

# **Internal Displacement, Internal Migration and Refugee Flows: Connecting the dots**

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'Internal displacement' is usually treated by as a distinctive form of movement due to its 'internal' and 'forced' character. But how does internal displacement compare to other related forms of movement? This research summary draws on existing evidence to explore, in countries affected by armed conflict or other serious violence, how internal displacement relates empirically to (i) internal economic migration as a more voluntary form of 'internal' movement; and (ii) refugee flows as an external form of 'forced' movement.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Internal Movement: Forced Displacement and Economic Migration

Even during conflict, forced displacement is usually the exception: the vast majority of the people in an affected country will not flee their homes. Moreover, in those countries, other forms of movement, such as internal labour migration, continues alongside conflict-driven displacement. Indeed, both conflict displacement and migration flows tend to follow similar pathways, including rural-urban migration chains, where they may overlap, as economic factors as well as violence still shape movement from conflict-affected areas. As such, internal displacement may feed into wider processes of social change that are driven by internal migration, such as increasing urbanisation and resulting shifts in societal dynamics, with important humanitarian and development consequences.

Like internal economic migration, internal displacement assumes myriad forms. These are shaped not only by the pursuit of livelihood strategies but also by the use of mobility as a self-protection mechanism in the face of the particular targeting and control strategies utilised by the armed actors present locally and the dynamics of that conflict. This can make patterns of internal displacement quite context-dependent, with the specific assistance, protection and solutions challenges for affected persons (and hosts) varying between contexts. Yet in conflict zones, the people who do not displace, and IDPs who return, often remain exposed to acute safety or livelihood risks, especially where the armed actors enforce 'immobility' as a strategy of war or control.

Economic migration and violence-driven displacement share certain key determinants, e.g. in both cases, persons with family or social networks elsewhere tend to be those more likely to relocate. However, violence not only introduces specific safety-related risks as a key driver for displacement but it can also invert key determinants of economic migration. The profile of people on the move seems to change as a result. Thus, whereas 'economic' migration mainly involves young working-age adults, whole households or even communities may be displaced during conflict. In some countries, conflict-IDPs also have lower-than-average education levels (compared with higher-than-average levels among economic migrants before the conflict) and young adults seem under-represented in IDP populations. In general, children also tend to be over-represented in IDP populations.

The fact of being forced to displace by conflict also often places IDPs in a particularly disadvantaged situation. Their reduced access to social and capital assets left behind due to conflict, such as housing and land, sets them apart from many other internal migrants. IDPs also seem to experience significantly worse poverty and labour market outcomes than most other internal migrants, an effect which appears long-lasting (and gendered). IDPs also appear more likely than other members of society (including refugees) to suffer conflict-related trauma. Indeed, where the situation of IDPs is not quickly stabilised, they seem to enter a vicious circle of impoverishment and marginality, and IDPs can end up over-represented among the poor and extreme poor of their countries. Thus, at the level of both individuals and societies, internal displacement can result in its own distinctive impact.

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1 For fuller analysis and reference to sources, see the research paper by the same name.

## 2. Forced Movement: Internal Displacement and External Refugee Flows

In contexts of conflict and other serious violence, internal displacement is often contrasted with external displacement in the form of refugee flows. Legal and policy frameworks recognise that IDPs and refugees are distinguished by the legal implications of border-crossing for the responsibilities of States and other international actors. However, in empirical terms, IDPs are often seen merely as refugees who have not (yet) crossed a border. The existing evidence indicates that (i) across different countries, structural factors shape the relative scale of internal as opposed to external displacement, and (ii) in any particular country, what drives internal displacement is not necessarily identical to what drives refugee flows, implying that IDPs and refugees may have distinct social profiles.

### 2.2 Structural factors – between countries

Combining UNHCR refugee data with the IDP dataset collated by IDMC since 2009 shows that, at the end of 2019, the global stock population of conflict/violence-IDPs is almost twice that of refugees, a proportion that has been roughly consistent during each year of the past decade. The annual total of refugees during the 2010s is not appreciably different from the 1990s. Rather the global stock of IDPs has risen significantly each year over the past decade. It seems that crises in particular regions – notably Africa, the Middle East and Latin America – are driving the high number of IDPs globally in recent years. Overall, if the figures are broadly accurate, they suggest that, at the global level, many more people displaced by conflict or violence stay within their countries than leave as refugees.

