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Citation

Jacobs, C. I. M., & Paviotti, A. (2017). *The elephant in the room: Internally Displaced People in urban settings*. Leiden: Van Vollenhoven Institute and Groupe Jérémie. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/58550>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



Policy brief #1

The elephant in the room: Internally Displaced People in urban settings

Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society (VVI)
and Groupe Jérémie.

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Colophon

This policy brief is part of a series of briefs that are the result of a socio-legal research project on 'Everyday justice and security provision for displaced and residents in Bukavu, DRC', funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research NWO/WOTRO Science for Global Development as part of the Security & Rule of Law programme (Grant number W08.40016.10020), and informed by the outcomes of prior research (carried out with funding from the same programme under grant number W08.400.2014.014). The quotes presented here are derived from interviews with IDPs in Bukavu. We thank Aembe Bwimana, Innocent Assumani, Joachim Ruhanya and Stanislas Lubala for their participation in the research. The research was a collaboration between the VVI, Leiden and Groupe Jérémie, Bukavu.

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Publisher

Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society

Design

Paul Oram

Cover photograph

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Policy brief #1

The elephant in the room: Internally Displaced People in urban settings

Executive summary

In spite of their mind blowing numbers, internally displaced people (IDPs), especially those within urban settings, tend to receive much less attention than refugees. This document reflects on a number of questions that are critical in developing policy and programming for urban IDPs such as: How to define urban IDPs and does it make sense to distinguish them from others? Until when can somebody be qualified as IDP? Can somebody still be considered an IDP when the security situation has improved? Where can we find IDPs? It is shown that answers are not straightforward as categorizations are blurred in space and time. We argue that urban IDPs deserve more attention and more efforts to be made visible, because they constitute a large part of the displaced people worldwide; because they may have particular needs that non-displaced or displaced in camps do not have; and because their presence has a high impact on the hosting communities leading to a raised conflict potential.

Introduction

Globally, refugees receive a lot of attention from policy makers, humanitarian aid workers, the media, as well as the general public. Although there are good reasons for that, it gives the impression that refugees constitute the major group of people on the move for violence. This is not the case. An often overlooked, yet much bigger group, is the group of Internally Displaced People (IDPs). Of the roughly 60 million people that are displaced worldwide, about 2 out of 3 people are displaced within their own country (<http://www.unhcr.org>). Since the year 2000 the group of IDPs has doubled, with a notable increase in most recent years (IDMC, 2017). Reluctant to get involved in national sovereignty issues, the international community usually puts IDPs on the back burner unless it receives an explicit request for help from a national government. IDPs are still national citizens and should be treated as such by their own government which should provide aid and protection to its inhabitants. What is overlooked here, is that governments in countries with large-scale displacement might lack the capacity or political willingness to provide adequate assistance and that IDPs might have particular needs or concerns that non-displaced do not have (Kalin, 2014).

The rising numbers of IDPs raises the question what we actually know about that huge group of people that stay – out of choice or out of necessity - within their home country in search of security. It makes sense to take a closer look at ways in which these people can best be defined, approached by policy makers, practitioners and researchers alike, and how they and their host communities can best be assisted. The first question is how exactly to define IDPs? Other relevant questions are: How to distinguish them from socio-economic migrants? Until when can somebody be considered an IDP? How can IDPs be traced if they do not register anywhere while in displacement? How can protracted displacement be reduced?

This is the first of four policy briefs that aim to make ‘the elephant in the room’ more prominently visible.¹ Our findings show that urban IDPs deserve further attention from national governments, and from policy makers and practitioners in the field of international humanitarian and development aid. Particular reference is made to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the country with the highest number of IDPs in the world. Research on which this brief is based, was carried out in Bukavu, a city located in the east of the DRC. Our research has shown that urban IDPs are often more vulnerable and therefore have particular needs that members of the host communities do not have (Jacobs & Kyamusugulwa, 2017). Without claiming generalisations, we are convinced that many of the findings are relevant to understand the situation of urban IDPs in other countries across the globe.

