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HUMANITARIAN REFORM: RESPONDING TO IDP SITUATIONS IN NON-CLUSTER COUNTRIES

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Internally displaced persons (IDPs) were central to the humanitarian reform initiated by Jan Egeland, then-Emergency Relief Coordinator in 2005. It was widely recognized that the collaborative approach which had been developed to assign institutional responsibilities for IDPs was not working. Humanitarian reform was intended to “fill the gaps” in humanitarian response – particularly for IDPs -- but over time it became something else. As the Humanitarian Policy Group has reported, “the profile of the cluster system, the significant investment in clusters at the global level and their expansion to include new areas of response (education and agriculture) is creating confusion as to whether the cluster approach has become accepted as the new system for coordination and leadership, and should be applied universally.”¹

But there is another gap in humanitarian reform: addressing the needs of IDPs living in protracted situations. Much has been written in recent years about protracted refugee situations, but virtually nothing has been published about long-term internal displacement. In June 2007, the Brookings-Bern Project in Internal Displacement, together with UNHCR convened an expert seminar to address this issue.² Using the definition of IDPs as set out in the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, the seminar agreed that protracted IDP situations are those where:

¹Sue Graves, Victoria Wheeler, and Ellen Martin “Lost in translation,” *HPG Policy Brief* 27, July 2007, p. 5.

² For the report of the seminar, see <http://www3.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/conferences/20070622.pdf>

- the process for finding durable solutions is stalled,³ and
- IDPs are marginalized as a consequence of violations or a lack of protection of human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights.

In some protracted IDP situations, there are also citizens of those countries living in protracted refugee situations. This makes intuitive sense; when a conflict occurs, some people are able to leave their country while others are displaced within their country's borders. These countries include: Angola, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Sudan.⁴ These are countries familiar to humanitarian organizations.

But there is another, larger category of countries where there are protracted IDP situations but no significant refugee movements: Algeria, Armenia, Bangladesh, Croatia, Cyprus, Georgia, Guatemala, India, Israel, Kenya, Macedonia, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Syria, and Turkey. Some of these countries – such as Algeria, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Georgia, Senegal and Turkey – are not countries on the top of the agenda for humanitarian agencies. Yet they all are reported to have long-standing internal displacement situations. In some of these cases – such as Algeria and Bangladesh – it may be that many IDPs have in fact found durable solutions. In others, such as Georgia and Turkey, IDPs continue to be vulnerable. But in none of these countries has the cluster approach been implemented.

In looking at the question of why these situations are protracted, there are three main categories. In some, the conflicts are 'frozen.' There is little progress on the political level which would resolve the conflict and allow IDPs to find durable solutions. Algeria, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Georgia, Israel, Russia, and Turkey fall in this category. A second group are countries where the conflict that produced the displacement has come to an end, but the IDPs have not been able to find solutions. This is the largest group and includes Angola, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, Croatia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Nepal, Peru, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Syria, and Uganda. Finally a third group are conflicts which continue, with new displacement taking place as well as protracted IDP situations: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Palestine, the Philippines, and Somalia.

IDPs displaced for long periods of time may face particular protection needs, including:

- Lack of permanent shelter
- Lack of work/livelihoods
- Lack of documentation

³ See Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement and Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University, [When Displacement Ends: A Framework for Durable Solutions](#), Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2007.

⁴ These listings consider only conflict-induced IDPs and are based on data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, www.internal-displacement.org.

- No or limited access to health and education
- Difficulties accessing pension rights and asserting tenancy rights
- Discrimination related to the fact of their displacement
- Limitations on their free choice of durable solutions

As in situations of on-going displacement, there are also specific protection needs of particular groups, such as women heads of households, the elderly, persons with disabilities and children.

It's hard to see how most of these protracted IDP situations fit into the cluster system. Where displacement is continuing, there are some countries where UNHCR has the cluster lead for protection (Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia). But in most of the others, neither UNHCR nor other humanitarian agencies are involved. In some situations, the Early Recovery Cluster might be able to play a role (e.g. Burundi or Nepal), but when conflicts were ended 12 years ago, as in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina – it is probably not appropriate to talk about 'early' recovery. Other actors – particularly development actors – need to step forward.

Analysis of protracted IDP situations highlights both the enduring human costs of conflict and the long-standing issue of the gap between relief and development. This gap has been endlessly acknowledged for at least the past 20 years, but never adequately addressed. It seems to me that there are two choices:

- Redefine emergencies to last until IDPs have been able to find a solution – which would mean the continued engagement of humanitarian actors long after peace agreements are signed, or
- Ensure that the task of finding durable solutions for IDPs is a central component of both national development planning and peacebuilding.

Both of these options are difficult. Finding durable solutions for IDPs can be a long and involved process, especially around issues of property restitution and compensation, and humanitarian organizations are reluctant to stay indefinitely. The fact is that new emergencies will inevitably demand their attention. In post-conflict situations, new governments face multiple challenges, such as de-mobilization and restoration of basic services. Ending displacement is usually not a top priority, especially when IDPs do not live in camps or collective centers, but rather among local urban populations.

While we're focusing here on the role of UNHCR and the international humanitarian community generally, it's important to emphasize that national governments have the responsibility of ensuring that IDPs have access to a durable solution. The existence of so many protracted IDP situations is evidence that many governments have failed to exercise this responsibility. But there are possibilities for international organizations to encourage and support national governments so that IDPs do not remain displaced for years, decades or even generations. I'm afraid that the cluster approach doesn't mean much for most IDPs living in protracted situations.

