

The Politics of IDP Data: Improving the Use of IDP Data and Evidence

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For full analysis and reference to sources, see IDRP research paper by the same author.

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This document synthesises current analysis and recommendations on improving the collection and use of data relating to internal displacement and reflects on challenges deriving from the politics of data on internally displaced persons (IDPs).

1. Current Analysis on Improving the Use of IDP Data and Evidence

Collecting timely, comprehensive, and robust data on internal displacement needs to be a priority for governments and international institutions.

- Governments, development, humanitarian, and peace building actors need reliable, timely data to respond to the needs of IDPs, inform policy and development programs, allocate resources effectively, and work towards finding durable solutions to displacement.
- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations (UN) Compacts for Refugees and Migrants, and the UN Secretary General's goal of cutting protracted displacement in half by the year 2030 all call for better data. This includes more exact estimations of IDP figures and locations, as well as more nuanced and contextual information to better understand the dynamics of displacement, its drivers, effects on host communities and national economies, and relation to other forms of migration, including refugee flows.
- Credible data on internal displacement situations (size and vulnerabilities of IDPs) are essential for advocacy. Data collection is often the first step or "entry point" for governments to acknowledge the problem and their responsibilities to address displacement and allocate adequate resources for action.

Despite significant improvements made during the past two decades, a number of operational, conceptual, and political challenges to data collection remain. To date, very few governments routinely collect and report timely data on IDPs. The various actors that collect and aggregate data use inconsistent methods and definitions. Information relating to the achievement of durable solutions is scarce. Large numbers of IDPs are left uncounted because they are beyond the reach of humanitarian actors. Many living in protracted situations have simply been forgotten.

The occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Guiding Principles, has seen a reassessment of the collection, diffusion, and use of IDP data with contributions from academia, humanitarian and monitoring organizations, and other stakeholders. Most significantly, the Expert Group on Refugees and IDP Statistics (EGRIS) has been addressing a number of significant technical challenges and produced a Technical Report on Statistics of Internally Displaced Persons, a set of International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS), and an accompanying Compilers' Manual.

The data process on internal displacement is plagued by significant conceptual, operational, and political challenges. These challenges are the result of a lack of conceptual clarity, proper guidance, coordination, capacity, and ultimately, political will - the implications of which are addressed here.

1.1 Conceptual Clarity

Definitions used to measure displacement vary greatly. In general, as a result of political and operational realities, definitions tend to be much narrower than the definition in the Guiding Principles, often resulting in many IDPs being left behind. **IDP definitions should be standardized**

across contexts, in accordance with the Guiding Principles. The IRIS provides a clear outline for this, noting that IDP definitions: (1) need to be inclusive, in line with the Guiding Principles, without arbitrary limitation with regards to timeframe, location, or cause of forced displacement; and (2) that children born in displacement need be accounted for as a separate population so as not to artificially inflate IDP numbers. IRIS outlines a number of basic indicators that should be collected to produce the necessary disaggregated data.

Statistics on internal displacement have been plagued by the challenge of deterring and measuring the end of displacement. The widely accepted Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) Framework for Durable Solutions (FDS) is necessarily broad and multi-faceted, but ultimately very difficult to operationalize. Consequently, the end of displacement often is determined on an ad hoc basis, largely in accordance with political interests.

Indicators, standards, and methodologies to collect the necessary data to determine when IDPs have achieved durable solutions must be developed. EGRIS and others have taken significant steps in this regard, but it remains a work very much in progress. For now, EGRIS is promoting a set of general recommendations for countries and international organizations to: (1) measure progress towards durable solutions and show the proportion of IDPs who have overcome vulnerabilities linked to their displacement over time; and (2) produce a composite measure of key displacement-related vulnerabilities.

1.2 More Focused Data Collection

The intended use of the data should always be the starting point of any data collection effort. It is important to move beyond generic calls for more and better data "to inform policy and response." They provide little guidance and can result in the production of data that is of limited value. Efforts to collect data should instead be targeted to meet clear objectives and directly contribute to the protection of IDPs. The focus needs to go beyond determining the number and location of IDPs to examining the population's specific vulnerabilities, experiences, and aspirations, with a view towards durable solutions.

A focus on durable solutions requires disaggregated and contextualized data that highlight IDPs' specific socio-economic situations, vulnerabilities, preferences, skills, and capacities. It also requires information on the broader social, economic, environmental, and political context and how IDPs figure in it. This, of course, means more qualitative data. While quantitative data is often framed as "hard evidence," it rarely produces all the answers. Qualitative data has the capacity to produce more nuanced insights into sensitive issues. It can be collected just as rigorously and transparently as quantitative data and tell stories that grab the attention of decision-makers.

1.3 Standard Methodologies

EGRIS has highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of various data collection methodologies, favouring sample household surveys as the most flexible data source. It also advocates for the integration of IDP variables and tabulations into official national statistics frameworks to ensure that countries are routinely monitoring internal displacement.

