# EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT RELIES ON GOOD INFORMATION FROM THE FIELD

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The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has since December 1999 offered the humanitarian community comprehensive and updated information on internal displacement around the world through its Global IDP Database. This information initiative is one component of the Global IDP Project (www.idpproject.org), which also provides training and its own publications on internal displacement. The dramatic growth in the availability of humanitarian information during this two-year period has not just enabled the Database to realize its advocacy role, but also to provide a valuable working tool for humanitarian actors to access IDP information in a cost-effective manner. Future development of the Database is now very much dependent on diminishing the gaps that exist in the reporting on internal displacement and improving the variable quality of existing information.

A realistic approach to global information management
The Global IDP Database materialised as a result of a dialogue between the UN humanitarian actors and NRC. This process was a response to a situation where reporting on situations of internal displacement was limited – reflecting the unresolved issue of UN mandate towards internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the *ad hoc* nature of the response taken by the international community. There was a shared understanding that existing information was fragmented and that a common terminology for IDP reporting was lacking. The origin and validity of the limited information available were often uncertain and major information gaps both in terms of geographical and thematic coverage existed. The underlying motive for NRC's engagement in this process has been a conviction that updated and reliable information can make a major contribution towards the protection and assistance offered the internally displaced.
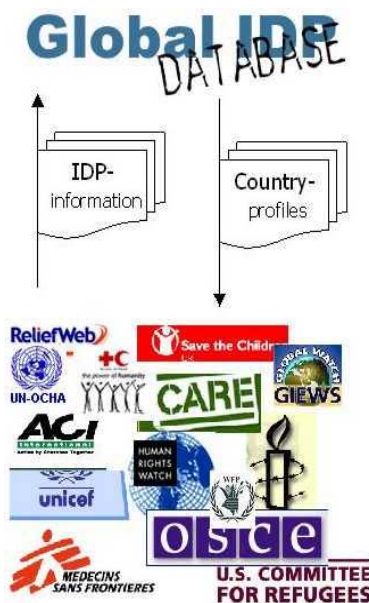
NRC in consultation with its UN and NGO partners agreed from the onset that it would be unrealistic to expect the Database to serve as a detailed tracking system for population movements or provide operational actors in the field with up-to-date information – functions that rather belongs to field-based information management systems. Although it has remained a specific goal to encourage actors in the field to fill information gaps, the main task of the Database has been to collect and analyze existing IDP related information, and make it more easily accessible for the humanitarian community through regularly updated country profiles.

One of the clear added values, noted by users, is that the Database acts like an IDP search engine; not just an information archive. As an information management service it screens, sorts and displays information in an user-friendly manner. By making information easier to

find, it draws an increased number of users and heightens awareness of the IDP issue. At the moment the Database regularly updates 47 country profiles and includes about 4000 different documents from about 700 different sources around the world. Nearly all the documents are directly available through Internet either from the original source or from the Database itself. A large number of the sources are small local NGOs, very often without the possibility to run their own web-sites, and the Database therefore functions as an important dissemination tool and encourages a culture of information sharing and transparency.

Making available information less overwhelming
The availability of humanitarian information on the Internet has grown dramatically during recent years, and has increased the workload of humanitarian actors that need reliable information for their work. The volume of information posted on ReliefWeb illustrates this clearly. For example, while there were 29 documents available on the humanitarian situation in Sierra Leone in March 1999 – the month succeeding a major rebel attack on the capital Freetown and a dramatic worsening of the IDP situation – 210 documents were posted during June 2000, the month following a similar escalation of the conflict. In fact, it takes today about a full working week just to locate relevant IDP information for one country on the Internet. This is an indicator of the time that users of the Database may save when accessing this information directly through its country profiles.

