Chapter 7

Forced migration and the humanitarian challenge: tackling the agenda

The complex nature of contemporary disasters and conflicts creates the potential to uproot very large numbers of people. Forced migration is now a global phenomenon, presenting vast challenges to governments, donors, international institutions and humanitarian actors.

This chapter reviews the governance of humanitarian response, efforts to enhance community-based responses and solve protracted displacement, and climate change and displacement.

Forced migration and displacement pose unique challenges for managing humanitarian operations. The humanitarian system's inability to address the needs of displaced people in emergencies adequately prompted the coordination reforms begun in 2005. Despite undeniable progress, international response still fails to keep pace with the changing character of forced migration.

Part of the problem is that no UN agency is mandated to coordinate assistance for forced *migrants* as opposed to refugees. The crises of the 1990s drew attention to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), revealing deficits in the humanitarian system and dissatisfaction at the disparity between assistance provided to refugees by UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) and, ad hoc, to IDPs.

The cluster system attempted to ensure comprehensive coverage of the needs of *all* individuals affected by emergencies. It recognized key specialist sectors of humanitarian assistance, but the IDP mandate gap was not addressed satisfactorily.

Seven years on, how has the system fared? Evaluations find that, despite initial difficulties, gaps in coverage have been reduced and effectiveness increased, but it is still too process-oriented and not focused on concrete outcomes – evident after the Haiti earthquake when insufficient attention was given to coherent area-based responses, as opposed to sectors.

The protection cluster, especially relevant to forced migrants, is consistently singled out as one of the least effective and least well-resourced.

The numbers of forced migrants continues to grow with changing global conditions such as climate change. The three major emergencies of the past three years – the Haiti earthquake, the 2010 Pakistan floods, and the Horn of Africa – were all displacement crises to varying degrees. Each one strained the humanitarian system's capacity. Criticism of the response was most acute in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake.

The poor showing in these emergencies prompted the UN and other agencies to reinvigorate the reform process with a 'transformative agenda'. Yet it makes little reference to the evolving role of governments in the system.

In Kenya and Ethiopia clusters are predominantly led by national governments, and in the Philippines they have been incorporated into legislation. Some national authorities, however, have become frustrated with international actors' failure to acknowledge their sovereignty and capacities, resulting in reluctance of some governments, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, to request regular international aid.

Agencies also recognize the challenge of responding to emergencies in urban settings. This has led to efforts to enhance coordination of assistance in urban areas and apply humanitarian tools to assist urban populations, including refugees and IDPs. Progress in responding to urban vulnerability, where the Kenya Red Cross Society is active, for example, indicates ways in which the urban agenda is being addressed.

These trends in international humanitarian action seem to point to three priority areas in assisting forced migrants and displaced people. The first is to ensure that the transformative agenda incorporates close consultation and partnership with regional, national and local authorities and NGOs.

Secondly, partnerships, community engagement and consultation with affected populations must be strengthened to align humanitarian responses with existing resilience mechanisms.

Thirdly, international agencies must make the internal changes needed for effective governance of humanitarian assistance. Effective rapid response will require that agencies commit the internal resources to fulfil their governance roles. Poor performance in the protection and shelter clusters – both vital for displaced populations – should be seen as admonitory; agencies must be held accountable, for example, for dedicating skilled personnel to cluster coordination.

Communities are often the first to respond in crisis situations, particularly – but not exclusively – in remote locations that are difficult to access, and the IFRC has identified six 'building blocks' for enhancing community resilience:

- Knowledge, skills and experience
- Organization and prioritization
- External connections: with diasporas, for example
- Management of natural assets
- Infrastructure and service systems
- Economic opportunities and adaptability.

Although social bonds change during displacement, the importance of networks and collective solidarity does not diminish. Indeed, pre-existing networks and support structures may actually be strengthened during and after displacement.

After Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, local communities worked together to rebuild houses in 18 villages, buying materials and building collectively so efficiently that the houses cost one-seventh of the amount paid by external agencies.

Displaced households often survive by placing family members inside and outside camps, in villages and cities. Families may decide that young children and the elderly should remain inside refugee or IDP camps while youth and adults move elsewhere.

Displaced communities may also develop protection strategies against violence. The IFRC Safe Spaces methodology, developed after the 2010 Haiti earthquake, illustrates how agencies are working with community-led protection to enhance resilience.

The IFRC has highlighted that, as in many displacement contexts, humanitarian actors often direct their questions towards 'representatives' of a household, a community or its social groups. The risk here is that the voices of those vulnerable to violence are left unheard.

Today, more than 20 million refugees and IDPs are trapped in protracted exile and the three traditional approaches – repatriation, local integration in a country of first asylum, or resettlement to a third state – are clearly inadequate.

Repatriation is not simple. The absolute lines drawn between conflict and non-conflict settings can be arbitrary. Both post-conflict and post-disaster states are often weak, with little capacity for providing citizens with rights and services.

