

NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Research Paper No. 186

Prevention of forced displacement: the inconsistencies of a concept

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April 2010



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ISSN 1020-7473

Introduction

Since the inception of its popularity in the 1990s, the concept of *prevention* has become a staple of almost all important attempts to delimitate the scope of humanitarian action in the field of forced displacement. The thesis of this article is that, despite its omnipresence, the concept not only remains ill-defined, but is also so much ridden with internal inconsistencies as to render it all but impractical as a basis for policy design in the humanitarian field.

My point of view here is exclusively functional: that is, we assume that if the concept of *prevention of forced displacement* reveals itself as not being instrumental in the development of concrete and sound protection policies and interventions in the humanitarian field, and therefore in effective protection of rights, then humanitarian policymakers need simply discontinue its systematic use.

A number of clarifications need to be made from the start. First, in this article I cover only forced displacement in the context of armed conflict, and although I succinctly trace the development of the concept in the refugee field, I focus mostly on internal displacement. Second, there is no particular claim here to novelty of analysis. The problems and inconsistencies of the concept of *prevention of forced displacement* have long been noted by policymakers and practitioners.

Thus, current doctrine habitually uses the concepts of either *prevention of root causes of forced displacement*, or *prevention of unlawful displacement*. I try to demonstrate here that, despite the inherent value of these efforts in injecting both an adequate rights focus and practical meaning to *prevention*, the potential of the concept to generate sound humanitarian policies remains very limited.

Third, as partly explained above, this article takes an analytical and also very practical perspective. I try to take distance from well-known debates on the presumed role of the important doctrinal, institutional and practical developments on IDP protection in the 90s and 00s, in actually preventing refugee movements to industrialized countries¹.

At the same time, I try to stay away from ongoing discussions on whether particular humanitarian organizations should be involved in particular aspects of the protection of war affected populations, IDPs and refugees. Whereas the field experiences at the origin of this article happened with the UNHCR, I try to adopt here a sort of *veil of ignorance* in the manner of Rawls, whereby the only criteria taken into account to define good protection policies are their capacity to actually guarantee equal access to

¹ The view that political factors and particularly the desire to contain refugee flows were a catalyst of renewed interest in IDPs in the 90s has been presented among other by J. Hathaway, in *New Directions to Avoid Hard Problems: The Distortion of the Palliative Role of Refugee Protection*, Journal of Refugee Studies, Vol. 8 No. 3, Oxford, 1995, pp. 290-294, and M. Barutciski, in *The Reinforcement of Non-Admission Policies and the Subversion of UNHCR: Displacement and Internal Assistance in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992 – 94)*, International Journal of Refugee Law Vol. 8 No. ½, Oxford, 1996, pp. 49-110. While I partially share these analysis, it is necessary to separate the questions of *why* the international community found an increased interest in IDPs in the 90s, from the questions of *how best* to address their assistance and protection concerns. This article situates itself squarely in the field of the latter question.

rights to affected populations, assuming as a working hypothesis that we do not know which humanitarian actors will implement them.

The fieldwork at the origin of this paper took place in the southern Colombian department of Nariño, in January-February 2005, in the framework of UNHCR's IDP operation in Colombia². I explain here the reactions of two indigenous groups at being presented by UNHCR with the concept of *prevention*, when trying to plan in a participatory way actions preventive of forced displacement.

The results of these consultations are presented here merely as a catalysis of reflection, and as a means to show the conceptual fragility of the idea of prevention when put to the test with war-affected populations. I examine afterwards the internal inconsistencies of the concept, referring to the main relevant policy references issued in the latest years, and the negative consequences in terms of the design of adequate protection policies that a hypothetical systematic use of the concept would entail. Finally, I present some possible alternatives to its use.

Preventing internal displacement in southern Colombia

In 2002, the UNHCR team in Colombia had for a number of years already been trying to answer the complicated question of how a large UNHCR IDP operation should relate to refugee operations in neighbouring countries, most notably Ecuador and Venezuela, home to thousands of Colombian refugees, expelled by the same internal conflict that was at the origin of Colombia's 3 million IDPs.

The most obvious response was the production of country of origin information, both as analysis of causes of displacement, and as an early warning for contingency and assistance purposes, with a particular focus on border areas. These efforts were usually dubbed *border monitoring*. In this case, the use of the expression occurs of course in symmetry to habitual UNHCR practice, whereby border monitoring takes place from the country of asylum.

During these years, the departments of Nariño and Putumayo, bordering with Ecuador, progressively became one of the focus of armed conflict in Colombia. An increase in drug production, together with the strategic importance of the border, pitted the Colombian army, paramilitary forces and FARC guerrillas against each other in a ruthless contest for territorial control, resulting very often in massive internal displacement or refugee outflows to Ecuador.

Initially, UNHCR based its border monitoring efforts in a combination of press reviews, conflict analysis and field missions, that soon became frustrating in its distance to local communities and therefore its relatively little added value in terms of early warning. Border monitoring started to be de-centralized to the Field Offices, which soon realized that effective early warning could only be produced in the framework of longer-term alliances with local communities considered as "at risk of displacement", based on some sort of assistance or protection intervention.

² This section is wholly based in the author's personal experience first as a focal point for border monitoring in the UNHCR Branch Office in Bogotá (April 2001 – May 2002), then as a head of Field Office in Puerto Asís, Putumayo, from October 2003 to December 2003, and finally as a head of Field Office in Pasto, Nariño, from January 2004 to December 2006.

This, of course, opened the question of what sort of intervention could UNHCR develop in communities that had so far not been displaced. Despite the important precedent of the Bosnia operation in the 90s and the intense debate it generated, the only policy documents at the time referred only to the prevention of refugee-producing situations, which only partially applied to the mentioned situation.

As an example, the 2003 Agenda for Protection, under Goal 1 (*Strengthening implementation of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol*) and its objective 12 (*More resolute responses to root causes of refugee movements*), instructed UNHCR, “through its field presence, to act as a catalyst, where appropriate, in mitigating circumstances which might lead to refugee flows”³.

Thus, the UNHCR Field Office in Nariño dedicated during 2004 considerable time and effort in building confidence with the indigenous Awá and Eperara-Siapidaara communities, which were at the time already deeply affected by massacres and forced displacement⁴. In February 2005 the Office and indigenous leaders decided to organize two separate workshops, with participation of some thirty leaders, women, men and youth from communities who were considered as *at risk of displacement*, in which to analyze the problem of forced displacement and see ways in which UNHCR could assist in preventing its causes.