Yet this 'global' picture also masks stark differences between countries. For instance, in certain countries with authoritarian States that exercise a high level of control over their territories, the UNHCR and IDMC data show that political violence has produced substantial numbers of refugees but no IDPs. Even so, anecdotal evidence in asylum claims of people going into hiding before fleeing such countries suggests that some internal displacement does occur but has a particularly atomised, hidden and transitory character. Of course, the authoritarian context of these countries precludes most humanitarian or development interventions for persons internally displaced in this way.

By contrast, in other countries, armed conflicts produce both refugee and IDP populations. As of the end of 2019, UNHCR and IDMC data show that the stock populations of refugees and IDPs from each country vary considerably, from relatively small-scale scenarios to the over 13 million Syrian IDPs and refugees currently displaced by that conflict. However, if we calculate the ratio of refugees-to-IDPs for each country of origin, this fluctuates between almost 50 IDPs to every 1 refugee (Yemen) to over 2 refugees to every 1 IDP (Myanmar), suggesting a substantial level of variation, even between countries all experiencing major armed conflicts. Yet such 'stock' figures give only a snapshot of the overall refugee or IDP population from a country at a particular point in time.

A more accurate picture of the scale of such movements through time for any particular country is provided by annual IDP and refugee 'flow' data from IDMC and UNHCR. From 2009 (when the IDMC dataset starts), for nine selected countries in conflict, these flow data point to intriguing features of the relative extent of the annual internal displacement and refugee flows over the past decade. Such preliminary findings suggest the need for caution about statements to the effect that 'in most situations, the number of IDPs and the number of refugees increase or decline in tandem' and that refugees and IDPs 'are fleeing the same risks by going to different destinations'.

Firstly, once a pattern of refugee flows has become established from a country experiencing con-

flict, the absolute scale of the flow remains relatively constant year-on-year (at least compared to the significant variations in absolute levels of internal displacement) or even tends to diminish as the conflict becomes protracted. As conflicts drag on, an increasingly higher proportion of the annual refugee flow also tends to go to non-neighbouring countries. This largely reflects a downward trend in the numbers of refugees arriving in neighbouring countries, even as the numbers of refugees going further afield are maintained or rise year-on-year (including secondary movements).

Secondly, the annual number of incidents of conflict-driven internal displacement seems to fluctuate to a much greater extent. Preliminary analysis suggests that the years in which internal displacement flows in that country increase significantly are those where the conflict worsens, suggesting that the timing of IDP flows may correspond more closely than refugee flows to the conflict dynamics. Moreover, in most years, the scale of internal displacement is far greater than the refugee flows. Where the scale of refugee flows is temporarily greater than internal displacement flows, this lasts for no more than a year or two and tends to reflect either a dip in the conflict and related internal displacement or the occurrence of an extreme event that particularly pushes external displacement.

Thirdly, the data strongly suggests that the scale of refugee flows in any one year does not generally track the scale of internal displacement. Several possible explanations exist (that are not mutually exclusive). They may include a time-lag for external displacement or the impact on it of factors external to the conflict, such as border closures or the imposition of visa regimes by destination countries. However, it may also be that what drives internal displacement is not necessarily identical to what drives refugee flows, raising the intriguing prospect that IDPs and refugees may have distinct social profiles (see below). Indeed, within any single conflict context, distinct dynamics of violence exist and each may be more likely to push either internal or external displacement.

### 2.3 Profiles – within countries

Structural factors shape the ratio of internal to external displacement in each country. But, in those that produce both IDPs and refugees, who becomes an IDP and who becomes a refugee? It is often assumed that refugees and IDPs are simply two points along a single line of 'forced displacement', separated only by the fact of border-crossing. Yet empirical studies suggest that, in some countries at least, differences tend to exist in the profiles of those who end up displaced internally and those who flee as refugees to adjacent and non-adjacent countries.

In conflict contexts, IDPs seem to be drawn principally from zones where violence is concentrated, which often have relatively poor or marginalised populations. For conflicts embedded in rural zones, the profile of IDPs often mirrors those of rural inhabitants, tending to relative rural poverty, low education levels and agricultural backgrounds. However, who exactly flees as IDPs from these areas reflects the particular targeting strategies of the armed actors. IDPs are also particularly likely (more so than refugees) to have had direct experience of violence prior to leaving. Moreover, IDPs tend to displace relatively short distances, often staying in the same region of a country. Post-displacement, the vast majority of IDPs live in individual accommodation rather than camps (except Africa), with IDPs in camps more likely to be poor, have lower access to services, and be more aid-dependent.

