# Solutions from the Start: Adapting the Deliverables for Humanitarian Country Teams to Ensure Better Outcomes for Internally Displaced Persons

## Learnings from Responses in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen

## Working Paper No. 43

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Middle East Durable Solutions Platform / Danish Refugee Council

July 2024

## Abstract

*This paper examines how early responses to internal displacement crises in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have utilised best practice guidance from the durable solutions approach, by engaging with government actors and other authorities as well as contributing to space for longer-term programming and the eventual realisation of solutions to displacement.*

*Through interviews with practitioners who worked in these responses in their early years, the paper concludes that solutions thinking was not considered within the formative years of a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) being set up, nor was there strategic engagement with national authorities on issues related to solutions. The paper concludes that more emphasis should be placed on translating decades of collective experience into improved implementation rather than, as some in the industry suggest, developing a new framework for solutions programming. This would include that HCTs be requested to develop strategies for the achievement of solutions in their first twelve months and to bring more technical expertise on solutions into humanitarian responses at an early stage.*

## Keywords

Durable solutions; internal displacement; UNSG Action Agenda on Internal Displacement; UN Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement; conflict displacement; humanitarian response; humanitarian country team; development response; humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus; localisation; capacity-building; Iraq; Syria; Yemen.

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## Acknowledgements

The Middle East Durable Solutions Platform (ME DSP) aims to generate knowledge that informs and inspires forward-thinking policy and practice on the long-term future of displaced persons in the Middle East. Since its establishment in 2016, ME DSP has developed research projects and supported advocacy efforts on key questions regarding durable solutions to displacement in the region. In addition, DSP has strengthened the capacity of civil society organisations on solutions to displacement.

Founded in 1956, Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest, and a leading international NGO — one of the few with a specific expertise in forced displacement. In 40 countries, our 7,500 employees protect, advocate and build sustainable futures for refugees and other displacement-affected people and communities.

This paper was produced with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, neither is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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## Executive Summary

As the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world soars and the nature of most displacements becomes more protracted, the eventual realisation of a durable solution to displacement seems increasingly out of reach or unattainable. Consequently, debates within the aid industry have begun to focus on whether the concept of durable solutions is outdated and whether new frameworks or types of responses are necessary. There has been less reflection on how aid responses have sought to implement the best practice approaches for durable solutions. These include ensuring that durable solutions are considered at an early stage of the response, with a focus on the barriers that IDPs will inevitably face should their displacement become protracted, and working with local actors including the government.

In the Middle East, crises in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen that have stretched over more than a decade have led to high IDP caseloads (in the case of Syria, the highest in the world) with millions still in internal displacement. In these contexts, the achievement of delivering a durable solution for IDPs now seems further away than at any time in the past.

This is not unique to the Middle East. Constantly rising numbers of forcibly displaced persons worldwide[1] have pushed durable solutions to the top of the global agenda, most prominently in the form of the United Nations Secretary General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement and the two-year mandate of the Office of the UNSG's Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement. The Action Agenda has been anchored in countries with UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) and therefore seen as an approach for development actors and strategies to deliver. Yet what happens at the onset of displacement, as part of the humanitarian response, is critical for outcomes, as well as the policy environment, years into the future.

This research, informed by key informant interviews with people involved in different parts of the international aid response in each country, has identified that none of the Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) set out a plan that considers durable solutions or recognises that the eventual achievement of durable solutions to displacement depends on actions taken by response actors in their first years of existence. Thinking on durable solutions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen only formally began when there had either been a significant reduction in active conflict or as humanitarian funding was seen to be shrinking. This correlated with, but does not necessarily have a causal connection to, the fact that none of the responses considered how to engage with the government from the inception stage, which is a key element of durable solutions given the government's central role as the primary duty-bearer for its citizens.

When it comes to early government engagement, the response in Iraq has been the most advanced by including the government in the Returns Working Group that was set up in 2016. Most interviewees across contexts highlighted that having a conversation with national governments at an early stage was too difficult, with governments often not seen as reliable interlocuters or trusted partners. For Syria, there were specific concerns about engaging the government given its role in causing internal displacement. Not engaging early, whether this was due to a context with a politically estranged government (if not an overall crisis in governance), meant that predictable areas of influence were not discussed at an early stage of

[1] GLOBAL TRENDS | UNHCR, last accessed 31 May 2024.

the humanitarian aid response. For example, issues around housing, land, and property (HLP) or peacebuilding in areas of origin inherently require interventions of a legal or political nature, and thus close engagement with government actors. Moreover, in all three cases, governments were thinking about issues relating to internal displacement to some degree (albeit largely through a security lens) well before international aid actors engaged with them, leading to a disjointed overall response.

A lack of early consideration of solutions and engagement with government has resulted in multiple challenges as aid responses have developed and transitioned towards development over time. These challenges include how national and local authorities have perceived the discussion on durable solutions and ensuring their engagement in providing those solutions – especially important given that states have the responsibility to provide services and assistance to IDPs on their territory, in line with any other citizen.

In particular in Iraq and Yemen, but to some extent in Syria, development actors were working before the onset of the crises that prompted a humanitarian response. However, it is unclear that any analysis of existing development programmes or substantial engagement with development across (especially those outside the UN) took place at the onset of humanitarian responses. This means important projects or national policies were missed when considering response approaches, for example a pre-existing government policy on the subject of internal displacement in Yemen.

While HCTs have space for civil society to engage, international NGOs (INGOs) also predominantly focused on the immediate humanitarian response in the initial stages and have not introduced early thinking on solutions. Indeed, INGOs' lack of consideration on durable solutions has meant that when strategic discussions did occur, they were entirely within the UN system. This had the adverse effect that interagency disagreements and competition, as well as personality-driven priority-setting among response leaders, had significant impact on the respective responses.

The lack of a collective long-term vision combined with the fact that activities contributing to the achievement of durable solutions are cross-cutting across response sectors, has meant that coordination on solutions activities has not been apparent and that agencies focus on fundraising for their own activities ahead of a coordinated response. This has resulted in an asymmetric allocation of resources to certain types of activities by certain actors. It is much more challenging to assign a fundraising appeal figure to a durable solutions response than a response in a single humanitarian sector (e.g. shelter or education), which adds to the complexity of delivering a coordinated and complementary response to achieve solutions to displacement.

