Building solutions for the world's 83 million internally displaced persons:

Recent lessons on how

IOM
UN MIGRATION

Publisher: International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons
P.O. Box 17
1211 Geneva 19
Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111
Fax: +41 22 798 6150
Email: hq@iom.int
Website: www.iom.int

Cover photo: Displaced people wait to receive aid from IOM in TVET site. © IOM 2018/Ollivia HEADON

Required citation: Piper, R. (2025). Building solutions for the world's 83 million internally displaced persons: Recent lessons on how. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.

ISBN 978-92-9278-016-6 (PDF)

PUB2025/038/EL

Building solutions for the world's 83 million internally displaced persons:

Recent lessons on how

IOM
UN MIGRATION

Building solutions for the world's 83 million internally displaced persons: **Recent lessons on how**

Robert Piper[1]

Introduction

As resources are slashed across the United Nations and wider aid system, there has perhaps never been as high a premium on finding lasting solutions for people caught in protracted crises. Emergency aid – humanitarian assistance – needs to be protected for short-term interventions that alleviate extreme suffering and vulnerability. Affected individuals and communities need to be supported to return quickly towards greater self-reliance, under the active engagement and leadership of their own governments. This implies the right kind of funding and policy support designed to reinforce government leadership and systems. The case for a quicker pivot towards such a "solutions approach" is especially compelling for the world's internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are among the world's most vulnerable people and need a more effective response from local and international actors alike.

IDPs are persons forced from their homes by factors outside their control and seek safety still within their own country, unlike refugees who have crossed a border. This phenomenon has increased dramatically over recent years – from around 24 million in 1992, when the then United Nations Secretary-General appointed a first Representative on Internally Displaced Persons,[2] to over 83 million today.[3]

The causes of internal displacement are multiple. Conflict and sudden-onset disasters triggered by natural hazards are the primary drivers, but criminal violence and slow-onset disaster events like

[1] Robert Piper is formerly the Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Solutions to Internal Displacement (2022–2024). The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations or any other organizations with which the author is affiliated. Comments and feedback provided by Prof. Walter Kälin, Mona Folkesson, William Chemaly and Marie McAuliffe are also gratefully acknowledged. Any errors or omissions remain the author's nevertheless.

[2] According to an independent review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) response to internal displacement (p. 9), there were 24 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 1992. See Lewis Sida, Erin Mooney, Oliver Lough, Leen Fouad, Kevin Kennedy, Tina Nelis, Abeer Hashem Al-Absi, Janvier Koko Kirusha, Fekadu Adugna Tufa, Raul Chambote, Mustapha Alhassan and Neem Institute, and Francesca Randazzo Eisemann, *Independent Review of the IASC Response to Internal Displacement* (London, ODI, 2024).

[3] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025* (Geneva, IDMC, 2025).

natural resource depletion, sea-level rise and desertification can also play a part. Adding to this pattern of growth is the increasingly *protracted* nature of displacement; some of today's IDPs in Colombia, for example, have been displaced for more than 20 years. Others in Nigeria, the Syrian Arab Republic or the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been displaced for more than 10 years. Hence, while the number of *new* displacements each year is increasing, the fact that more and more *existing* IDPs are also not finding solutions adds to this pattern of growth.

Conflict- and disaster-driven displacements unfold differently. While these patterns may be changing as climate and conflict increasingly intersect, generally speaking most disaster displacement tends to be relatively short-term (i.e. measured in months), as compared to most conflict displacement, which is more likely to become protracted (i.e. measured in years).

Estimated international humanitarian spending on internal displacement has been around USD 5 billion annually over recent years.[4] This number is likely conservative and does not include assistance to host communities to mitigate the impact of IDP arrivals. It also does not include spending by governments of affected countries, which, in the case of Colombia and Iraq, for example, can be substantial (in excess of USD 1 billion annually in the case of Colombia over recent years).[5]

These escalating numbers – of affected persons, impact, costs and spending – moved 57 Member States to approach the United Nations Secretary-General in 2019 to encourage him to commission a special panel to look into the issue. Led by former Vice President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini and former President of the African Development Bank Donald Kaberuka, an eight-person High Level Panel on Internal Displacement looked at the issue afresh in 2020–2021 and made a set of recommendations on how the approach generally to internal displacement needed to change to keep up with what was clearly a growing and morphing challenge.[6]

The United Nations itself integrated most of the independent Panel's recommendations into its own Action Agenda on Internal Displacement,[7] which it launched in mid-2022. The Action Agenda contained 33 commitments by 20+ United Nations agencies across three axes of action – prevention of new displacement, responding to displacement when it occurs and solutions to protracted displacement. While the Action Agenda was a set of United Nations commitments, not an intergovernmentally endorsed programme of action, it also drew on the Panel's findings to make recommendations to Member States – affected countries and donors alike.

[4] This rough estimate was calculated by my Office, the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement (OSA), and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) based on extrapolations from humanitarian response plans' spending and IDP targeting over the past five years.

