

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE HIGH-LEVEL PANEL ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT: WILL THE VISION FOR THE FUTURE CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO?

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Internal displacement due to conflict, violence and disasters has reached an all-time high over the past few years, with about 55 million people internally displaced at the end of 2020, according to the [Internal Displacement Monitoring Center](#). Tackling those challenges and proposing a ‘[Vision for the Future](#)’, on 29 September the UN Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement released its long-awaited report. This outcome marked a major landmark in efforts to generate political momentum and guidance to address internal displacement challenges.

Already in 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit had highlighted the issue of protracted internal displacement. However, the [New York Declaration](#) and the two Global Compacts that followed largely left the fate of internally displaced persons unattended, focusing rather on refugees and ‘safe, orderly and regular migration’. Concerned that Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) may ‘fall through the cracks’, a variety of stakeholders mobilized to ensure renewed attention to the issue of internal displacement.

Following lobbying from Statesⁱ and civil society organizations, and building on the 20th anniversary of the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#), and initiatives such as the [GP20 Plan of Action](#), on 23 October 2019 UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, [announced the establishment of a High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement](#), further [detailing its composition in December](#) of that year.

As described in its initial [Terms of Reference](#) (ToRs), the Panel’s objectives were focused on addressing solutions to protracted displacement in a strategic but tangible manner, with particular attention to the Triple-Nexus and achieving government-led durable solutions to internal displacement. The Panel was clearly called to “raise international attention to the issue of internal displacement and its impact”. In doing so, the Panel was tasked to prepare a

report for the UN Secretary-General “with concrete and practical recommendations to Member States, the United Nations system, and other relevant stakeholders”. Despite the inherent focus on State ownership in dealing with internal displacement – national governments have the primary responsibility for protecting, assisting, and supporting solutions to their displaced citizens – the process thus clearly envisaged multi-stakeholder engagements and responsibility.

Based on direct involvement in this process over the past two years and contacts with civil society (particularly, but not exclusively, humanitarian organizations), this short essay will shed some light on the following questions: What has been the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in this process? What were their expectations in December 2019? How has civil society received the recommendations contained in the Panel’s report? And how do they see the way forward?

An inclusive process, despite the pandemic restrictions:

NGOs have invested in the process from the early stages, also contributing to the mobilization that preceded the launch of the Panel.ⁱⁱ From its inception meeting on 25 February 2020, the High-Level Panel adopted a participatory approach, engaging with a variety of stakeholders. Some of the [eminent Panelists](#) had direct experience with civil society, while both the [Panel’s Secretariat](#) and its [Expert Advisory Group](#) drew heavily from the expertise of NGOs and academia.

The process was built on interactions with a variety of stakeholders and the [written submissions received by the Panel](#) underscore the diversity in expertise and experience it could draw from. In particular, there were about 40 submissions from Academia, NGOs, as well as particularly impactful joint, multistakeholder contributions, often initiated by civil society organizations.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of those are now referenced in the final Report.

Civil society and other actors have been involved at various levels, through different channels, sometimes starting from a very informal plane and leading to concrete and influential outputs. For example, initial brainstorming between the Panel Secretariat and the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) resulted in a [publication in the Refugee Survey Quarterly](#) emphasizing the increasingly urban nature of internal displacement, a diagnosis clearly identified in the Panel’s



report. Similarly, the [research partnership](#) established between the Panel's Secretariat and the [Internal Displacement Research Programme \(IDRP\)](#) at the Refugee Law Initiative was instrumental in highlighting such issues and provided research input on many topics of interest to the Panel.

Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted initial plans for consultations. However, by all accounts, the Panel and its Secretariat quickly managed to adapt and maintain an enabling environment, including several [meetings in the last stretch](#) when the recommendations took shape. In this endeavor, they benefited from a web of civil society actors, an existing community, that supported the Panel's efforts. Networks of NGOs such as [InterAction](#) and the [International Council of Voluntary Agencies \(ICVA\)](#) played an important role, not only by [mobilizing support for the extension of the Panel's mandate in time](#), but also by acting as connectors and convenors, organizing fruitful brainstorming that often crossed specific stakeholder lines.

