

First Regional Conference on Internal Displacement in West Africa
Abuja, Nigeria
26 – 28 April 2006

Meeting recommendations and summary of discussions

The presentations and discussions reflected the concern for the plight of IDPs shared by governments, organizations and individuals across West Africa. There is significant momentum to address internal displacement issues in Africa; this momentum is reflected in initiatives such as the African Union's efforts to develop a legal framework on internal displacement, and the creation of a protocol on IDPs in the Great Lakes sub-region. Participants underlined the severity of the internal displacement crisis in Africa, a continent with over 12 million IDPs. There are currently more than one million IDPs in West Africa, and there remains significant risk of further large-scale displacement in the sub-region.

Participants recognized that internal displacement in West Africa, while mainly occurring in the context of armed conflict, is the result of diverse and inter-related causes such as natural disasters, development projects, impoverishment and food insecurity. Internal displacement in West Africa is often closely linked with refugee issues, as well as with problems of poverty and governance. Although ethnicity and religion are often cited as reasons for conflict and internal displacement in West Africa, these factors are often manipulated to serve political interests, masking the genesis of displacement in inequitable access to land and other resources.

Although there is a serious lack of reliable data on internal displacement in West Africa, it is clear that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of internal displacement in the sub-region. Many West Africans have been forced from their homes numerous times, often for long periods. The internally displaced often face discrimination, and are unable to access food, education and health care. Too often, they lack basic documentation and the ability to exercise their political rights, such as the right to vote. Protection needs in the sub-region are severe, as displacement has been used as a tactic of war, and IDPs have been subjected to armed attacks and sexual abuse.

There was strong consensus amongst participants regarding the importance of acknowledging and responding to the vulnerabilities facing the internally displaced. Equally, participants concurred that national governments bear primary responsibility for IDPs, who are entitled to their full rights as persons who remain in their own countries. The speakers underlined the importance of addressing the root causes of internal displacement, as well as the prevention, management and resolution of internal displacement crises. National human rights institutions, civil society organizations, international agencies and donors play an indispensable role in supporting national responsibility for internal displacement, as illustrated by the presentations from many of our speakers.

Participants recognized the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement as the key normative framework for preventing, responding to and resolving internal displacement, and discussed the challenges associated with integrating the Guiding Principles into national laws and policies. The discussions were enriched by explanations of the policy development processes underway in countries such as Nigeria.

In addition to these issues, participants addressed the protection challenges facing the sub-region, and the obstacles to durable solutions to internal displacement, which range from the devastation of infrastructure and the proliferation of landmines to the demobilization of combatants and the provision of reliable information on conditions in return communities.

The following recommendations may be drawn from our discussions over the past days; they are divided up according to the relevant level of responsibility, national, regional or international.

Recommendations for ECOWAS governments

The meeting underscored that the primary responsibility for addressing internal displacement rests with national authorities. The Framework for National Responsibility was presented as a reference and a tool to assist Governments in carrying out this responsibility by identifying key measures to be taken to address internal displacement. The subsequent recommendations were raised for follow-up in the ECOWAS sub-region:

- **Promote and disseminate the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.** Acknowledged and accepted as the standard norm and framework for addressing internal displacement within the ECOWAS sub-region, the *Guiding Principles* should be widely disseminated and promoted across West Africa. Personnel of all relevant organizations and institutions should be trained in the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. Efforts should also be made to popularize international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law in the sub-region, and ensure that IDPs themselves are aware of their rights.
- **Develop national laws and policies on internal displacement based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.** National laws, policies and plans of action should be based on the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* and should be developed with the support of the highest levels of government. They should be developed through a process of broad consultation and reflect a consensus at the national level on how best to address the particular protection and assistance needs of internally displaced persons. All causes and phases of displacement should be addressed.
- **Implement legal obligations relating to the internally displaced.** States should ratify, implement and monitor international, regional and sub-regional human rights and humanitarian instruments relating to internal displacement. States should implement the recommendations of fact-finding missions of the

international, regional and sub-regional human rights mechanisms related to internal displacement, such as the Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa and the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons.