While humanitarian responses are inherently challenging, and often take place in fast-paced environments with multiple access challenges, they hold the key to improving responses to internal displacement. Ensuring that HCTs consider solutions thinking at the earliest possible stage, for example by holding them accountable for delivering against key priorities and for developing strategies towards identifying barriers to solutions and responding to them (through programmes or advocacy), is critical to improving responses in the future. This must involve

engaging on these topics with authorities, discussing with those undertaking development work in the country pre-crisis, engaging with donor governments to provide humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus funding at an early stage, and incorporating the views of national and local civil society (many of whom were also working in development pre-crisis).

This paper concludes that it is not through a reframing of the issue that responses to internal displacement will improve. Rather it is about embedding within humanitarian responses the best practice approaches that exist and holding the humanitarian system to account for delivering on them. Only then could we begin to see tangible progress in delivering solutions for the internally displaced.

# 1. Introduction

Throughout the course of any response, aid actors will face several barriers to the successful implementation of programming. This paper explores how best practices in responding to internal displacement, including through operationalising the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework,[2] were often under- or un-utilised in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, three contexts with protracted displacement crises in which humanitarian funding is reducing while needs continue to grow. The paper outlines how this has contributed to aid actors seeking to relabel or reframe the discussion on durable solutions, ahead of assessing whether and how best practice has been applied. As governments are the primary duty-bearer for the safety, security, protection, and access to services of all their citizens, including those that are internally displaced, their involvement in working towards the achievement of solutions to displacement is critical. Appreciating that conflict reduces the capacity and resource of the state to discharge its responsibilities, the international community should support the state in carrying them out, which includes considering the long-term implications of emergency aid responses.

This paper is produced at a time when the UN Secretary General (UNSG) has demanded a focus on improving responses to internal displacement, publishing an Action Agenda following the conclusions of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement and recruiting a Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement (UNSA) to deliver against the Agenda by the end of 2024. It builds on reports from OCHA in 2017[3] and UNHCR in 2023[4] that outline steps needed to break siloes between humanitarian and development actors and engage authorities to ensure the best opportunity to provide a durable solution to displacement.

Displacement crises do not have a neat beginning, middle, and end. This paper takes the moment of a humanitarian architecture being initiated and the setup of a Humanitarian Country Team as the onset or beginning of a response, namely when a humanitarian crisis was acknowledged and when displacement was occurring. The paper considers what was deemed important to aid response leadership at HCT set up and explores three main questions, namely 1) at what point the aid response started developing a durable solutions strategy, 2) how it raised these issues with authorities, and 3) how the response to displacement was resourced. As a narrative develops within the aid sector that a new approach is needed to tackle internal displacement, with durable solutions seemingly unachievable for many IDPs, this paper explores what might be different if the best practice guidance issued by many agencies were more closely followed, in accordance with the IASC Framework.

This paper was written by international NGO (INGO) workers, with other international aid response actors as the intended primary audience. It is based on the hypothesis – drawn from practical experience - that other actors will show the same weaknesses that our own agencies,

[2] HTTPS://INTERAGENCYSTANDINGCOMMITTEE.ORG/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/MIGRATED/2019-08/IASC_FRAMEWORK_ON_DURABLE_SOLUTIONS_FOR_IDPS_APRIL_2010.PDF, last accessed 31 May 2024.
[3] NEW CALL TO 'BREAK THE IMPASSE' OF DECADES OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT | OCHA (UNOCHA.ORG), last accessed 31 May 2024.
[4] UNHCR INSTITUTIONAL PLAN ON SOLUTIONS TO INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT, MARCH 2023, last accessed 31 May 2024.

previous NGO employers, and, based on observations, other actors in the aid industry including the UN, show when it comes to thinking about solutions from the start, and that they are therefore not pushing it in aid coordination systems like the inter-cluster coordination system and do not have the capacity or mindset to engage with government in a meaningful way. It is based on interviews with practitioners[5] who worked at different stages of the response across the three countries, and who were selected based on how early they joined the humanitarian response or how likely they were to have insight in early decision-making. Thus, this paper is by no means conclusive but provides an opportunity to reflect on how responses to internal displacement have been delivered to date and where improvements can be sought.

## 2. Context

Over the past two decades, the Middle East has been the host of three of the most significant internal displacement crises in the world. Syria is the largest IDP crisis in the world, with approximately 6.9m IDPs – around one-third of the population – while Yemen has 4.5m IDPs, many displaced on multiple occasions since the start of the current conflict in 2015. IDP numbers are easily instrumentalised and politicised, and who is and is not counted as an IDP can be subject to rather blunt indicators that are not connected to integration, for instance by using the amount of time that someone has been living in displacement as the leading indicator for whether they are an IDP. As a result, Iraq now has smaller numbers of people that are counted as IDPs, but for many of the 6m people that were displaced between 2014 and 2017 a solution to their displacement is yet to be achieved. For them and the over 1m remaining officially counted IDPs across Iraq, marginalisation and vulnerability is increasing and they often face complex barriers to achieving a durable solution to their displacement.

For different reasons, humanitarian funding for Iraq, Syria, and Yemen is declining, and development funding, where it exists, does not necessarily seek to support the achievement of durable solutions. Each context, in its own way, shows the challenges of transition from a predominantly humanitarian-focused response to one focused on development. Given the achievement of durable solutions straddles across the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus (HDPN), delivering an effective response relies on effective coordination across these spheres.

All three countries saw internal displacement caused by conflict where the authorities themselves were parties to the conflict, complicating engagement by the international community. The emergence of either *de facto* authorities or non-state armed groups taking control of parts of each country has complicated application of the IASC framework with the need to engage multiple authorities during a conflict. In the case of Syria, traditional donor governments all but cut off diplomatic relations with the Government of Syria and therefore have not supported programmes that strengthen the capacity of authorities to respond to internal displacement. As part of a conflict-sensitive and rights-based programme approach, UN agencies and INGOs have had to consider how and where it is appropriate to support authorities across all three countries, but the issue has been particularly prevalent in Syria.

[5] Key informant interviews with 15 aid professionals, predominantly people that worked at UN agencies, but also a person that worked at the NGO coordination architecture and a donor for each context, at the early stages of the response in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Sanctions and counter-terror legislation from the United States of America and European Union have also affected response management across all three countries.