The methodology chosen for the workshops was that of problem analysis in the logical framework. Interpreters and aides for those who could not read or write were at hand, and a highly visual approach was used whereby the problem tree was presented as a physical rainforest tree. The workshops were kicked off by presenting “forced displacement” as the main problem, in the hope that community participants would then identify the different layers of causality (i.e., the roots of the tree), and then design activities to prevent the root causes from appearing.

During the first hours of the workshops, whereas almost all participants quickly grasped the meaning of *prevention*, they were unable to apprehend why *forced displacement* was presented as the central problem. The reaction to this approach can be summarized around three points:

First, on many occasions people flee to protect their lives, that is, they use flight as a protective strategy against the effects of armed conflict. Rather than preventing it, flight and displacement need to be *managed* so that communities can have maximum control over it and its consequences, for instance through the establishment of assembly centres with stockpiles of food and non-food items as near as possible the places of origin, the drafting of community based contingency plans, and training at national and international protection principles of IDPs so that they can successfully negotiate with authorities protection, assistance and durable solutions.

Second, forced displacement is just one of the threats generated by armed conflict. Others are: kidnappings, assassinations, loss of land and property, loss of autonomy and self-governing capacity at the hands of regular or irregular armed groups.

³ See UNHCR, *Agenda for Protection*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3e637b194.pdf> [accessed 28 December 2008].

⁴ Armed conflict has dramatically intensified in Nariño over the last three years. In February 2009, according to Awá leaders, FARC guerrillas massacred at least 17 members of this community. Again in August 2009 this community denounced a fresh massacre of 12 indigenous persons.

Therefore, it does not make sense that one international agency with a protection mandate would choose to concentrate in just one of these threats, and not necessarily the most serious one.

Third, the typical triggering events of forced displacement can certainly be identified: assassinations, threats, and combats in the proximity or in inhabited areas. However, a protective strategy will not be able to prevent the appearance of these factors. Rather, in some cases communities may have some control over the root causes.

If, for instance, communities reduce the cultivation of coca leaves, the incentive for armed actors to compete for this resource is reduced and therefore conflict diminishes. In this case, the root causes of forced displacement are exactly the same as for other consequences of armed conflict. Therefore, any intervention at their level loses its character of “IDP policy” and becomes just protection in the context of armed conflict. It becomes then arbitrary to use exclusively the concept of forced displacement to identify its root causes and plan a preventive policy.

UNHCR was in the end left with no choice other than developing an intervention that did away with the concept of prevention of displacement and sought instead to develop certain abilities in the community that would reduce their vulnerability to armed conflict, such as training of leaders, strengthening of community-based justice mechanisms in order to avoid armed actors adopting the role of conflict-solvers, gaining thereby control of communities, and developing community-based contingency plans for forced displacement. The latter ended up being the only element in the intervention that was directly related to forced displacement.

UNHCR was initially very reluctant to embark in the initiative. After much internal analysis, the Field Office finally decided to do so, partly out of our initial commitment to leave the indigenous population a wide margin to participate in project design. The most shocking aspect was not finding out that UNHCR’s expertise on forced displacement was being rejected out of hand, but rather being forced to look at communities affected by armed conflict, which we were labelling as “communities at risk of displacement”, through lenses other than the dynamics of forced migration.

What follows below is a critical analysis of the concept of prevention of forced displacement in its diverse incarnations. The discussion is mainly conceptual and it does not claim to be fully based on field experience, as the two cases above cannot in any case amount to a sample valid for research purposes. However, these cases contribute to illuminate the risks inherent to the developing of humanitarian policies when their conceptual foundations are not sound and have not passed the tests of critical analysis and, above all, of testing with the communities we are trying to protect.

Evolution of the concept of prevention of forced displacement

The current concept of prevention as applied to forced displacement first surfaces in the early 80s⁵. On a suggestion by the Federal Republic of Germany, the Secretary-

⁵ As such, the concept is by no means a new one. J. Hope Simpson, in a 1939 study devoted to refugees in the interwar period, states that “[p]revention is better than cure, and international action must be directed to prevent the emergence of new refugee movements by easing those tensions, political and

General of the United Nations appointed in 1981 a group of experts to explore ways to avert new flows of refugees, which pointed in its 1986 report to the close links between human rights violations and refugee flight⁶.

At the time, UNHCR reacted coldly to these approaches, stating that “it cannot concern itself with the circumstances that brought [refugee problems] into existence”⁷. In a parallel development, former High Commissioner to Refugees Sadruddin Aga Khan was appointed in 1981 by the UN Commission on Human Rights as a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and Mass Exoduses, recommending the deployment of humanitarian observers to crisis areas, the adoption of an early warning system and the carrying out of conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms as the choice preventive policies⁸.

The 1981 Report of the UN Secretary General makes a clear link between violations of human rights and the flight of refugees, and proposes early warning as one of the key mechanisms to “avert refugee flows”⁹. A similar approach is taken by a 1986 document of the UN General Assembly focusing on international cooperation to avert new flows of refugees¹⁰. The 90s were to witness a dramatic change in the way international relations affected humanitarian policies, of which the expansion of the concept of prevention was one of its main manifestations.

The sudden interest of donor countries and some humanitarian organizations, first of all UNHCR, in the concept has been attributed to a diversity of factors: the growing costs to donors and host countries that the increase in refugee flows was originating¹¹; the perceived threat posed by these flows to national, regional and international security¹²; and the opportunity for humanitarian action closer to the causes of displacement that the perceived relaxation of classic concepts of sovereignty, following the end of the Cold War, seemed to be opening for humanitarian actors¹³.

All these circumstances seemed to conspire to enable the application of the old medical adage, “prevention is better than cure”, to humanitarian work, based on a

economic, which threaten to produce unplanned migration movements”. See Hope Simpson, J., *The Refugee Problem, Report of a Survey*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1939.

⁶ *Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on International Co-operation to Avert New Flows of Refugees*, Note by the Secretary-General, A/41/324, 13 May 1986.

⁷ Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations, General Assembly, A/36/582, 23 October 1981.

