



BRIEFING PAPER

Understanding the root causes of displacement: towards a comprehensive approach to prevention and solutions

8 DECEMBER 2015

The UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) eighth annual High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges – on the theme *Understanding and addressing the root causes of displacement* – will take place on 16 and 17 December 2015 in Geneva. The dialogue seeks to foster a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of displacement and to identify opportunities for tackling them through strengthened cooperation between humanitarian, human rights and development actors.

The Dialogue's focus could hardly be timelier. The current influx of refugees into Europe has dramatically highlighted the need to re-think displacement and migration. Understanding the root causes and complex patterns of displacement is key to:

- responding better to displaced people's protection and assistance needs
- preventing crises which cause families to risk their lives in pursuit of safety
- ensuring today's internally displaced are not displaced again.

The growing numbers of people caught in protracted and chronic patterns of displacement, underscore the limits of humanitarian action and the need for concerted efforts by political and operational actors to address the underlying issues that create and sustain displacement. Recent events in Europe raise doubts whether current policy and operational frameworks are adapted to this ever-growing challenge or are able to tackle it in a sustained and comprehensive way.

The purpose of this paper is to feed into the discussions that will take place during this year's Dialogue and to help participants re-think displacement in the context of today's crises. IDMC is developing a more nuanced and complete understanding of the phenomenon of internal displacement with a view to strengthening our monitoring and analysis and, it is hoped, ultimately improving policy and operational responses.

Sustainably addressing displacement requires the work of political actors, development experts, human rights advocates, data specialists and many other stakeholders. IDMC will continue to contribute data and analysis to influence policy. Going forward this work will require developing new partnerships across diverse sectors and mandates to enable us to document the multiple causes, patterns and impacts of

displacement and find solutions that can be truly sustainable. These partnerships need to be built on a common understanding of what drives displacement risk, how displacement comes about in different situations and which actors need to be mobilised in order to address it.

As states, intergovernmental organisations, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations gather for the Dialogue, participants will need to:

- **Agree on a clear and common terminology to discuss root causes of displacement.** Conceptual clarity about what constitutes *root causes* and *drivers*, and how they relate to *proximate causes* or *triggers* is necessary in order for partners to speak the same language and to understand displacement in the same way.
- **Acknowledge that any response to displacement must be informed by a comprehensive and contextualised analysis of its drivers and their linkages.** Better analysis will allow partners to identify the right leverage points and develop more coordinated and sustainable responses across a wider range of actors, timeframes and mandates.
- **Support IDMC's calls for more accurate and comprehensive data across all phases of displacement and across all situations.** Without this data, the global picture on internal displacement will remain incomplete. Policy and operational actors will not have the tools they need to address displacement in a tailored and targeted way.
- **Commit to finding political solutions to displacement crises.** The most common drivers of displacement are political. Resolving displacement requires sustained political dialogue with governments and recognition that state responsibility is key to addressing the factors that drive global displacement risk.
- **Capitalise on the opportunities offered by the post-2015 global policy agenda** to recognise displacement as an issue cutting across approaches to address multiple global challenges, including humanitarian action, sustainable development, climate change and disaster risk reduction.

Displacement drivers combine to trigger displacement

Various terms are used in the literature to discuss causes of displacement. These include *root cause*, *cause*, *driver*, *stressor*, *trigger*, *shock* and *hazard*, among others. IDMC proposes that the terms *driver* and *trigger* be used in discussions of causes of displacement, and refer to the following:

- **Drivers:** distant underlying structural factors that combine to enable a crisis to erupt. Synonyms are: root cause, push factor, stressor. Examples include:
 - Environmental drivers: including desertification and damming of tributaries.
 - Social drivers: such as limited education opportunities; inter-communal tensions.
 - Political drivers: for example, poor urban planning and corruption.
 - Economic drivers: including poverty and lack of access to markets.

- **Triggers:** proximate precipitating events that leave people with little choice but to flee their homes. These are visible events in the wider environment that can threaten people's physical or economic security. Synonyms are: cause, hazard, shock, tipping point. Examples include: armed attacks, earthquakes and forced eviction.