Once a country is in crisis it is likely to see new waves of displacement, and conflict dynamics have also affected aid architectures and displacement dynamics in each context. In Syria, a lot of IDPs ended up outside of areas under the management of the HCT, having been transferred by authorities from areas where the Government of Syria won back control militarily (e.g. Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus) to areas of Idlib governorate that are under the control of other groups. Moreover, the Turkish military operation into north-east Syria in 2019 caused a new wave of displacement from border areas into other parts of north-east Syria, also outside of the control of the government and not in areas of the response under the management of the HCT. That said, given the political complexities of the Syria response, the UN Security Council passed resolutions providing for aid to be delivered from neighbouring countries directly into areas of the country outside of the control of the government, the so called 'cross-border mechanism', which essentially overrode Syrian sovereignty over specific border crossings. This access modality sat underneath an aid structure managed away from the HCT, with a separate body – the Strategic Steering Group (SSG) – being the highest-level aid coordination body for the entirety of Syria, and with cluster or sector coordination in each area of control, but additionally with a Whole of Syria (WoS) cluster system sitting above. These complexities have challenged strategic thinking within the aid response on internal displacement across the country and added an overtly political dimension to seeking to discuss IDPs with the government, which opposed communication with response actors using the cross-border modality active in areas of displacement outside of government control. While there have been considerations in Iraq and Yemen on how to respond in areas outside of government control, the aid response has always maintained the single country structure and a structure for coordination with all duty bearers, with Area HCTs operating beneath the country HCT.

Additionally, alongside being the largest internal displacement crisis in the world, Syria also saw millions of its citizens flee the country seeking international protection, with over 5 million registered refugees still living in countries in the region and many more unregistered, while others have left the region, either through onward migration or as part of resettlement schemes and complementary pathways. The large number of refugees, and related political developments in Europe and the region, resulted in the concept of durable solutions being discussed almost exclusively through the refugee lens, compounding other difficulties connected to discussing the internal displacement file. Any discussion with the Government of Syria on durable solutions for internal displacement has tended to lead to a reply mentioning the return of refugees, while traditional donor governments have also ended up focusing on this discussion. Our informants suggest this led to a situation where it was almost impossible to discuss a plan for durable solutions for internal displacement, as the political nature of the refugee file led to it dominating all discussions, even where unintended.

In Iraq and Yemen, on the other hand, movement of people across conflict lines is common, both at the point of initial displacement and subsequently as people seek to gather information to support their decision-making. However, in Iraq challenges persist for those with a perceived affiliation with Daesh. These IDPs require security clearance in order to apply for civil documentation and often do not have legal or status documentation, which exposes them to

risks at checkpoints.[6] In Yemen, on the other hand, the conflict has resulted in two distinct areas of control, one under the Internationally Recognised Government (IRG) and one under the Ansar Allah *de facto* authority. The reduction in conflict since 2022, combined with continued poor economic conditions, has led to the scapegoating of some IDPs in areas of displacement, compelling them to consider return without full knowledge of areas of origin. Others fear discrimination when returning to their home, while aid actors are largely unable to support given lack of intentions knowledge and lack of access. In Syria these issues are less prominent as there are insignificant population movements between non-government and government-held areas of the country, although there are similar dynamics in people moving between different areas of non-government control.

Gathering data on population movements is not an exact science. People who are forced to leave their place of habitual residence sometimes move for short periods and on multiple occasions, making it challenging to come up with a contextually appropriate definition for internal displacement. Moreover, access constraints can make it difficult for aid responses to fully understand movement dynamics. However, responses in Syria and Yemen have particularly struggled with monitoring population movements, with INGOs in Yemen highlighting that they still lack a significant amount of data through which to provide an effective response.[7] Interviewees supported this viewpoint, describing a complex context in which there is very little complete data available on drivers of displacement despite several intentions surveys, with programming in certain areas getting framed as successful because mass displacement led to economic growth in absolute terms.

A finding that did not appear in other contexts but that is worth noting, is that the role of the private sector in planning for the achievement of durable solutions came up in Yemen. However, this was only being considered recently as part of the response.

## 3. Best Practice #1: Solutions from the Start

When IDPs first become displaced they often still have resources to be resilient to certain shocks and maintain a degree of self-reliance. Aid response decisions that get taken early on in a crisis can either support and extend this resilience or sabotage it for the short- or long-term. For instance, when displaced persons are housed in displacement camps, where they have limited freedom of movement and where there are no livelihood opportunities for an extended period, aid reliance will likely become the only option, rapidly decreasing displaced persons' agency and space to ensure their basic subsistence. Unfortunately, displacement contexts are often characterised by physical, legal, and other ways of excluding the displaced from fully participating in the community that is hosting them, preventing them from fully availing themselves of their rights. This is one of the reasons why IDPs often have continuing humanitarian needs, and why it is imperative that actors working on reducing immediate displacement-related needs also maintain a view of how those interventions influence prospects for durable solutions and potential future displacement-related vulnerabilities.

[6] LIFE IN THE MARGINS: RE-EXAMINING THE NEEDS OF PAPERLESS PEOPLE IN POST-CONFLICT IRAQ | DRC DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL, last accessed 31 May 2024.
[7] YEARNING FOR A HOME THAT NO LONGER EXISTS: THE DILEMMA FACING PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE IN YEMEN | DRC DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL, last accessed 31 May 2024.

At the onset of a crisis of a certain scale and complexity, the United Nations will set up a HCT to function as the strategic and operational decision-making and oversight forum which works with the inter-cluster or inter-sector coordination group (ICCG/ISCG) to ensure a coherent humanitarian approach with common objectives. As such, the HCT plays a central role in ensuring that the initial response to a crisis is a conduit for longer-term work across the HDPN. The HCT will set the scene in terms of resource allocation and involvement of non-humanitarian actors and, directly or indirectly, deliberately or by consequence, determine the scope of work that development actors can invest in.

As such, the first good practice that will be discussed is ensuring that durable solutions or, in a nutshell, long-term prospects for integration, are considered at the beginning of a crisis for which an HCT was set up. Given that some governments associate the technical term 'durable solutions' with undue influence on policymaking space, and that response actors therefore sometimes strategically avoid using it, key informants were asked about practical approaches to longer-term planning and inclusion of a variety of actors, as well as key concepts aiming to provide a framework for planning and inclusion in a similar way to durable solutions, like HDPN thinking.

## *3.1 Consideration of Durable Solutions at Onset of Crises in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen*

One of the central questions relevant to this good practice is whether the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), any individual UN agency, or formal or informal working group took responsibility for ensuring that durable solutions thinking was integrated from the start of responses that saw significant, potentially long-term, displacement. Interviewees stated none of the HCTs devised a plan that looked beyond providing basic services and overcoming immediate access constraints, or that considered medium-term self-reliance and eventual socio-economic inclusion, in their first years of existence, and that there was no mention of durable solutions or the longer-term implications of HCT decisions at the beginning of these humanitarian crises. International NGOs also focused on the immediate humanitarian response at the onset and did not use the HCT's space for engagement with civil society to introduce early thinking about solutions. Some interviewees saw the root cause of a lack of consideration of solutions from the start in the fact that durable solutions are not a sector or a cluster and that no UN agency, but rather the Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator (HC/RC), is responsible for ensuring that they are considered in the response. Additionally, different UN agencies have taken the lead in each of the three countries, resulting in inconsistent approaches in strategic thinking and a likelihood that lessons are not learned across responses.

