Internally Displaced Persons Outside Camps:
Achieving a More Equitable Humanitarian Response

This note is offered to prompt discussion among IASC agencies on the adequacy of arrangements for protection and assistance to IDPs who do not live in a camp-based environment. Ultimately it is hoped that agencies will strengthen the humanitarian response by reducing disparities in protection and assistance experienced by IDPs.

**Background**

1. Through adoption of the Cluster Approach, the IASC has sought to improve preparedness and response to internal displacement in humanitarian emergencies – an aim which applies equally to all internally displaced persons (IDPs), regardless of the setting of their displacement. Yet to date, whether by design or inadvertently, the humanitarian response to internal displacement has largely remained focused on IDPs in camp settings.

2. Importantly, this note does not suggest that the answer lies in merely raising the level of protection and assistance to be identical with that provided in camps; rather, that disparities in the response, if warranted or unavoidable, should be adopted only on a rational basis and only after a clear assessment of needs and recognition of specific operational contexts.

3. UNHCR has prepared this note as global lead of the Protection Cluster Working Group (PCWG) and the emergency shelter and camp coordination/management clusters in situations of conflict-induced displacement. It has done so in recognition that successful protection and assistance to IDPs, whether camp-based or not, depends upon the active contribution of all actors engaged in a coordinated humanitarian response. Thus it is hoped that all interested agencies will participate in this discussion and the formulation of an appropriate strategy or response.

**Issue statement**

4. Of the 26 million conflict-induced IDPs in the world today, only a minority reside in camps. Humanitarian agencies agree that camps are, in principle, the “least favoured” environment for IDPs in most contexts, not least due to the risk of institutionalizing displacement within an artificial setting.

5. The majority of IDPs instead find shelter, support and security outside camps. In some countries, going to a camp is not a choice for IDPs: the absence of camps reflects national or local government policy. In other situations, IDPs live in a diverse mix of camp and non-camp based settings.

6. IDPs may choose to stay with host communities, residing with families or in homes and on land owned by others. These host communities – whether in urban, semi-rural or rural

---

1 While this note is addressed principally to IASC members, it is predicated on the principle that humanitarian intervention in situations of internal displacement should reinforce the performance, responsibility and accountability of state authorities, whether national, provincial or local.

2 UNHCR, IDPs: On the run in their own land, http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c146.html. Although this note addresses the response to conflict-induced internal displacement, the observations and analysis may be similar for displacement due to natural disasters.

3 The term “camps” refers collectively to all types of camps and communal settings covered by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (the “CCCM Cluster”). This includes “planned camps”, “self-settled camps”, “collective centres”, and “transit centres”, each as defined by the CCCM Cluster.

areas - can be highly supportive to the displaced, sometimes due to extended family links or common ethnic or tribal affiliation. In other cases however, IDPs may be marginalized, shunned by a community that may physically surround them but offers little or no support, or alternatively forced to remain in isolated and inhospitable areas away from any community.

7. Disaggregated data on the type of location where IDPs reside is not available. Although a meaningful characteristic, no humanitarian actor currently monitors and reports global IDP statistics in this fashion. Information is provided only in broad terms:

7.1. Of the 14.4 million IDPs “protected and assisted by UNHCR” as of 1 January 2009 in 25 countries, breakdown per type of location is only available for 8.2 million persons (58%). Of these, 1.9 million (23%) live in camps or collective centres, both in rural and urban areas; 2 million (24%) live in urban areas outside of camps or collective centres and a further 4.3 million (53%) live in rural areas, also outside of camps or collective centres.5

7.2. Of the 54 countries monitored by IDMC, “at least half of these countries have no or very few camps or collective centres for IDPs.”6

The question emerging from this overview is whether IDP camps constitute an answer to the challenge of internal displacement or whether they are part of the problem, whether or not the services provided in camps constitute a pull factor increasing displacement, discouraging solutions and undermining traditional coping mechanisms. The argument for this is strong and agencies increasingly concur that camps are a last resort, an option to use when no other option is appropriate.

Factors skewing assistance and attention toward camps

8. The humanitarian community’s commitment to ensure comprehensive support to all internally displaced populations is influenced, in practice, by a variety of factors. While some of these are easy to rectify, others are less apparent, more pervasive and more intractable.

9. Experience suggests that disproportionate attention may be given to camp settings not by design, but due to contextual factors:

- The greater visibility of those living in a clearly defined location often provides easily quantifiable evidence of needs;
- Service delivery islogistically easier in camps and less costly; and
- Camp-based life enables community mobilization for better assistance.

10. Where operations reach IDPs outside camps, such interventions are often one-time or frontloaded during the initial phase of displacement. IDPs in camps thus retain more regular attention from humanitarian agencies than IDPs outside camps.