⁸ *Human Rights and Mass Exoduses*, UN GA res. 30 (XXXVI) of 11 March 1980.

⁹ United Nations, Economic and Social Council, *Study on Human Rights and Massive Exoduses*, E/CN.4/1503, 31 December 1981.

¹⁰ United Nations, General Assembly, *International Co-operation to Avert New Flows of Refugees*, A/41/324, 13 May 1986.

¹¹ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme, Standing Committee, *Follow-up to ECOSOC resolution 1995/56: UNHCR activities in relation to prevention*, EC/46/SC/CRP.33, 28 May 1996. Also on occasion of the mass refugee influx in the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide, UNHCR was asking “what would have happened in Rwanda if the two billion dollars spent in the first two weeks of the refugee emergency would have been used to maintain peace, protect human rights and promote development in the period preceding the genocide?”. UNHCR, *The State of the World’s Refugees: in Search of Solutions*, 1995.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Scholar Luise Drüke, for instance was writing in 1993 : «[t]he international community should move forcefully now, while almost global cooperation is possible, since the vanishing of the East-West Conflict, to institutionalize new preventive and interventionist approaches to save human lives, prevent future abuses and forced population displacement ». Drüke, Luise, *Preventive Action for Refugee Producing Situations*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a.M., 1993.

logic of reduced costs and increased impact of preventive rather than reactive action. Thus, for UNHCR, the classical approach focusing on prevention and solutions (that is, responsive action and remedial action) gave way to the three-pronged approach of prevention, protection and solutions (preventive action, responsive action and remedial action)¹⁴.

UNHCR struggled at the beginning with the actual content of the concept and particularly with the question of whether it applied to the *causes* of refugee flows (concerning itself therefore with questions of human rights and human security), or merely to the *symptom* (the refugee flows in themselves, as a migration management concern). The 1992 Note on International Protection, containing one of the first definitions of prevention by UNHCR, maintains some ambiguity while underlining the need to uphold the right to seek asylum:

The Working Group considered prevention to be an umbrella term covering activities both to attenuate causes of departure and to reduce or contain cross-border movements or internal displacements. Prevention is not, however, a substitute for asylum; the right to seek and enjoy asylum, therefore, must continue to be upheld.¹⁵

At the same time, from early on UNHCR saw the ease with which this definition could be interpreted as giving policy coverage to activities seeking to reduce access to asylum, particularly to industrialized countries, and to put the financial and political costs of the response to forced displacement in the countries where it originated. Thus, the 1993 *Note on International Protection* warns that

The objective of prevention is not to obstruct escape from danger or from an intolerable situation, but to make flight unnecessary by removing or alleviating the conditions that force people to flee. Defending the right to remain does not in any way negate the right to seek and to enjoy asylum. UNHCR has always insisted that its activities in countries of origin are not incompatible with and must not in any way undermine the institutions of asylum or the individual's access to safety.¹⁶

UNHCR's groundbreaking interventions in northern Iraq and Bosnia (which the agency at times presented as falling under the concept of prevention), and the catastrophic failure of techniques of in-country protection such as the safe areas in Srebrenica, Gorazde, Bihac and Zepa opened the concept wide for criticism¹⁷. After

¹⁴ On this, see Mangala, Jack, *Prévention des déplacements forcés de population – possibilités et limites*, International Review of the Red Cross, vol. 83 no. 844, pp. 1067 – 1095. This article remains one of the very few studies focusing on the actual merits and shortcomings of the concept of prevention.

¹⁵ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, *Note on International Protection*, 25 August 1992, A/AC.96/799, para. 26.

¹⁶ Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, *Note on International Protection*, 31 August 1993, A/AC.96/815, para. 37.

¹⁷ Michael Barutciski in *The Reinforcement...* (*op. cit.*) affirms that "the international refugee regime's recent preoccupation with in-country protection is intended to reinforce State policies that deny entry to asylum seekers, and that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is assigned these interventionist activities in order to indirectly subvert its original palliative role." Barutciski adds that "(...) there is legitimate concern that the new paradigm by which refugee flows are to be prevented from occurring may solve problems for powerful States that feel endangered by forced migration while not actually helping persons who face persecution".

1995, the agency continued to work on the concept, while pointedly warning against its more contentious interpretation of “prevention of refugee movements”. The definition crystallized around addressing the causes of refugee movements:

Preventive action consists of initiatives which have the effect of averting the occurrence and recurrence of those conditions which force people to leave their usual place of residence. The notion of prevention should never be confused with efforts to obstruct the flight of threatened populations, to deter the departure of people who intend to seek refuge elsewhere or to undermine the institution of asylum.¹⁸

The last important appearance of the concept, as applied to refugees, in a UNHCR document dates back from 2001, when one of the objectives of the Agenda for Protection¹⁹ was formulated as “addressing the root causes of refugee movements”.

The second important field of humanitarian policy in which the concept has been used and developed has been the general efforts to clarify the legal basis and operational principles of the protection of internally displaced persons. Noteworthy is the 1998 study on the legal aspects relating to the protection against arbitrary displacement²⁰, the annotations to the Guiding Principles by Prof. Walter Kälin²¹, and subsequent efforts to offer general operational guidance to IDP operations, in particular the document *Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: A Manual for Law and Policymakers*²², the *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*²³, the manual *Protection of Conflict-Induced IDPs: Assessment for Action*²⁴, and several UNHCR documents clarifying the material and personal scope of UNHCR’s IDP protection activities.

The most notable aspect of these efforts is, with a few exceptions, its legal tilt: its focus is very much on exploring how and to which extent International Humanitarian Law prohibits forced displacement, what may be the exceptions to this prohibition, what are the conditions under which legal displacement can be carried out, and what are the activities that humanitarian actors can undertake to promote respect for this

¹⁸ *UNHCR’s role in the prevention of refugee-producing situations*, UNHCR, Geneva, 1999.

¹⁹ See above, endnote no. 3.

²⁰ *Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Francis Deng, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 1997/39, Addendum, Compilation and Analysis of Legal Norms, part II: Legal Aspects Relating to the Protection against Arbitrary Displacement*, E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.1, 15 February 1998.

²¹ Kälin, W., *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: Annotations*, Studies in Transnational Legal Policy no. 38, The American Society of International Law, Washington DC, 2008.

