



Shining a Light on the Meaning and Value of Citizenship for Internally Displaced Persons

The recent [UN High-Level Panel Report on internal displacement](#), “Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future”, recommends a ‘whole-of-society approach’ to tackle internal displacement (recommendation 3). Looking beyond formal citizenship can help to see the value and potential of this approach. This blog contribution proposes to take a broad understanding of citizenship, and applies this understanding to the everyday reality of IDPs to illustrate the value of the approach.

Published on 7 February 2022

Carolien Jacobs and Nadia Sonneveld

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have many things in common, but one important difference between the two is that the latter are – in most cases - citizens of the country in which they seek refuge, and thus should have the same rights and entitlements as other citizens in their country. In a way, this makes it easier to displace within one’s own country rather than to flee abroad: there is no need to worry about an asylum request, or to fear expulsion, as an IDP is among fellow country-women and -men. But there may be a considerable caveat in seeking refuge within one’s own country. If a person did not feel secure in the community of origin because the state was unable to provide adequate protection, will that person feel secure in displacement, where protection is supposed to come from that same state? Or do actors other than the state step in to help IDPs to find security and feel protected?

The UN High-Level Panel report emphasises that the primary responsibility for IDPs issues rests with the territorial state. This is in line with the international position that nation-states have primary responsibility over their own territory and internal affairs. At the same time, the third recommendation of the UN High-Level Panel report suggests that the ‘whole of society’ should be invested to tackle internal displacement, including other actors than the nation-state. If a

national government is unable to secure the rights of its internally displaced population, we fully agree that it makes sense to look at other actors beyond the nation-state to safeguard fundamental rights of internally displaced persons. In this blog we investigate the potential of the whole-of-society approach. Specifically, we suggest it is helpful to look into the different political communities to which displaced citizens can adhere to realise their rights. This requires an understanding of citizenship that goes beyond the narrow, legal definition that relates citizenship to the nation-state only ([Isin 2017](#)). To aid reflection on the value of a broad understanding of citizenship in the context of the UN's whole-of-society approach, we refer to an article that we recently published in [Citizenship Studies](#) on '[Empirical understandings of informal citizenship and membership](#)'.

Citizenship is frequently used in relation to the nation-state, and this is what the HLP report also seems to suggest. The classical - and still often used - definition by Marshall defines citizenship as 'full membership in a community with all its rights and responsibilities' ([Marshall 2009: 149](#), first published in 1950). Although Marshall himself discussed the notion of citizenship in relation to the nation-state, his usage of 'a community' rather than 'a nation-state' paves the way for an understanding of multiple citizenships. A political community then can be defined as 'a group of people who self-consciously interact on the basis of shared beliefs, practices and identities sufficient to engender 'we-feeling' for the purpose of addressing issues they understand to be political' ([Williams 2015: 94](#)). Citizenship, understood as membership to such a political community, comes with both rights and responsibilities.

If membership in a political community enables people to claim goods and fundamental human rights, it is important to understand ways in which people can become members of such communities. Scholars here often distinguish between earned and automatic citizenships, with the former being dependent on active participation, while the latter is more automatic, exclusive and inalienable (cf. [Marshall 2009](#), [Parolin 2009](#)). Automatic citizenship then is more a status than a claim ([Das 2011](#)).

How does all of this work in practice? What happens when a nation-state government is not in a position to guarantee many of the rights that are supposed to come with citizenship in a nation-state? The eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a case a point. In this region, insecurity and conflict

have been reigning for decades, leading to large-scale and repeated displacements for millions of people. Many IDPs flee to Bukavu, one of the major cities in this region, located at the border with Rwanda, and the place of refuge for many Congolese citizens who come from the rural hinterland. In our long-term research in this city we notice that displaced people draw on membership in various different political communities to realise rights the state is unable to provide. their rights. Affiliation to these communities sometimes existed prior to displacement, in other cases these political communities are connected to the post-displacement situation. We here highlight some of the most important communities to which IDPs in our research setting find security and protection.