In a context where travel was restricted or even impossible, being connected to 'front line' NGOs proved particularly beneficial. Moreover, the pandemic situation quickly put in jeopardy a critical building block of the Panel's process: consultations with displaced and affected communities. Despite its non-operational nature, [ICVA particularly supported the initial drive](#) towards enlisting support from [32 NGOs and five UN agencies, which allowed the Panel to consult over 12,500 IDPs and host community members across 22 countries](#). Such efforts helped inform the Panel's recommendations and further highlighted the notion that IDPs can take an active part in developing long-term solutions, alongside host communities.

Initial NGO expectations

Followed through the entire process, expectations from civil society organizations were clearly spelled out from the outset. Having campaigned for the launch of such a process, NGOs welcomed the creation of the High-Level Panel and its emphasis on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus as a vector for durable solutions aligned with people's rights and aspirations. NGOs expressed high hopes from its inception, envisioning a final report with concrete follow-up actions, programmatic, legislative, and policy orientations helping States and other actors to prevent, address and respond to internal displacement.

While reminding the Panel of the existing solid basis presented by the Guiding Principles and other instruments, civil society imagination was particularly captured by the Panel's Co-Chairs' invocation of innovative, 'outside the box' thinking, likely to bring new but concrete recommendations. Specific [roadmaps or "compacts" to promote durable solutions](#) for IDPs were quickly called for.

Thematically, many NGOs' [initial orientations](#) focused mainly on recommending a people-centered and rights-based approach, promoting the further implementation and domestication of the Guiding Principles and relevant legal frameworks. Echoing the Panel's ToRs, many stressed the importance of an age, gender, and diversity approach in ensuring comprehensive protection and non-discrimination. Likewise, meaningful participation of IDPs and host communities in processes affecting them was highlighted as an essential element of building resilience and durable solutions, while allowing for accountability to IDPs.

Recommendations towards holding to account and supporting States in fulfilling their responsibility towards IDPs were also expected. NGOs particularly called on the Panel to help clarify roles and responsibilities at operational level, ensuring effective coordination and funding mechanisms. There were high hopes that increased global attention through the Panel would translate into enhanced responsibility-sharing and much needed funding, resources and effectiveness in IDP response. Finally, NGOs supported the work towards quality data – based on protection standards – to inform more inclusive and efficient programming, policymaking, advocacy and preventative measures. This included particular attention to developing recommendations on effective disaster risk reduction, mitigation, adaptation, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

NGO perspectives on the final recommendations

Immediately following the release of the Report, on 29 September, civil society joined other stakeholders in issuing enthusiastic messages and press releases on social media, some celebrating the [achievement of a milestone](#) and [promising times for internally displaced people worldwide](#). Those reactions referred to the full set of recommendations, as well as to those highlighting a role for civil society. Such recommendations mostly focus on a catalytic role, within a whole-of-society approach, in supporting political will and developing nationally owned, accountable and resourced solution strategies.

Based on their original expectations, preliminary NGO analyses focused on the following themes:^{iv}

Solutions focused on internally displaced persons as “rights-holding citizens”

The emphasis on IDPs as citizens was very much welcome as was the Report’s strong focus on the human rights and participation of IDPs. Following their strong advocacy, NGOs celebrated the consistent inclusion of age, gender and diversity (AGD) considerations. Some even considered it as a [“landmark for internally displaced young women and girls”](#), not only recognizing their discrimination and exclusion from decision-making but also calling for reforming systems to better address the specific barriers they face. The Report’s plea to eliminate legal and/or societal inequalities that prevent women and girls from exercising their full rights, as well as the [explicit mention of gender discrimination in nationality laws](#) were particularly noted.

Overall, NGOs are encouraged to see recommendations on meaningfully engaging IDPs, local communities and civil society under the solutions section, which stresses the need to recognize solutions as a development priority. However, NGOs reminded that a development-oriented approach to durable solutions needs to address potential risks of leaving out IDPs and civil society from decision-making processes. Indeed, development actors do not regularly consult civil society organizations or involve IDPs in decision making processes.