Since many IDPs seek shelter in urban centres rather than in camps, it is important to raise awareness about this group. Consultations with NGOs showed us that they increasingly target both displaced and hosts in their interventions. This is done to avoid tensions but also because host communities are often vulnerable as well and their absorptive capacity is overstretched by the presence of large groups of newcomers. Our findings show that some differentiation might nevertheless be helpful because of the particular needs and concerns of IDPs. This will be set out in greater detail in the next briefs, whereas this brief will shed light primarily on the definitional challenges. Vignettes provided below are drawn from interviews with respondents in Bukavu.

- 1) Worldwide more than 60 million people are displaced.
- 2) Of these 60, only about 1 million have fled to Europe.
- 3) About 2 out of 3 displaced people, are displaced internally.
- 4) DR Congo is the country with the highest number of IDPs in the world; about 4 million (September 2017).
- 5) Only about 13% of the IDPs in DR Congo live in camps, all others stay in host communities or create their own shelters.

(UNOCHA 2017, www.internal-displacement.org)

How to define an IDP?

Internally displaced persons are: “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”

(Article 2, UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, UNOCHA, 2004)

The definition of an IDP might sound straightforward at first sight, but when looking closer at it, it also raises a lot of questions about boundary setting and practical implications of categorization. For international policy makers, the difference between an IDP and a refugee is clear-cut: Refugees cross internationally recognised borders, IDPs do not. IDPs do not enjoy as much special protection under international conventions such as the 1951 Geneva

¹ Preliminary ideas for this policy brief were presented during the 2017 Annual Conference of the Knowledge Platform Security and the Rule of Law that was dedicated to the theme ‘Elephants in the Room’.

Convention. Noteworthy however are the 2006 Great Lakes Protocol on the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons and the 2009 Kampala Convention on the Protection and Assistance for Internally Displaced Persons in Africa.

Whereas the distinction between refugees and IDPs might be clear on paper, we found that many people on the ground do not make such a distinction and simply use the term ‘refugees’ as a sort of container concept, embracing both IDPs and refugees. IDP is a more technical, rather bureaucratic concept, and despite the mentioned Protocol and Convention, hardly any concrete (legal) steps are taken by states to address the issue locally. For the operationalisation of field research, or for the selection of project beneficiaries, it is therefore of limited use. In addition, borders that are clearly visible on maps, might be fluid in practice, with people not perceiving the border as a physical boundary. In crossing the border however, responsibilities of international and national actors become significantly different.

How to distinguish them from other migrants?

“I first lived in K. but had to flee because of insecurity and left all my belongings behind. I fled to W, but in W. I was not able to make a living and my brother invited me to join him in Bukavu.”

People often move to a different place for a complex of push-and-pull factors. Insecurity is one reason, among others such as economic opportunities, health care, or education. In fact, when talking about the arrival of newcomers to the city, a number of the longer-term residents would argue that people do not come because of the insecurity at home, but primarily because they prefer life in the city, and that they are not interested to return to the rural communities from which they originate. To some extent, all of this might be true. Newcomers to the city will usually look for jobs, as this is the way in which they can survive in the city, but it does not necessarily turn them into economic migrants. What to think of a farmer that is not able to cultivate his fields because of security threats? What about the farmer who is not able to commercialise her crops because people do not dare to come to the market out of fear of extortion and bribery, either by state or non-state actors? Such a farmer will at some point give up cash cropping and might have to resort to petty jobs in the city. Is this person an economic migrant or is it a war-affected person that is internally displaced? Both answers apply. The forced, and often rather spontaneous nature of the movement is what distinguishes IDPs from others.

Until when does somebody remain an IDP?