For Syria, interviewees emphasised that geopolitical considerations influenced how and whether certain displacement-related needs were discussed. Interviewees that worked in government-controlled areas reported extreme reluctance by response actors to discuss HLP, with some saying that durable solutions would have been "thrown out" of discussions at the HCT had they been brought up. Since some (sub-)sectors influence prospects for durable solutions more than others, with HLP being one of the cornerstones of successful integration, these dynamics greatly influenced the preparedness for moving out of the emergency response.

Moreover, interviewees reported that, overall, the fact that the response community was reluctant to engage the government to negotiate access and provide resources to specific internally displaced populations made longer-term strategic and needs-based programming impossible from the start, and inadvertently caused harm to displaced populations in government-held areas. That said, some interviewees did mention efforts to push back on the politicisation of the response. For instance, on occasion UN agency red lines would be maintained by going ahead with initiatives without waiting for certain Government of Syria permissions.

In Yemen, the lack of consideration of durable solutions at the onset of the displacement crisis is starker given the existence of a government strategy on internal displacement that was drafted with the support of UNHCR in 2012 in response to climate-induced displacement of up to a quarter of a million people in the north of the country. This strategy was not considered when the HCT was set up or when the durable solutions working group (DSWG) was eventually launched at the end of 2021, with interviewees pointing to the fact that food security was the only topic of conversation in Yemen during the first years of the war and that there was no (or very limited) technical expertise in country about durable solutions or the HDPN.

In Iraq, interviewees connected the lack of thinking about solutions from the start to a common belief among response actors that upholding a strict separation between the humanitarian response and durable solutions work was both feasible and desirable and, like in Yemen, emphasised that few actors had a good technical understanding of durable solutions at the time. Therefore, despite the fact that the clusters were activated early on in the crisis, in 2014, and that the trajectory of the displacement was more predictable than in other contexts, the best practice was not implemented.

## *3.2 Later Integration of Durable Solutions Thinking*

In Syria, some interviewees viewed the introduction of a pillar on recovery and resilience in the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) as the first space for discussion of durable solutions, but on the whole interviewees refer to the Returns and Reintegration Working Group (RRWG) that was set up under the Whole of Syria architecture in 2019. Copying the composition of the HCT, the RRWG, which has a Technical Working Group co-chaired by UNHCR and UNDP, was not set up to discuss all pathways to solutions but only to deal with refugee return[8] – although officially also having internal displacement in its remit. Interviewees stressed that, from its inception, the working group was not inclusive of NGOs and that it did not meet more than twice in 2019/2020, with the terms of reference taking a year to complete. That said, interviewees mention that UN collaboration was quite strong in Syria from the start, linking this to the fact that there were no donors in country, no IOM to complicate the relationship with UNHCR, and no strong platform for advocacy by INGOs.

In Yemen, the UN set up a DSWG during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was placed within the humanitarian architecture, which precluded it from linking to non-humanitarian donors and development actors including international financial institutions (IFIs) and, in part due to an

[8] The definition of which was contested, while there were no structures in place for monitoring.

uptick in the conflict, it took a year for it to devise a strategy, which was not operationalised until 2023. The 2022 truce and arrival of an advisor on internal displacement as part of the Action Agenda led to a push on durable solutions work in Yemen, in part also because of a decrease in humanitarian funding and potential for Action Agenda-linked funding. Moreover, the UN started engaging the authorities in Yemen on a UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) (discussed in more detail under best practice number two), which prompted moving the architecture under the RC position. This led to an explicit acknowledgement of the RC's responsibility to deliver against durable solutions objectives. Interviewees stated that UN agencies in Yemen see durable solutions, and therefore the response, holistically and more as a value chain than as linear or sequenced along the HDPN, but that some agencies have had concerns that this created space for a tendency to report humanitarian-funded work as development work.

As in Syria, return was the focus of the first durable solutions work in Iraq, in this case through a principled returns framework agreement between response actors and the government of Iraq. As such, the Returns Working Group (RWG) was set up under the ICCG in 2016, leading to the creation of so-called governorate return committees, which included representatives from the government, NGOs, and UN agencies including OCHA. Consecutively, around 2019/2020, IOM pulled together NGOs, UNHCR, and others to start an informal durable solutions network that was later turned into the Durable Solutions Task Force (DSTF). This collaboration came into being despite reports of serious ongoing disagreements between the two involved UN agencies, and other UN agencies did not buy into the work on durable solutions until there was a change in the HC.

Once the DSTF had been established it was moved into a separate architecture reporting to the RC which, interviewees explained, also meant that all questions related to durable solutions were referred and that the humanitarian coordination architecture, reporting to the HC (the same person as the RC), did not need to consider its role in durable solutions anymore. To this day, and even though the cluster system was deactivated in 2022, the HCT and DSTF coexist and have separate meetings. Interviewees note that individuals tried to build bridges between the two structures, and that coordination is aided by the fact that OCHA participates in both architectures and that the HRP now includes a mention of humanitarian activities that contribute to durable solutions. That said, the setup is not conducive to the implementation and integration of durable solutions work and inadvertently strengthened the iterative approach to durable solutions, allowing response actors to continue seeing durable solutions work as automatically not being humanitarian and explicitly exclude 'solutions' from HRP resources. The latter is also significant because of donors' reluctance to invest in Iraq, due to its significant oil wealth and competing crises across the world. There was never any serious funding for development and, as a consequence of the linear approach, therewith also no investment in durable solutions work. Interviewees report that this might have been different had there been support from the office of the HC/RC in lobbying for resources for the implementation of durable solutions work at the outset, which would have been in line with the prioritisation of solutions to internal displacement at a global level.

## 4. Best Practice #2: Inclusion of Government Actors

A holistic approach to displacement-related needs that helps people maintain or build a degree of resilience to further shocks after displacement cannot be achieved by one type of actor. It requires collaboration across the HDPN as well as between aid actors and the government, private sector, and others. In this it is especially important for international response actors to follow the IASC[9] recommendation of 'locally led' at as early a stage as possible by seeking out and including local actors in programme design and implementation.