Drivers refer to the less visible factors that pre-date and contribute to the immediate and more visible trigger. Over time, they link, overlap and accumulate to a point where human rights abuses occur or a crisis erupts. For example, displacement in Sudan triggered by conflict has been traced back to a myriad of drivers including drought and environmental degradation, a food crisis that morphed into famine due to government neglect, changing regional demographics, land grabbing and impoverishment.¹ Similarly, displacement in Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake followed a long history of interaction of drivers – including development projects that led to land grabbing and environmental degradation, rapid urbanisation, the subsequent formation of crowded informal settlements and the inability of authorities to enforce building codes and land-use plans.²

Triggers are the more visible events in the wider environment that threaten people's security. Triggers may or may not lead to displacement as people evaluate the level of threat posed by an event to their immediate physical and economic security and their capacity to flee their homes. While these events directly trigger displacement, they come about as a result of the complex interaction of multiple underlying drivers.

Triggers can combine or occur in succession, giving rise to complex patterns and dynamics of displacement and significantly erode people's coping capacities in the process. This was the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where some people displaced by the 1992-1995 war were further displaced by floods in 2014.³ Many impoverished IDPs initially displaced in the 1990s who were unwilling to return to their area of origin and lacked tenure documents to claim property restitution, built homes without permission on land in risk-prone localities. Two decades later the floods washed away their reconstruction efforts, reigniting past traumas of displacement and loss. Protracted displacement can itself become a driver of future displacement risk.

Triggers of displacement are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding the phenomenon of displacement

Displacement tends to be described exclusively in relation to its immediate trigger. For data collection and reporting purposes this serves to estimate the scale of different displacement situations. However, analysing and responding to displacement in this way conceals the reality that displacement is a complex phenomenon that results from a combination of multiple underlying drivers, often interacting over decades. Categorising displacement into broad triggers such as conflict, natural hazards or development projects also underestimates the degree of human agency involved in the decision to move, masking the individual's or household's subjective assessment of threat and their physical ability to move.

The example of Nigeria illustrates how attributing the 1.98 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)⁴ in northeastern Nigeria to the violent insurgency of Boko Haram without un-

Understanding the endemic underlying factors is short sighted and has led to a fragmented response. The genesis of Boko Haram has been traced in large part to the frustration of disenfranchised northeastern youth denied livelihood opportunities and education.⁵ In addition, livelihoods, access to water and grazing pastures have also been under strain for decades as the surface area of Lake Chad has shrunk by 90 per cent over the last 45 years.⁶ This is a result of climate change and anthropogenic factors including the damming of tributaries, lack of sustainable water management policies and overgrazing.⁷ People have increasingly migrated southwards along the Lake Chad basin perimeter which, over time, has led some 70 ethnic groups to converge and led to resource competition, tension and conflicts. These have increased in scale and geographical scope since 1972.⁸