Adding analytical value to humanitarian information
The Global IDP Database complements available sources of humanitarian information both in the field and at the global level. As local sources of information are preoccupied with reporting on the most current and urgent aspects of emergencies, the country profiles in the Database give users in the field an opportunity to acquire a more holistic and historical understanding of the situation of internal displacement. The various field based humanitarian information mechanisms that are now emerging, e.g. Information Centres (ICs)[1], may offer a similar perspective. However, the explicit IDP focus by the Database appears to encourage complementarity rather than duplication. The Database will also remain an important channel for the ICs' information to reach a global audience. At the global level, the Database similarly represents added value vis-à-vis other information providers like ReliefWeb or IRIN. While users get the most updated information from the latter, the country profiles in the Database provide an additional analytical dimension and direct access to literally all publicly available IDP related information.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement were introduced by the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons in 1998 as a legal framework that defines their rights and the obligations of governments, non-state actors and the international community towards this group. The Guiding Principles address the different phases of displacement, i.e. the right of civilians to be protected from armed conflicts, the rights of people after being displaced and the rights and duties of relevant actors

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[1] See "Humanitarian Information Centres: Establishing Coherent Approaches to Field-Based Information Management in Emergencies" by Paul Currion, consultant to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), March 2001, available from the Symposium web site: http://www.reliefweb.int/symposium/resources.htm

during the return phase. The topics of country profiles in the Database similarly reflects the different phases and needs of the displaced. One may thus say that the Guiding Principles function as a monitoring framework for the Database, while at the same the Database also monitors the implementation of the Guiding Principles in the specific situations of internal displacement. As a testament to the breadth of the Guiding Principles, the profiles within the Database highlight protection concerns that frequently are overlooked, such as the impact of displacement on community structures, women or the ability of the displaced to select local representatives or participate in elections. By developing profiles that apply a uniform set of variables for all countries based on the Guiding Principles, the Database facilitates cross-country comparison and assists in the development of common standards for data collection, definition of indicators and methodologies.

Reporting on situations of internal displacement remains inadequate
Globally, the quality of information on internal displacement varies significantly. In some countries with regular access to the displaced and not a too unstable situation (e.g. Uganda and Kosovo), the investments by humanitarian actors in information management have resulted in regular access to accurate and relevant information. In other countries, reliable information is only available from limited areas of the conflicts – often provided by civil society groups dedicated to reporting on the IDP situation (e.g. Burma and Colombia). In other countries, with complex, large and inaccessible displacement situations (e.g. Sudan), the availability of displacement information is more arbitrary and often limited to occasional reports from field assessment missions or the annual humanitarian needs assessments prior to the consolidated UN appeals.

Lack of accurate information, even in countries with a large presence of humanitarian actors, might be seen as a sign that humanitarian workers do not consider reporting a priority task. However, the Database is of the impression that fieldworkers in fact do regularly report on the situation facing their target groups. The problem is that this information is not further processed or shared between the various actors. There may be obvious reasons for this, e.g. organisations are simply overloaded with their operational activities, and overlook the relationship between availability of accurate information and effective operational planning. While efforts should be made to make field offices of humanitarian organisations recognize the benefits of more open information sharing, equal attention should be given towards improving the content and quality of humanitarian information.

Until recently humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies in the field shied away from reporting on issues related to the physical protection needs of conflict affected groups like internally displaced persons. The work was considered too politically sensitive, the risks to country assistance programs too high and concerns about staff security too great. Reporting on less sensitive aspects of IDP situations, e.g. need for food and shelter, have often also been covered in an *ad hoc* manner. Displacement figures constitute the most controversial area of humanitarian reporting, as it often ends up being a very politicized variable. A government may have an interest in inflating numbers to attract donor support, or the opposite – if its own armed forces are causing displacement. Estimating IDP numbers is often constrained by lack of access to the affected groups and involves complex methodological problems. Fortunately, as the issue of internal displacement has recently arrived at the forefront of the humanitarian agenda, the reporting on humanitarian situations is gradually including more human rights information and a wider selection of issues related to internal displacement.