“So then I bought a house and now I am a resident”

Whenever people flee, they will make arrangements to install themselves in their new residencies, to find a way to make a living, to get connected to the new social world that surrounds them. Depending on available assets, some people manage to do so quickly and for others this step takes much more time. Some will always keep a sense of being out-of-place and of longing back to their home community, others consider themselves a resident within months. At the moment their home community is somewhat safer, the former group is more likely to return, whereas the other group might not consider going back but instead install themselves at the new place on a permanent basis. There are no strict indicators that help to draw a line between being an IDP and no longer being an IDP. Self-definition and definition by

the social surrounding are important. Some common markers of integration and acceptance that are often referred to by our respondents are economic stability and the acquisition of property. Somebody who manages to find a job and/or the rare person who manages to obtain his/her own house, is usually no longer considered an IDP but a 'resident' by fellow citizens. The IASC framework refers about durable solutions in more general terms. According to this framework a durable solution is achieved when IDPs no longer need specific assistance and protection. This goal is supposed to be achieved through return, local integration, or sustainable relocation (IASC, 2010:5).

Can somebody still be considered an IDP once security is back?

“Whenever I go back to my village, the memories of being raped come back and I cannot bear to sleep in my own house anymore.”

We often heard long-term residents in Bukavu arguing that when security returns to an area, IDPs can no longer be seen as such, since they could return to their area of origin. In our research however, we find that this is not as straightforward. Obviously, people who have gotten used to city life might not be eager on returning to a village that lacks many of the services that a city has to offer. This is in line with the Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons that elaborated on principle 28 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The Framework emphasizes the importance of ensuring that '[o]pportunities that IDPs had during displacement should be preserved to the extent possible' (IASC, 2010:34). But a durable solution is not only about socio-economic conditions. Several people we talked to indicated that they would very much prefer to return but the fear of reviving traumatic experiences was holding them back. Others knew that there was nothing left behind to which they could return. In a context such as the DRC, traumas are not easily talked about, nor is it easy to get treatment for it and hence many people continue living in displacement after insecurity in their home community has ended. As a result, some people in displacement can still be considered as IDPs – or at least as victims of displacement - even when living for decades in their new community. Psycho-social assistance might help them to prepare a return. The IASC framework rightly points out that durable solutions include 'access to effective remedies and access to justice' in case people have experienced violations of their rights (IASC, 2010:42).

Where to find them?

“They don't identify themselves with us [local authorities] if they settle in the neighbourhood. We only find out they are here when they run into problems and need our assistance.”

A complication for those interested in the fate of internally displaced, is that in many cases, they do not seek refuge within the confines of a camp, but increasingly install themselves independently, or with the help of their relatives or friends within more urbanized areas that are supposed to have higher levels of security than their places of origin and more livelihood opportunities. This is further explained in policy brief #3. In such urban centres, they often live amidst other IDPs and longer-term residents that share many of the characteristics of precariousness. It then becomes difficult to distinguish between the different categories of people and thus to target potential beneficiaries for project interventions, or respondents for

a research. This hinders a deeper understanding of their position and increases the risk of overseeing tensions that exist between two groups of people that oftentimes regard themselves as different, namely the longer-term residents and the newcomers.

Conclusion

Although a clear categorization of IDPs is difficult to make, it is important to be aware of some of the critical questions that can be asked, both in determining whether somebody is an IDP, and in determining whether somebody is in need of particular assistance. A complex of factors will need to be disentangled to come to an assessment; IDPs are to some extent different from economic migrants, to some extent they are the same; some integrate quickly and cannot be seen as particularly vulnerable, whereas others might fail to lift themselves from the precarious situation they are in. It is important to keep in mind that displacement does not always end with the return of security. Generally, it is hard to trace IDPs in urban settings without formal registration. On the basis of the findings, we recommend to avoid easy generalizations and to pay attention to the particular needs and concerns of this group of people, but to look into the absorptive capacity of host communities and at relations between IDPs and members of these communities. Our following briefs will set out some of these concerns in relation to particular topics such as housing, labour, and social integration and illustrate why we feel urban displaced people deserve more attention.

Further reading

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