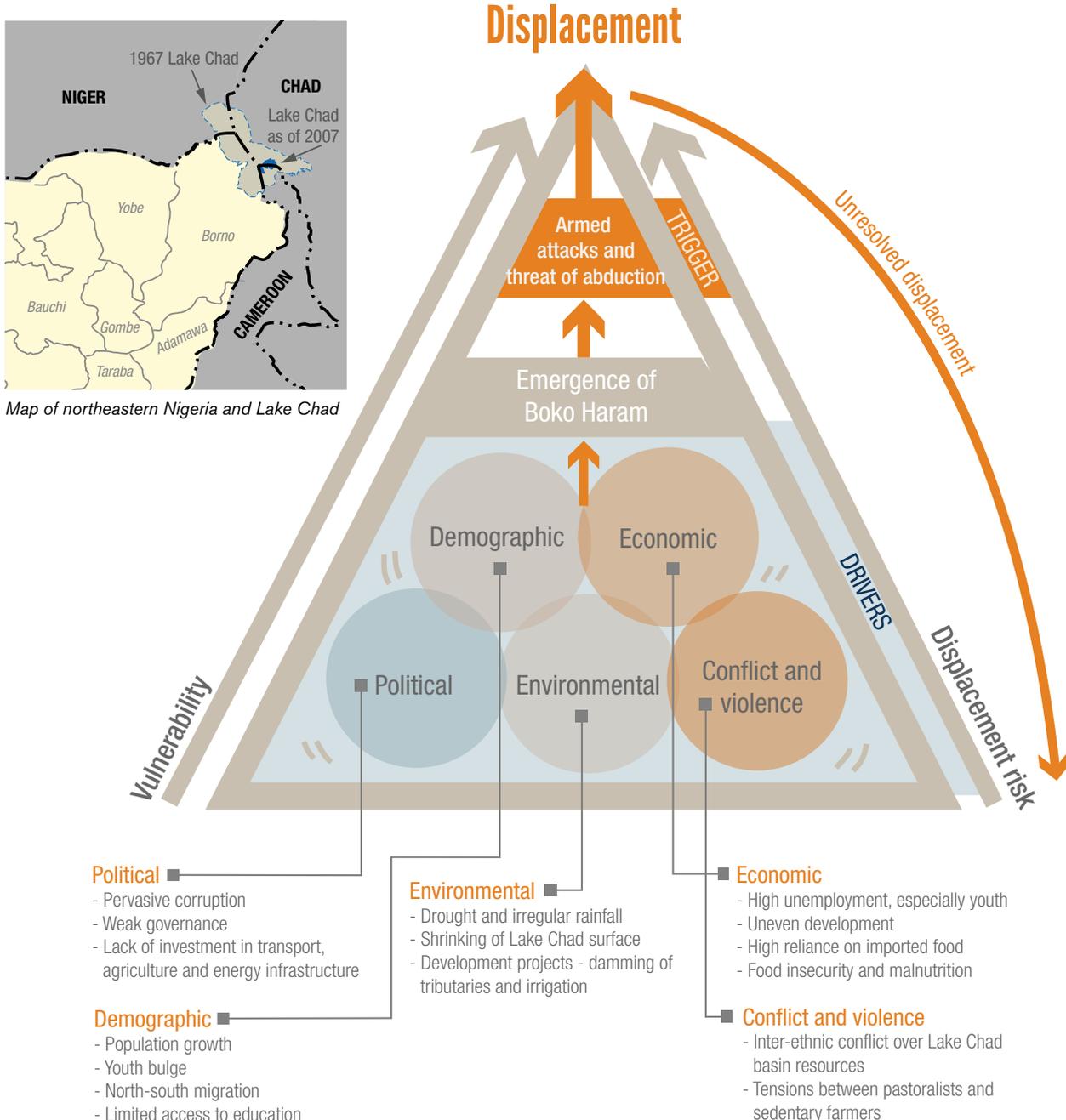
Other structural drivers have contributed to displacement in Nigeria. Pervasive corruption,⁹ weak governance and the absence of investment in transport, agricultural and energy

infrastructure has left northeastern Nigeria dependent on imported food despite hosting some of the region's most fertile land.¹⁰ Food insecurity is high and is worsened in the absence of any welfare or robust safety nets as currency fluctuations impact food costs. Few in the northeast have reaped any dividends despite the economic growth Nigeria has experienced in the last decade.¹¹

Figure 1 shows the interaction of these drivers and illustrates how any response to Nigeria's current displacement crisis cannot afford to overlook the economic, social, political and environmental factors that have accumulated over time, paved the way to conflict and violence and ultimately forced people to flee their homes. The trigger, Boko Haram's physical attacks, is just the tip of the iceberg to understanding displacement in Nigeria.

Please note that the drivers listed in Figure 1 are non-exhaustive.

Figure 1. Displacement in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency – Nigeria northeastern states



The most common drivers of displacement are political

Conflict and disasters do not take place in a political vacuum. Protracted displacement situations as well as obstacles to solutions are often political in nature. IDMC's research has shown that the majority of displacement crises, particularly protracted ones, are the result of political blockages that prevent adequate protection and assistance reaching IDPs and limit prospects for resolution of displacement crises. The scope and severity of displacement situations are determined by political factors that include state fragility, weak governance, corruption, prioritising economic interests over IDPs' needs and rights and misuse of resources.

Data from conflict-related displacement contexts shows a strong correlation between protracted displacement and political crisis.¹² State fragility and the failure of governance commonly lead to intermittent conflict, inter-communal violence, endemic insecurity, poverty and repeated population movements, often over decades. This is apparent in a number of countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar/Burma and Somalia. Displacement can also be prolonged whenever governments politicise the issue and refuse to enter into the formal resolution of a crisis. This was the case under Qadhafi's Libya, during Russia's conflict in Chechnya and today in Syria and Myanmar.¹³

