

UNHCR AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

UNHCR's role in support of an enhanced humanitarian response to IDP situations



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Cover Photo:

This boy has just arrived in a transit centre near Monrovia. Before his arrival, he stayed for several months in a nearby school with hundreds of other IDPs . © UNHCR / H. Caux

1. INTRODUCTION

Based upon its established competence and capacity, UNHCR aims to provide effective support to national and international responses to situations of forced displacement. Complementing its longstanding mandate to provide protection and solutions to refugees, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees is committed to become a more predictable and reliable partner in efforts to address and resolve the plight of people who are displaced within their own country.

This document explains the global significance of internal displacement; identifies the capacities that UNHCR brings to such situations; presents the principles which form the basis of UNHCR's evolving role in IDP situations; and summarizes the implementation strategy that the Agency has established in relation to this issue.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

Concern for the welfare of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has grown steadily in recent years, a development that has been driven by a variety of related considerations.

« **The number of people who have been internally displaced as a result of armed conflict has increased substantially over the past decade, and now stands at approximately 25 million.** »

In many situations, the internally displaced are confronted with serious and persistent threats to their wellbeing. Many - perhaps most - of the world's IDPs have been displaced for protracted periods of time and do not have an early prospect of finding a solution. While the dynamics and consequences of displacement vary considerably from one country to another, there is considerable evidence to suggest that IDPs experience specific forms of loss and require particular efforts to address and resolve their plight.

3. THE HUMANITARIAN REFORM PROCESS

In 2005, the United Nations initiated a programme of humanitarian reform, based on a recognition that responses to complex emergencies and disasters often failed to meet the needs of IDPs and other affected populations in a timely and consistent manner.

The humanitarian reform initiative includes a number of measures to address this situation, including increasing the availability of resources for humanitarian operations, broadening the partnership base with NGOs, strengthening the leadership of Humanitarian Coordinators, and agreeing on a division of labour known as the **"cluster approach"** to respond to humanitarian emergencies. Under the cluster approach,

« **At the global level, UNHCR leads the protection cluster for all types of response and co-leads the emergency shelter and the camp coordination and camp management clusters for conflict-related IDPs.** »

In addition, UNHCR actively participates in other clusters; shares a role with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNICEF in ensuring the protection of people displaced by natural disasters; and has been designated by UNAIDS as the lead agency for HIV and AIDS amongst displaced populations.

UNHCR is committed to the cluster approach and to the task of establishing an enhanced response to the needs of IDPs, and is determined to exercise effectively the responsibilities which it has assumed in relation to such populations. The Office has a number of important assets at its disposal in meeting these commitments. These include:

- **The legitimacy and moral authority** that derive from the status of the Office within the United Nations;
- **The Executive Committee and General Assembly's consistent support** for UNHCR's role in providing protection and humanitarian assistance to IDPs;
- **The close working relationship** that the Office has established with states, and with international, regional and non-governmental organizations in every part of the world;
- **The expertise, competence and capacity** that UNHCR has developed in protecting and finding solutions for uprooted populations since its establishment more than 50 years ago.

UNHCR must reposition itself to provide protection and assistance to displaced people in need, regardless of whether they have crossed an international border.

4. UNHCR's IDP FRAMEWORK

To guide UNHCR's evolving role in relation to the issue of internal displacement, the Office has established a policy framework which consists of **eight principles** as outlined below.

Scope and nature of involvement

UNHCR stands ready to contribute to the inter-agency response in situations of internal displacement in any **conflict-affected** country where the presence

and programmes of the Office have the consent of the authorities, where the humanitarian activities of UNHCR and its partners are free from undue political or military interference, and where the security environment enables its personnel to function within acceptable levels of risk*.

UNHCR considers that the Cluster Approach provides a valuable basis for strengthening the inter-agency response in situations of internal displacement.

