

BRIEFING PAPER

Left behind: IDPs forgotten in Mali's southern cities

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Down from a peak of 350,000 in June 2013, there are currently nearly 200,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) who fled the violence in the north during Mali's 2012-2013 crisis and are still sheltering far from their homes. Tens of thousands have attempted to go back to rebuild but, in many cases, this has been premature and they have been forced to uproot their families once more. While attention understandably turns to the country's north, where the conflict hit hardest, nearly half of the country's IDPs have been left behind in Mali's southern cities.

The response to the needs of southern IDPs has been inconsistent and insufficient since the beginning of the crisis, forcing many displaced Malians to fend for themselves and stretching the resources of the communities that have taken them in. Many IDPs have now been living in displacement for nearly two years and have watched their resources dwindle over time. Vulnerable IDPs have begun to blend in with the urban poor.

These urban IDPs have been increasingly marginalised as the Malian Government and the aid community shift focus to the north. The government is eager to give the impression of stability, encouraging IDPs, civil servants and professionals to return to the north, where security is fragile, services extremely limited and deep social, ethnic and religious tensions persist. This push has coincided with curbs on funding and overall declining donor support for Mali, as humanitarian agencies reprioritise budgets, downscaling or suspending assistance programmes for IDPs in southern Mali.

This focus on the north at the expense of the south has undermined the right of IDPs to choose when and where to resettle following displacement. Furthermore, it ignores the overwhelming needs of those left living in displacement in the south.

Donors and humanitarian agencies should continue to fund humanitarian and development agencies to programme for durable solutions, both for those people who are returning to their northern homes and for those left behind in southern cities in

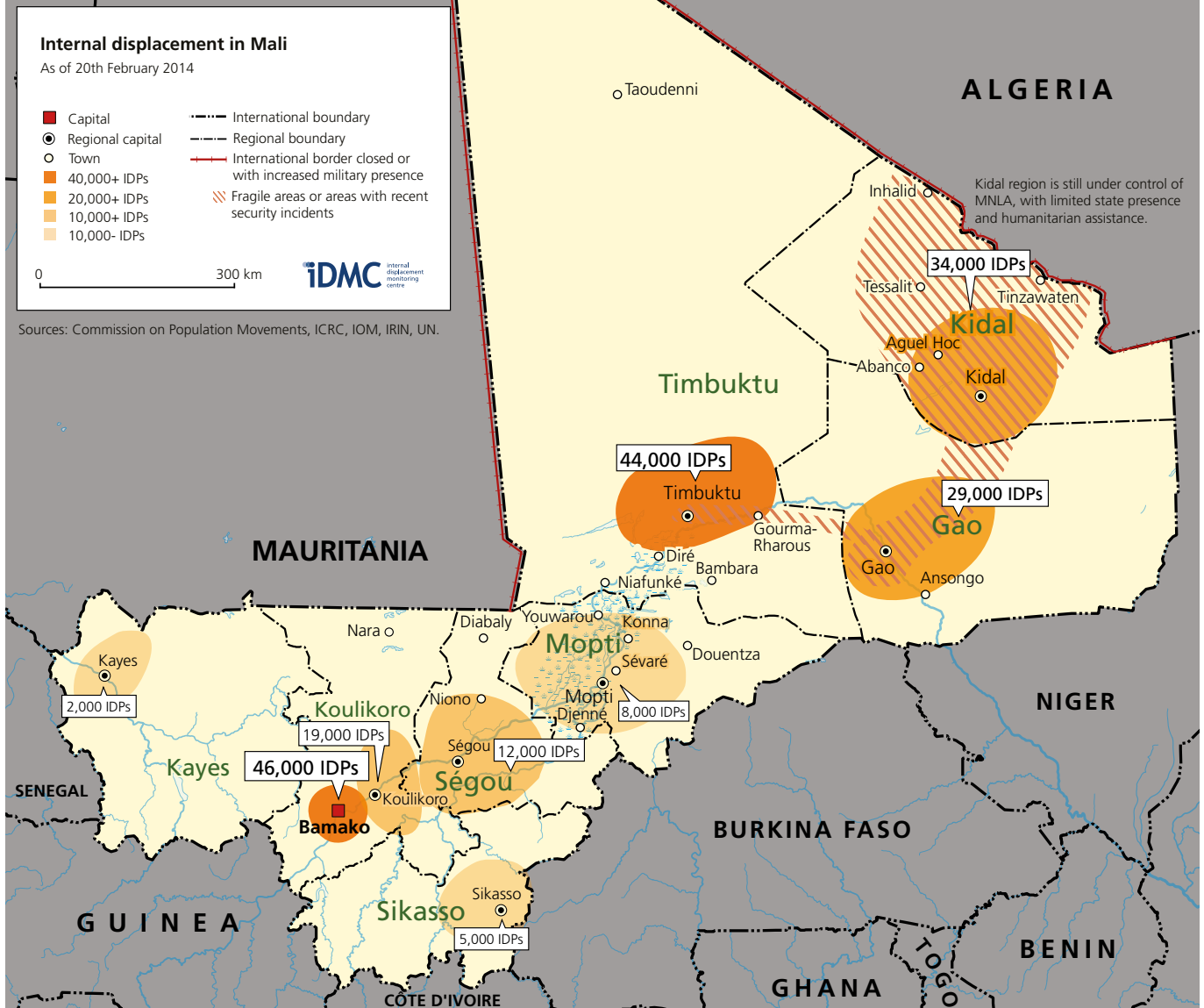
the medium- or long-term. This will require a significant revision of the existing strategy for durable solutions to include the full range of settlement options for IDPs. This will also require the Malian government to honour obligations resulting from its December 2012 ratification of the *African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of IDPs* – also known as the *Kampala Convention*. This would entail facilitating a durable solutions process which respects the rights of IDPs to make informed, free and voluntary choices of settlement and would also require developing and implementing a national IDP policy or law to guarantee those rights.