Analysis of the main drivers of disaster-related displacement repeatedly demonstrates how political factors play a key role. Natural hazards that trigger displacement and lead to crises are often heavily influenced by human actions including deforestation, dam-building and release of flood waters, indicating drivers that are less than 'natural'.¹⁴ The impact of natural hazards is particularly significant in urban areas

where population growth has been rapid, poorly planned and weakly governed leading people to live in at-risk areas, increasing their exposure and vulnerability to hazards.¹⁵ The recent floods in Chennai, India and Accra, Ghana, which particularly affected people who were already vulnerable,¹⁶ are just a couple of examples.¹⁷

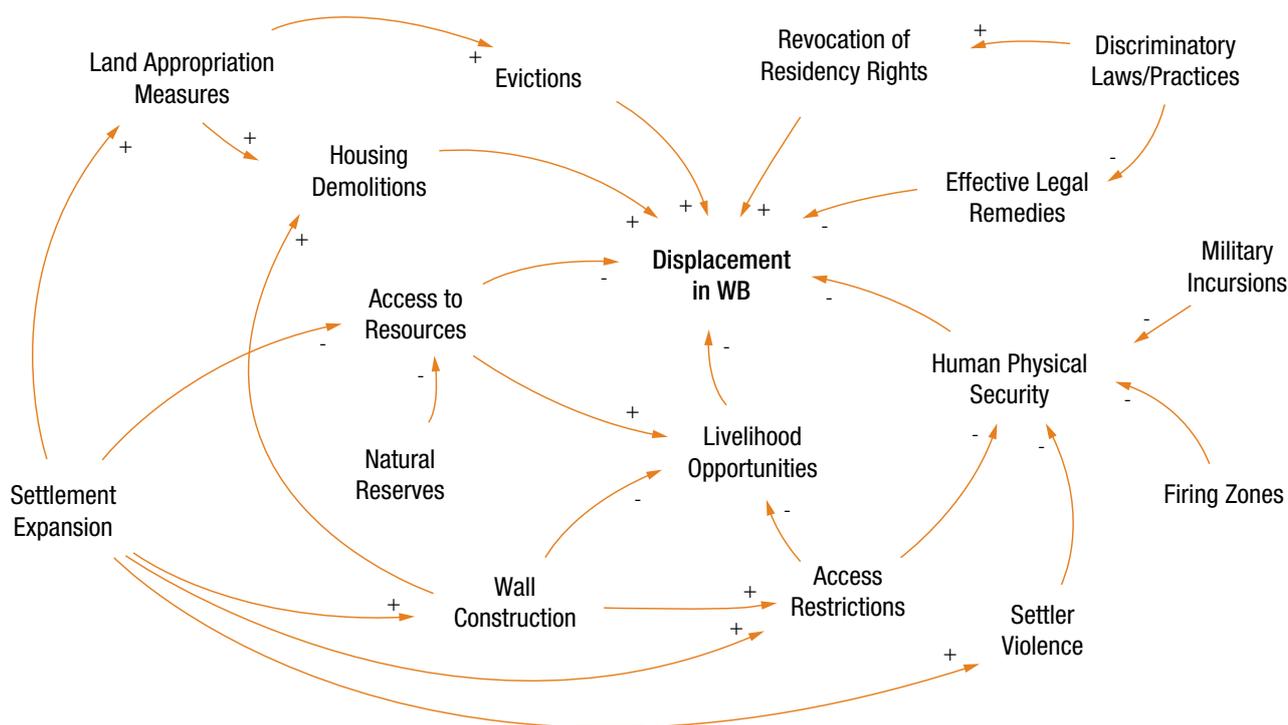
Displacement can also be a symptom of pre-existing patterns of social exclusion, inequality and discrimination, affecting the poor and marginalised. This is not only the case in low-income countries, such as Mali and Sudan, but also in middle and high-income countries. Some examples include the floods around Lake St. Martin in Manitoba, Canada in 2011 where people of colour and indigenous First Nations communities respectively were disproportionately affected. These communities are caught in protracted displacement as patterns of marginalisation and discrimination remain unaddressed.¹⁸

More data and research is needed to inform sustainable solutions to displacement

IDP figures should be accompanied by a comprehensive contextual analysis of the underlying drivers and their linkages, displacement triggers and their overlap, patterns of displacement as well as the various needs and vulnerabilities of IDPs and their reasons for flight. This is crucial for identifying actors and actions that can address the drivers of displacement, build coping capacities and avert further crises. Such an analysis can also indicate where attention might be focused to facilitate the achievement of durable solutions.