The UN coordination system is tasked with inclusion of all relevant actors, including government authorities at all levels, i.a., to ensure that response actors have access to displaced populations, and vice versa, but in times of crisis also to ensure that the HCT has a thorough understanding of the problem it is addressing. As such, the HCT can engage non-HCT members, including locally led organisations and specific sub-national level government bodies, to gather information. Coordination between all relevant actors should also safeguard that aid interventions complement existing systems and that there is, at minimum, an awareness and acknowledgement of the time limit on international attention and funding for any given response – and of the fact that responses tend to scale down when funding runs low rather than when there are fewer needs.

As the duty bearer for taking care of its citizens, the government is considered a key player in the UNSG's Action Agenda, and it is UN policy to engage with the government from the onset of an intervention.[10] When there is no humanitarian crisis in a country that has development needs, the relationship between national governments and the UN is governed by a UNSDCF that is regularly renegotiated. This practice was applied in Iraq, while the context in which the humanitarian crises unfolded in Syria and Yemen prevented the successful negotiation of an agreement in these countries. Yemen had not had a UN development cooperation framework for close to a decade when the UNSDCF in exceptional circumstances, i.e., not signed by the IRG, was published in mid-2022. Meanwhile, Syria's first UN Development Assistance Framework (the UNSDCF's predecessor), which covered the period 2007-2011, was extended year-by-year until the introduction of the first 'strategic framework' for 2016-2017,[11] which was in turn extended to cover 2016-2020 and only updated in the second strategic framework for 2022-2024.[12] The timelines and workarounds applied in Yemen and Syria are indicators of a fraught relationship that either led to unsigned agreements or no attempts at negotiating agreements in the interim.

[9] HTTPS://INTERAGENCYSTANDINGCOMMITTEE.ORG/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/MIGRATED/2019-08/IASC_FRAMEWORK_ON_DURABLE_SOLUTIONS_FOR_IDPS_APRIL_2010.PDF, last accessed 31 May 2024.
[10] UNSDG | MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK OF THE UN DEVELOPMENT AND RESIDENT COORDINATOR SYSTEM, last accessed 31 May 2024.
[11] STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK (UNDP.ORG), last accessed 31 May 2024.
[12] UNSF 2022-2024 ENGLISH FINAL SIGNED.PDF, last accessed 31 May 2024. This document includes a pillar on "resilient return" that references internal displacement, the return of Syrian refugees and Palestine refugees in Syria.

In line with the findings of the recently published Independent Review of Humanitarian Responses to Internal Displacement,[13] which found that the IASC humanitarian system is not joined up and too focused on internal processes, this research found that response actors tended to overlook actors that were already in country before the crisis, and that this included government as well as locally led organisations.

## *4.1 Early Engagement with Government Actors*

All interviewees stated that there was no engagement with the government at the early stage of any of the responses studied, nor was this a consideration for any of the international response actors. Interviewees mentioned varying degrees of assumptions that the state actor in question would not be open to discussing internal displacement. Still, Syria is an outlier for this good practice, with respondents emphasising that international response actors had to go as far as limiting exposure of their activities from the government because of security risks and risks of undue influence. At the beginning of the crisis, they were also working with the conviction that the central government was not a relevant interlocutor, except for registration purposes and to get permission for specific programmes, because it would soon lose its power and existing systems would be overhauled.[14] Response actors were additionally concerned that working with local governments would lead to politicisation of activities because of their strong ties to Damascus.

UN agencies did engage with the government on their respective portfolios, but interviewees underlined that the HC was the only person with a solid understanding of the positions of all response actors and the Government of Syria, with NGOs emphasizing that they had no insight in the messaging of the UN to the government. Moreover, the complexities around the Whole of Syria architecture, with the SSG instead of the HCT as the highest level coordination forum and an HC/RC equivalent position for non-government controlled areas in the form of the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator, meant that significant resources were poured into the coordination system and that the response was not community-driven and adapted to local needs, for instance through localised area-HCT responses. Interviewees stated that the topic of durable solutions was so sensitive and politicised that the UN placed the durable solutions workstream under the UN Country Team to avoid having additional scrutiny from civil society and donor governments. As such, a lack of collective understanding of durable solutions was also a major obstacle because it prevented the response from keeping conversations at a technical level so as to avoid politicisation. Lastly, interviewees that worked on Syria report that international response actors did not consider reaching out to the government to, e.g., share training on SPHERE standards or international humanitarian law, and that there was no analysis of existing policies, but that occasionally there would be a collective interest in engaging with locally led organisations and foundations that had existed since before the war.

[13] INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE IASC RESPONSE TO INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT SUMMARY REPORTINDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE IASC RESPONSE TO INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT SUMMARY REPORT (INTERAGENCYSTANDINGCOMMITTEE.ORG), last accessed 31 May 2024.

[14] An example of this is the fact that there was a big conference in Beirut in 2014 to plan the forthcoming 3RP without any representation from the government of Syria.

Even prior to the current conflict, engagement with authorities in Yemen was already challenging. An interviewee noted that the development response that was being implemented in Yemen before 2014 was taking place in a country running out of water and with major food insecurity concerns, but that the security dynamics and the imposition of restrictions by authorities meant that international aid actors were finding it challenging to move around and engage with communities, local authorities, or the private sector. As the conflict escalated, local authority engagement could often only happen if those authorities travelled to Aden or Sana'a, which significantly reduced opportunities for effective engagement. Another reason for not engaging the government on durable solutions at the early stages was related to the fact that food security was seen the core issue of interest and dominated aid response thinking.

As such, interviewees described the approach as necessarily iterative, stating that they had to work on a project level in the beginning of the crisis and that it has only become possible to work on systems and governance levels in recent years, despite the development response in the country prior to the conflict. In that vein, government engagement initially focused on good governance and the HDPN, which included work on improved access to services and inclusion of IDPs, and outreach to the government about durable solutions only started in 2022/2023, once the DSWG had been established. Interviewees report that collaboration between the UN and the IRG improved when Yemen was selected as a pilot country by the UNSA, and that the fact that it came with technical support helped ensure that durable solutions were on the agenda and included in the Yemen Compact. The increased collaboration also allowed for negotiations facilitating the inclusion of vulnerable groups across the whole of Yemen in the 2022 SDCF. That said, interviewees note that the *de facto* authorities in the northern part of the country remain difficult to engage because of an awareness that the funding coming to the north has always been related to the humanitarian imperative and that development funding will predominantly go to the south.