[5] A new IDP "tag" was introduced by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in its financial tracking system in 2023, which will hopefully greatly help gather more robust data on internal displacement spending in the coming years, as it becomes more systematically applied by donors to their data sets.

[6] United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: An Agenda for the Future (New York, United Nations, 2021).

[7] OSA, The United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement: Follow-Up to the Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (New York, United Nations, June 2022).

I was asked by the Secretary-General to lead a small, temporary, inter-agency team to catalyse action around these multiple commitments and engagements to ensure the momentum was not lost. As the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement, my primary responsibility was to operationalize the Panel's recommendations linked to reversing protracted displacement. Working closely with a group of United Nations agencies and the World Bank in particular, the mandate was nevertheless also an opportunity to help ensure there was momentum around the broader prevention and response commitments of the Action Agenda as well.[8]

Our office, the Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement (OSA), closed at the end of 2024 as planned – it was intended to be a catalyst not a permanent new entity. This article contains some reflections at the end of the mandate about the nature of internal displacement and some of the key lessons we learned, good and bad, over those 30 months. Reflecting the mandate, the focus here is on the **solutions** dimension of the task – that is, how to break this worrying pattern of *protracted* displacement. And specifically, what we have learned about the challenges of operationalizing many important ideas which we may "know to be true" but have proven hard to implement in practice. This article is not intended to be a self-assessment of what the Office did or did not achieve during its brief existence.[9]

A historically overlooked group

The issue of internal displacement has been, historically, chronically overlooked. The High-Level Panel's final report title – "Shining the Light on Internal Displacement" – underlined this reality.

Refugees are a substantially smaller number than IDPs among the world's overall "*forcibly* displaced" persons (less than half of the number of IDPs today) yet are widely acknowledged internationally and much more visible politically and to the general public. Migrants are not technically "forcibly displaced", but as another key category of people on the move, they also typically receive much more attention, internationally, than IDPs. The scale of displacement numbers during World War II placed refugees prominently on the international agenda and has surely and rightfully ingrained the refugee issue in our psyche ever since. But not internal displacement, as such.

Why this relative obscurity?

The sheer breadth of IDP situations may be part of the explanation. Short-term, long-term, conflict or disaster displacement can present very different scenarios, once we get beyond the initial physical event of the displacement itself. As a "body" of more than 83 million people overall, IDPs are not a homogeneous group, and the overall scale of the challenge may thus not be felt so acutely.

[8] For an overview of implementation of the Action Agenda at two and a half years, see OSA, The UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement: Progress during the mandate of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement 2022–2024 (n.p., OSA, 2024).

[9] A number of observers have already published assessments of the work of the Office. See for example: Steven Goldfinch, "The UN Office on Internal Displacement closed: Now what?" Center For Global Development (CGD) Note 386 (CGD, January 2025); Caitlin Sturridge, Kerrie Holloway and Sarah Miller, "What next for internal displacement? Four priority actions for 2025", Expert comment (ODI, January 2025); Nadine Knapp and Anne Koch, "The Legacy of the UN Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement. How to Maintain Political Momentum after the Mandate Expires", German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP), SWP Comment No. 51 (Berlin, SWP, November 2024).

Data constraints also contribute to the visibility challenge to some extent. Overall, tracking of numbers and profiling of specific populations has gotten better and better over recent years, thanks to organizations like IOM, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the Joint IDP Profiling Service and REACH. But important data gaps exist that are key to build a clear narrative around internal displacement and enable the necessary detailed analysis. For example, we have little granular data that distinguishes between protracted versus the recently displaced, or the different impact of slow- versus rapid-onset disasters. Better data on "exits" from displacement and on financing overall would help bring greater clarity to the issue. Data sets that identify the different status of IDPs versus non-displaced populations are also critical to help identify whether and how IDPs need purpose-built policy responses – a key gap the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)–World Bank Joint Data Centre is starting to address. Beyond data gaps, the splicing of different pieces of data by different actors to reinforce their own particular mandates does not help reinforce a consistent narrative – a common complaint from donors at the country level was their confusion with similar but not identical numbers coming from different parts of the United Nations on internal displacement numbers.

Government sensitivities around internal displacement surely also play a part in the relatively low visibility of this issue. Countries deliberately displacing people in their own countries (Myanmar for example) are, needless to say, not going to promote this issue internationally. Even where displacement might be arguably the unintended consequence of government counter-insurgency measures, here too governments are often reluctant to engage internationally. Some Member States argue more generically that this is ultimately an "internal" issue (i.e. IDPs by definition do not cross a border) and hence is somehow disqualified from being discussed at the intergovernmental level, yet it is hard to understand how IDPs are intrinsically different in this respect to say indigenous persons, or women, or disabled persons – all of whom are discussed in dedicated intergovernmental forums of some kind or another. "Sensitivities" cut in another direction as well – the fact that refugees and migrants do cross borders inevitably generates a domestic political and often financial imperative in receiving countries, which very deliberately seek international attention to assist them manage the situation. Government positions are not static on the internal displacement issue either – the current Government of Colombia, for example, is an outspoken champion on internal displacement, while its immediate predecessor was more reticent on the subject.