Similarly, host states are reluctant to offer local integration or expand resettlement, in part because allowing poor foreigners the rights that attach to citizenship is often politically toxic.

In the long term, solving displacement is likely to involve *migration* – a normal human response to development needs. It can also help to make peace processes more sustainable by generating remittances and increasing human capital.

More incremental approaches to integration may help overcome states' resistance to naturalization. In all protracted displacement crises, local integration becomes a reality over time, even where such contact is officially proscribed, but a lack of official status means these gains are precarious.

Responding to this reality requires more institutional flexibility, particularly from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR. Rather than separating migrants from refugees, they should facilitate hybrid refugee migration. International organizations should protect these links, ensuring that asylum offers protection and not segregation.

No one should be forced to move, but the realities of poverty and conflict mean that securing a future often depends upon being *free* to move. New approaches must place displaced people themselves at the centre of the process.

In the warmer, wetter world of climate change, millions of people living near sea level, in drought-affected regions, and where extreme-weather events become the norm, are increasingly vulnerable and at risk of displacement. Climate change also precipitates 'slow-onset' disasters, which present unfamiliar challenges.

It is conceptually difficult to establish a precise category of environmental or climate migrant; the extent to which migration is 'forced' is open to debate; and prudence is needed on estimating the likely numbers who will be displaced. Predictions of

hundreds of millions forced to migrate are wide of the mark, and the term 'climate refugees' is misleading. But the numbers and consequences will be very significant.

For those crossing international borders due to adverse environmental conditions, there are significant international legal gaps, but extending the 1951 Refugee Convention is not the answer. That would dilute the claims of those fleeing persecution, while calls for a new convention on environmental displacement are unrealistic. Most people susceptible to climate-induced displacement will remain in their own countries.

Irrespective of whether displacement is internal or across borders, it is the impacts of *slow*-onset climate change – especially for those who can never return – where rights protection remains a challenge.

Humanitarian actors should give much stronger support for the innovative 'Nansen process' to develop policies and capacities to manage climate change-induced displacement. Humanitarian organizations can encourage national governments to:

- Adopt protection policies and norms, as well as international agreements
- Produce detailed operational and practical guidance on rights protection
- Support civil society in rights-based advocacy and empowerment.

Secondly, international coordination must be strengthened. UNHCR and IOM have taken the lead in developing policy and operational responses, but this has been problematic.

Thirdly, climate change and migration adversely affect the world's poorest countries, compounding their struggle for development. Yet high-income countries are the principal emitters of carbon and have the duty to support national governments and civil society in developing strategies for adaptation, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resettlement.

Fourthly, while no one denies the need to reinforce and enhance the response capacity of climate-stressed countries, how can international humanitarian organizations support this? What should be their priorities?

Humanitarian actors must support governments working in partnership with affected communities and local and international NGOs. The response to Typhoon Ketsana in the Philippines in 2009 demonstrated that effective DRR and relief and recovery, including a major role by the Philippine Red Cross, mitigated the worst effects.

Next, we must recognize that migration is not a development failure. It is a viable, often proactive, adaptation strategy, but it must be planned and locally owned.

Finally, new thinking is needed to respond to slow-onset disasters and new policies and tools must be designed. This is where most needs to be done, but where the scope to innovate and confront existing norms and practices is greatest.

BOX
Satellite analysis and forced displacement

Over the last ten years, disaster managers and early responders have increasingly used satellite maps and analyses, available within hours after the satellite has passed over a disaster area.

The level of detail in commercial satellite-images has increased by a factor of 400 during the last 15 years. Small shelters, vehicles, pathways and groups of people can be easily mapped. Detailed damage-assessments are carried out, giving disaster managers more accurate and timely information than ever before.

The main advantages of satellite imagery are:

- It is available for areas where there is limited access.
- It provides objective information on what is going on at a specific time.
- It is very fast.
- It reaches multiple levels from field to HQ, improving vertical coordination.
- It reaches sectors simultaneously, improving horizontal coordination.
- It can be highly detailed, useful for raising awareness and donor support.

Recently, the UN Institute for Training and Research's Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT) provided analyses of the IDP situation in Mogadishu, Somalia, allowing humanitarian assistance to be delivered to affected communities who are moving around.

The Arab spring has seen many examples of forced displacement for which UNITAR–UNOSAT has provided extensive analyses.

Agencies should now ensure proper routines exist internally for distribution of information, as UNICEF does with UNOSAT maps and assessment reports. In some cases, the extent of an event such as a large flood does not allow for the collection of detailed imagery covering all the area of interest simultaneously. But medium-resolution satellites can cover the full area in less detail. Clouds hamper the view from space, even if detailed radar images are proving increasingly useful.

In future more actors on the ground will carry smart phones that can be used to upload geo-tagged photos either by professional responders or from crowd-sourcing. Drones collecting super-high resolution imagery and live video feeds from the international space station will become available.

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