In Iraq, once the conflict with Daesh had been announced as concluded, policymaking on internal displacement from both the government and aid response actors had a direct impact on the lives of displaced persons, including those who have attempted to return. From the government side, this came in the form of the Ministry of Migration and Displacement's (MoMD) policy document on ensuring the return of IDPs to "liberated areas", which resulted in a policy discussion heavily focused on return at the expense of the other two durable solutions and led to further marginalisation for those from communities where return is not an option due to decisions of the local security apparatus. From aid actors' side, this came in the form of the RWG which did outreach to authorities, organising workshops to discuss solutions at a government level and including national authorities in their meetings.

As a result of this relatively early engagement, most local authorities had already gone through different types of training by the time the three-tiered DSTF was put in place in 2020/2021. The DSTF included the setting up of area-based coordination groups (ABCs), which included local authorities in the inception phase and all successive decision making. An added layer of complexity was that the central government allocated funding to governorates based on registered residents. Given that IDPs were not registered in their governorate of displacement, this took away any incentive and extra resources to invest in displaced persons and led to a dependence on aid. In practice, the early focus on return by both government and aid actors

has resulted in fewer considerations of how to support IDPs to integrate in areas of their displacement or resettle in a third area, in a context where return is complicated not just by damage and destruction to private property and public services, but additionally in social tensions linked to perceived affiliation with Daesh. This has left many IDPs without the support they require to achieve the durable solution of their choice.

## *4.2 Status Quo of Engagement with Government Actors*

In all three countries the problems that were built into the system became painfully obvious once the architectures were underway.

The IRG of Yemen set up an Executive Unit department to work on issues related to internal displacement, including camp management and coordination. This is seen as positive, providing greater leadership from national authorities and allowing them to engage, for example, with private landowners who are hosting IDP sites on their land. The Executive Unit has been a key interlocuter for aid actors and conducts consultations with other political actors about integration. It significantly pre-dates any shift to a durable solutions discussion within the aid response, which in some cases led to aid actors finding it difficult to influence durable solutions thinking. Interviewees further note that only a couple of other authorities are open to discussing solutions. As such, there is regular engagement between aid actors and the Executive Unit, but not with ministries for each relevant sector. Interviewees report that the IRG steadily grew in confidence when it comes to engaging with response actors but that it struggles to find the resources to lead the response and that UNHCR has financed much of the capacity in the Executive Unit to ensure some continuity. The fact that Yemen does not have a functioning national government, covering both the north and the south, has meant that the SDCF emphasises area-based approaches and focuses on governorate engagement as a workaround for engaging with the *de facto* authorities in the north. Overall, there is engagement with the government only as far as it concerns the south and is funded by the international community, which is not sustainable.

Interviewees mention that one of the persistent challenges in negotiations with the Government of Syria has been that they are only interested in refugees and tend to overlook the needs of the internally displaced, especially those in the northwest and northeast (including those displaced because of the conflict with Daesh). Our informants suggest this led to a situation where it was almost impossible to discuss a plan for durable solutions for internal displacement with both the government and donors, as the political nature of the refugee file led to it dominating all discussions, even where unintended. An added layer of complexity was the fact that the central government had a vested interest in denying emergency needs and propping up the state of the country. Interviewees stated that some local governments were more responsive to the IDP caseload, but that there was always disagreement about the numbers – the IOM-led Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) tracking system was more sophisticated than the usual Displacement Tracking Matrix and OCHA relied heavily on those numbers while the government of Syria contested them. Some interviewees emphasized that the Government of Syria's lack of interest in discussing the humanitarian portfolio could have been used to start the negotiations for a development cooperation framework, with no expectation that the government would sign but rather to ensure that more actors would be able to participate in

conversations with the government and therewith enhance transparency. Others emphasized that the RC has the explicit mandate and responsibility to conduct broad consultations among response actors even if the final agreement is only between the UN and the government.[15] Interviewees also noted that the government started planning their response to internal displacement well before aid actors had done so, and when the aid response leadership began engaging the government on this file, the government already had elements of a policy agenda that it wanted to see enacted.

All interviewees mentioned that governments continued to govern and develop policies responding to the needs of the population as a whole. In Syria this happened through an interministerial mechanism that involved two key actors in the humanitarian sector, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Asma al Assad-founded Syria Trust for Development,[16] as well as other national NGOs. This mechanism was oriented to refugee return and held consultations with neighbouring countries, but was also used for discussing internal displacement. When it comes to engagement with the RRWG, interviewees stated that the government did not see it as meaningful because it was only set up in 2018/2019, while they had already been working on key issues like recognising school diplomas issued by other countries or authorities in other areas of control. That notwithstanding, once the RRWG had been set up there was a push to ensure a harmonised response on returns by seeking to complement the work of the interministerial mechanism, holding consultations with municipalities and national NGOs in different parts of the country – essentially taking an area-based approach. However, due to concerns about how areas were prioritised, the international community maintained the parallel system. Some interviewees note that there would have been entry points through technical discussions with technical government staff, but that the government's perception of the aid community was not conducive to concerted action, e.g, because the Government of Syria saw aid actors in some ways as an extension of ministries that they should be able to direct.

While the outreach and architecture in Iraq is more advanced than in Syria and Yemen, interviewees stated that the interests and expertise of different HCs[17] had significant impact on willingness to connect with the government about durable solutions. The perception that the government would not be open to discussing durable solutions for internally displaced persons only changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which then led to positive active engagement. This was around the same time that the ABCs, which were set up primarily in areas of return, were meant to be activated, and the pandemic forced them to work in ways that compromised efforts to make the meeting setup inclusive of government actors. Moreover, the fact that Iraq did not have a Prime Minister when the DSTF was set up led to a host of practical and procedural problems, e.g., when it came to certain permissions that governors did not have the

[15] UNSDG | MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK OF THE UN DEVELOPMENT AND RESIDENT COORDINATOR SYSTEM, last accessed 31 May 2024.
[16] SYRIA TRUST FOR DEVELOPMENT; SYRIA'S STATE CAPTURE: THE RISING INFLUENCE OF MRS ASSAD (FT.COM), last accessed 31 May 2024.
[17] Noting for instance that the Special Envoy for internal displacement came to Iraq before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and wrote a thorough report that was accepted by the government but that was not taken up by the RC office, and that the DSTF wanted to use the existing Iraqi Joint Coordination and Monitoring Center as a resource, but this was blocked by OCHA, therewith also blocking further engagement with the government and efforts to build a more sustainable response.

authority to decide on. Governorates also had different dependencies on the central government for their budgets and different policy positions, which required a willingness from response actors, notably the RC, to take on complex issues. Interviewees report that this willingness was often not there and that there was an excessive focus on things that had a chance of succeeding at the expense of investment in things that needed doing, also from the office of the UNSA later on. Interviewees also noted that the setup gave off the perception that foreigners were in charge of dealing with IDPs and that local authorities did not have the primary responsibility for managing the complexity of the internal displacement file.