²² *Protecting Internally Displaced Persons: A Manual for Law and Policymakers*, Brookings Institution – University of Bern, October 2008, available at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2008/1016_internal_displacement/10_internal_displacement_manual.pdf [accessed 7 September 2009]. The Manual is of course addressed mainly to States. However, it provides guidance to humanitarian actors precisely in the range of measures, such as the express prohibition of arbitrary displacement, for which they need to advocate with Governments.

²³ *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, Global Protection Cluster Working Group, December 2007, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4790cbc02.pdf> [accessed 7 September 2009]

²⁴ *Protection of Conflict-Induced IDPs: Assessment for Action*, Protection Cluster Working Group – Early Recovery Cluster Working Group, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/47eba3c62.pdf> [accessed 7 September 2009]

legal framework. The Guiding Principles partly echo the ICRC's main response to the prevention debates of the 90s, that is, that prevention efforts must above all be based on promoting in general the respect of International Humanitarian Law²⁵:

All authorities and international actors shall respect and ensure respect for their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, in all circumstances, so as to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement of persons.²⁶

1. Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence.

2. The prohibition of arbitrary displacement includes displacement:

(a) When it is based on policies of apartheid, "ethnic cleansing" or similar practices aimed at or resulting in alteration of the ethnic, religious or racial composition of the affected populations;

(b) In situations of armed conflict, unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand (...).²⁷

The concept of prevention is thus very much at the centre of efforts to distill what must be done *before* displacement occurs, and it is mentioned in each and every document mentioned above. While no particular attempt at definition is done, much care is taken to avoid the conceptual traps that plagued debates over the concept in the 90s. As an example, the IDP Handbook warns that

(...) All persons have a right to move freely and in safety within their country and to leave the country and seek asylum in another country at any time. Efforts to prevent and / or minimize forced displacement and mitigate its adverse effects must not in any way restrict or limit freedom of movement, impede people's ability to move, or influence their decision to do so.²⁸

As for the particular activities that an operationalization of the concept of prevention might contain, there is some divergence between the documents mentioned above. All activities, however, might be grouped into four larger categories:

- promoting legal recognition and respect of the right to be free from arbitrary displacement, and the consequent prohibition of arbitrary displacement:
- addressing root causes particularly through conflict prevention:
- assessment, early warning and contingency planning; and,

²⁵ ICRC, declaration to the OAU / UNHCR Commemorative Symposium on African Refugees and the Problems of Forced Displacement of Populations, quoted in Mandala, J., *Le déplacement forcé de populations comme nouvelle dimension de sécurité : rôle et responsabilités de l'OTAN*, August 2001, available at <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/99-01/munuma.pdf> [accessed 7 September 2009].

²⁶ Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Principle 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Principle 6.

²⁸ *Handbook, op. cit.*, , page 164.

- field-based protective strategies, such as presence, advocacy, community mobilization and information on their rights.²⁹

Only UNHCR seems to tackle the question of who might be the persons of communities to be protected by these activities, when attempting to clarify the organization's scope of engagement with the protection of internally displaced persons. Thus, the concept coined to delimit the personal scope of preventive activities is "communities at risk of displacement". The organization readily admits that this category, the nature and scope of corresponding protection responses and operational activities, and the potential overlap of mandates between UNHCR, ICRC and OHCHR all need further clarification.³⁰

Analysis of the concept

Let us now take a closer look at the concept in itself and the possible consequences of a systematic application. Any analysis of the concept of prevention of forced displacement must start by a statement of the obvious: it fails to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of forced migration in contexts of armed conflict.

According to the cases, forced displacement may be a legitimate decision by armed actors; an unintended consequence of armed actions that may be in themselves legal or illegal; a method of warfare and a war crime; and in addition to all this, a trigger of humanitarian catastrophes, or an additional causal element in broader migration trends linked to poverty.

At the same time, looking at the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the own decision-making processes of affected populations, it is also in many cases a self-protective strategy by which families trade livelihoods, property and social networks for a chance at survival. Thus, proponents of the concept of prevention of forced displacement have to grapple with the conundrum of forced displacement being at the same time, in the lingo of contemporary protection theory, a threat (which may or may not have as its source an illegal act, and may or may not be illegal in itself, when actively sought by armed actors), and a coping mechanism.

We have seen above that the answer proposed to this problem by refugee doctrine is to focus on the prevention of root causes. This approach has two salutary effects. First, it recognizes that no matter the role displacement plays in a conflict and whether it is arbitrary or not, its consequences in humanitarian terms may well be equally catastrophic for the affected populations: by focusing prevention upwards in the causality chain, it seeks to pre-empt the humanitarian consequences of all types of displacement.

²⁹ It is striking to note that of these four categories, three of them had already been mentioned by Sadruddin Aga Khan in his landmark 1981 report. The only novelty is the legal treatment of the right not to be displaced and the prohibition of arbitrary displacement. See Sadruddin Aga Khan. 1981. "Questions of the Violation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in Any Part of the World, with Particular Reference to Colonial and Other Dependent Countries and Territories, Study of Human Rights and Massive Exoduses". New York: United Nations Commission on Human Rights (U.N. Document E/CN.4/1503)

³⁰ *The Protection of Internally Displaced Persons and the Role of UNHCR*, Informal Consultative Meeting, UNHCR, Geneva, 27 February 2007.

And second, this approach to prevention, at least in its latest incarnations, is carefully crafted so as to preserve the possibility of affected populations to choose their coping mechanisms and among them flight, be it internally or across international borders³¹.

In contrast, IDP doctrine has focused its interpretation of the concept on the prevention of arbitrary displacement, focusing thereby, mostly on the basis of International Humanitarian Law, on the actors causing displacement and the legality of the act. This approach equally preserves the possibility of displacement as a coping mechanism, and has the additional advantage (absent from the refugee approach) of focusing minds on the actual role displacement plays in armed conflict and the responsibilities behind it, and therefore of opening the door to the right to reparations as an integral part of durable solutions strategies.

However, this approach does not address the fact that even “legal” displacement may have catastrophic humanitarian consequences. That this preoccupation is present at the core of the concept of prevention is shown by the fact that contingency planning is included in most contemporary elaborations of the concept.