One way to claim membership and belonging in the community of displacement is house ownership. This is an aspiration of many displaced (and other) residents of the city alike. It turns somebody from an outsider into a resident, who is entitled to claim a place in the city. It is reflected in the words of a widowed woman who fled to the city of Bukavu after her husband was killed. She said: *'I do not want to go back to L... I now consider myself a resident of Bukavu because, irrespective of the place, as long as you do not possess your own house, you are considered a stranger; someone who, at any time, can change environment and settle elsewhere. Here ... I have already consolidated my presence in this town, and even [that of] my children.'* A local state authority confirms: *'A displaced person cannot become a chief. If you are a tenant and don't have your own house, you cannot become a chief, because if you are renting a house, you can be removed easily. If a displaced person owns a house, he is no longer a displaced person. He is a resident.'* Hence, a house owner has more entitlements than a temporary inhabitant as s/he can participate in public affairs of the community and play a role in decision-making. In this case, participation in general community affairs – which is highlighted in the HLP report as being essential – becomes accessible through house ownership, which subsequently provides community membership.

House ownership is one way to obtain a form of citizenship in the eastern Congolese city of Bukavu, but it is unattainable for most displaced people. A more accessible option is to become an active participant in the neighbourhood activities, such as the community works *salongo*. This consists of weekly cleaning tasks in the neighbourhood through which IDPs can become respected and accepted members of the neighbourhood. Moreover, performing neighbourhood activities sometimes opens up opportunities for employment and new

connections, which in turn help people to become more sustainably settled in their new environment, and hence drive their own solutions, as recommended in the HLP report. Membership of the neighbourhood, however, requires active participation and has to be 'earned' (cf. [van Houdt, Suvarierol and Schinkel 2011](#)). The same goes for church membership. In itself, church membership is inclusive and open to everyone, but the more active church members usually reap more benefits from their membership; they can draw on stronger connections, but are also more likely to receive aid, health care, education for their children, or other services that are available to a limited extent only. The church in itself may not constitute a political community for all its members at all times. But when membership to the church community comes with additional benefits that help members to realise basic rights, participation in the church becomes participation in a political community.

When settling in a new environment, IDPs do not solely rely on memberships of new communities. They can also draw benefits from rights that are derived from citizenships they had prior to displacement. The extended family, the community of origin, or the ethnic group to which somebody belongs can all help IDPs to realise their rights in displacement. This is most useful in cases of large-scale displacement, as it is more likely that displaced people settle among people with a shared origin. In contrast to the aforementioned post-displacement memberships, these memberships are often innate and do not necessarily need active maintenance to remain useful but can be mobilised when needed. It does not mean, however, that such memberships are forever. When trust is irreparably harmed, IDPs may decide to break away from pre-displacement communities.

To conclude, we argue that many displaced people are members of various political communities and that citizenship is not limited to citizenship to the nation-state. In fragile state contexts that trigger mass displacement, other political communities may be more significant to people in realizing their rights. Thus, humanitarian and development actors should not rely only on the (hollow) mantra that IDPs are citizens of their state but rather actively seek to understand and support the more significant forms of citizenship of other political communities through which IDPs seek safety and inclusion. We therefore welcome the whole-of-society approach that is advocated in the HLP report. Recognising and supporting non-state political communities in fulfilling their role

of providing ‘political goods’ is an important step in helping displaced people to realise their fundamental rights to security and protection.

Carolien Jacobs, PhD, is assistant professor at the [Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society](#) at Leiden University, the Netherlands. She has an interdisciplinary background in international development and legal anthropology. Most of her research experience is in Africa (most recently especially [Mozambique](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#)), where she works on displacement in contexts of conflict, disaster, and climate change. Her current research on IDPs’ protracted displacement in the DRC is conducted within the project [TRAFIG](#) that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 programme under grant no. 822453. Carolien is a senior research associate of the [RLI’s Internal Displacement Research Programme](#).

*Nadia Sonneveld, PhD, is associate professor at the [Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society](#) at Leiden University, the Netherlands. She has an academic background in anthropology, Arabic and law. In her research, she focuses on gender, migration, and law in the Middle East and North Africa, with a particular focus on Egypt and Morocco. In her current research project *Living on the Other Side: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of Migration and Family Law in Morocco*, she asks how migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East deal with the formal and informal aspects of major life events, such as marriage, divorce, and death.*