System reform

NGOs broadly support the recommendations towards system reform, also hoping for a streamlined process that does not get stuck into bureaucratic quicksand and systemic hurdles. All recommendations should actually be considered in this light, [not seen in isolation from the planned system review](#). NGOs endorse the specific recommendation towards an independent review of the humanitarian system in contexts of internal displacement and would engage in a process to update relevant policy and operational guidance of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

To drive solutions forward, the role of the proposed Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Solutions to Internal Displacement, and other actors in the nexus space, definitely needs to be further explored. As

recognized early on by the Panel, a “[major hurdle is the lack of a coordination mechanism between humanitarian and development actors](#)” and it is hoped that the SRSg position as well as an enhanced role for Resident Coordinators at country level, will bring progress.

The role and space for NGOs in this context, at national, regional and global level, remains to be clarified. NGOs will also remain attentive to ensuring that the role of the SRSg is complementary and coherent with the role of the [UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons](#). Moreover, while welcomed and necessary, the emphasis on the role of development actors and approaches should be tempered to recognize that maintaining space for principled humanitarian action will often still be essential.

Accountability

As [accountability on solutions is required across all areas and relevant actors](#), the report proposes ambitious ideas, including the push for the new SRSg position. If properly implemented with the meaningful participation of IDPs and civil society, those recommendations could be important catalyzers of political will and accountability towards finding solutions to internal displacement. However, such recommendations largely focus on accountability within the United Nations and the humanitarian sector.

Recommendations seem much less likely to dramatically ‘move the needle’ when it comes to States, while in effect accountability lies above all with the affected States for preventing displacement and implementing efforts to resolve it and meet the needs of their IDP citizens. The recommendation around investigating and prosecuting those who forcibly displace populations or commit other violations of rights that contribute to displacement might well be seized upon by civil society but provides a relatively small hook.

Ultimately, accountability should be to the affected populations, meaning all actors carry responsibility to protect IDPs’ rights and dignity and deliver solutions that have lasting impact. An immediate collective responsibility here might be to create feedback loops with communities consulted during the Panel’s process and reflect on how the recommendations can be given life at their level.

Financing and resourcing

Of course, accountability also lies with donors in providing funding that incentivizes States to take positive actions and promotes better outcomes for IDPs. NGOs are generally supportive of the proposed Global Fund on Internal Displacement Solutions, as there is a need to address a significant gap in existing humanitarian and development funding mechanisms. NGOs appreciate the Panel's decision to put forward this recommendation despite some resistance from other stakeholders to establishing new funds or a preference for incorporating IDP solutions efforts into existing funding mechanisms. The new fund should bring predictable multi-year funding and enable catalytic approaches by States owning their displacement challenges and committing to create an enabling environment for solutions.

It will particularly be important to draw lessons from the [High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing](#) and the [Grand Bargain](#) to ensure that targeted policy change is identified and strategically actioned in the short, medium and long term. Leadership on this will be essential. International Financial Institutions will need to step up to ensure that appropriate funding is available for IDP solutions. Some NGOs also wonder what happened to the “[promise and potential of 'durable solutions markers' \[possibly tied\] to new financing mechanisms](#)” mentioned in a Panel's concept paper.

Climate change and disaster displacement

A relative surprise for many expert NGOs is the extent to which climate change and environmental disasters are reflected in the recommendations. In its problem statement, the Report recognizes that we all face a “climate crisis” and that disasters or adverse effects of climate change “are responsible for the majority of new internal displacements each year”. The work of the [Platform on Disaster Displacement](#) is also referenced in the Report, previous background documents and the Panel's ToRs.

Yet, directly related recommendations are almost all found under the Prevention chapter (recommendation 8). There may have been scope to better mainstream those dynamics in the other sets of recommendations. While definitely saluting the work of the Panel, this has led some to consider that climate change may be treated in a “[superficial way](#)” in the Report, representing a “missed opportunity to lean into bridging protection gaps”.^v

This may be a one of the main thematic areas where further work needs to be done to present a “Vision for the Future” that is clearly fit for purpose and for the defining challenges of our times.

The impact ‘on the ground’

Any fair assessment of the initial civil society reactions to the Report should relate a balanced view on the impact(s) that the report may have. In other words, will the Report have an impact for IDPs in Tigray and Afghanistan, and when? As mentioned above, the Panel started with a high bar, being – as per its ToRs – “expected to identify innovative and concrete solutions for IDPs and help trigger tangible changes on the ground.” (emphasis added) As one NGO put it, the “[success of the report can only be measured in real change in the lives of the millions of IDPs, half of whom are women and girls.](#)” The Panel’s Report do call for a series of crucial “overall shifts”, likely to profoundly alter the way internal displacement is addressed. However, alongside strong support, a few NGOs have also privately expressed the notion that they were expecting more groundbreaking and transformative proposals.