In some conflict-affected countries, this IDP profile seems to contrast with that of persons who flee to relatively wealthy non-neighbouring countries. For instance, people arriving in Europe as refugees from countries affected by major conflict tended to be relatively highly-educated and in employment before leaving home. Likewise, Syrians who fled to non-adjacent countries as refugees or migrants tended to be highly-educated, wealthier people from relatively more stable

parts of the country not directly affected by violent conflict.

Yet, globally, the vast majority of refugees still go to a country adjacent to their own. Data on the profile of these refugees suggests they reflect a mix of the other two profiles. They also seem more likely to be from nearby 'hot' zones in the country of origin that have land access to the border and they may be more likely to be drawn from societal groups that are the subject of violent targeting by the State in their country of origin and/or which have strong social bonds across the border.

Thus, although the evidence on this point should not be overstated, existing data seems to suggest that, in countries affected by conflict or similar violence, differences tend to exist in the profiles of those who become IDPs and those who flee to adjacent and non-adjacent countries. If correct, then this suggests that IDPs and refugees are not just two points along a single trajectory of displacement. Rather, it implies that conflict affects differently-situated people in each society in different ways and that this is reflected in the resulting patterns of movement. Certainly, once IDPs settle there is a lack of robust evidence of significant shifts from IDP to refugee situations as a general rule.

Conversely, not all refugees who repatriate during conflict do not return to their original homes or, having done so, are forced to displace again internally and thus become 'IDPs'. In principle, though, IDPs and repatriating refugees from a similar area and background seem likely to behave alike and to face similar challenges to integrating at the site of their original homes or elsewhere. Yet the experience of refugees outside the country can distinguish their prospects. Thus, refugee households that were unable to work during exile seem more inclined to return to areas of origin and to have significantly fewer resources, exacerbating hardship in receiving communities. But where refugees return from countries where they have been able to build skills, experience and networks, they seem better placed to access and even create employment, and in better remunerated sectors, than IDPs.

Finally, the overlapping strands of movement in countries affected by conflict or violence mean that some zones will contain a mix of IDPs, asylum-seekers, refugees, returning refugees, returning overseas migrants, internal economic migrants and others affected by violence. In such zones, tensions often exist over the perception that refugees and/or IDPs have better access to aid. This suggests that an area-based rather than a category-based approach may be more appropriate in some circumstances, so long as it takes differences in the profiles of such persons into account.

### 3. Conclusions

Existing data on internal displacement may not be perfect. However, as shown here, it is sufficient to illustrate certain broad trends in its relationship to other forms of movement. A clearer picture of conflict-driven internal displacement emerges from connecting the dots to other mobility dynamics.

It illustrates how internal displacement cannot always be neatly separated off from other forms of movement but rather overlaps at certain key points. Specifically in contexts of conflict and violence, internal displacement intersects with other strands of internal migration to accelerate or shape processes of wider societal change driven by mobility, such as urbanisation. In tandem, internal displacement and refugee flows are driven by similar root causes, even if their respective scale and patterns reflect a range of proximate factors in each country. Both research and policy need to work harder to understand the implications of these points of synergy in practice. For instance, loss of housing, land and property left behind by displacement is a common concern that impacts on the situation of both IDPs and refugees (or, at least, those from zones of conflict).

Equally, though, certain aspects of internal displacement tend to distinguish it from both internal

migration and refugee flows. Thus, IDPs are not merely a sub-species of internal labour migrants nor are they just proto-refugees. Internal displacement due to conflict is a substantive societal process in its own right with humanitarian, development and wider societal implications and should not be viewed as a root cause of refugee flows (it is not). Indeed, where IDP policy has uncritically borrowed from the refugee field, by drawing on concepts such as 'solutions', significant conceptual challenges arise. The same is true for the distinct access and security implications of working with conflict-IDPs as compared to refugees fleeing conflicts. In this regard, the analysis suggests the need for more careful attention to the potentially distinct social profiles of those who end up, respectively, as IDPs and refugees.