Both approaches, therefore, give only partial answers to the conundrum enunciated above: in realization of this, they are often combined when elaborating the concept of prevention, to ensure that preventive strategies will both address displacement as a crime, when necessary, and its root causes, to cover the consequences in humanitarian terms of all types of displacement. We will endeavour to show that, even in this case, the concept in itself not only remains of little use, but can lead to significant problems in the quality and integrity of humanitarian strategies designed on its basis.

The specific activities looking to address the root causes of displacement, as included in the IDP policy documents cited above, rank from conflict prevention through mediation and dialogue, to more concrete measures to promote the respect of human rights and international humanitarian law in the midst of armed conflict, and prevent the general occurrence of violations.

Whereas questions may be raised as to the role and possible loss of neutrality of humanitarian actors involved in conflict prevention, it is apparent that as we go up the causality chain of forced displacement, the specificity to IDP policy of these activities gradually vanishes: they are as good to prevent forced displacement as they are to prevent any other humanitarian consequences of armed conflict. Their labelling as *prevention of root causes of forced displacement* is thus fairly arbitrary, as there is nothing specific to displacement in them; conversely, the concept of *prevention of the root causes of forced displacement* does not reveal any particular value, when unfolding and analyzing its content, for the design of these particular policies.

Let us then assume that a humanitarian agency interested in preventing the causes of forced displacement goes down the causal chain and closer to the more immediate causes of displacement, and sets out to design a preventive strategy based in preventing the occurrence of violations or abuses of human rights, and infractions of international humanitarian law, that are at the basis of forced displacement. The kind

³¹ Although originating in refugee policy and practice, the concept of “prevention of the root causes of forced displacement” has found its way into some texts referring to IDP policy. Therefore, although this article refers mostly to prevention in an IDP context, it will also address this particular version of the prevention concept.

of activities that current IDP policy prescribe to achieve this objective include presence of humanitarian personnel in areas of high risk of displacement, and advocacy with duty bearers including all parties to a conflict.

Assuming that the agency is facing a conflict of relative low intensity, where these activities are most likely to have some impact, affected populations will certainly retain some agency on whether to stay or to leave. In these cases, different populations will have a certain capacity to define their threshold of tolerance to violations of human rights and infractions of IHLs, above which displacement will most certainly occur.

This threshold is partly defined by a rational calculation of risks to be faced by respectively a decision to stay (reduced safety, psychological problems for children, a possibility of loss of life) and a decision to leave (loss of livelihoods, destruction of social connections, loss of property). As an instance, the cyclical character of violence in Mindanao (entailing a possibility of returning in the short term and recovering property), together with heightened psychological vulnerability to violence caused by years of exposure, may partly explain the massive displacement of whole villages triggered by acts of relatively low-level violence.

Communities of coca-growing settlers in the Colombian jungle may be the first to get displaced in upsurges of violence, particularly as compared to indigenous populations, given their availability of capital to restart elsewhere, and the fact that they may have kept social connections and even housing in their places of origin.

At the same time, political and cultural factors may come into play which are less susceptible to be explained in terms of rational decisions. Indigenous peoples in Guatemala in the 80s, and in Colombia today, have developed a strong interpretation of the long-term objectives behind their displacement, as tied to political or economic models requiring their neutralization as autonomous social and political actors: the keywords then are resistance to displacement, or returns even before the signature of peace agreements (the case of Guatemala in the 90s) or the issuance of guarantees that violence will recede (as happens nowadays in Colombia).

The clear consequence of all this is that displacement may be in many cases a very poor indicator of the level of suffering or violations of rights of local populations. Affected populations may choose to stay because of lack of social and economic alternatives elsewhere, because they have developed some coping mechanisms, or because of deeply ingrained motivations related to their political project and their identity. They may also be *forced* to stay.

If we accept that the prevention of acts that lead to displacement is the main policy basis of an agency engaging in protection in areas affected by armed conflict, then it is very likely that the designed intervention may end up considering areas less likely to produce displacement, but with a higher level of suffering and violations of rights, as a lesser priority. That is, the prioritization exercise linked to considering prevention as a good basis for protection policy may well lead to serious breaches of the principle according to which aid and protection must be distributed according to need³².

³² Interestingly enough, a different but not totally unconnected prioritization problem has also been identified for prevention policies seeking to address the causes of refugee movements. In a 2002 paper

Let us now focus on field-based preventive policies seeking to prevent unlawful displacement. The first difficulty with the concept of *prevention of unlawful displacement* is its highly technical character. Assessing the lawfulness of forced displacement may require a proficiency in international humanitarian law that is out of reach of most of humanitarian actors outside the ICRC; at the same time, one must wonder whether this analysis is needed and at all possible, previous to the engagement of humanitarian agencies in the activities indicated above, when there is a risk of forced displacement.

In many situations of low-level conflict armed actors who seek a particular military advantage in the displacement of civilians may pursue this objective by a series of acts of low-level violence, designed to disguise its relation to their ultimate objective and therefore to deflect attention from the press, humanitarian actors and agents mandated to ensure the security of civilians: these acts may include intimidation, threats, progressive deprivation of means of subsistence, selective killings, etc.

In these cases, it seems fairly clear that humanitarian agencies seeking to devise field-based preventive strategies must focus as a basis for policy on the gravity of these acts as violations of accepted standards of international human rights and humanitarian law in themselves, and not on the ultimate intention of the armed actor concerned, which may be difficult if not impossible to establish with any legal accuracy, or at least not in any timely manner so as to implement preventive strategies.

The prioritization problem mentioned above applies also in this case. It is perfectly imaginable to think of military operations within the parameters of IHL that are however at the root of the mass displacement of civilians, causing untold suffering, loss of livelihoods and social disruption, as compared to small-scale ethnic cleansing in another conflict.

Does it mean that humanitarian actors must prioritize the second scenario in their preventive activities, and shun prevention of legal violence that leads to great suffering and perhaps loss of life? The correct strategy here, particularly when there is little clarity as to the legality of the act, and until this clarity appears, is to advocate for the respect of IHL principles and restraint in the use of military force, in view of the consequences it is unleashing.