The absence of a dedicated intergovernmental institutional home and legal anchor for IDPs may be a symptom or a cause of the relative lack of attention to internal displacement. Refugees and migrants have their "own" dedicated agency as it were, focused on their plight. Both have international legal frameworks that dictate their rights and the obligations of signatories to them. Both have their own "Global Compact", which provides not only a set of undertakings by signatories but also a regular intergovernmental space to discuss their situations and needs. IDPs have none of this – no agency, no global convention, no dedicated forum. The issue belongs to everyone and no one at the same time.

On the other hand, a dedicated agency for internal displacement arguably makes little sense and is not an idea seriously promoted by anyone. The 1998 United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement[10] recognized by the United Nations General Assembly as "an important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons"[11] and subsequently reflected in the regional 2009 Kampala Convention[12] also go much of the way towards a convention equivalence.[13] The absence of some kind of international forum to focus on this issue remains an obvious gap in our international architecture however. This was noted by the United Nations Secretary-General in the Action Agenda for Internal Displacement; hopefully, a 30-strong Member State "group of friends" assembled to support displacement solutions and operating out of diplomatic missions in Geneva will move this idea forward over the coming years.

A recent surge in attention brings renewed attention around protracted displacement in particular

While the issue of internal displacement has been historically overlooked, action over recent years has arguably started to reverse this trend.

The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement submitted its report in September 2021. The Panel focused especially on the increasingly protracted nature of displacement and postulated that people are much less likely to move "out" of feeling/being displaced while their situation is not comprehensively addressed. Internally displaced persons may seek to return to their place of origin, but they may also opt to integrate permanently in their place of displacement or another location in the country. Beyond physical location, "resolution" of displacement implies restoring safety and security, often as compensation for lost assets and some recourse to justice. In disaster contexts, the underlying causes of displacement may need to be addressed or they will find themselves displaced once again. In short, the process of reversing the impact of years of displacement is more often than not complex, both politically and structurally.

These observations led the Panel to its core recommendation – that governments in affected countries, above all, needed to take greater responsibility to find solutions for their own internally displaced citizens.[14] No one can substitute for that government leadership. No one else can make undertakings on behalf of a State. No one else can make the difficult political calls around issues like compensation. No one else can mobilize the longer-term policy and financing engagements necessary to address structural drivers of displacement. No one else can convene the multisectoral response required for such a complex undertaking.

[10] United Nations, Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Francis M. Deng, submitted pursuant to Commission resolution 1997/39: Addendum – Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (E/C.N.4/1998/53/Add.2 of 11 February 1998).

[11] United Nations General Assembly resolution 60/1 on the 2005 World Summit Outcome (24 October 2005), para. 132.

[12] African Union, African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) (23 October 2009).

[13] See Walter Kälin, *Internal Displacement and the Law* (Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2023).

[14] See UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement.

At the same time, the High-Level Panel reserved some of its criticism for the international community, which seems reluctant to internalize this reality as well, returning as it does to internal displacement situations with a short-term humanitarian took-kit year after year, often working through third parties on stand-alone projects rather than hand-in-hand with governments and, more often than not, tackling symptoms rather than causes.

The Panel called for a major overhaul of how the issue of internal displacement is understood and addressed therefore, with a stronger focus on government leadership and ownership, supported by a much broader coalition of actors – especially development investors like the World Bank and the African Development Bank – to assist them in their efforts.

If we remain in a primarily short-term "response" mode and fail to pivot early towards a solutions approach, the Panel argued, the number of people caught in internal displacement will only keep increasing. In addition, the Panel warned that these numbers are likely to increase exponentially with conflicts and climate-induced disasters on the rise and an increasingly toxic dynamic between these two primary drivers of displacement that will surely make solutions yet more difficult to achieve.

Government at the centre? "It's complicated."

This notion of pivoting to a government-led, development-financed solutions approach poses a number of challenges. Below are just some of the most notable.

First, as noted earlier, in some contexts, governments are deliberately displacing their own citizens and often unwilling to even discuss the issue, let alone seeking to resolve the situation responsibly and with respect for the rights of the displaced themselves. In these contexts, the notion of government leadership is obviously very problematic. This reality represents a minority of situations perhaps, but they are very real and are the most problematic contexts for the IDPs themselves and the actors seeking to help them. The work of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of the Internally Displaced Persons should be especially focused on these acute situations where accountability is the missing first step. Where governments are the perpetrators, we cannot really talk about "solutions" as such – indeed, if we do, we risk becoming instrumentalized and part of the problem.

Second, in many contexts of high displacement numbers, a government may be *willing* but not necessarily *able* to assert the necessary leadership. Pulling together a government solutions strategy for millions of IDPs requires clear policy positions and strong coordination across ministries and between capitals and regions. Implementation at scale – hundreds of thousands of houses across north-east Nigeria for example – requires robust government systems for procurement and delivery. It requires systems at the local level. Meanwhile, IDPs themselves are naturally in a hurry for solutions, and donors want quick results. This combination of factors can create a strong temptation to short-circuit government leadership – that is, drafting strategies "on behalf of", using third-party implementers, sticking to a project approach. After years of mainly humanitarian response, these well-meaning substitution reflexes are difficult to reverse.