The agency supports the decision to use the Cluster Approach in all new emergencies, as well as its progressive extension to countries with Humanitarian Coordinators. In operations where existing coordination mechanisms work effectively or where its introduction might impair good working relations with the host government, thus reduce humanitarian access, UNHCR supports a review process to determine the benefits of applying the Cluster Approach.

UNHCR will not seek an extensive or prolonged operational involvement in situations where people have been displaced by natural disasters. However, the Office may, in consultation with affected states and partner organizations, lend immediate support to such populations when it is in a position to do so.

IDPs and refugees

UNHCR will ensure that its role in situations of internal displacement does not detract from its mandated activities in relation to refugees, and will seek to maximize the synergies and economies of scale that link the two functions.

UNHCR will uphold the internationally recognized right of people to seek and enjoy asylum in other states, and has established criteria to ensure that IDP activities undertaken by the Office do not undermine that right.

* Where the state is unable or unwilling to protect internally displaced citizens, UNHCR will work with the broader UN to identify ways for the international community to ensure respect for the basic rights of IDPs.

State responsibility

It is a well-established principle in international law that **states have primary responsibility for the rights and welfare of their citizens**, including those who are internally displaced. UNHCR stands ready to support states in fulfilling this responsibility.

UNHCR encourages states and relevant organs of the United Nations to prevent and resolve situations of internal displacement and to protect the rights of IDPs.

Partnerships

UNHCR's involvement in situations of internal displacement will entail the establishment of partnerships and working relationships with a range of national actors, including central government structures and local authorities, human rights institutions, parliamentarians, the judiciary, NGOs, religious bodies and other members of civil society, as well as with displaced persons and with local communities.

UNHCR considers that the needs of IDPs will be most effectively met by means of inter-agency and partnership approaches that support national efforts which are responsive, flexible and adapted to realities on the ground.

In the context of its IDP programmes, UNHCR is committed to the development of strategic partnerships at the global and national levels, as well as in functional areas such as operations, advocacy, and human and financial resource mobilization. In this respect, UNHCR will in particular draw upon its longstanding partnership with the NGO community.

Protection and human rights

UNHCR's efforts on behalf of the internally displaced are based on the principle that IDPs, like all other citizens, are entitled to **protection under national law, as well as under international human rights and humanitarian law**, at all stages of the displacement process. In accordance with this principle, the Office will cooperate with national and international actors that are engaged in the establishment of laws and mechanisms that safeguard the rights of IDPs and enable them to find lasting solutions.

Based upon this approach, all IDP activities and operations undertaken by

UNHCR will incorporate the norms, standards and principles of international human rights and humanitarian law, as well as the United Nations "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement".

UNHCR will also advocate on behalf of these norms, standards and principles, in close association with OHCHR, the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Resolving situations of internal displacement

UNHCR considers it imperative to seek to prevent the emergence of protracted IDP situations, especially those in which the internally displaced are deprived of their rights, basic needs and opportunities for self-reliance. UNHCR will therefore work closely with states, as well as other national and humanitarian actors, in promoting lasting solutions for IDPs, including:

- voluntary return to their former place of residence
- long-term or permanent settlement in areas to which they have been displaced
- voluntary relocation to another part of their own country.

Irrespective of the solution pursued, the Office considers it essential to ensure that IDPs are able to benefit from a process of **legal, economic and social integration**, thereby enabling the progressive and responsible withdrawal of UNHCR's presence and programmes. UNHCR will establish appropriate benchmarks and "exit strategies" to facilitate this task.

Age, gender and diversity mainstreaming

UNHCR's role in the protection of IDPs will be based on the principle of age, gender and diversity mainstreaming. This principle recognizes that displaced populations consist of different social groups, including females and males,

young and old, who have equal rights under international law, but who also have varying resources, abilities, aspirations, needs and vulnerabilities.

UNHCR notes that displaced females generally have less power, a lower social status and fewer opportunities in life than displaced men and boys. Such inequalities are often exacerbated in the process of displacement.

UNHCR will support and empower women and girls as a means of reinforcing their rights and welfare.