There is also the recognition that the recommendations remain very much work in progress. The recommendation about commissioning an independent review of the humanitarian system in contexts of internal displacement is a case in point, revealing that some issues were maybe beyond the Panel’s purview, exact ToRs and the current ‘political realm of possibilities’. For many NGOs, the Report should not be seen as the end of the process. As such, civil society actors and other stakeholders may see the recommendations more as an important baseline rather than a ceiling. The wealth of analyses and suggestions now archived on [the Panel’s website](#) should continue to inspire further developments. However, a first step will clearly be the implementation of existing recommendations. Effects will most probably not be felt immediately, but a lot depends on the pace of implementation and this is directly related to the follow-up section in the report.

Conclusion: The Way forward

Already in the latter stages of the process NGOs started considering the ‘next move’, agreeing broadly with the Panel’s call to sustain momentum for change. In this perspective, civil society is highly supportive of the proposed follow-up recommendations to chart the way forward, starting with the idea that it is,

first and foremost, the UN Secretary General's responsibility to provide strong leadership and ensure the report is not shelved. Though independent, this was his Panel. It is now his report and there are a number of recommendations on which he can directly act.

As argued by a number of NGOs, Mr. Antonio Guterres' early action will be fundamental in leading the way, instrumental in generating political will, and in providing the initial impetus for constructive momentum. At [the launch event](#), the UN Secretary General mentioned that he would "gather the UN system" to consider the way forward. NGOs do hope that he will soon indicate a more precise timeline and strategy for implementation as there are concerns that the report's recommendations may not be actioned urgently.

This approach also points to a necessary reflection on sequencing and prioritization in the implementation of the recommendations. Recognizing the collective responsibility and accountability to generate real change, it is hoped that quick and firm initiative from the UN Secretary General will help set in motion actions on other recommendations, by other stakeholders, including States, UN agencies and civil society. As the report mentions: "All actors should be proactive and resolute in moving forward with the implementation." In an ironic twist, recommendations meant to help generate political will [require political will from Member States to succeed](#). In this perspective, NGOs are supportive of continuing the States' "Group of Friends" of the Panel to ensure recommendations get taken forward by key Member States; the creation of opportunities for State-to-State engagement and learning, although also calling for more regular multistakeholder exchanges.

NGOs support the idea of an annual report on the State of Solutions to Internal Displacement, provided it is transparent and publicly accessible; and of establishing a focal point (the SRSG or a Secretariat) to help advance the different components of the recommendations. There are however questions about who will have the capacity and be given authority to follow up on recommendations not made to the UN Secretary General. It is also important to remind that the implementation of the recommendations should not be conflated with the Follow-up section in the report. This section is geared towards instituting an enabling environment for the implementation of *all* recommendations.

While presenting their honest assessment of the recommendations, civil society organizations have clearly shown their support for swift action and will do their part in maintaining visibility on the issue, helping fine-tune the recommendations' details and influencing the way forward. A new, most important phase now opens up to capitalize on the remarkable work of the Panel and its Secretariat.

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ⁱ See in particular the two letters sent to the UN Secretary General in [July 2018](#) and then [May 2019](#).

ⁱⁱ For example, in June 2019, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) organized an "[Informal briefing on the status and progress of the initiative for a High-Level Panel on Internally Displaced Persons](#)".

ⁱⁱⁱ See in particular: "[Leaving No One Behind: Ensuring an Age, Gender, and Diversity \(AGD\) Inclusive Approach to Internal Displacement – Joint Submission to the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement](#)", May 2020.

^{iv} The following development is mainly drawn from [InterAction Summary Note](#) of a July 2021 Meeting between NGOs and the High-Level Panel Secretariat, a [similar meeting held on 21 September 2021](#), where the final recommendations were discussed, as well as the authors' exchanges with some NGO staff members.

^v Note that another missed opportunity by some NGOs is around [strong recommendations on education for internally displaced children](#).