Systems thinking can uncover the drivers and their relation to each other and the trigger(s) of displacement. This is illustrated in the causal loop diagram below on displacement in the West Bank.

Figure 2. Structural drivers of displacement in the West Bank



This approach focuses on how multiple constituents of a system interact. With regard to displacement it allows for the identification and analysis of drivers and triggers and can expose the factors undermining resilience. A complementary understanding of people's capacity to adjust, mitigate and cope with drivers at the local level can explain why and when different people flee and processes through which areas may become uninhabitable. Combining this comprehensive contextual analysis with robust data should allow practitioners to identify what erodes peoples' capacity to cope and ways to intervene to reduce displacement risk.

The displaced themselves have an important role to play in ensuring the veracity of this data. They can point to drivers beyond the precipitating trigger when explaining why they fled. In Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia, for example, pastoralist IDPs might be expected to report drought or conflict as their main reason for flight, but, counterintuitively, identify economic and social factors as the primary cause of their movement.¹⁹ Similarly, in Nepal, IDPs displaced as a result of the civil war attribute their decision to flee to life-threatening violence as well as other factors such as economic loss and a safe opportunity to leave.²⁰ Since the displaced do not necessarily identify the exact causal chain that drove them to flee, household survey findings should be combined with other research methodologies to probe deeper into the complex reasons for flight.

Systems dynamics modelling can complement household surveys and identify the overlapping drivers of displacement or the severity of impact. However, more work is needed to refine this approach to account for the complexity, non-linearity and context sensitivity associated with displacement triggers. In the meantime, coordination among state, inter-governmental, private sector and civil society actors is needed to understand how displacement starts, what determines its scope, scale and patterns over time, how it impacts different people in different ways and how and when it ends.²¹

Analysing displacement drivers helps identify and mobilise the right actors and approaches

Analysing displacement drivers shows that displacement is far more than a humanitarian challenge. It raises issues of concern to a much broader range of actors and approaches. While prevention and response should be recognised primarily as a state responsibility, there are also roles for non-state armed groups, civil society organisations, the private sector and intergovernmental and international organisations. Of key importance is to also combine wide-ranging perspectives from those engaged in peace-building, climate change adaptation, land management, security and psycho-social care. Humanitarians alone cannot address the structural factors that drive crises and displacement.

The response to internal displacement in the Democratic Republic of Congo provides an example of the shortcomings of a humanitarian approach focused on addressing the impacts, rather than the root causes, of multiple, repeated cycles of crisis and displacement. Most assistance provided over the past two decades to people affected by displacement has been funded and implemented by humanitarian structures and actors solely with the imperative to address basic needs. Planners have overlooked the fact that most IDPs have been

displaced multiple times and regularly shuttle between their place of origin and refuge. Interventions have failed to take a long-term perspective and address the reality that many IDPs will be displaced again and will need to repeatedly seek to replenish basic needs and assets.²² Experience here, and elsewhere, shows that concerted engagement – beyond solely that of humanitarian immediate response actors – is required to address the root causes and drivers of conflict.²³

Detailed knowledge of the historic and more recent background to displacement can help avoid aid interventions that reinforce, prolong or exacerbate tensions and undermine or replicate local or national structures.²⁴ A better understanding of drivers offers an opportunity to build an evidence base about what kinds of action improve people's ability to withstand, adapt and quickly recover from shocks and how to scale this up to support people's adaptive capacities. This new knowledge can inform disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and conflict prevention measures that aim to make people more resilient in the face of a crisis. Investing in measures to reduce vulnerability and manage risk are also better value-for-money than humanitarian responses in the aftermath of a crisis.²⁵

Experience in Nigeria shows that solutions to the crisis in the northeast require consideration of the complex and linked drivers that have forced so many to flee. Without investments in the conservation of the region's major resources, especially water, and the socio-economic development of its inhabitants, displacement will continue. The protracted and chronic humanitarian crisis is also likely to continue to spill over into countries in and adjacent to Nigeria such as Cameroon, Chad, Mali and Niger, driving regional instability. In order to more effectively address underlying drivers, assistance should be centred on social inclusion, education, youth employment, natural resource management, investment in infrastructure and environmental protection. This requires engagement from the Nigerian authorities, civil society, governments of neighbouring countries and the international community.