The “prioritization problem” can also be studied from the viewpoint of the actors causing displacement. It has long been recognized that the movement of particular sectors or the whole of the civilian population in a given place may represent a

otherwise seeking to encourage the European Union to more forcefully adopt these policies, Christina Boswell acknowledges that “[t]he main potential area of conflict between migration prevention and other external relations goals concerns priority regions. A policy to prevent economic migration would be likely to focus development efforts on the “good performers”, while a displacement preventive policy would tend to focus on (potential) crisis areas. In both cases, the regional focus would be on countries with established economic, historical or linguistic ties to EU states, whose emigrants would be most likely to choose the EU as a destination (i.e. enabling factors). While this regional focus would be broader than that of the EU’s current “proximity” policy, it would nonetheless not extend to all the countries prioritized on strictly development-related criteria. More specifically, it would exclude some of the poorest countries whose inhabitants are unlikely to have the resources or contacts to travel to the EU.” Boswell, Christina, *Addressing the causes of migratory and refugee movements: the role of the European Union*, New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper no. 73, UNHCR, December 2002, p. 22.

distinct military and political advantage for armed actors in a conflict. Now, forced displacement is one in many strategies by which military actors seek to use civilians for military gain.

As an example, in internal conflicts without a significant ethnic or religious background, that is, without anything very closely linked to the identity of the individual that may create a perception of support for a particular military actor, and when control of civilian populations is nevertheless key for territorial and political gains, a wide variety of means will be used to exact this control. In particular, sectors of the population perceived as an actual or potential threat will be subjected to a variety of pressures to either neutralize them, or enlist support, or eliminate them according to the resistance and the threat perceived.

As another example, in Afghanistan the insurgency has shown a detailed perception of the kind of threat to their power that different categories of civilians would pose. While high-ranking Government officials and those working for particular ministries, such as Women Affairs, may directly be targeted for killing, the insurgents are content with the expulsion of lower-ranking civil servants.

It is hardly thinkable that any humanitarian agency involved in protection in these areas (assuming this can be done at all), would develop a particular strategy to prevent these expulsions, instead of a more integrated approach involving all human rights violations and infractions of IHL, where prioritization would be made on the basis of gravity only³³.

Communities at risk

We have seen how a hypothetical exercise in applying the concept of prevention of forced displacement, no matter how we formulate it, may lead to grave errors in the formulation and implementation of protection activities. Now, the concept of prevention of forced displacement has also other ways to lead to policy inconsistencies. It is often the case that the development of a policy will lead or necessitate a definition of the population group it intends to target, in order to more accurately reach this population or even for purposes of eligibility.

Thus, the concept of prevention of forced displacement has led to the definition of the population group that prevention policies are supposed to target, that is, *populations at risk of displacement*. Notably, UNHCR defines the personal scope of UNHCR's IDP protection activities as "populations who are affected by internal displacement but who are not necessarily displaced themselves", including "persons or communities at risk of displacement"³⁴. It also acknowledges that questions remain as to the nature and scope of protection responses and operational activities that this involvement would entail.

The expression *risk* has been used in a number of occasions during the last ten years in different attempts at conceptualize protection in the humanitarian sphere. There is currently no consensus on its exact meaning, as compared for instance with *protection*

³³ Research undertaken by the author in Afghanistan in 2008.

³⁴ UNHCR, *The Protection of Internally Displaced Persons...*, *op. cit.*

gaps, threats and violations of rights. Beyond this lack of definition, the category “populations at risk of displacement” hides a number of practical difficulties.

Any intuitive definition of *risk* and particularly when used in the context of *communities at risk of displacement* would refer to a specific possibility of harm to life, integrity or dignity of civilian populations in the immediate future. Thus, the concept of *risk*, as by the way, the concept of prevention, points to the possibility of something that has not happened yet.

It is however very difficult to imagine a community which can be considered at risk of displacement where some kind of violations of rights or harm to civilians is not already happening, among other reasons, because short of this there would probably be no other meaningful indicators of risk. Thus, the very concept of *communities at risk*, by exclusively focusing on future events, contributes to obscure current violations of rights and other abuses.

In addition to this, as we have seen above, different communities may place the “triggering threshold” for displacement at different levels of suffering: as a matter of course, those having less to lose from displacement, because of having better coping mechanisms or simply less attachment to the land, will be displaced first, which is the same as to say that, in many cases, they may well be at a higher risk of displacement given a comparatively lower level of suffering or human rights violations. Thus, the very concept of “communities at risk of displacement”, if taken seriously, may easily lead of grave errors in the prioritization of communities for protection activities.

A final difficulty inherent to the concept of “communities at risk” refers to the timeliness and efficiency of protective interventions. By definition, the closer a community is to its displacement threshold, the more at risk of displacement it will be: it is difficult not to conclude that these would be priority communities for intervention under the concept of “communities at risk”. This presents a number of problems.

First, by the time a community reaches “priority” status, it may be too late for any meaningful intervention. Second, common sense indicates that a community whose displacement represents a high military and political stake for an armed actor (for instance, because of real or perceived support to an enemy guerrilla group, as was the case in Guatemala, or is the case in Darfur), or in the vicinity of which restraint and respect for the principle of proportionality are seen as too contrary to military interests, are clearly at a higher risk of displacement.

However, it is precisely in this kind of situations where it would be illusory to think that protective activities by the humanitarian community may have any effect in stopping or restraining armed actors from displacing civilians, or from undertaking military activities that could incidentally lead to displacement. In these cases, while humanitarian protection agencies may want to continue advocacy as a matter of principle and consistency and as a longer term strategy, from the viewpoint of operational protection priority must be in preparedness, contingency planning, and even in some cases in the evacuation of endangered populations.

The IDP prism of protection policies

We have tried to analyse above the internal problems and inconsistencies that are inherent to the concept of *prevention of forced displacement*. Some of them, as we have tried to show, contain an enormous do-harm potential for humanitarian agencies when designing protection strategies and priorities for civilians in conflict-affected areas. It is perhaps surprising that, while continuing to be a staple of practically any general policy developments or guidance documents in the IDP sphere, the concept of prevention is subject to comparatively little practical use at field level.’

One might then legitimately ask about the usefulness of a theoretical exercise in analyzing and ultimately deconstructing the concept. The answer lies partially in the fact that the very survival of the concept points to a number of deep-seated distortions in the design of humanitarian policies for IDPs, which are in dire need of discussion and ultimately correction. From a more practical viewpoint, there remains an acute need to delimitate more precisely the respective material and personal scopes of the concepts of IDP protection and general protection in areas affected by armed conflict, if nothing else for the sake of the quality of programme design.

