaced from, within or into countries with serious protection, human rights and governance weaknesses. Roughly 36 million out of a total of 59.5 million displaced people (60%) originated in countries categorised on the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index as 'alert' and 'high alert', while 48% of all displaced were exiled in countries falling into those categories.

Second, displacement is increasingly an urban and dispersed phenomenon, with settled camps becoming the exception. An estimated six in ten refugees are living in urban areas. The UN Special Rapporteur notes that most IDPs are outside identifiable camps or settlements and instead live dispersed in a variety of urban, rural or remote settings.

Third, most displacement crises persist for many years. Less than one in 40 refugee crises are resolved within three years, and protractedness is usually a matter of decades. More than 80% of refugee crises last for ten years or more; two in five last 20 years or more. Countries

experiencing conflict-related displacement have reported figures for IDPs over periods of 23 years on average.

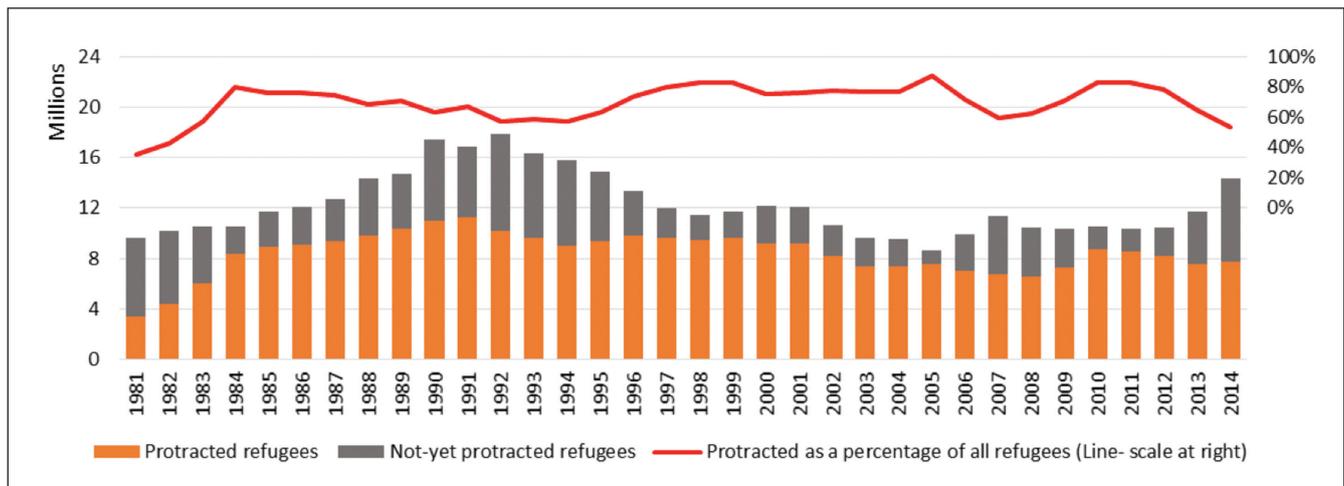
Humanitarian responses to protracted displacement

Aid agencies seeking to promote self-reliance and livelihoods amongst people in protracted displacement have progressed from models of assistance largely focused on care and maintenance towards a more holistic response to the challenges and opportunities available to displaced people. Because of insufficient or inconsistent funding, care and maintenance regimes generally have not provided a stable platform on which beneficiaries could progress towards self-reliance. They also seem to have fallen short in contributing to lowering chronic malnutrition – an indicator of lost future economic potential. When it comes to more direct interventions to support self-reliance and livelihoods, such as vocational training and income generating projects supported by grants and loans, the research literature reveals a panoply of small-scale uncoordinated and unsustainable interventions, with inadequate technical and managerial expertise, poor links to markets and short-term and unreliable funding.

At the same time, as protracted displacement has become the norm analysts and aid professionals have developed a more complex understanding of the kinds of environments – policy, political, economic and geographical – that can encourage self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods among the displaced, as well as the characteristics of displaced people that favour or discourage positive economic integration. Much of this improved diagnosis has been spurred by a pragmatic acceptance that displacement will be prolonged (and that options for traditional 'durable solutions' are often closed), which in turn has led to a better appreciation of how market forces and the connectedness of displaced people – amplified by their social capital – have allowed them in some contexts to achieve positive livelihood outcomes.

Central to this shift in understanding has been a focus away from an aid-centric view of livelihoods in displacement – that the livelihoods of displaced people depend on external interventions – to an appreciation of the steps displaced people themselves are taking to find their way, and the support they may need to sustain these initiatives. Evidence that the economic dynamism of displaced people can have positive effects for host populations and states has

FIGURE 1: REFUGEES IN PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT, 1981–2014



also led to a consensus around advocacy for displaced people: encouraging access to livelihoods (e.g. work permits or freedom of movement) is not just a human rights issue, but also offers practical economic and social returns – an argument, however, that has so far borne few positive results in host states, whose behaviour continues to be shaped by domestic political calculations.