Official IDP registration systems may be useful for the purpose of providing IDPs with access to services and assistance, but they should not be set up to produce statistics on displacement. These databases can be subject to self-selection because many IDPs choose not to come forward out of fear or distrust of the authorities. Barriers to registration can lead to underestimations and can have adverse protection consequences if information ends up in the wrong hands. Registration systems under the exclusive control of the State also increase the opportunity for political manip-

ulation of the data.

1.4 IDP Involvement

IDPs should be involved as much as possible in shaping and implementing the data processes. Because they understand their situation better than anyone, their involvement increases the relevance and transformative potential of the evidence produced. Bolder efforts must be made to guarantee a meaningful engagement of the affected communities in the various steps of the process. They also should have access to the evidence produced to inform their own decisions.

1.5 Better Coordination

EGRIS calls for better coordination in data collection at the national, regional, and international levels. In particular, they outline how the various producers and users of IDP statistics can work collaboratively to enhance the quality and availability of this data. A critical first step is the integration of IDP data into National Statistical Systems (NSS).

2. Addressing the Politics of IDP Data

IDP data is inherently political, sensitive, and contentious. States and other actors have powerful motives to manipulate or suppress data to favor a preferred narrative. While refugees are tracked by external bodies, national governments are primarily responsible for monitoring and protecting their own IDPs. These same countries often bear some responsibility for IDP displacement. International and national actors have different, often competing interests regarding IDP figures. Both influence the process of data collection, manipulating it in various forms and often placing obstacles to its very collection.

Governments routinely minimize displacement estimates and even block attempts by international organizations to collect and publish more accurate information. They may be motivated by a desire to hide a displacement crisis that they fear could expose or draw unwanted international attention to human rights violations, unresolved conflicts, or simply the erosion of State authority. Internal displacement can be interpreted as a sign of political failure and an indication that governments do not have control over their territory. This makes States reluctant to recognize internal displacement, even in cases where people are displaced by enemies of the State or criminal elements.

Displacement crises can call attention to inconvenient realities about countries' ethnic conflicts and social disparities. When States are directly involved in displacing their own people, the incentives to minimize, repress, and deny data on displacement becomes much greater, resulting in "blind spots" and "hard cases." Other governments conversely inflate the numbers of IDPs to attract more humanitarian aid or mobilize international opinion against an internal or external adversary accused of being responsible for the displacement. This goes beyond basic statistics. The collection of disaggregated information can be particularly sensitive, especially when it touches upon issues of ethnicity and tribal affiliation, minority rights, the comparative wellbeing of different groups, and their access to aid and services.

Like States, humanitarian and advocacy organizations involved in data collection also may have a reason to manipulate data or treat it selectively. They often rely on IDP data to call international attention to issues of critical importance to them, to boost their fundraising, or to justify the resources they receive. They may be motivated to overstate the gravity of IDPs in some situations,

while in others they may chose not to call attention to certain sensitive crises out of fear of losing funding or access.

Current efforts to develop greater methodological guidance and conceptual clarity for IDP statistics can significantly contribute to reducing the opportunities for political manipulation and corruption of the data. If properly implemented, IRIS could significantly improve the quality and availability of IDP data. These types of initiatives, however, can only achieve so much. Ultimately, the political dimensions of IDP data must be recognized. Better data depends on a continuation of efforts to build the necessary “political will.”

3. Conclusions

Because of the risk of political bias in IDP statistics, an over-reliance on any individual source of data, particularly State-generated statistics, is problematic. As a rule, data is most reliable when it is produced transparently and collaboratively; when it is possible to triangulate from multiple sources; and when it is explicit about its limitations. Moving towards “open data” systems that make disaggregated raw data available to the research community also can enhance data quality and transparency and lead to new insights into IDP issues.

Advocacy and diplomatic efforts must accompany the data process. Until national governments and the international community begin to treat displacement crises as high profile problems, their true dimensions will not be fully understood. Conversely, these crises are unlikely to generate the necessary level of attention until their true dimensions are recognized. For this reason, the focus should be placed both on what data is collected and on how it is collected.

As the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) has repeatedly pointed out, the very process of gathering data on internal displacement has tremendous transformative potential beyond providing evidence for policy and response. When approached collaboratively with the involvement of national authorities, the process of gathering data on IDPs can change attitudes and contribute to incentivizing buy-in and political will; build trust among actors with competing agendas; foster long-term cooperation; maximize local capacity, and ultimately reduce data collection obstacles and political bias. Collaboration is particularly imperative in internal displacement cases where data and analysis are highly politicized. Collaborative approaches also promote greater transparency, facilitating consensus and encouraging governments to engage in critical examination and durable solutions.

Finally, given the political limitations outlined here, the question of who should lead the task of collecting statistics on IDPs also needs to be considered. Unlike refugees, IDPs do not have a single UN agency mandated to protect them. This responsibility has largely been relegated to national governments, with the intervention of international agencies in cases when governments are unable or unwilling to step in. Independent academic and international civil society organizations continue to play critical roles in collecting IDP data, as they do with other conflict related data (i.e. small arms, combat deaths, etc.). The absence of a clear international mandate on data collection, however, will continue to handicap efforts to produce more and better data. The HLP should discuss the possibility of assigning an international organization the task of collecting and/or validating basic IDP statistics.