The ABCs that were set up under the DSTF from 2020 to 2022 developed action plans with local authorities, but struggled to deliver on those plans as the aid architecture in Iraq shifted. Where these groups did have government engagement, government largely saw itself as having a position either to listen or to instruct, but not to be part of a unified process between aid agencies and duty bearers. The ABCs faced significant funding challenges, including when it came to resourcing the local partners that played a vital role in implementation, and all but one have been disbanded and replaced by a new coordination mechanism co-led by the governorates. Despite significant investment in including relevant actors in the architecture in Iraq, and a strong position in the leadership of the ABCs, NGOs were not part of the strategic conversations between UN actors and the Iraqi government - and are not generally part of UNSDCF conversations. Thus, their experience was not considered, despite the fact that they had first-hand relevant information on the progress with the ABCs and challenges and successes of collaboration between response actors and local government – which led them to strongly recommend more and different government outreach and inclusion at an early stage. Where NGO representatives did participate, they often felt so outnumbered by representatives of UN agencies that they felt the participation was tokenistic, especially at a strategic level where decisions would be presented to NGOs ‘for endorsement’. Given that NGO coordination in Iraq integrated international NGOs with a significant number of Iraqi and Kurdish NGOs, many of which also existed before the 2014 crises, this was a significant missed opportunity to have the information needed to tailor the response to the specific needs of displaced persons in different areas and move ahead with the Grand Bargain commitments on localisation.

Iraq had been made a focus country by the UNSA by the time the decision was made to dismantle the humanitarian structure and deactivate the clusters in 2022. Interviewees reported several concerns related to this decision but also stated that the opportunity for ensuring continuity through a handover of the OCHA coordination system to the durable solutions architecture was not taken because the relevant UN agencies were not made to hand them over. Given that the OCHA system was inclusive of the government, this was a missed opportunity, and the buy in of the government was gone by the time the UN internal coordination problem was solved more than six months later. This then also reversed progress made with the government of Iraq on engaging them on the topic as duty bearers with a responsibility to work for internally displaced persons.

## 5. Best Practice #3: Strategic Allocation of Resources

One of the purposes of the durable solutions approach is to ensure that response actors link different points in time, e.g., the present humanitarian crisis and future development work, and different stakeholders to make the prerequisites for future integration of displaced persons visible throughout the response and ensure that all actors work towards this.

However, the pervasive thread throughout the interviews with key informants in all three contexts is that response actors did not think through their interventions by considering where they landed and how they were positioning themselves *vis-à-vis* other actors in the country, including the government. Interviewees lamented the lack of institutional memory at different agencies and how hard it was to figure out which actors were brought into which processes at what point in time, noting that response actors did not have intra-organisational strategies for ensuring continuity in the work despite predictable timelines for staff turnover, let alone a collective long-term vision.

As stated, aid interventions do not tend to reach an end point when there are no more needs but rather when funding significantly declines in proportion to needs, and interviewees noted that one of the difficulties with determining prerequisites for creating pathways to durable solutions early on in a response is the fact that you cannot easily put a funding appeal number on durable solutions. Once a response gets underway, the complexities of interventions in different sectors and innate competition over resources between agencies make that few actors have the bandwidth to consider factors that fall outside the boundaries of their area of responsibility, which is inherent to durable solutions as it is not a cluster or a sector.

This research found that resourcing for durable solutions played a very different role in each context. It was the central point of failure in Iraq, is preventing any progress from being made in government-controlled Syria, and has jumpstarted cooperation on durable solutions in Yemen.

In Iraq, interviewees stated that the innovative approach that was developed through the DSTF did not get off the ground because of asymmetric resource allocation favouring the UN. This meant that there was no funding for coordination and the locally led actors that bore the brunt of the work for the ABCs, where even coordination posts hosted by civil society were not resourced, meaning they had to be completed by someone within an existing role. This made the success of the ABCs dependent on the willingness and ability of NGOs to extend their mandates and on the goodwill of local authorities, and the degree to which both were empowered and resourced. Moreover, a lack of resources made it seem like response actors did not fully support the area-based approach, which was exacerbated by failed fundraising efforts due to, i.a., changes in HC/RC. A lack of engagement with the actors working at the local level compromised insight into the interventions that were working and, perhaps more importantly, that needed a change of course. In other words, there was no investment in the practice, with the focus staying on resourcing the idea at macro level. In this, interviewees also mentioned that the UNSA's intervention focused the attention and the resources, narrowing the funding opportunities that response actors could apply for, with some noting that a decrease in HRP funding went hand in hand with Iraqi politicians losing interest in discussing solutions to

internal displacement, instead taking a non-interventionist approach essentially based on the belief that displacement that was no longer visible had solved itself. Interviewees report that, over time, the architecture became more important than its objectives and explained that discussions around the UNSDCF made it clear that the response was not ready to actually implement the HDPN and that the UN and partners were not able to form a coherent block in relation to the Iraqi government.

Interviewees outlined the effects of the decision by some traditional donors to block funding for development work in government-controlled areas in Syria as long as the current President and Government of Syria stay in power. This approach precludes any progress being made across the HDPN that would support durable solutions and, more generally, citizens' access to services and a dignified life, and arguably gives those countries a responsibility to ensure that humanitarian funding is kept commensurate to the needs caused by the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Interviewees report that, in relation to the Syria response, there is a lot of discussion about the material difference between humanitarian and development projects and that donors' reluctance to invest in projects that go beyond lifesaving aid has had the adverse effect of UN agencies' trying to get their development-oriented projects funded under the HRP, leading to an inflated HRP. On the other hand, some direly needed foundational work to increase protection, for example a UNHCR project to restore the ability of registrars to work on civil documentation, has come under fire because it was considered too close to development work.

In Yemen, resources have been a problem across the board and interviewees stated that authorities see durable solutions work as an opportunity to stay on the map in a shrinking funding landscape, but that concerns about the affiliation of certain locally led organisations and potential aid diversion have contributed to underfunding of camps. Interviewees report that the fact that Yemen became a focus country for the UNSA had a positive effect, and that the funding for durable solutions work in the south helped put a focus on this approach. Given that the areas in the north are often not eligible for development funding, areas of displacement are more likely to see investment in the essentials for basic subsistence and offer more space for development, while places of origin are not seeing investment that opens up pathways to return for those that want to do so. Underfunding of the HRP has also resulted in an exercise to reprioritise the response, which will likely lead to a focus on delivering the most life-saving aid.