Third, there is sometimes legitimate resistance to this pivot coming from the humanitarian community itself. Displacement settings are complex and varied. One part of the same country may be ready for government-led solutions, while another part of the country remains a humanitarian response setting with high protection needs. Furthermore, even in locations where government-led solutions are possible, this takes time; in the interim, communities may continue to face very real humanitarian needs. The humanitarian community questions whether our current systems and capacities are able to handle such nuance – humanitarian donors, for example, can be quick to declare an emergency "over" and close their emergency funding prematurely. United Nations teams may similarly not have the dexterity to operate with a different posture in different parts of the same country. Delays between development actors declaring their engagement and the organizations and development funding actually showing up can also put lives at risk, according to some observers.

It needs to be said that the way in which the intergovernmental system is organized around internal displacement does not create a particularly enabling environment for government leadership of this kind either. Today, internal displacement is largely discussed in either the humanitarian segment of the General Assembly's Third Committee or around the submission of reports by the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council or the General Assembly. There is no obvious venue where governments come as a "client", as it were, seeking support and being afforded an opportunity to articulate their institutional, policy, and financing needs and expectations, and where the development, peacebuilding and international financial institution (IFI) communities can be assembled to listen and respond collectively. This underlines the urgency of establishing some kind of forum to discuss internal displacement more comprehensively, as called for in the Action Agenda.

How did the Office go about operationalizing the Panel recommendations?[15]

The 30-month mandate of the Office was an opportunity to test how to bridge the gap between good ideas and concrete action.

The structural issues mitigating against a more joined up and effective United Nations response at least needed to be recognized upfront. For example, strategic leadership was required that transcended individual agency mandates and competition and United Nations Resident Coordinators were tasked accordingly, but Resident Coordinators needed the institutional and policy support to exercise that leadership. A relatively smaller development coordination footprint versus a humanitarian coordination footprint also historically skewed the United Nations response particularly at the local level – outside the capital – where humanitarian assets can often be found but development actors are much fewer and far between. Heavy dependence on earmarked project funding also profoundly shaped the United Nations response – from creating strong

[15] Details on what was accomplished by the OSA, and under the Action Agenda, can be found on the OSA website. See, for example, OSA, 2024 and OSA, "End of mandate note" (December 2024).

incentives for United Nations actors to manage projects rather than invest in government systems to the very late arrival of development funding and to the limited agility of the United Nations system to respond to windows of opportunity to accompany government leadership.[16]

Most of our focus was necessarily at the country level. Working through United Nations Resident Coordinators and United Nations teams, we engaged in a number of pilot countries where we thought the conditions were conducive – that is, willing governments, willing United Nations leadership and teams, and engaged donors. These countries included Colombia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Somalia. We included Vanuatu to have a more "pure" climate case. A small number of countries were outliers vis-à-vis national governments – Afghanistan and Yemen in particular were among our pilot countries where the emphasis would necessarily be more about local administrations.[17]

At the country level we promoted "solutions pathways". In line with the High-Level Panel's recommendations, these pathways contained distinct components around (1) strong government leadership and convening an all-of-government approach, (2) a new generation of solutions strategies that recognize the structural and development issues that need to be addressed for solutions to be lasting and (3) a financing framework which encompasses as wide a range as possible of potential domestic and international funding sources. Strong IDP participation, clear accountabilities vis-à-vis roles and responsibilities, and robust data cut across all the components. Progress at the country level went at different speeds and some situations (Sudan, most tragically) saw serious reversals in the situation of their internally displaced, but by the end of 2024 nearly 12 million IDPs had been placed on solutions pathways by their governments in the Central African Republic, Colombia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Somalia. Many of these same governments also committed financing towards the task. An IDP solutions fund was created to provide strategic funding for United Nations country teams (UNCTs) to support governments in their leadership.[18] Solutions advisers were placed in a number of Resident Coordinator offices to support inter-agency coordination. Resident Coordinators and agency country leaders were convened in different configurations to tease out challenges, needs and emerging lessons.

At the global level – also as urged by the High-Level Panel – we attempted to engage new actors in this domain. International financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank and African Development Bank are especially important. So too are the development side of the donor world. Through 2023 and 2024 we engaged the Economic and Social Council, the Peacebuilding Commission, the United Cities and Local Governments network of mayors, the Climate Conference of Parties (COP) processes, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic

[16] The structural issues that work against a more joined up response on internal displacement are elaborated in a document prepared in 2024 under the auspices of the United Nations High-Level Committee on Programmes – "The System-wide Approach to Internal Displacement" outlines the collective commitment of 28 United Nations agencies addressing challenges of visibility, predictability and agility in the United Nations system response. See www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/ceb_2024_6_add.1-system-wide-approach-to-internal-displacement-jan-2025_advance-unedited.pdf.