11. Several equally important factors are less immediately apparent:

11.1. Where humanitarian access is prevented or severely constrained due to insecurity (e.g. Afghanistan, DRC, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen), humanitarian actors may logically focus on the areas of highest population concentration, notably in camps,

---

5 UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Information is not indicated on the location of the balance of 6.10 million IDPs.
6 IDMC, Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2008, Geneva, April 2009, p. 16. “Although camp settings may offer easier opportunities for regular provision of assistance, the majority of the IDPs are not in camp-like situations where registration is the normal practice.” [Emphasis added]. See also, ICRC, ICRC calls for more action to help internally displaced people outside camps, 2009 http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/displacement-news-121109 (“The ICRC drew attention to the fact that most displaced people do not end up in camps but are taken in by host communities and families.”)
whenever they can deploy field missions. UN restrictions on staff and partner movements, and security clearance and escort procedures, contribute to this trend.

11.2. IDPs outside camps may disperse among other internal or economic migrants as well as host populations. Their reasons for moving can be mixed and involve persecution, conflict, insecurity in areas of origin, work opportunities, or availability of facilities and services. Movement towards towns and cities may be seasonal, reflecting agricultural cycles or opportunities for work. Isolating forced displacement from other forms of internal migration in these situations is complex.

11.3. International attention is often immediately and effectively captured by media footage of IDP camps, and the suffering apparent within. When operations depend on donor attention, some humanitarian agencies may feel obliged to highlight a visible presence in camp environments. Donor earmarking to camps reinforces this tendency.

11.4. For non-camp IDPs, no coordination structure exists similar to the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM). Therefore, the principles of the CCM, including:

- ensuring a well-planned and coordinated delivery of services based on the participation of displaced communities;
- comprehensive and continual assessment of needs across all sectors; and
- monitoring the fair and rational delivery of services;

may not be consistently applied to non-camp populations.

12. Admittedly, certain circumstances or contexts may argue for more limited engagement with IDPs outside camps:

12.1. Host family arrangements, dispersed settlements and use of rented accommodation may signal functioning coping mechanisms by IDPs and displacement-affected communities; humanitarian interventions may be limited in order not to disturb or discourage such coping mechanisms.

12.2. IDPs may consciously remain outside camps precisely to avoid being visible as IDPs. The visibility of humanitarian workers in non-camp communities may inadvertently expose IDPs to increased protection risks.

12.3. There are sometimes compelling reasons to prioritize attention within camps. IDPs may be in a camp because they lack other options, whether due to absence of resources or family networks. National or local authorities may establish camps in response to overwhelming numbers, security imperatives, or a lack of absorption capacity within local communities. IDPs themselves sometimes spontaneously establish camps, whether in an effort to preserve their communities or as a means of obtaining security in numbers, particularly when relations with surrounding communities are tense.

13. Yet regardless of the original reason for disparate attention to those outside camps, even the most effective and resilient of coping mechanisms of displacement-affected communities tend to degrade over time as resources dwindle. Thus, even where a conscious avoidance of engagement with IDPs in such communities at the early stages of displacement is arguably warranted, it is seldom justified in the long term.

---

7 The CCM Cluster defines its responsibilities as not applying to host family situations. See http://oneresponse.info/GlobalClusters/Camp%20Coordination%20Management/Pages/default.aspx

8 In contrast to refugee situations, IDPs often remain within proximity to the armed groups or other elements that provoked their flight.
Addressing the imbalance: humanitarian response to date

14. At the global level, several inter-agency initiatives have begun to address the challenges of assisting IDPs outside camps, with attention to guidance in identification, profiling and assistance:

14.1. The Global Protection Cluster and the CCCM Cluster participated in the drafting of *Guidance on Profiling Internally Displaced Persons.* "IDP profiling" provides estimates of numbers, locations and situations of IDPs through use of various survey techniques. It is most relevant to situations where registration is difficult – such as when IDPs are dispersed – or when individual-based registration or identification is inadvisable. Profiling enables humanitarian actors to prioritize interventions and target areas hosting the largest number and the most vulnerable. DRC, IDMC, UNFPA and UNHCR have initiated a project to support field operations from all humanitarian agencies as well as to continue standard-setting on IDP profiling.


15. At the field level, recent experiences reaching IDPs outside camps may provide examples of good practice appropriate for replication elsewhere.

15.1. In Colombia, where 3 to 4 million IDPs are widely dispersed, almost none are in camps or collective centres. Several protection actors have increased their capacity to analyze public policy and to advocate, including before the Constitutional Court, for the realization of basic rights and improved access to services for IDPs regardless of location. At the same time, partners have established a broad net of mobile outreach teams for the provision of civil documentation to IDPs, wherever they are located. International actors have also urged government policymakers not to emphasize the construction of permanent housing for those currently displaced, but rather to strengthen utilities and social services infrastructure to displacement-affected communities.