- **Build the capacity of national institutions and civil society organizations to address internal displacement.** Capacity building should go beyond basic training to address issues of institutional development including strategic planning, auditing, resource mobilization, public/private partnerships, and the effective use of communications tools.
- **Address the root causes of internal displacement.** Activities should be developed to prevent and tackle the root causes of internal displacement. These activities should address reconciliation and peace-building, poverty alleviation, accountable governance and natural disaster mitigation. Early warning systems should also be developed.
- **Engage all stakeholders, in particular IDPs, in decision-making and implementation processes regarding internal displacement.** Decision-making processes and the implementation of programs on internal displacement should involve the active consultation and participation of the full range of stakeholders, and particularly IDPs themselves. IDPs should also have the opportunity to take part in deliberations on internal displacement at all levels.
- **Strengthen efforts to address the specific needs of IDPs with increased vulnerability.** Among internally displaced persons, women, children, the elderly, and the disabled may have special needs which should be identified and addressed during all phases of displacement and in all contexts, including camps and urban environments.
- **Ensure protection and assistance programs address the needs of host communities.** Host communities make invaluable contributions to assisting the internally displaced. Responses to internal displacement must take into account not only the needs of IDPs, but also the concerns of the families and communities that provide them shelter.
- **Ensure clear and effective coordination among stakeholders.** Organizations at the governmental, non-governmental, regional and international levels should coordinate their activities to ensure a comprehensive approach to internal displacement that avoids the duplication of efforts and the inefficient use of resources. To this end, each ECOWAS state should identify a national focal point with responsibility for internal displacement issues.

- **Facilitate humanitarian access to the internally displaced.** States should ensure that civil society partners and international agencies have safe and unhindered access to internally displaced populations requiring protection and assistance.
- **Improve data collection on internal displacement in West Africa.** Relevant state authorities, in conjunction with civil society organizations, academic institutions and international agencies should collaborate to improve methods of gathering, analysing and disseminating data on the location, condition and needs of IDPs and the communities in which they live. When appropriate, the internally displaced should be registered in conditions that do not threaten their security or undermine their privacy.
- **Provide durable solutions to internal displacement.** A comprehensive approach to durable solutions is required that addresses the original causes of displacement as well as the vulnerability of IDPs and their neighbors. In order to ensure the sustainability of return, resettlement and reintegration, post-conflict transition programs should be implemented, as well as land tenure reform and employment generation programs. In particular, youth unemployment should be addressed and skills training provided as necessary.
- **Respect the right of the internally displaced to freedom of choice regarding durable solutions.** Internally displaced persons have the right to choose whether to return, resettle or integrate locally. In order to make an informed choice, the displaced must be provided with accurate and comprehensive information about places of return, resettlement and reintegration, including the security situation and availability and adequacy of basic services and infrastructure.
- **Seek and apportion adequate resources for internal displacement.** Human and material resources are required in order for states to meet their obligations towards internally displaced persons. Allocations for IDP programs should be made in national budgets, and opportunities for public-private funding partnerships should be explored. International donors should provide consistent and reliable support.
- **Enhance protection and empowerment of IDP women.** While displaced many IDP women develop valuable professional and livelihood skills, particularly as heads of households. Greater efforts are required to ensure that IDP women can preserve and continue to develop these skills following return, resettlement and family reunification. Domestic violence against IDP women and the health and psychosocial needs of the survivors of sexual abuse also require increased attention from national authorities and NGOs.
- **Improve protection and access to durable solutions for IDP children.** Increased support should be directed towards family reunification programs to lessen the risk of recruitment of IDP children into armed forces. Provisions on displaced children should be integrated into national child protection laws, and the

ECOWAS Peer Review Mechanism should be applied to promote the protection of IDP children. Durable solutions should be presented in a way that children can understand, and support should be provided in return and resettlement communities to ensure that displaced children are able to integrate without risk of abuse, discrimination or exploitation. Specialized training should be provided to improve services for displaced children, particularly child combatants.

