Internal displacement

Whereas some people are forced to move across international borders, others are forced to move within their own country in response to, among other things, conflict, violence, persecution, or natural disasters. They are referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Internal displacement raises particular development challenges.¹

The number of IDPs has increased rapidly over the last decade.² Aggregate estimates are based on national definitions that are not directly comparable, but the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre has assessed that 59.1 million people were internally displaced as of the end of 2021, up from 26.4 million at the end of 2012.³ Of these, 53.2 million were internally displaced by conflict and violence and 5.9 million by natural disasters across 59 countries and territories (map S7.1). Ten countries account for more than two-thirds of the total.⁴

Although some IDPs leave their homes for only a short period, others remain displaced for years. In the Syrian Arab Republic, for example, an estimated four out of five displaced households have been in that situation for more than five years, and in Sudan an estimated 56 percent of IDPs have been displaced

for more than 10 years. In other situations, displacement is repeated or even cyclical, with devastating impacts on affected individuals and households. Many IDPs experience trauma and losses similar to those experienced by refugees (box S7.1). Internal displacement has long-lasting economic effects, including increased poverty and vulnerability.

Like refugees, IDPs are often concentrated in particular geographic areas, and their host communities are substantially affected. Many IDPs move from rural to urban areas, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Most IDPs live in cities and towns, often in informal settlements alongside other poor urban dwellers.

**Normative frameworks and the need for a typology**

The 1998 United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are the main normative framework for IDPs, although the Guiding Principles are not legally binding. Based on human rights law and international humanitarian law, they recognize IDPs as persons endowed with human rights who, because of their displacement, need dedicated attention. They also draw on international refugee law, including for notions such as protection and “durable solutions.” The Guiding Principles underpin a range of legally binding instruments, including the 2009 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) as well as laws and regulations in several countries.

Yet definitions of an IDP vary significantly across countries. Of the 72 countries that have IDP-specific legal frameworks, only 21 use the definition in the Guiding Principles. More frequently, IDP definitions are limited to specific groups, geographic areas, or causes of displacement. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina considers IDPs as only those who were displaced within a particular time period, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq ties displacement to specific conflict events. Georgia and Ukraine have at various times restricted IDPs to citizens and a few other select groups. There is also no consensus on how far a person must flee to be considered internally displaced or for how long (it can be brief in the case of natural disasters); what it means for nomadic groups; and whether children born to IDPs in displacement are themselves IDPs, as in Azerbaijan and Colombia.
Internal displacement encompasses a broad range of situations that are hardly comparable: a US family affected by flooding in the state of Maine; Ukrainians displaced by the Russian invasion of their country; returning Afghan refugees who settled in the suburbs of Kabul; and villagers evicted from their homes in Ethiopia to make space for agroindustrial projects. The necessary responses vary considerably across such situations. Distinguishing between various types of internal displacements is key to addressing the corresponding challenges effectively.

The solutions conundrum

Defining what constitutes a satisfactory endpoint to internal displacement is critical. The aim of support for IDPs is not only to help them survive while in displacement but also to enable them to reestablish their lives as contributing members of society and to reach a point where dedicated assistance is no longer needed. Thus support of IDPs is not just temporary relief; it needs to be designed and delivered throughout the displacement cycle in a manner that facilitates achievement of a durable solution.

What constitutes a durable solution to IDP situations is not easily articulated. In some debates, durable solutions are modeled on the refugee paradigm. They focus on three possibilities for a solution that are derived from the experience with refugees: return to the place of origin; local integration in areas of displacement; or integration elsewhere in the country. However, as displacement becomes protracted, the definition of what is considered a durable solution becomes increasingly ambiguous. For example, at what point should urban IDPs (who are unlikely to return to rural areas) no longer considered IDPs? And how does one determine whether sustainable integration has been achieved?

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has elaborated on these definitions with a focus on socioeconomic vulnerabilities. A durable solution is considered achieved when, based on a set of criteria, IDPs no longer have needs arising from their forced displacement. Yet, in practice, some of these criteria are difficult to achieve in countries and regions where even nondisplaced households face dire development challenges. As a result, many people continue to be considered IDPs with no solution in sight, which is in part behind the steady increase in global IDP numbers.

The Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics (EGRISS) under the United Nations Statistical Commission has proposed a practical way forward. It recommends using a comparison with the general population, rather than global standards, to assess the persistence of displacement-related vulnerabilities among IDPs. It suggests that IDPs form a distinct population of concern to the extent that they have specific vulnerabilities and cannot seize economic opportunities available to other nationals. Under this approach, they are no longer IDPs when they are back on a level playing field with those who have not been displaced.

Internal displacement and vulnerability

Many people are affected by conflicts or disasters, but those who have been internally displaced are the subject of special attention. Why? In many contexts, internal displacement has become a proxy to identify those who should benefit from specific forms of assistance (box S7.2).

The nature of such assistance varies across countries and contexts. For example, internal displacement can be a proxy for vulnerability to violence or abuses and for the need for protection against such harm, such as in Ukraine. It can be a proxy as well for war-induced destitution and humanitarian assistance needs, such as in Somalia and the Republic of Yemen. It can also be used to assess and signal the severity of a conflict situation and help steer the allocation of scarce aid resources across countries.

The focus on IDPs can also be grounded in more political rationales. For example, in the Caucasus the insistence that IDPs have the right to return to their places of origin—even if they are under the
de facto control of another country—is an important part of a political discourse aimed at asserting territorial claims. In other contexts, such as in Colombia, the IDP status is linked to expectations of future compensation processes for war victims.

Internal displacement should be approached in the context of a broader discussion on vulnerability. In a context of conflict, persecution, or natural disaster, IDPs are often not the only highly vulnerable group. The new widows and widowers arising from a war or disaster, for example, may also be highly vulnerable, even though they are not the subject of a distinct international framework.

Prioritizing IDPs over other groups of citizens may not always be an effective way to frame policies or deliver aid, especially in resource-constrained environments. In some cases, other indicators of vulnerability, such as income or household composition or belonging to certain social groups, may be better proxies to focus the limited assistance on those who need it most. For example, in Georgia IDPs who live in the capital, Tbilisi, are less likely to be poor than non-IDPs in rural areas. In the Sahel, some ethnic groups are deliberately targeted by armed factions and need protection, regardless of whether they have been displaced.

In any event, IDP status should not become a source of vulnerability in its own right. This has happened when the mere use of the IDP category creates forms of discrimination, such as when IDPs are required to live in specific settlements or to send their children to dedicated IDP schools, especially if the situation becomes protracted.

Key principles for intervention

Governments can consider several key principles for intervention:

Government leadership. National governments retain the primary responsibility for IDPs in their territory consistent with their international human rights obligations, including when IDPs are stateless. Sustainable improvements in the situation of IDPs and their host communities often depend on policies adopted by their governments.
Political economy. Governments’ decisions are often influenced by political considerations that go beyond the interests of those who have been displaced. In a conflict context, for example, governments may focus on how internal displacement affects conflict dynamics and potential drivers of future unrest. They manage IDPs with a view toward reducing social tensions and violence nationwide instead of a sole focus on IDPs’ needs. Politics play an even larger role when IDPs have fled violence instigated by the government itself or when their loyalty is questioned. Even in natural disasters, government decisions may be steered by political considerations based, for example, on the ethnicity or perceived political affiliations of the IDP population.21 Because political considerations are so central and because IDP situations vary widely—including in war-torn regions, stable middle-income environments, or places affected by natural disaster—government and international responses must be adjusted to each context.

Holistic perspective and inclusion. Once they have reached a safe place, many IDPs behave like other internal (voluntary) migrants and look for opportunities to improve their welfare. If well managed, the resolution of internal displacement can generate some of the positive benefits of economic mobility. This can benefit both IDPs, as well as the rest of the country. Promoting IDPs’ economic and social inclusion is crucial, including improving their self-reliance and incorporating them into national health and education systems.22 Facilitating IDPs’ movements to areas where they can find socioeconomic opportunities may also ease their recovery and lessen adverse impacts on host communities.