## 6. Conclusion

Across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, our interviewees have provided information that suggests that despite the highly predictable outcome of protracted displacement, HCTs did not consider strategies on solutions to displacement in their formative years, instead only initiating this discussion either when the external context was seen as favourable (e.g. reduced conflict) or when humanitarian funding had begun to shrink significantly as a proportion of the response appeal. In all three countries, 'conflict'-affected' was a more important prism than 'displacement-affected' and there was an over-reliance on humanitarian architectures and humanitarian donor funding to deliver durable solutions work. The fact that NGOs did not get involved by introducing early thinking on solutions meant that, once strategic discussions on durable solutions occurred, this happened entirely within the UN system. As such the

respective responses were prone to being influenced by interagency disagreements and competition, personality-driven priority-setting, and coordination structures that were not adapted to local actors in terms of ways of working and distribution of resources.

Likewise, for differing reasons, aid leadership chose not to engage national governments on core solutions concepts early in the response, even though governments are the primary duty-bearer to their citizens, including those internally displaced. In fact, across these three significant responses to internal displacement, it took many years after the initiation of the humanitarian architecture for the aid community to seek engagement with the respective governments. This has resulted in not just a lack of coordination between all relevant actors in country but has made it more challenging to introduce a rights-based approach in dialogue with authorities further down the line. Our informants have suggested that humanitarian response leaders often deemed that governments were not a reliable interlocuter for such a discussion, or that such a conversation may obscure more critical needs within the aid response. This meant that at the time conversations began, the motives of the aid response were often unclear to governments, or aid leadership was confronted with government positions it assessed as problematic but had missed the opportunity to influence.

The lack of long-term strategic thinking and investment in relationships with governments was coupled with resource allocation that did not support HDPN programming, the area-based approaches that each context relied on, or any kind of continuity of operations. Rather, the fact that durable solutions by their nature get mainstreamed throughout response plans and do not come with indicator frameworks that form the basis for funding appeals, allowed for a mentality among aid actors where none of them felt responsible, or indeed were formally held responsible, for durable solutions outcomes – i.e., long-term positive outcomes for internally displaced populations.

This paper argues that, as the entity that is likely to determine what happens with the first big influx of funding, the HCT should be tasked with ensuring that a degree of prioritisation happens from the onset of a crisis that sees mass displacement. In this, response actors' collective years of experience should be used to determine the *sine qua non*s of humanitarian responses, i.e., interventions without which pathways to durable solutions are cut off from the start. Setting minimum standards for the HCT to deliver against in its first year would also be in line with a key purpose of following the humanitarian principles, namely to ensure that decisions taken in the heat of an emergency do not set the response up in a way that will cause harm to affected populations later on.

Following this line of thinking, this paper recommends that the aid system invest in early detection of possible opportunities and threats to the response in the long-term and is made to come up with a plan for tackling these specific issues, including by identifying which actors need to be involved and how, and how resources will be allocated. Recognising that this is a tall order, and that an emergency situation in which (parts of) the government are, in the best case, not able, and, in the worst case, not willing to be a partner in the response, the international aid community should be able to translate its experience and knowledge about the sectors and areas of responsibility that are cornerstones for potential integration, like access to civil and personal documentation and HLP rights, to determine the framework for prioritisation.

The fact that there was little thought about durable solutions until the respective crises became protracted means that the durable solutions framework was not the problem in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, but rather how that framework was operationalised and resourced, in particular *vis-à-vis* HCT accountabilities. Given donor governments want their humanitarian funds to be used efficiently, meeting immediate life-saving needs of affected populations and supporting positive sustainable change that enables humanitarian needs to reduce, and funding to be phased out, they should be invested in the durable solutions approach as the frame through which humanitarian interventions are paired with consecutive work on recovery and resilience that lays a foundation for sustainable development projects.

This paper argues that the international aid community has too much experience to be allowing this situation to occur and should be clearly embedding durable solutions planning at the earliest stage of the activation of a HCT response, both in order to avoid displacement becoming protracted and to ensure pathways out of protracted displacement. UN agencies and civil society actors with knowledge of response sectors particularly relevant to the achievement of solutions should be empowered to begin setting out a framework for the response and advise the HCT and the HC/RC on how to engage authorities, both national and local, on priorities. This should be undertaken as part of a conflict sensitive approach, acknowledging that governments are regularly parties to conflict and can themselves cause harm to IDPs. Asserting the complex role often played by governments, including those that can be labelled as perpetrators of internal displacement, is a key element in responses to internal displacement. This needs to be acknowledged in aid actors' strategies from the early stages in order to ensure better long-term outcomes for affected populations.

It is critical that new HCTs are judged against an agreed framework for the consideration of durable solutions during their first twelve months, with expectations of a strategy being developed and approaches for how to engage authorities being articulated. It can only be through setting this expectation, and reporting against it, that the aid community can really see if the overall frameworks for responses to durable solutions are effective, or if a reframing is really needed.

## Recommendations

1. Humanitarian Country Teams should be held responsible for producing a deliverable that includes a risk analysis and mapping of the *sine qua nons* for durable solutions that are under threat in the first twelve months after their inception. This document should couple the threats with a plan for engagement with government at all levels as well as *de facto* authorities designed to minimise and respond to them. The document could be utilised, as the response develops, to guide thinking on how and when the aid architecture should shift.

2. The UN system should develop a preferred model of responsibility for durable solutions to internal displacement to avoid variation in responses based solely on the UN agency or HC/RC in charge.

3. The UN should draft a policy for principled engagement, guiding all agencies, with politically estranged countries and *de facto* authorities so that collaboration with those authorities and governments is not blocked (or severely limited) from the outset and therewith a prohibitive factor to the achievement of durable solutions.

4. Donors, especially those in 'traditional' donor countries that are often also influential member states of the UN, should explicitly give response actors space to engage with authorities when diplomatic ties have been cut.

5. The international aid community should invest in training on durable solutions to avoid situations where a lack of technical knowledge becomes the primary reason there is no strategic thinking about durable solutions from the start of a humanitarian aid response. The aid community should take maximum advantage of the space for technical engagement with government actors in contexts where the aid response is heavily politicised, building technical working relationships to improve pathways to durable solutions.

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