Viewing displacement through a systems approach shows that instituting separate response mechanisms according to the precipitating trigger may not be the most efficient or effective approach if the underlying drivers of displacement are the same, which they often are. Unfortunately policy and operational frameworks have tended to approach displacement according to the precipitating trigger. Humanitarian response to conflicts and disasters has thus come to use separate language and terminology and there is often a lack of coordinated analysis and programming. There is separate training for humanitarian leaders on how to best respond to conflict and disaster.²⁶ Some governments have adopted distinct national legal frameworks on protection of people displaced by conflict and disaster.²⁷ Conflict prevention and disaster risk management are regarded as discrete issues. Sadly, the result is that there is limited crossover of expertise, sharing of knowledge or joint working. Effective responses to displacement require common frameworks and analysis and coordinated programming.

Afghanistan – a country to which disproportionate levels of aid have been directed – illustrates this point. Afghanistan's national IDP policy acknowledges that the interplay of conflict, urbanisation and natural hazards warrants holistic and long-term responses to prevent and resolve displacement. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides

assistance to IDPs displaced by disasters and the national task force on IDPs, co-chaired by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation and UNHCR, coordinates the humanitarian response to those displaced by conflict.²⁸ The unforeseen consequence of this disjointed and siloed approach has seen some IDPs calculating whether they would be better-off identifying as conflict- or as natural hazard-IDPs.²⁹

Multi-sector and area-based approaches take a comprehensive approach to addressing displacement. These put districts or communities at the core of the response, rather than individual beneficiaries. Actors from relevant sectors collaborate to better understand and meet their needs. In Haiti, a neighbourhood recovery and upgrade programme following the 2010 earthquake addressed some of the drivers and consequences of displacement. It included the provision of transitional shelter that could be upgraded; disaster risk reduction initiatives; rubble clearance; water and sanitation; health and livelihoods programmes and social protection of vulnerable groups.³⁰ Community enumeration and profiling exercises identified the complexity of different forms of land rights, tenure claims and ownership as well as community priorities. This engendered a sense of ownership of the project within the community, building trust and resolving problems that arose during implementation, thus yielding "higher impacts".³¹ Documenting practices such as this can help promote integrated responses to current and future displacement crises.

Post-2015 policy frameworks must address the root causes and longer-term impacts of displacement

Internal displacement is a global issue that resonates in all of the post-2015 policy processes. These include those of actors engaged in:

- Humanitarian issues: the [World Humanitarian Summit \(WHS\)](#)
- Development: the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\)](#)
- Climate change: the [2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference \(COP21\)](#)
- Disaster-induced cross border displacement: the [Nansen Initiative's Protection Agenda](#)
- Disaster risk reduction: the [Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction](#)
- Urban development: the [United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development \(Habitat III\)](#).

Together, the multiple processes have potential to address the complex roots that underpin today's displacement crises and to consensually develop indicators to measure the drivers that lead to displacement. Regrettably, none of these processes have merged, despite calls to do so from high-level leaders.³² Neither have they all incorporated displacement as a priority issue. It is imperative that implementation of these policies is formally and coherently linked. The *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* acknowledges poverty and climate change as drivers of displacement, yet omits any reference to conflict.³³ The inescapable link between them is featured more explicitly in the *Sustainable Development Goals* where disaster risk reduction is included in goals on poverty and climate change.³⁴

We have a unique opportunity to ensure that the still-incomplete processes of WHS, COP21 and Habitat III embrace the realities of contemporary displacement. The High Commissioner can feed the Dialogue's conclusions into these initiatives and urge combined efforts where there are shared objectives on mitigating the drivers of displacement. Dialogue participants involved in forging policy should ensure IDPs are not left behind in policy implementation and the underlying drivers of displacement are addressed sustainably. Failing to do so will leave the consequences of displacement unaddressed. Such neglect would only exacerbate underlying drivers and lead to additional, repeated and cross-border displacement.

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CONTACT

Nadine Walicki
Senior Strategic Advisor on
Development
+41 22 552 36 35
nadine.walicki@idmc.ch

Marita Swain
Research Coordinator
+41 22 552 36 34
marita.swain@idmc.ch

Alexandra Bilak
Head of Policy and Research
+41 22 552 36 11
alexandra.bilak@nrc.ch

IDMC
Norwegian Refugee Council
3 rue de Varembe
1202 Geneva
www.internal-displacement.org
+41 22 552 3600