The first of the distortions that we endeavour to summarily analyze here is the subsistence of an “IDP prism” in the design of general protection policies. It is well known that the absence of a clear institutional setting at the international level for the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons was one of the main factors behind attempts at streamlining the international humanitarian system in the 90s and ultimately the launching of the Humanitarian Review and the Humanitarian Reform Process in 2005.

Several observers and humanitarian actors have noted that, particularly in the first two or three years of the implementation of the cluster system, this resulted on an excessive focus on IDPs in the policy development undertaken by the Clusters at global level, particularly by the UNHCR-led Global Protection Cluster³⁵. While this has been substantially corrected, I argue in this article that this effect has distorted humanitarian strategies and priorities in ways that are subtler than just prioritizing one population segment, in this case IDPs, over others. Let us take as examples humanitarian operations with a strong focus on forced displacement, such as Colombia and Afghanistan. While humanitarian actors did pay attention to local communities affected by armed conflict, in doing so they used categories such as “internally stranded persons”³⁶, “comunidades sitiadas” (communities under siege), and “comunidades bloqueadas” (blocked communities)³⁷.

³⁵ The Humanitarian Policy Group, in its report no. 26, has noted that “the humanitarian reform process has resulted in the prioritization of IDPs at the expense of a more comprehensive approach which addresses the needs of the entire population”. See Humanitarian Policy Group, *Protective action: Incorporating civilian protection into humanitarian response*, report no. 26, p. 13, available at <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1020.pdf> [accessed 7 September 2009].

At the same time, in the first years of existence of the Global Protection Cluster various participating agencies made in repeated occasions similar observations to UNHCR as Global Cluster Lead.

³⁶ In an unpublished document of 2002, Peter Marsden quotes UN sources in saying that in 2001 there were 4,150,000 “internally stranded persons” in Afghanistan.

³⁷ These expressions, as observed by the author, were widely used by both local NGOs and international humanitarian actors in Colombia at the beginning of the 2000s.

This effort at categorization obviously resulted, in part at least, from a realization of the limitations of the concept of “communities at risk” that IDP policy seemed to offer to brand local populations affected by armed conflict, as we have tried to explain above, and from a honest effort to show that armed conflict was affecting local populations in forms other than internal displacement. Its use may also have partially arisen from emulation at the wide “branding” success of the category “internally displaced persons”.

However, and perhaps with the exception of “communities under siege” it is not too difficult to perceive that *mobility* is still the concept behind these categories. In particular in Colombia, in the context of particular situations where restricting freedom of movement of rural communities was militarily more advantageous to some armed actors than forcibly displacing them, the concept of “blocked communities” was instrumental to various humanitarian actors in contesting the Government’s arguments that dwindling IDP figures were an indicator of improvement in humanitarian conditions. Thus, the concept of “blocked communities” was certainly used in contraposition to “internally displaced persons”, but this only shows its conceptual dependence to the IDP concept.

There is yet another way to look at the distortion in protection concepts created by the way *internal displacement*, as a special category of concern in humanitarian policy, has been used. In an article contesting the inclusion of refugees into the broader category of *forced migration*, Hathaway has noted the risks in de-humanizing humanitarian policies that arise when categories at the basis of them migrate from those defining *population groups* (in this case, the internally displaced) to those defining *phenomena* (internal displacement): while persons have rights that need to be fulfilled and their own ideas and feelings about how to solve their problems, phenomena demand just to be understood, studied and properly managed³⁸.

Studying internal displacement as a phenomenon, and trying to conceptualize it, already far away from the complexities and infinite nuances of the situation of internally displaced persons themselves, leads to understanding displacement as a cycle with a *before displacement*, *during displacement* and *the end of displacement*, that has long served as a blueprint to structure thinking and policy development in the IDP field.

The concept of *forced displacement* and the cycle with which it is structured (that is, before, during and after displacement) are applied back to affected populations to divide them up in categories: the result of this experiment for the category *before displacement*, is obviously the corresponding category *populations at risk of displacement*. We have seen above the extent of the inconsistencies that arise when this category is used to develop protection policies.

We see now that this is the result of applying a large and abstractly defined “IDP prism” to the whole of the populations directly affected by armed conflict, instead of relying on a much more empirical assessment of the violations of rights and protection needs arising in this environment. This somewhat abstract approach may well be at

³⁸ Hathaway, James C., *Forced Migration Studies: Could We Agree Just to “Date”?*, Journal of Refugee Studies, Vol. 20 No. 3, Oxford, 2007 pp. 349-369.

the core of UNHCR's difficulties to define the personal scope of its involvement with IDPs.

In a key policy paper, UNHCR states that "affected populations, the definition of which includes persons or communities 'at risk of displacement', fall squarely within the coordination responsibilities it has assumed under that cluster". The same document acknowledges that

[...] questions and indeed concerns have arisen over this category and the nature and scope of the protection responses and operational activities it entails. The built-in system of consultations alluded to earlier should result in the identification of the appropriate protection-mandated agency, particularly in the light of the respective of the OHCRC and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Finally, the consent of the State concerned will also have to be given.³⁹

Let us look back at the problem of the boundaries of the concept of internal displacement. Where do we draw the lines will determine the conceptual basis from which policy will be designed. Let us take the problem of refugee repatriation and reintegration: once refugees have returned to their country of origin, when do we cease to consider them as returnees, beneficiaries of durable solutions programmes and strategies, to consider them as beneficiaries of general development and reconstruction policies? It is interesting to see that, for refugees, this problem poses itself only at the end of the displacement cycle, and not at the beginning: the borders of States act as clear geographical but also legal and conceptual boundaries for the *refugee* concept.

Contrary to refugees, and for purposes of policy design, the internal displacement cycle has had vaguely defined vanishing points both at the end and at the beginning of the cycle. We have tried to show that, when choosing the right conceptual basis for policy and programme design (that is, protective strategies for populations affected by armed conflict), the vagueness at the beginning of the cycle disappears.

³⁹ Besides the inconsistencies inherent with the concept of *communities at risk*, that we have explored earlier, the concept of "affected populations", that is, persons "who are affected by internal displacement but are not displaced themselves" gives rise to additional difficulties. According to the same document,

"[...] the protection cluster foresees engagement with three specific categories of "non-displaced" persons termed as "affected populations". These are communities hosting IDPs; those to which IDPs have returned; and others "at risk of displacement".