[17] The complete list of 15 pilot countries was: Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Libya, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, Vanuatu and Yemen.

[18] See the Internal Displacement Solutions Fund.

Cooperation and Development, and many more that are not traditionally active on internal displacement. Inside the IFIs we sought to go beyond fragility teams to engage poverty, urban, social inclusion and climate practices for example. Within the United Nations we facilitated a "systemwide approach to internal displacement" strategy, which consolidated the new thinking and highlighted the synergies between the actions of 28 normative and operational agencies, from climate to counterterrorism to development.

During this period, among many important firsts, both the World Bank and the African Development Bank introduced internal displacement solutions into their Corporate Scorecards. The World Bank's poverty team started integrating internal displacement systematically into its analytical frames for countries like the Central African Republic. An internal Community of Practice was formed at the World Bank to connect practitioners on this work. At COPs 28 and 29, internal displacement was firmly integrated into the loss and damage policy and financing mechanism. UN-Habitat launched a handbook on urban displacement at the World Urban Forum in Cairo in November 2024. A dedicated session on internal displacement took place at the Global Fragility Forum in Washington, D.C., in February 2024. A dozen United Nations agencies also committed to new corporate policies to increase the visibility of and focus on internal displacement in their policies and systems through new financing, revised policies and accountabilities. These are just a few of the measures that have been introduced over the last two years in response to the Action Agenda.[19]

It has to be recognized that the enabling environment for these efforts has unfortunately deteriorated significantly as 2025 unfolds, with major cuts to funding and staffing for aid generally and to some of the key United Nations and international non-governmental organizations working on this issue.

What did we learn?

About government leadership …

The most important takeaways from the mandate have been around the **role of government** in solutions work. Even in the most benign contexts of disaster-induced displacements, the act of displacement often represents a failure of the State in its duty of care. Whether it is a failure to impose building codes or poor urban zoning or the behaviour of security forces in counter-insurgency operations, when people are displaced there has almost inevitably been a major breakdown in the social contract. Seen through this lens, it is useful to think of pathways to solutions in part as the process by which government rebuilds a frayed social contract.[20] Importantly, we also saw how the international community can undermine this delicate process in different ways, for example by branding its aid strongly at a time when the government needs to be seen to be stepping up by its own citizens.

[19] The 12 agency institutional plans can be viewed here: Resources Publications, Documents, Reports, Photos.

[20] See United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Turning the Tide on Internal Displacement: A Development Approach to Solutions* (New York, UNDP, 2022).

The experience of our pilot countries time and time again was that ***local* governments proved to be highly attuned and responsive to this issue** – governors in Nigeria, regional presidents in Ethiopia, mayors in Colombia and the like. At the local level we saw a great sense of urgency and a vision for solutions pathways. It is clear that solutions processes hinge on this local leadership. Local politicians are more willing to invest political capital in a solutions process and to take perhaps unpopular but necessary positions on policy options. The three governors of the States of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa in north-east Nigeria, for example, were willing to invest a fixed percentage of their revenue in the plan they developed for the five years to come. Each also produced quite different solutions plans, reflecting their different ground realities, different IDP profiles and so forth. Not surprisingly, across our pilot countries, we saw that where there was more decentralized governance, there was more space for local and regional leaders, and there was quicker progress on getting solutions strategies off the ground. Notwithstanding this critical role of local leadership, the process underlined the limits of local leadership as well – the absence of clear national policies and standards on issues like compensation and justice naturally hindered progress at the regional level. Not to mention the critical role of the centre vis-à-vis access to development finance (discussed further below).

In most settings we also saw that ensuring local leadership required **investing early in the capacity of local governments**. Urban authorities need planning systems and data. District-level governments need planning and coordination systems to integrate this work into their day-to-day programming. Building implementation capacity at the local and regional levels is critical if solutions are to be delivered by local actors and at scale. This capacity-building cannot wait for a perfect peace and a risk-free operating environment, if/when the development actors arrive. That work needs to continue throughout, ideally with development actors remaining engaged – and funded – from day 1. The humanitarian community can and should do some capacity-building also – at the very least, transferring data and systems to local counterparts should be seen as integral to planning a responsible exit. The presence of the humanitarian community at the local level can be a key asset in this early capacity-building process, but this is the exception rather than the rule – the "capacity builders" are typically arriving much too late and humanitarian agencies are often criticized by their own donors if they are seen to be doing any capacity-building at all.