Statelessness
At least 4.3 million people in 95 countries are stateless or of undetermined nationality.23 Under international law, states set the rules for the acquisition, change, and withdrawal of nationality. A stateless person is defined as someone who is not considered to be a national by any state.24

Among those for whom data are publicly available, stateless persons or those with undetermined nationality are currently found mainly in Côte d’Ivoire (about 930,000 persons); among Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals hosted by Bangladesh (about 920,000 persons); in Myanmar (about 600,000 Rohingya in Rakhine State); in Thailand (about 560,000 persons); in Syria (about 160,000 persons); in Malaysia (about 100,000 persons); in Kuwait (about 92,000 persons); and in Cambodia (about 75,000 ethnic Vietnamese).25

Statelessness arises from a variety of reasons: discrimination against particular ethnic or religious groups (such as that against the Rohingya in Myanmar) or on the basis of gender; the emergence or breakup of states (a situation that left some Roma minorities stateless following the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia); or incomplete nationality laws or conflicts between them (for example, when a child is unable to access the nationality of his or her parents or the nationality of the country of birth, which can happen in forced displacement or irregular migration). Other people are not stateless by law but find themselves unable to obtain documentation that would prove their nationality. For all practical purposes, they are in a situation similar to that of stateless persons.26

Regardless of its causes, statelessness has adverse development consequences. Stateless persons are often denied a range of socioeconomic rights: to enter the labor market, access public services, own property, or simply move within the country. These can be both formal legal interdictions or unpassable administrative hurdles, such as if family members must present identification papers or a birth certificate to register a child in school.27 Even when stateless persons are granted a protected status, they often do not have clear pathways to acquiring nationality for themselves and their children. Detailed data on their circumstances are often missing, but most stateless persons live on the margins of society with high degrees of vulnerability.

Over the last few decades, some countries have taken steps to resolve major situations of statelessness. Sri Lanka passed legislation in 2003 allowing about 200,000 Hill Tamils to acquire nationality.
Bangladesh confirmed the citizenship of Urdu-speaking or “Bihari” persons in 2008. The Russian Federation naturalized about 650,000 former Soviet nationals between 2003 and 2012. And in 2017, Kenya offered citizenship to about 6,000 ethnic Makonde—the descendants of Mozambican migrants who had arrived in the 1930s.

Resolving statelessness is part of achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Some situations may be politically difficult. But others arise mainly from legal inconsistencies that could be corrected with relatively few political costs if there are incentives to do so. For example, ensuring that no child is born stateless and adopting universal birth registration; removing gender discrimination from nationality laws; preventing denial, loss, or deprivation of nationality on discriminatory grounds; and issuing nationality documentation to those who are entitled to it.

Notes
4. The 10 countries are the Syrian Arab Republic (6.7 million IDPs), the Democratic Republic of Congo (5.3 million), Colombia (5.2 million), Afghanistan (4.3 million), the Republic of Yemen (4.3 million), Ethiopia (3.6 million), Nigeria (3.2 million), Sudan (3.2 million), Somalia (3.0 million), and Burkina Faso (1.6 million). Numbers are based on IDMC (2022).
5. IDMC (2022).
6. While both refugee and IDP populations have higher rates of mental health issues than the nondisplaced populations (Porter and Haslam 2005; Steel et al. 2009), IDPs have been shown to have higher rates of morbidity than refugees and returned refugees in several settings (Al Ibraheem et al. 2017; Mels et al. 2010; Tekeli-Yesil et al. 2018). In Colombia, the psychological effects of IDPs’ traumatic experiences have been shown to lead to risk aversion and hopelessness, affecting their economic decisions and contributing to their vulnerability (Moya 2018; Moya and Carter 2019).
13. EGRIS (2020).
15. EGRIS (2020).
16. Since the introduction of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs in 2010 (IASC 2010), there has been a progressive shift away from a refugee paradigm of durable solutions to the IASC (2010, A1) definition of the end of internal displacement (“when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement”), whereby (re)integration in places of origin/refugee/elsewhere in the country is a gradual path to a durable solution. The debate has shifted to how to operationalize the IASC definition and criteria for durable solutions.
17. The Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons of the IASC suggests eight criteria for determining whether durable solutions have been achieved: (1) safety and security, including freedom of movement; (2) an adequate standard of living, including access to essential food and water, basic housing, essential health care, and basic education; (3) access to employment and livelihoods; (4) restoration of housing, land, and property; (5) access to documentation; (6) family reunification; (7) participation in public affairs; and (8) access to effective remedies and justice (IASC 2010).
18. EGRIS (2020). EGRIS was recently renamed EGRISS to include statelessness—that is, the Expert Group on Refugee, IDP and Statelessness Statistics.
23. UNHCR (2022a).
25. UNHCR (2022a, 2022b).
27. UNHCR (2014).
29. UNHCR (2014).
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