Quality information should be a priority

The emergence of Information Centres (ICs) is a positive development, and it is reasonable to expect that it will improve UN coordination and, hopefully, contribute towards a more sound division of labour between the UN agencies, Government institutions and NGOs. The "collaborative approach" taken by the UN towards internal displacement may in particular benefit from more effective information management in the field. The success of an IC will obviously depend on the extent to which humanitarian organisations genuinely decide to make information management a priority.

A starting point should be for UN agencies and NGOs to take better advantage of their field personnel's closeness to the displaced by developing a culture where reporting is appreciated and information openly shared. Mechanisms like ICs must be in place to consolidate the numerous "pieces of information" this may generate into intelligible information within its proper context. This underscores the importance of establishing standards for information collection and the indicators to be used. For example, in a particular emergency there should be a common understanding about who should be counted as an internally displaced person. The recently launched SHARE approach is an encouraging step in this direction.[2]

Information workers in the field need to be equipped with the knowledge needed to enter new areas of humanitarian reporting. For example, improved reporting on human rights in conflict situations will require background knowledge both about basic human rights principles and international humanitarian law. As the Global IDP Database has experienced, processing information on internal displacements requires both a wide understanding of the issue and in depth knowledge about its various aspects. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement has proven to be an effective analytical tool in this process.

Centralized information management must not undermine information pluralism

It is generally accepted that humanitarian activities should have a high level of accountability vis-à-vis the beneficiaries, i.e. that they to the extent possible should reflect the priority needs of the displaced. To achieve this it is important to establish mechanisms for the displaced to express their needs, and to maintain information channels that monitor the response towards these needs. This underscores the importance of encouraging a manifold of information providers, for example by strengthening the capacity of local organisations, even the press, to report on the humanitarian situation. The accountability issue should also be given due attention when considering the methodological aspects of information collection, for example, how beneficiaries are consulted when humanitarian agencies undertake field assessment missions.

In many countries, especially pre- and post-conflict situations, the UN is working hand-in-hand with the Government's own emergency structure. In terms of information management, there are certainly advantages of an institutional set up that facilitates

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[2] See "Structured Humanitarian Assistance Reporting (SHARE)" by Dennis King (UN OCHA) and Maxx Dilley (University of Wisconsin Disaster Management Center), 24 May 2001, aavailable from the Symposium web site: http://www.reliefweb.int/symposium/resources.htm

effective information flows between the Government and the UN system – as well as the NGOs. Access to reliable and updated information is crucial for a national authority to carry out its main responsibility for protection and assistance to people internally displaced within its national borders. However, the political dimension of humanitarian information should not be ignored. A centralized information mechanism implemented in partnership between the UN system and a Government may both be constrained by political considerations as well as be used as a political tool. A counterweight to these risks may be to ensure that such information mechanisms are transparent about their objectives and purpose and that they take an inclusive approach regarding involvement humanitarian actors both as sources and in the information processing. Again, a multitude of information channels should not necessarily be seen as a sign of disorder but an asset for the national and international response to emergencies.

Don't overlook the "forgotten conflicts"
The discussion on how to improve humanitarian information exchange is often focused on larger complex emergencies where a major challenge is how to share and process existing information. Internal displacement is a major aspect of these emergencies and improved reporting on this particularly vulnerable group deserve due attention. However, people are internally displaced in nearly 50 countries, and most of these situations seldom reach the headlines. In fact, only about one-third of these are considered "complex emergencies" by the UN. The major constraint on humanitarian reporting from these situations is lack of access to the displaced, e.g. Kenya and Turkey. In some cases it is even considered a crime to report on the human rights situation of the internally displaced.

Protection of internally displaced persons is basically about promoting respect of the rights of a group of civilians, mostly women and children who have lost their homes, been separated from their families and placed in a very vulnerable situation. The objective is actually quite simple - they need help both in terms of immediate assistance but also in making the government or other actors respect their right for physical protection. Members of the humanitarian information management community have a valuable part to play in the process as advocates in raising awareness of the conditions of the internally displaced.

The Global IDP Database can be accessed at: www.idpproject.org