Growing needs in the south

During the peak of the crisis, the majority of IDPs – some 216,000 people – sought refuge with host families in urban centres in Mali's south. According to February 2014 estimates from the Commission on Population Movements, there are still some 92,200 people today, the majority of whom are women and children, living in displacement in Mali's southern cities, including Bamako (46,143), Koulikoro (19,101) and Ségou (12,139). The majority of IDPs still insist on returning home once security and socio-economic conditions improve, but ongoing insecurity, unstable food supply and poor living conditions all make life in the north unsustainable. Instead, people are staying where they are, or fleeing further south. In any case, displacement is becoming protracted, and IDPs in southern urban centres will continue to need humanitarian assistance in the medium term. The increasing numbers of IDPs who are electing to integrate into the local community and not to return at all will need longer-term support.

After months of living with host families, some of whom opened their doors to dozens of people at a time, most urban IDPs now live in rented accommodation in impoverished neighbourhoods. Evaluations indicate that IDPs are having more and more difficulty paying their rent, thus putting them at risk of being evicted, notably in Bamako. IDPs also have found it difficult to adapt their skills and traditional sources of income to the market in the south. Only about half of Malian IDPs have personal identification, making it difficult to access assistance

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IDMC.



and services and further impeding socio-economic recovery.

Some internally displaced women have reported being forced to resort to early marriage, survival sex and other negative coping mechanisms to survive. Women-headed households, over half of all IDP families, are particularly vulnerable to such protection risks. Furthermore, many women and girls remain at risk of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV) in over-crowded households with minimal privacy. During the crisis, there were widespread reports of rape and SGBV committed by armed groups operating in the north. Victims of these atrocities face stigmatisation within their families and communities and lack the necessary psychosocial support to recover.

Southern schools have endeavoured to find places for IDP children but anecdotal evidence suggests language remains a barrier to effective schooling, with northern children struggling to keep up in the French language schools of the south. Others children are simply not enrolled in school because they have to support their families. Existing health needs have been compounded by the trauma of flight and poor living conditions in places of displacement.

Apart from limited provision of cash transfers by humanitarian agencies, urban IDPs have been forced to continue

to depend on community and familial solidarity. As displacement becomes protracted even this support has decreased significantly as the resources of host communities dwindle and patience runs thin. In the face of increasing hardship, the resilience of Malian society needs to be nurtured and more effectively developed through sustainable early recovery development programmes.

