Internal Displacement, Internal Migration and Refugee Flows: Connecting the Dots

Professor David James Cantor, Director, Internal Displacement Research Programme

Jacob Ochieng Apollo, MA Refugee Protection

August 2020

IDRP Research Briefing Paper

UNSG High Level Panel on Internal Displacement

Work-stream 6 (Data and Evidence)

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

The Internal Displacement Research Programme (IDRP) is a specialised programme of the Refugee Law Initiative

'Internal displacement' is usually treated as a distinctive form of movement of persons due to its 'internal' and 'forced' character. But how does internal displacement compare to other related forms of movement? This research briefing draws on existing evidence to assess, 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.

1. Internal movement: forced displacement and economic migration

Even during conflict, forced displacement is usually the exception: the vast majority of 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. As such, internal displacement may feed into wider processes of social change that are driven by internal migration, such as increasing urbanisation and the resulting shifts in societal dynamics, with important humanitarian and developmental consequences.

Like internal economic migration, internal displacement assumes many forms. These are shaped not only by the pursuit of livelihood strategies but also by use of mobility as a self-protection mechanism in the face of the particular risk dynamics of that conflict. This can make patterns of internal displacement quite context-dependent, with specific assistance, protection and solutions challenges for affected persons (and their hosts) varying between contexts. Yet in conflict zones, the people who do not displace, and IDPs who return, are often exposed to even more acute safety or livelihood risks, especially where 'immobility' is enforced 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 key drivers for displacement but it can also invert key determinants of economic migration. As a result the profile of people on the move seems to change. 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, 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), and are more likely 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 can end up over-represented among the poor and extreme poor of their countries. Thus, for both individuals and societies, internal displacement can produce a distinctive impact.

erally 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 or less likely to push either internal or external displacement.

2.2. 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 are often relatively poor or marginalised. For conflicts embedded in rural zones, the profile of IDPs often mirrors those of rural inhabitants, manifesting relative rural poverty, low education levels and agricultural backgrounds, although who exactly flees as IDPs from these areas reflects also the targeting strategies of the armed actors. IDPs are thus 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 in camps (except in Africa).

In some conflict-affected countries, this IDP profile seems to contrast with the profile of those who flee to relatively wealthy non-neighbouring countries. For example, people arriving in Europe as refugees from Syria and other countries affected by major conflict tend to be relatively highly-educated and in employment before leaving home. Likewise, Syrians who flee to non-adjacent countries as refugees or migrants tend 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 with access to the border and they may be more likely to be drawn from ethnic or political groups that are the subject of violent targeting by the State in their country of origin and/or which have strong group bonds across the border.

Thus, although the evidence on this point should not be overstated, existing data suggests 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. This in turn 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. As a general rule, once IDPs settle there is a lack of robust evidence of significant shifts from IDP to refugee situations.

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 integration challenges in the site of return or elsewhere. Yet the prospects of refu-

gees can di er due to their experience outside the country. Thus, refugee households that were unable to work during exile seem more inclined to return to areas of origin and to have signi cant-ly fewer resources, thereby 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 a ected by con ict or violence results in some zones containing a mix of IDPs, asylum-seekers, refugees, returning refugees, returning overseas migrants, internal economic migrants and others a ected by violence. In such zones, tensions often exist over whether refugees and/or IDPs have better access to aid. In such contexts, an area-based rather than a category-based approach may be appropriate, so long as it takes into account di erences in the pro les of such persons.

3. Conclusions

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

The evidence implies that internal displacement cannot always be neatly separated o from other forms of movement but rather overlaps at certain key points. Speci cally in contexts of con ict and violence, internal displacement intersects with other strands of internal migration to accel-erate or shape processes of wider societal change driven by mobility, such as urbanisation. In tandem, internal displacement and refugee ows are driven by similar root causes, even if their re-spective scale and patterns re ect a range of proximate factors in each country. Both research and policy need to work harder to appreciate 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 con ict).

However, certain aspects of internal displacement tend to distinguish it from both internal migra-tion and refugee ows. Thus, IDPs are not merely a sub-species of internal labour migrants nor are they just proto-refugees. Internal displacement due to con ict 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 ows (it is not). Indeed, where IDP policy has uncritically borrowed from the refugee eld, signi cant conceptual challenges have arisen. The same is true for the distinct access and security implications of working with con ict-IDPs as compared to ref-ugees eeing con icts. To this end, the analysis here suggests the need for more careful attention to the potentially distinct social pro les of those who end up, respectively, as IDPs and refugees.