- **Harmonize responses to internal displacement across the sub-region.** Inconsistency in the implementation of programs for IDPs and war victims in West Africa erodes the sustainability of return and resettlement, and can undermine disarmament and demobilization processes. Efforts should be made to ensure the equitable treatment of IDPs and other vulnerable populations across the sub-region.
- **Promote IDPs' access to justice and reconciliation processes.** Legal redress and reconciliation is essential to promote social cohesion and the sustainability of returns. IDPs' access to national justice systems should be facilitated and every effort should be made to combat impunity for human rights violations. Community-based approaches to reconciliation such as cooperative economic projects should also be pursued.
- **Disseminate and implement the recommendations of the First Conference on Internal Displacement in West Africa at upcoming sub-regional fora.** ECOWAS Member States should ensure the conference recommendations are disseminated appropriately, including within ECOWAS mechanisms, particularly at upcoming Ministerial meetings and at the Africa Union meeting on internal displacement scheduled to take place in Burkina Faso in June 2006.

Recommendations for the ECOWAS sub-region

Sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS can play an important role in reinforcing and supporting national responsibility for internal displacement. This requires the dedication of not only the ECOWAS Secretariat, but also the Member States. With this in mind, the following recommendations were drawn from discussions:

- **Strengthen the engagement of ECOWAS on issues of internal displacement.** In this context, ECOWAS should place the issue of internal displacement on the agenda of upcoming Ministerial and Heads of State meetings. Member states should consider the development of a protocol, declaration or plan of action to address internal displacement in West Africa. Such efforts should be coordinated with the African Union and linked to donor initiatives, and support should be provided to ensure implementation. In addition, ECOWAS should encourage Member States to create emergency response mechanisms and focal points for internal displacement, and should facilitate the development of networks working on issues of internal displacement.

- **Reinforce the capacity of ECOWAS to advocate on issues of internal displacement.** ECOWAS should appoint a focal point dedicated to addressing issues of internal displacement in West Africa. This person may be an eminent dignitary responsible for raising awareness of displacement issues, investigating situations of displacement, and promoting protection and assistance for IDPs in West Africa.
- **Encourage ratification and implementation of relevant ECOWAS Protocols.** ECOWAS has developed various norms and standards relevant to internal displacement, including the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement, the ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism on Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolutions, Peacekeeping and Security, and the Supplementary Protocol on Good Governance. State commitment to these Protocols should be consolidated through universal ratification. ECOWAS should undertake regular monitoring of the implementation of these instruments.
- **Encourage stronger inter-regional dialogue on issues of internal displacement.** In particular, national human rights institutions from across Africa should have the opportunity to meet and compare experiences in addressing internal displacement.
- **Train the ECOWAS Stand-By Force on issues of internal displacement.** ECOWAS has recognized that training on the Guiding Principles should be undertaken. Training of the force at all levels should take place before deployment, and reinforced regularly.

International recommendations

Participants welcomed the changes that have been made in the UN system over the course of the past year to enhance sectoral accountability for internal displacement, but underlined the need for more consistent and predictable support from the international community, including donors. While suggestions were raised regarding the establishment of a UN agency specifically dedicated to IDPs, it was also recognized that the problem of internal displacement is so complex and of such a magnitude that it requires the specialized expertise and input of a range of different agencies.

Recommendations raised for the international community include:

- **Integrate protection issues into the design of peace operations and strengthen the capacity of peacekeepers to respond to internal displacement.** The protection and assistance needs of the internally displaced should form part of any intervention strategy. Peacekeepers, police and security officials should receive training in the *Guiding Principles* before and during deployment. Monitoring is essential to ensure that codes of conduct banning the exploitation of the displaced by peacekeeping forces are rigorously enforced.
- **Ensure that international interventions on behalf of IDPs do not promote dependence but foster self-reliance and community sustainability.** Local

activities should include the establishment of community-based early warning mechanisms.

- **Partner with the media to draw attention to the plight of IDPs.** Media coverage should be sought to raise awareness of the challenges IDPs face in West Africa, and to leverage greater financial support for assistance and protection efforts.