Focus on the north at the expense of the south

Against this backdrop of growing needs in the south, coupled with insecurity and a lack of services in the north, the Malian government's promotion of return to northern regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu is concerning as is the programmatic and funding focus of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) on the north.

Government promotion of return has included cash incentives of \$500 for civil servants and the offer of return packages or transport (in so called "peace boat" convoys) to the general population. Such initiatives have been questioned by the humanitarian community and boats are often dangerously overloaded.

Even though some members of the HCT continue to support population movements north as per their mandates, some feel these spontaneous returns have been somewhat coerced and radio statements promoting return misleading, failing to fully inform IDPs about still volatile return conditions. This has undermined the ability of IDPs to make an informed choice about the range of settlement options available, including safe and dignified return, or voluntary resettlement in another part of the country, including places of displacement. The Malian government is obligated by the *Kampala Convention* to support all three of these settlement options.

Government promotion of northwards return has also coincided with curbs in international assistance. This is apparent in the recently developed Priority Action Plan for Northern Mali, the result the 2013 Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) mid-term review process. The plan mentions local integration but provides no blueprint to implement it. The CAP also remained insufficiently funded at year-end, jeopardising recovery efforts and placing IDPs at risk of protracted vulnerability.

The current Strategic Response Plan, launched in February 2014, and informed by the humanitarian needs overview of November 2013, also stops short of addressing durable solutions comprehensively. Although it includes constructive assistance for people affected by displacement in Mali's north and south, it also risks over-emphasising support to returns to the north to the detriment of the south owing to path dependency on past planning. Indeed, by adhering to these strategies, organisations have redirected their budgets towards the north, reducing or terminating assistance in the south.

Furthermore, many in the humanitarian community hold that northern areas may remain unsafe. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has declared that it is not yet possible for the majority of displaced people – refugees and IDPs – to return to their areas of origin in a safe, sustainable way. Despite the numerous challenges to safe and sustainable returns to the north, IDPs for varying reasons continue going back, with some agencies recognising their obligation to assist those returnees. However, if greater, more predictable assistance were available to meet the needs of IDPs in the south, many of these IDPs who cite “unbearable” living conditions in the south as a reason for going back north would not feel pressure to return prematurely.

Donors have also increased investment in the recovery of the north, with a strong emphasis on infrastructure. As long as the IDP crisis persists, humanitarian and development assis-

tance must be delivered in tandem. Long-term development investment must be complemented with short-term assistance to protect people in need today. In the medium-term, assistance for IDPs should be geared towards meeting basic needs of IDPs in the south as well as the north and enabling them to resume normal lives in the areas in which they choose to resettle by reinforcing their resilience through capacity-building and livelihood programmes.

Seizing the opportunity that comes with increasing stability

As attention to humanitarian needs diminishes, and as political and security situations slowly improve, the time is right for the Malian Government to adopt and implement a national IDP policy and to fully assume the responsibilities which flow from Mali's ratification of the *Kampala Convention*. The HCT also needs to revisit the current strategies to ensure a genuine inclusion of local integration and settlement elsewhere, in addition to return, as durable solution options.

There are recent promising, albeit belated, developments which could contribute to improved strategy. Notably, UNHCR and UNDP are in the process of transforming the previous Working Group on Returns into a Working Group on Durable Solutions, with the aim of improving resource mobilisation and advocacy for durable solutions, developing a durable solutions strategy paired with a plan of action, and supporting the Malian Government in implementing the *Kampala Convention*.

Indeed, the *Kampala Convention* offers a framework for collaborative action not only for humanitarian response but also for sustained engagement with long-established development organisations operating in Mali. The 2011 UN Secretary-General *Framework for Ending Displacement in the Aftermath of Conflict*, which established priorities and responsibilities for different UN agencies to support the delivery of durable solutions for IDPs and refugees, could also serve as guidance in developing a holistic durable solutions strategy for the whole of Mali.

Finally, the donor community has a responsibility to finance a coherent, longer term strategy to address Mali's displacement, return and development needs. Such a strategy should include durable solutions for all Malians, including host communities and those who chose to remain behind in southern cities for the medium- or long-term.

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