



## **UN High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement: Can a new development-based approach bring solutions to this global crisis?**

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*A potentially ground-breaking independent UN panel report launched this week proposes robust mechanisms to promote a development-based approach to help resolve the crisis of protracted internal displacement*

When does displacement end? For the [40 million people](#) who, last year alone, fled their homes to escape conflict, violence and disasters but remained in their own countries, the answer is: not any time soon, if ever.

Indeed, [nine of every ten](#) internally displaced persons (IDPs) globally have been living in protracted situations of displacement for more than ten years. Even though the humanitarian system has scaled up the delivery of short-term aid to IDPs over the past three decades, long-term solutions to their plight remain elusive.

Against this backdrop, this week an independent UN high level panel established to identify solutions to the crisis launches its long-anticipated report: '*Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future*'. To facilitate long-term solutions to internal displacement, the panel report proposes building development action into the humanitarian response at an early stage and better linking up humanitarian and development approaches in IDP crises. Might this be a game-changer for fully reintegrating IDPs into society and thus bringing an end to their displacement?

“Leave No One Behind” is the mantra behind global efforts to meet the [UN sustainable development goals by 2030](#). The importance of harnessing long-term development processes and interventions to facilitate the integration of refugees – who have been displaced across borders – is increasingly well-recognised. However, while the global refugee crisis has occupied an important

place on the international agenda in recent years, the IDP crisis has largely been overlooked.

It is noteworthy that almost all internal displacement due to conflict and violence presently takes place in developing countries and, unlike refugee arrivals, does not directly affect major donor countries. In IDP situations, for a number of reasons, it is also harder for donors to provide development financing than humanitarian aid. As a result, on the international stage, the internal displacement crisis tends to be confined to the shadows.

Internal displacement may be a relatively 'hidden' crisis, but its human and development impact is vast. In the world today, there are an [estimated 48 million IDPs](#) who have fled conflict or violence. By contrast, there are [26 million refugees](#). Moreover, IDPs tend to be among the poorest people in their country – often too poor to cross a border. In Colombia, for example, [IDPs make up around 20-30% of the population living below the poverty line and 60-70% of those living in extreme poverty](#).

This is hardly surprising, given the loss of access to homes, land, property, livelihoods and local social support structures that IDPs experience, as well as the relatively modest levels of humanitarian aid available to them. And it inevitably affects other living standards. On health, for instance: [they tend to suffer significantly higher levels of death and disease than other conflict-affected populations](#), including refugees who have managed to flee their country and are thus less directly affected by the conflict and its dangers and devastation. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Clearly, tens of millions of IDPs are currently being 'left behind'.

The development impact of internal displacement is felt not only by individual IDPs. It can also upset long-term national and regional development processes. The cumulative loss of IDPs' human and material capital, as well as the resulting damage to the social fabric, means that national planners find themselves chasing an ever-diminishing development baseline. At the same time, the repeated mass displacement of people within a country, especially over a period of years or decades, throws development planning assumptions into disarray, as some areas rapidly empty out and others suddenly grow in unplanned ways, with crucial impacts on local economies.

Therefore, in conflict contexts, we need to recognise that internal displacement adds another factor to the mix of processes, such as

infrastructure destruction and capital and investment flight, that influence development outcomes. In a similar way, it can also feed into ongoing political instability.

In this context, short-term humanitarian aid clearly remains an absolute necessity for IDPs. Unlike refugees, the displaced who remain in their country continue to be exposed to the dangers and infrastructure destruction caused by the conflict which triggered their displacement. Under these conditions, humanitarian actors have played a crucial role in housing and feeding IDPs during the emergency phase – a task often made more difficult by the fact that they tend to be dispersed among host communities and are rarely concentrated in camps. However, once the emergency phase ends and the humanitarians return home, IDPs and the communities that host them are all too often forgotten by governments, agencies and donors, leaving a gap in ‘solutions’ to internal displacement.

The report presented this week by the UN Secretary-General’s high level panel argues that the long-term nature of reintegrating IDPs within society as a solution to their plight requires development action early in humanitarian responses to IDP crises and for better linking up between humanitarian and development approaches. Of course, the need to integrate development approaches into humanitarian work is generally well-recognised, and the panel is not the first to propose the idea.

Indeed, that is a key tenet of the Grand Bargain and New Way of Working agreed at the [World Humanitarian Summit](#) in 2016. But it is fair to say that its implementation since then, especially in the response to internal displacement, has been haphazard and patchy at best. This reflects not only a generalised lack of interest in the plight of IDPs among donors but also the turf wars waged between UN agencies (and others too) for prestige and funding and the difficulty of linking this kind of development work with humanitarian interventions in unstable conflict contexts.

On this point, the true importance of this UN report lies in the new mechanisms that it proposes to ensure that the wider international system for responding to IDP crises integrates this long-term development approach to solutions. The report emphasises that the whole of society needs to become invested in the work of facilitating solutions to internal displacement, including the private sector, whose capacities have been underutilised.

The report highlights a number of recommendations to strengthen the UN's leadership and accountability on this issue. Key among them is the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Solutions to Internal Displacement and upgrading the role of UN resident coordinators to serve as the point person in the response to IDP crises. The panel calls for efforts to address the gap in financing, by establishing a Global Fund on Internal Displacement Solutions, and to provide funding as locally as possible by supporting municipal authorities and local civil society. These are the actors traditionally left behind to do the heavy lifting once the humanitarians and donors leave.

The UN panel sketches out the proposed mechanisms in broad brush strokes, leaving the detail to be fleshed out by the appropriate stakeholders. Likewise, on the wider development-based approach to IDP solutions too, there remains a need to better understand in practice 'what works' in diverse contexts of internal displacement, especially where conflict and insecurity remain ongoing, but also where displacement is caused by natural hazards or climate change. In this regard, the UN panel report rightly emphasises the need to strengthen the effective use of internal displacement data and analysis. The launch this week of the [Researching Internal Displacement](#) website, on which this piece is hosted, and our free online training on [Internal Displacement, Conflict and Protection](#) respond directly to this call.

Even so, a real strength of the report is its deployment of existing knowledge, including [research](#) from our [Internal Displacement Research Programme](#) (IDRP) and the other networks hosted on the [Researching Internal Displacement](#) website, to ground its analysis and recommendations. This was recognised expressly in the report: *"The Panel benefited from research and analysis through a pro-bono partnership with the University of London Refugee Law Initiative's Internal Displacement Research Programme. The programme facilitates regional networks of researchers in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East on internal displacement"*. Publications by IDRP staff and affiliates and the Health and Internal Displacement Network were also cited in the final report.

In fact, this diverse and experienced panel undertook an extraordinarily wide consultation process. During 17 months of work, and despite the global COVID-19 pandemic, it held more than 100 bilateral consultations, received over 100 written submissions from governments and experts, and consulted with at least 12,500 IDPs and host community members in over 20 countries. This

provides the panel report with a validity that goes well beyond rubber-stamping the views of the usual UN interlocutors.

Indeed, the process of consultation by the panel and its ensuing report make this a moment of crucial importance for many millions of IDPs worldwide. Not since the first UN efforts during the 1990s to recognise the issue of internal displacement and create the shared protection framework of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement has so much been at stake politically.

The panel has done its work and the report is published. It now lies in the hands of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who established this panel, and UN member States and agencies to dictate whether this will be a turning point for IDPs globally, or another wasted opportunity by the UN and governments. Ultimately, they alone will be judged on whether there is the political will to seize the moment. A word of caution, though: if we neglect this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to scale-up solutions for IDPs, it is difficult to see how the sustainable development goals can possibly be achieved by 2030.

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