The experience also underlined the intensely **political nature** of displacement solutions. Solutions typically require policy decisions (and resources) on issues such as compensation, justice, housing, land and property. Mogadishu's 1 million IDPs or the 200,000 or so IDPs living in and around Maiduguri change the demographics of the local electorate. All this can be very political, and the choices that need to be made will invariably alienate one constituency or another. To make real progress on solutions requires identifying the leadership at the local level willing to invest the necessary political capital to address these types of sensitive issues. Obviously, no outsider can take these decisions. Less obvious perhaps is that the political actors with the greatest stake in these outcomes are also likely local leaders – success or failure of an IDP solutions plan at the state level in Nigeria is not going to play into the national electoral process but it may well determine the governor's electoral fate. We witnessed this tension between *local* leaders willing to invest the necessary political capital to build and sell a difficult and potentially unpopular solutions policy versus national actors less incentivized to invest in the difficult policy decisions that need to be made at the national level. Political risk can be shared between national and local actors, but this

can be difficult if the politics are not aligned (i.e. when different political parties lead national versus local governments). Political risk can also be shared with the international community when the latter places its support behind difficult policy choices made by local and national leaders.

Beyond getting that critical balance between national and local or regional leadership, finding the right **government leadership and coordination configuration at the national level for solutions** is another key part of the task. Governments typically have the same challenges as the United Nations and donors in trying to break away from an exclusively humanitarian focus when it comes to promoting displacement *solutions*. The IDP response in government is always led by emergency actors in the first instance, such as Ministers of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management Commissions, Refugees and IDP Commissions, among others. The challenge for the government as it is for the United Nations is to retrain that reflex so that other parts of the government are also engaged. It is rare that a government will actually distinguish leadership for the solutions phase separate from the response phase as the Government of Somalia has done in putting the Ministry of Planning in charge of solutions efforts. More typically, we found that governments chose to keep humanitarian actors in the lead. This worked where these actors joined forces willingly and deliberately with Ministries of Finance, Planning, Peace or Social Welfare for example – whoever was necessary to make sure there is convening authority that goes beyond first responders and a link to development and sector planning and financing. In Colombia, for example, the Victims Unit, which has typically been left alone to "solve" the displacement situation of more than 8 million Colombians, teamed up with the Departments of National Planning and Social Prosperity to create a fresh coalition to work on solutions. In Ethiopia, the United Nations offered support to the Ministries of Planning and of Finance to facilitate their greater engagement in the effort. Again, the international community can help or hinder these configuration choices by government – we witnessed some unfortunate examples where external actors were actively promoting their preferred government counterparts over others, as the government was attempting to reconfigure the leadership arrangements for solutions.

About transitioning away from emergency relief …

As we saw greater engagement by governments and development actors in this displacement solutions issue, we appreciated more and more that the task was not simply about getting internal solutions more firmly on the development radar – the initial humanitarian response itself also profoundly shapes what does and does not follow, that is, **the humanitarian system also needs to be very deliberate** about how to help solutions efforts. This second set of takeaways is sadly familiar and speaks to how poor we are at shifting gears quickly with evolving needs on the ground – our inability to anticipate new phases and the misalignment of incentives in the current setup. Much ink has been spilled on this transition issue – what new could we possibly say about this old chestnut? What did we learn on transition management when it comes to displacement solutions?

The 2023 review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement, which was commissioned by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), provided a wealth of excellent analysis on the urgency of getting this right. As the review team observed, "humanitarian assistance too often remains stuck in emergency mode long after the acute crisis is over, contributing to IDPs being

stuck in limbo".[21] The review team identified a series of concrete measures that humanitarian country teams (HCTs) can do to lay the ground more effectively for solutions, from engaging government and development actors early to increasing investments in activities like education, documentation and livelihoods on which longer-term self-reliance depends. Anticipating this need was a key message of the review which warned that "too often the approach has been 'aid until the money runs out', rather than thinking about what could be done to help with agency, sustainability and reinforcing people's capacities, even in protracted displacement".[22]

In responding to the review, the IASC leadership recognized that there needs to be baked into the humanitarian response strategy from day 1 a deliberate approach to promote "**solutions from the start**". Part of this is to articulate a joint multi-year HCT/UNCT "strategic approach" towards internal displacement that should transition "as soon as the conditions are right" into a government solutions strategy supported by the UNCT/HCT.[23] A key operating assumption for humanitarian responders needs to be that the duration of the displacement will very likely outlive the ability of the international humanitarian system to respond and that ultimately the government will have to either sustain emergency aid to these IDPs or accelerate their progress to solutions. Recognizing this reality upfront should trigger specific measures and responses which do not necessarily come naturally to a humanitarian-led initial response; hence, the deliberate "strategic approach" – measures such as working as closely as possible with government and government systems (whether it is on cash provision or data systems), engaging sector ministries and their development partners early, looking for ways to integrate vulnerable IDPs into national social protection policies and helping build the evidence of the structural vulnerabilities of certain IDP groups.

Relatedly, we saw that **early investments in systems, plans and data** are critical. This is, typically, the language of development insofar as it is about building local capacities. However, if we know from the outset that most of the conflict (and slow-onset disasters) IDPs that have fled to towns (now the overwhelming majority of the overall total) will likely remain in those towns indefinitely, then we already know that the task of providing solutions will ultimately fall on the shoulders of mayors and depend on the capacity of local governments. These leaders and institutions will require local development plans, zoning and policies. They will need reliable data – which the Ministries of Finance recognize as legitimate – to underwrite plans. This requires early investments that are sufficiently politically risk tolerant to handle the potential criticisms that this is "too early" or "legitimizing the wrong people". Not to do so is to delay solutions pathways for potentially years at great financial and human costs. Humanitarian response plans need to make space for such early "no regret" development investments somehow.