While there are many elements that are common to communities hosting IDPs and communities to which IDPs have returned (based on the fact that both risk having their own resources and coping mechanisms severely restrained by having to host and, presumably, assist the direct victims of a particular event that has not affected them directly), the same is not true for "communities at risk of displacement". This has proved already to be a source for confusion in discussing policy and response mechanisms. In addition, it is perhaps not entirely ethical to found a category of persons (here, "affected populations") solely on its usefulness to address coordination and scoping problems in the international humanitarian system. As underlined above, categories ought only to be instrumental in delimiting population groups affected by protection problems of such particularity and seriousness as to merit targeted intervention: as such, categories ought to be only instruments for the design of adequate and efficient humanitarian policies. See UNHCR, *The Protection of Internally Displaced Persons... op. cit.*

Conclusion

At this point, we must ask ourselves whether the conclusion of this argument is that the activities generally listed under *prevention of forced displacement* are not valid for protection programming. The answer is, of course, that they remain fully valid.

Contributing to peaceful conflict resolution; advocating for the incorporation of IHL into national law, including the prohibition of arbitrary displacement, and for the respect of human rights and humanitarian law principles; early warning and contingency planning; and proximity-based protective strategies, such as protection-by-presence, all belong to the toolbox from which, according to the particular situation, humanitarian agencies may draw for their protective strategies in armed conflict.

It is just that, perhaps with the partial exception of contingency planning (which, in principle, is a key part to IDP strategies in armed conflict) they do not address displacement-specific issues and therefore do not belong to IDP policy. They must simply be an integral part of policies and programmes generally designed to prevent, mitigate and redress the effects of armed conflict on civilian populations, where design and prioritization cannot rest solely on their potential to address the root causes of displacement, or to prevent arbitrary displacement, but more generally on the gravity of the abuses addressed and the needs generated by them.

As we have seen, labelling these activities as *prevention of forced displacement* and situating them as part of IDP strategies may in many cases result (even if the somewhat absurd errors foreseen above are avoided) in being neglected in favour of activities focused on mitigating the consequences of displacement, such as assistance and protection delivered in IDP camps or in non-conflict affected urban settings where IDPs settle⁴⁰.

A second relevant consideration here refers to whether there may be IDP-specific elements that are necessary for the good design of protective programming in areas from which persons are getting displaced. We propose here three possibilities.

A good analysis of the immediate causes of displacement, and particularly whether it is a side-effect of armed conflict or there is a “will to displace”, is both part of a general analysis of how populations are affected by conflict, and of contingency planning for response to IDP crises. It will also be a key element of analysis of possible protection problems upon return, and will therefore guide the “rules of engagement” of humanitarian actors in this activity.

Second, a number of protective activities in areas affected by armed conflict might contribute to preventively reduce the threats caused by displacement. In some

⁴⁰ Protection clusters at field level have generally strived not to become an IDP-specific coordination body. However, humanitarian agencies – and rightly so – continue to advocate for the adoption of IDP-specific focal points or coordination structures for national authorities, for which it remains then an open question whether they will integrate prevention as part of their portfolio of responsibilities, opening then the door to all the distortions mentioned above. Some of these distortions may become almost comical, if not entirely innocent: in 2004, some departmental authorities in Colombia listed all housing projects in conflict-affected areas under the chapter of *prevention of displacement*, thereby inflating the displacement budget they reported and shielding themselves from criticism from international agencies.

particular cases, particularly when a relative low level of conflict is combined with a high level of grassroots organization, assistance can be given to communities to prepare their own contingency plans, including training on relevant national and international legal and policy references to internal displacement to enhance their capacity to advocate with national authorities and other duty bearers.

And third, activities linked to the protection of returned IDPs, particularly when conflict is ongoing, will in most cases have very little difference with general protective strategies in the theatre of confrontations. This is particularly valid in situations where displacement and returns follow a cyclical pattern with no particular prospect of durable solutions, such as is the case in Mindanao in the Philippines.

In these cases, for instance, a good analysis of the causes of displacement and the role it plays in the conflict will be as necessary to contingency planning and foreseeing protection problems upon displacement, as it will be to analyze the possibilities for return and the protection problems that returnees might experience in their places of origin.

Considering activities linked to return as somehow a separate case, this reduces the scope of displacement-specific activities in areas of expulsion to one main concept: reducing the vulnerability of affected populations to the harm that eventual displacement is likely to cause⁴¹. At this point of the reasoning, whether or not we choose to call this prevention is just a matter of semantics. In a certain way, what we are proposing for areas of expulsion is simply to mainstream displacement-specific issues into general protective strategies, instead of introducing a preventive “chapter” on IDP strategies.

Some other more general conclusions may also preliminarily be drawn from our succinct study of the concept of prevention of forced displacement. For much of the existing literature on forced displacement that has been produced in the last 15 years, there remains a need to further explore the very complex equation between armed conflict and forced displacement, taking also into the picture wider factors such as pre-existing migration patterns as survival strategies that might be exacerbated or interrupted by conflict, and the economic and social effects of forced displacement and their relationship to war ends.

At the same time, while the *forced* character of some displacement movements needs still to be recognized for purposes of underlining the elements of coercion and therefore designing responsibilities and preserving the right to compensations, this has sometimes obscured the fact that affected populations retain in many cases some agency on whether or not to resort to displacement as a survival strategy. While the

⁴¹ In some very specific circumstances, an analysis of the causes of displacement might lead to ideas on how to reduce the interest of armed actors in forced displacement through protection programming; that is, how to reduce the *threat* of displacement (as an additional objective to reducing the *vulnerability* to displacement). As an example, in cases where land grabs or the reversal of agricultural reform is at the origin of the expulsion of local population, issuing land titles to peasants or suspending the sale of agricultural land might create a disincentive to expulsions. However, the situations where a real disincentive can be created will be exceptional, and because of the very obstacle that they pose to military objectives such programmes may create additional risks for beneficiaries and humanitarian practitioners alone. At the same time, as we have shown above, these hypothetical programmes would need to be referenced above all on their ability to uphold rights of local populations, and not on their potential to reduce displacement.

constraints and risks linked to this are obvious, protection practitioners need to further explore and develop participatory techniques to assess risks and understand coping strategies of affected populations in the midst of armed conflict.