15.2. In Yemen, the Shelter and CCCM clusters merged and enlarged to facilitate a comprehensive approach to the delivery of shelter and non-food items to IDPs, whether in or outside camps. Similarly, the Protection/Education Cluster agencies prioritize the establishment of IDP support centres outside camps (including in cities) in addition to those inside camps. These centres serve as information and programme delivery points for IDPs and communities, and serve as hubs for mobile outreach teams.

15.3. In the Philippines, a participatory protection assessment was tailored to identify the specific needs of persons displaced by floods and living outside camps. Thus informed, the Protection Cluster has combined high-level advocacy on policy instruments with local-level initiatives, such as NGOs leading field visits for Government social workers to identify special needs among the non-camp population.

15.4. In DRC, shelter interventions in the Kivus specifically address protection risks in host families, as some of the CCCM cluster’s management concepts are being expanded and applied to the benefit of those living outside camps. Other clusters are also giving more priority to IDPs in host families in their responses.

15.5. In Puntland, Somalia, humanitarian actors have used sporadic humanitarian access to target the one-time establishment or enlargement of basic infrastructure in

displacement-affected communities, rather than attempting the construction and on-going support of IDP camps.

15.6. In Sri Lanka, agencies advocated for smaller settlements rather than formal and sizeable camps in displacement areas in the North during the conflict. The rationale was that settling groups of 20-30 families in existing villages would reduce the need for large-scale structural humanitarian intervention: existing service infrastructure (schools, health posts, markets) already existed in most villages and only needed reinforcement or upgrading, with added benefits to the local population. Should IDPs ultimately opt to remain in their place of displacement, local integration would be eased where such upgrades had been supported. At the same time, humanitarian interventions were tailored to the specific but potentially different needs of those in camps, those in collective centres, and those in displacement-affected communities, to ensure an even-handed approach. Shelter assistance strategies -- including the provision of community-based assistance to those hosting the displaced -- aimed to minimize tensions between IDPs and displacement-affected communities.

**Addressing the imbalance: going forward**

16. The following is a provisional, non-exhaustive list proposed for discussion and action by IASC members:

16.1. *More and disaggregated data.* Recognizing that no humanitarian actor consistently collects information on the type of location of IDPs, more concerted attention needs to be paid to identify the scale of IDP populations living outside camps as well as variations in their living and protection environments.

16.2. *Assessment and monitoring encompassing all IDPs.* Particularly—but not only—in an emergency or difficult security environment, assessment teams can more easily reach IDPs in camps. Because assistance and protection interventions normally flow to the groups earlier assessed, ensuring that IDPs outside camps are included in assessments is a first step to ensuring they may benefit equally. This may require:

16.2.1. For IDPs staying outside camps and without the assistance of displacement-affected communities (for instance, in isolated rural areas): particular efforts to understand the reasons why they do not enter or remain in camps or closer within displacement-affected communities, and more crucially, what needs to be done to facilitate more receptive communities.

16.2.2. For IDPs within displacement-affected communities: assessment of the character and stability of the IDP-community relationship, as well as the protection and assistance needs of the communities themselves. Such an assessment would facilitate protection and assistance interventions to pre-empt or reduce community tensions.

16.2.3. For IDPs in urban environments: as urban IDPs often mix with economic migrants and the urban poor, effective means to overcome the “invisibility” of displacement and its effects. For both formal and informal assessments, one such means is the use of community outreach volunteers from among the IDP community. Stronger links between humanitarian and development actors also would be particularly effective here.

16.3. *Delivery platforms de-linked from camps.* Access to humanitarian actors and the assistance and interventions they provide should not be contingent upon IDPs coming to camps. Equal attention should be given to establishing physical premises outside camps (including community centres in urban areas of high IDP concentration) where agencies can interact with and provide services to IDPs. Similarly, multi-disciplinary mobile outreach teams -- including volunteers from

---

11 Due to the escalation of the conflict in 2008-2009, only few of these settlements could be established.
among the IDPs themselves -- can effectively enlarge the zone of physical presence of humanitarian actors. Further, new technologies – such as provision of protection-related information via text messaging or cash assistance via bank cards – render physical location irrelevant and can be much more efficient than physical distribution.

16.4. An IASC cluster architecture that more fully embraces IDPs outside camps. The CCCM cluster expressly excludes IDPs outside camps from its area of responsibility. Recalling that the CCCM was itself a supplementary structure to address a gap, the IASC Principals may consider amending the current cluster structure to redress this gap in attention. This could entail an enlargement of the terms of reference of the CCCM cluster (and its consequent re-naming) or the creation of an additional coordination structure adapting the CCCM approach to more dispersed populations.