[21] Sida et al., 2011, p. 11.

[22] Ibid., p. 34.

[23] The humanitarian country team (HCT) includes local and international NGOs that are members of the IASC. The United Nations country team (UNCT) refers to the United Nations agencies working on development in the country.

Adopting a **geographic-/area-based approach** appears to also facilitate smart transition management. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Flagship Initiative reached the same conclusion in terms of delivering more effectively in the humanitarian realm.[24] Anchoring programming around clearly defined spatial areas – and their local administrations – is an effective way of delivering humanitarian aid and provides greater chance of a less fragmented (i.e. clustered) response to the needs of people. From a solutions perspective, this approach also makes it easier to create synergies with national programmes, or parallel development investments. But area-based approaches pose a number of challenges for the development community; development coordination and planning infrastructure, for example, tend to be capital based – very few Resident Coordinator offices have a footprint outside the capital. The United Nations development planning tool, the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, tends to be defined nationally and rarely single out specific geographic areas for focus.

How to operationalize these types of transition management measures when the natural tendency is one of path dependency? How to break this pattern and pivot more quickly towards a solutions focus? It would be nice to think there was a constituency for a new large-scale fund that rewarded these types of transitional investments (something the High-Level Panel advocated for), but we do not see much appetite for a third funding window for transition settings that has been talked about for decades. The alternative approach we promoted is to introduce some kind of "circuit breaker" into the humanitarian system. A deliberate disruption that forces the actors – government, the United Nations, bilateral donors, banks and others – to have a regular, structured dialogue around whether the posture should shift or at least whether it is shifting fast enough. In our follow-up "Guidance on Solutions", we have developed a methodology for what we called a **pivot review** to help lay the groundwork for this shift in approach.[25]

About financing …

A third set of takeaways from the mandate relates to financing. We worked with governments in articulating what solutions pathways they propose for their IDPs. Reflecting this local ownership, no two plans were entirely alike, even between two abutting regions in north-east Nigeria. Key to the exercise was to tease out what policies the Government will adopt (e.g. on building standards or compensation) and, of course, to figure out what it will cost to deliver solutions in their context, and, ultimately, how to pay for it. We now have a good sense of what these government-led solutions processes cost.

Not surprisingly **solutions are expensive**. Rebuilding someone's life when they have lost all their assets is not a cheap undertaking. Housing is often the single highest cost item everywhere even with different standards per unit; in Iraq, for example, we estimated that USD 4 billion would be required for housing for 134,400 households. The analysis from the three states in north-east

[24] See Flagship Initiative for more information about OCHA's flagship project.

[25] See OSA, United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) and IASC, Guidance on Solutions to Internal Displacement (UNSDG, 2025).

Nigeria was that USD 1.7 billion would be needed for housing for 340,000 households. Solutions mean homes, not transitional shelters. Beyond housing, restoring access to services, supporting livelihoods, considering compensation and the costs start to mount substantially. Somalia's solutions plan for the first 1 million IDPs will cost around USD 2 billion. Nigeria's solutions plans for the three north-east states – covering 4 million IDPs and 5 million people in host communities or 9 million people in total – will cost around USD 5 billion. Early plans from three regions in Ethiopia target a mix of 2 million IDPs, recent returnees and host communities also at a cost of around USD 2 billion.

Governments themselves are surely the first port of call to provide financing for solutions for their own citizens. For example, the Governments of Iraq, Libya and Colombia have made very substantial direct budget commitments towards their solutions pathways over recent years. In north-east Nigeria, the Governors of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States committed 15 per cent, 7 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively, of their revenues for the coming five years. The Government of Somalia committed some USD 180 million for land purchase to enable IDP resettlement. The regional government of one of the poorest regions in Ethiopia – the Somali region – also committed some of its own finance towards its solutions efforts.

There are also ample opportunities to tap into **existing development investments** to support solutions processes – be they bilateral or multilateral. Much of the components of solutions pathways are, after all, the daily bread and butter of development work – social services, livelihoods and infrastructure. If, for example, the World Bank is financing new schools and the African Development Bank is financing new health centres next year in any case, and if the political will is there on the donor side and on the government side to tap into these existing plans, then the task becomes one of synchronizing those development investments so they show up in the right place at the right time to also be integrated into the solutions plan of a given region in these countries. Easier said than done of course, but there is substantial scope to tap into existing investments if the will and coordination capacity is there.