Muslim IDP welfare centre in Puttalam, Sri Lanka 2004. © UNHCR/ N. Wright

Community-based Approach

UNHCR will adopt an inclusive and **participatory approach to IDP protection and solutions**, building upon the capacities of displaced communities and facilitating their involvement in decisions that affect their lives. The Office will give special attention to the protection of IDPs who are at risk of discrimination and marginalization.

UNHCR's activities will be primarily targeted at large and concentrated IDP populations, whether they are living amongst the resident population or are accommodated in camps and settlements. The Agency may also provide support to local communities in areas of displacement.

UNHCR is not in a position to assume broader responsibility as an Agency for the well-being of other non-displaced citizens affected by conflict and crisis.

5. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

To ensure that the policy framework and rules of engagement presented above are effectively operationalized, UNHCR has formulated an implementation strategy on internal displacement, as outlined below.

UNHCR's role in situations of internal displacement continues to be an important consideration in its ongoing Structural and Management Reform initiative, the objective of which is to **optimize the effectiveness and responsiveness of the Office** across the whole range of its activities.

Organizational capacity and structure

At UNHCR Headquarters, a senior-level staff member is currently coordinating the timely implementation of the corporate strategy. **The Senior Coordinator for IDP Operations** is tasked with ensuring that the implementation of the strategy is consistent with the policy framework set out in this document. Primary responsibility for implementing IDP operations remains with the Regional Bureaux, which ensure that UNHCR's evolving role with IDPs is adapted to the specific circumstances of each country and region.

UNHCR's **IDP Support Team (IST)** is a multifunctional coordination mechanism that meets on a regular basis, chaired by the Coordinator, involving senior representatives from all parts of Headquarters.

UNHCR has strengthened the capacity and technical competence of the three Global Clusters that it leads. Given UNHCR's primary expertise in the protection of IDPs, it will promote the *droit de regard* that the Protection Cluster exercises in relation to the other clusters.

Internal communications and staff development

The Office has initiated an extensive internal communications and staff development programme which incorporates issues such as the Cluster Approach, the Humanitarian Coordinator system, pooled funding arrangements, the role of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Particular attention is being given by UNHCR to a **review and revision of existing learning programmes**, so as to equip the Office with the additional skills required by the Cluster Approach.

Priority is being given to the preparation of concise and **practical field-based tools** to complement inter-agency guidance materials.

Human resources deployment

UNHCR has identified staff members with the skills and experience required to function effectively in IDP operations. They are being provided with specialized training in order to develop their leadership and coordination skills, as well as their understanding of UNHCR's policy framework and corporate strategy on IDPs.

Resource mobilization and management

UNHCR will implement a resource mobilization strategy that takes advantage of the fundraising opportunities associated with the process of humanitarian reform, without detracting from its mandated responsibility to provide protection and solutions to refugees.

Security in IDP-populated areas

Situations of internal displacement are generally more dangerous than those involving refugees, as they are often located in areas of active conflict and are characterized by the presence of military forces, security personnel and militia groups.

UNHCR's response to the challenge of staff security in IDP-populated areas will continue to stress the primary responsibility of the host government.

Emergency preparedness and contingency planning

UNHCR's implementation strategy requires close attention to the issue of emergency preparedness and contingency planning.

Results-based management

UNHCR will continue to contribute to inter-agency efforts to establish a set of performance and impact indicators that will be used as a basis for the formulation of an enhanced response to the provision of protection, assistance and protection and solutions to IDPs.

Monitoring, assessment and evaluation

In keeping with the principles of transparency and openness in international responses to humanitarian emergencies, UNHCR, in cooperation with states and partner organizations, will continue to assess its IDP operations and ensure that such reviews are utilized for the purposes of policy-making, planning and programming. The agency will also play a full part in inter-agency evaluation initiatives related to IDP issues and operations.



This document is based on the UNHCR's Policy Framework and Implementation Strategy: UNHCR's role in support of an enhanced humanitarian response to situations of internal displacement, 4 June, 2007.



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