16.5. Empowering and capacitating displacement-affected communities and local/provincial government. Instead of investing in camp infrastructure, in many contexts, similar attention and resources could be better directed to increasing the absorption capacity and resilience of displacement-affected communities. Attention to the local governmental structure and services that “touch” IDPs and displacement-affected communities may include both physical resources and capacity-building. Such support is strengthened by appropriate and enduring linkage to longer term development planning and support (e.g., national development policies and the UNDAF). Whether these are resources to improve and enlarge community potable water sources, local primary schools or provincial offices issuing civil documentation, such initiatives benefit communities during active displacement periods, the return phase as well as local integration alike, and ultimately help to reduce tensions between displacement-affected communities and IDPs.

16.6. Increased use of community-based networking. Establishing a network of contacts among communities increases the capacity of humanitarian agencies to be informed at all times of the situation in all areas, even where not directly present. Information from reliable community sources will enable better prioritization of field missions to areas where they are most urgently needed. In doing so, due caution needs to be exercised not to expose communities to protection risks or to over solicit them through multiple parallel, and potentially conflicting, sector/cluster specific networks.

16.7. Use of mass media, new technology and other information dissemination tools to reach dispersed populations. The traditional model of “camp meeting with megaphone” is irrelevant to IDPs outside camps. The increasing penetration of mobile phones, radio services, satellite television, as well as the internet enables quick relay of information to dispersed populations, for any purpose, including government or humanitarian programmes, registration procedures or conditions in areas of origin. Lessons can be learned from recent information dissemination practices utilized with refugees, where humanitarian agencies used mass SMS to instantly inform large numbers of dispersed refugees.

16.8. Objective criteria guiding when, and when not, to establish and assist camps. The elaboration of objective criteria to guide when and when not to establish camps -- and when to close them -- will be useful globally as well as within country or local humanitarian response strategies. If elaborated within the IASC, such criteria can support a consistent and unified humanitarian approach.

16.9. Attention to the advantages of smaller settlements. Large camps may provide visible targets for armed attack within conflict situations, especially aerial bombardment. Armed forces and armed groups may also target large concentrations of uprooted and vulnerable persons for military recruitment, including children. A policy favouring smaller settlements, when appropriate, may facilitate humanitarian agencies’ engagement to improve conditions in self-settled camps, further reducing the need for IDPs to displace again to larger planned
camps later. Small settlements in existing villages may benefit from infrastructure and services already in place. Assistance interventions in such cases would naturally benefit both host and displaced communities to reinforce coexistence. The smaller settlement approach, however, is not appropriate in all cases:

- Where the community is hostile to displaced populations, smaller settlements may expose IDPs to harassment and assaults. Larger camps may provide more security and can be better monitored by humanitarian agencies and civil law enforcement bodies.

- Where the terrain poses particularly arduous logistical challenges, reaching scattered settlements may not be feasible for humanitarian agencies. Similarly, the establishment of support structures such as primary health clinics may require, from an efficiency perspective, a minimum population served. Broad operating principles could usefully be developed for such situations.

16.10. Increased use of cash grants. Research and evaluations by UN, NGOs and donors have analyzed the pros and cons of cash grants in humanitarian responses. When used with safeguards, the use of grants, in cash or through mobile phone or debit cards transfers, can be an essential part of protection and assistance and has been welcomed by beneficiaries as a more dignified means of receiving support. Cash grants can empower individuals, communities and the private market. They can effectively assist populations in remote or inaccessible areas. There are indeed risks associated with cash grants: they can give rise to fraud, misuse, or expose recipients to extortion and exploitation. Further, where IDPs are not already registered or otherwise individually identified, their use may be impractical. Where used, cash grants should be designed to manage and reduce risks and allow for close monitoring.

16.11. Updating emergency preparedness initiatives to reduce camp bias. Greater attention should be given to IDPs outside camps during contingency planning, emergency response training and capacity-building of staff. For example, emergency training exercises and response guidelines could better elaborate on how to reach IDPs outside camps, as well as when camps should be established, and when they should be avoided.

16.12. Learn from experience. If the general approach to date has favoured camp populations, this has not been true of all organizations or all operations, particularly local NGOs who have, of necessity, adapted to the context in which they operated. The IASC and clusters can be a valuable network for collecting and disseminating examples of good practice from agencies working with IDPs outside of camp environments.

**Conclusion**

17. While effective practices exist with regard to interventions in favour of IDPs outside camps, there is room for substantial improvement and focus by humanitarian agencies as well as national and local actors. Challenges ahead will include finding ways to differentiate humanitarian responses to IDPs based on the various types of non-camp locations. Another challenge will be to do so without compromising the provision of protection and assistance to those living in camps. This objective is a compelling one, and one undoubtedly shared by all IASC members: equality of humanitarian attention to the internally displaced without discrimination, defined not by physical location but by rights and needs.

UNHCR
April 2010