Nevertheless, we found that getting governments to prioritize these investments over other priorities from their limited development aid funds is **not easy**. There are market failures that need to be addressed to generate a different level of financing for this work. Beyond the universal challenge that there are too many priorities chasing too few resources, raising resources at the scale necessary for IDP solutions faces additional hurdles. First, governments – and their Ministries of Finance – are grappling with many investment priorities and often develop a degree of reliance on humanitarian funding for their IDP challenges. Understandably, the reflex, as it is with many international actors also, is to turn to the humanitarian community to support this issue. Second, while they may recognize the chronic vulnerability of IDPs, some governments are hesitant to single out a particular community, for "preferential treatment" as it were, particularly in a region that may be very poor already. Third, IDPs are typically displaced in remote regions and cities creating direct pressures more on local and regional governments that are not necessarily felt so acutely at the centre. Put simply, the market signals for the need to invest substantial development resources in this issue do not necessarily reach those with the ability and responsibility to respond.

In late 2024 my Office, OSA, inspired by the very successful UNHCR–World Bank refugee financing mechanisms put in place over recent years, presented governments and IFIs with a proposal to create a dedicated **concessional financing mechanism** via the IFIs.[26] We have proposed that donors set aside the equivalent of 10 per cent of humanitarian spending on internal displacement, or USD 400–500 million annually, in **development** grants per year, to be committed to bringing down the total displacement numbers by helping governments finance their solutions pathways. Our proposal is to blend these development funds with IFI financing in order to generate the kind of investments necessary to finance solutions at scale. While this idea was generally (unsurprisingly) well received by the humanitarian department of most donor agencies, it will go nowhere if the development colleagues in these same agencies do not see this as a shared challenge and opportunity.

What of the **private sector**? Given the scale of the needs and given the nature of solutions investments which often relate to housing and infrastructure, there is potential for private sector engagement in this work, as identified by the High-Level Panel. We saw some early steps on this front, during the mandate, including a first ever private sector roundtable focused on IDP solutions in Africa, which took place at the end of November in Lagos, Nigeria, co-sponsored by UNHCR, the Government of Nigeria and my Office. At the launch of the Somalia national Solutions Pathways Action Plan also, a private foundation – the Hormuud Salaam Foundation – pledged land in the Mogadishu area for up to 10,000 internally displaced families to be resettled. This field of private sector engagement remains relatively untapped however.

What happens next?

My Office closed as planned on 31 December 2024, but this renewed focus on solutions for IDPs continues. As an issue that "belongs" to multiple United Nations agencies and does not have a single home, a special setup is required that draws on many of the United Nations assets and beyond.

The lessons learned in these initial 30 months have been captured in a new "Guidance on Solutions" for practitioners.[27] Government counterparts have also assembled and placed on line their lessons learned for the benefit especially of other governments setting out on their own ambitious displacement-solutions efforts.[28] An inter-agency United Nations Solutions Hub has been formed, underwritten financially by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR and IOM, and hosted by the United Nations Development Coordination Office (which manages the United Nations Resident Coordinator system) to provide ongoing technical support to UNCTs as well as to house a financing facility – the Internal Displacement Solutions Fund – which provides catalytic resources to UNCTs accompanying governments on their solutions pathways.

[26] See www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/osa_idp-concession-finance-concept.pdf for the full proposal.

[27] See OSA, UNSDG and IASC, 2025.

[28] See https://webtv.un.org/en/search/categories/news-features/features/office -special-adviser-solutions-internal-displacement.

The Principals of those three agencies – the UNDP Administrator, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the IOM Director General – have agreed to serve as "champions" for internal displacement solutions, joined by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Assistant Secretary General for Peacebuilding and the Special Rapporteur for the Rights of IDPs.

The work developed with the 15 pilot countries will now be extended to all interested countries dealing with protracted displacement.

Closing

Member States themselves triggered this surge in effort around internal displacement when they approached the United Nations Secretary-General in 2019. A lot has happened since – from a High-Level Panel to a United Nations Action Agenda to my temporary Office.

The United Nations has put in place a new approach to this relatively "old" problem. International non-governmental organizations, IFIs and donors have joined the effort. Most importantly, governments in affected countries have stepped up their leadership and engagement, including making serious financial commitments to solve their displacement challenges.

This progress needs to be consolidated and built on. There remain many outstanding priorities to address the internal displacement issue – from establishing some kind of international forum dedicated to the issue to finding new development financing to take solutions to scale.

The experience of the last few years has underlined the importance of getting behind local and regional governments as the natural leaders in this effort – building their capacity, ensuring resources reach them and putting in place the enabling national policies to facilitate this work.

We have learned how important it is that the humanitarian community operates from the start with a differentiated approach for IDPs – one that recognizes the high risk of these situations becoming protracted and the high opportunity cost of not ensuring strong government ownership of the issue.

We have seen the financial costs of providing solutions, underlining the need to bring as wide a range as possible of financing sources together and further cementing the financial arguments for preventing displacement in the first place, wherever possible.

The momentum must not be lost. A surge in conflict and disasters over recent years is pushing displacement numbers inexorably higher against a backdrop of dramatic cuts in aid overall – both humanitarian and developmental. The urgency of shifting to a government-led solutions approaches could not be more compelling.

International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland
Phone.: +41 22 717 9111 • Fax: +41 22 798 6150
Email: hq@iom.int • Website: www.iom.int