Even if host states and local administrations have been slow to embrace more enabling policy frameworks, humanitarian and development agencies have begun to introduce programmes in support of self-reliance and livelihoods that appreciate the complexity of livelihood strategies open to displaced people, the barriers they face and the steps they are taking on their own. At the macro level, this has meant understanding protracted displacement in the context of broader national and regional poverty and development challenges, and supporting displaced people through investments in national and local poverty reduction and development strategies. At the micro level, it has meant more integrated and holistic interventions which stress sophisticated market analysis, and which complement and upgrade traditional self-reliance and livelihoods projects (such as small grants, vocational training or micro-credit) with psychosocial and other technical and social services. In both cases, hosts as well as refugees and IDPs are targeted to the extent that they share vulnerabilities and their economic and social well-being is intertwined.

Both macro- and micro-level approaches can build from humanitarian interventions, but in the end depend on longer-term development horizons (and funding),

as well as links to sustainable, national systems. From the outset of a displacement crisis, development actors that acknowledge displacement as a fixture within the community – and that show greater speed and agility in designing new interventions or adapting ongoing programmes – could help displaced people find their path to livelihoods more quickly and with less pain, while preserving humanitarian funding for acute new crises. That said, the well-documented humanitarian–development programming and funding gap continues to pose a challenge to holistic approaches, despite adjustments over the years to the architecture of the international aid system.

Identifying opportunities for self-reliance and livelihood programming

In seeking ways to support the self-reliance and livelihoods of people in protracted displacement, donors and aid agencies need to guard against generalising about situations of protracted displacement or the needs of displaced people. Situations of displacement are not static events but instead change continuously; they rarely proceed along a predictable path from displacement to stabilisation to return; and the displaced are usually a highly heterogeneous population.

The receptivity of a particular situation to interventions that may support self-reliance and livelihoods can vary depending on a range of factors, including the legal and protective environment, access to markets, the resources and social capital of the displaced and the capacity and willingness of host institutions to absorb assistance.

The better decision may be to concentrate assistance on social safety net schemes that support future livelihoods by protecting human capital over generations. In other instances, direct assistance that helps link displaced people to development opportunities or includes them within broader national developmental strategies may be possible. Often, some combination of these approaches would be preferable since, even in the most enabling environments for self-reliance and livelihoods, some displaced people – often the most marginalised – are likely to remain in need of social safety nets, though their needs may be indistinguishable from similarly vulnerable hosts. Figure 2 presents a pilot tool to begin understanding the opportunities for self-reliance and livelihood assistance afforded by various situations of displacement.

The typology examines four themes in any situation of protracted displacement that affect the ability of people to seek self-reliance and livelihood solutions: i) the legal framework and protection environment; ii) access to markets and the private sector; iii) the capacities, resources and assets of the displaced; and iv) the environment for external intervention. For each situation of protracted displacement, each of the four themes is assigned a numerical score ranging from 0 to 60, based on a checklist of questions. The aggregate score provides an overall estimate, ranging from ‘most constraining’ (21 or below) to ‘most conducive’ (above 40), of how receptive that displacement crisis would be to external interventions in support of self-reliance and livelihoods. The typology suggests four broad categories of ‘receptiveness’ for self-reliance and livelihoods in situations of protracted displacement:

1. ‘Social Protection Priorities’ (score: 0–21)

In these scenarios it is likely that little is possible beyond care and maintenance or protection activities, probably because of acute needs among the displaced population, political constraints on livelihoods work, instability in the local environment and weak leverage or interest of the international community, or a combination of these factors. This does not mean that livelihoods should not be analysed and factored into programming, just that resources spent promoting ‘self-reliance’ are highly unlikely to achieve that result at scale and may detract from core emergency activities.

2. ‘Precarious Providers’ (score: 22–30)

This scenario also displays a range of severe constraints

FIGURE 2: A PROPOSED TYPOLOGY FOR SITUATIONS OF PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT



on livelihoods work, though there may be space for small projects to exploit ‘grey areas’ in legal or political frameworks or engage in work that may reap benefits when conditions change. These scenarios may require humanitarian modalities in the present, though possible links to development programmes or the integration of development approaches should not be ignored where these do not compromise humanitarian space.

3. ‘Hopeful Providers’ (31–39)

In these scenarios there is scope for innovative programming, though perhaps not at scale. There is capacity and willingness in some parts of government to improve the self-reliance of the displaced, though this probably does not enjoy widespread political support. The scope may exist for integration into some development plans. The environment is probably enabling for spontaneous income generating activities and for some of the displaced to cover basic needs and still have surplus income.

4. ‘Partners in Prosperity’ (score 40–57)

In this scenario there is scope for meaningful collaboration with host governments and an enabling environment for innovative approaches. Dialogue is possible on integrating the displaced into national and local development frameworks. The displaced are free to work or own businesses and property without extraordinary discrimination. With some support, they could achieve economic integration and the ability to invest in the future