

# To prevent or pursue displacement?

Casey Barrs

**The repertoire of survival actions of at-risk civilians includes both avoiding and attempting displacement. But there are also overlaps, combinations and tacking back and forth between the two, while trying to mitigate the risks that any choice entails.**

The perception of displacement as the failure of outsiders to prevent civilians being driven from their homes rests on several arguable assumptions: firstly, that displacement should be prevented, not pursued; secondly, that displacement can be most influenced by outsiders, not locals; and, thirdly, that displacement is about one particular moment when people are forced to flee.

Wisely or not, civilians often try to hold their ground. Displacement can disrupt life-critical sustenance, services, and protective social units and networks. Flight can be perilous and destinations thought to be safer often turn out to be deadly as well. If in a given situation both staying and going are dangerous choices, then familiarity with one's home ground might – or might not – be a decisive argument for staying. As Fred Cuny said, “Any strategy that can help reduce displacement is an important element in reducing the number of deaths.” He found that when mortality rates among refugees and those who remain behind in conflict areas are compared, in most cases people have a better chance of survival in conflict zones.

On the other hand, civilians should – and often do – prepare for a failure to prevent flight and this readiness can reduce a range of risks. In the field of natural disaster risk reduction, everyone plans for self-displacement. But the political, social and visceral reaction to threat by monsoon differs from that to threat by machete.

Armed groups sometimes build their readiness for years. Without foresight, civilians might have only minutes. Nonetheless, the best posture for saving lives is to try to be prepared to either prevent or pursue displacement. It can be argued that civilians have a right to either stay or go as they determine best. For people experiencing violence the issue is more tactical than legal. Our liberal-democratic formula of duty bearers and rights holders does not offer any tactical skills for living out those rights by outliving killers. And humanitarians, even when in the assumed role of protector, in reality are often the first to be displaced.

Walter Kälin, the former UN Secretary-General's Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, contends that constant new instances of displacement indicate that the international community is failing in its duties. And indeed, efforts to influence dangerous actors and events far too often fail, leaving the outcome determined by either the self-restraint of belligerents or the self-protection of civilians themselves. But others emphasise that the three main determinants of the survival of civilians facing violence, whether *in situ* or in flight, are the actions of belligerent parties, of third parties and of endangered civilians themselves. Too much of the debate and policy regarding at-risk civilians excludes those civilians.

The truth is that outsiders' efforts to prevent displacement might sometimes be motivated by the desire of outside parties to contain population flows. And sometimes these efforts not only fail but can place locals further in harm's way; encouragement to stay in place might interrupt local survival strategies – including displacement.

The international community does not often control whether displacement will be prevented or will be pursued but locals sometimes do. The term ‘forced migration’ might not capture the degree of local autonomy and the range of intelligent choices even within coercive conditions. Seeing and supporting this potential requires humility on the part of outsiders and consideration of the types of Plan B that locals almost always begin to develop.

The idea of supporting local capacity for self-preservation is not new. There is much that aid organisations can do to build on the strategies that communities employ in order to “maintain their assets, escape violence, and mitigate threats.”<sup>1</sup> The UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee suggests bolstering remote management by partnering with proven indigenous providers, emphasising innovative, localised humanitarian access. It also argues that “practical protection is provided first of all by and through the community.” Whatever mechanisms of support are chosen, the bedrock must be consultation.

Civilians decide whether to prevent or pursue displacement – and how best to mitigate the risks of either choice – based on their calculations about safety as well as livelihood and life-critical services. The international community is often mindful of the hard choices that locals face in the months and years preceding physical displacement and has developed a range of stratagems. It offers its presence and accompaniment, and supports local efforts at mediation, dialogue, and other approaches to transform or manage conflict. It sometimes encourages community policing, early warning structures and contingency planning. It often supports livelihoods amid chronic instability in the hope of helping locals to maintain the wherewithal to stay *in situ*. And it increasingly establishes remote control apparatus so projects can continue through local counterpart staff and partners even after it evacuates.

But there is universal agreement that these well-intended efforts do not succeed often enough and so it is vital to look at the often stark disconnects between how **we** seek to prevent or mitigate displacement and how **locals** do.

## Tactics for managing risk

Loss of security, collapse of sustenance and breakdown of services (especially health care) are frequently called conflict's ‘centre of gravity’ and are the factors most likely to induce people to move. As violence closes in, families and communities try to augment

We may be more inclined to...		While locals may be more inclined to...
Promote dialogue with controlling powers	↔	Cut deals with controlling powers
Send early warning to duty bearers	↔	Send early warning to those in harm's way
Keep families together at all costs	↔	Split families up based on tactical calculations
Support western-style 'community policing'	↔	Police using skills suited for not just lawlessness but also armed conflict
Provide livelihood supports premised on relief then recovery of production and markets	↔	Take livelihood steps premised on return of violence and collapse of formal economy
Focus on improved agriculture and marketable cash crops to the neglect of conflict-resistant subsistence farming and foraging practices	↔	Pursue subsistence farming and foraging – and the tactics of scouting, safe movement and hidden farm lots that make it safer
Consider asset stripping counter-intuitive and anti-development	↔	Strip and transfer assets in order to protect family wealth; remove resources that invite attack; keep those assets out of the hands of criminals and belligerents; and put those resources into hands of trusted first responders, thus strengthening those networks
Malign black markets and avoid informal money transfer agents	↔	Use both to a very great degree
Help prepare local staff and partners for conventional aid delivery on their own	↔	Pursue the tactics and architecture of more discreet and mobile aid

their physical safety, adapt livelihoods and modify indigenous methods of aid delivery. In their experience, displacement is not merely defined by movement away from a location but is also about dismantling and reassembling a range of essential practices. Even when staying, people often make decisions more consequential even than flight. The following are some of the hundreds of tactics cited in the Cuny Center report *How Civilians Survive Violence: A Preliminary Inventory*.<sup>2</sup>

**To enhance safety** they may persuade threatening actors they are helpful or harmless; fabricate false identities; persuade community members to remain non-aligned and peaceful; cut deals with threatening actors; improve skills of information gathering, assessment and disinformation; split family up based on safety and economic considerations; commute between home/farm and shadow settlements; establish or build on non-formal policing; establish conflict early-warning/response systems; help specific vulnerable or threatened groups with personal safety measures; help families and other social networks prepare contingency plans for violence; pursue useful ties to powerful patrons; take up arms, or ally with armed protectors.

**To underpin sustenance** they may diversify or substitute conventional livelihood practices by, for example, reducing consumption, expenditure and investment, pooling or selling assets, pursuing subsistence agriculture or foraging, or entering shadow (black market) and coping economies. In support of these tactics they may, for example, make pay-offs – fees, taxes or bribes – in order to pursue livelihood activities unmolested.

In addition they may look for external support by seeking out patronage networks – most commonly among religious, business, political or armed entities

– and expand money networks such as personal or commercial borrowing and foreign remittances. Finally, as forms of deliberate 'material displacement', they may use 'strip and transfer' tactics of redeeming, dismantling, liquidating, caching, depositing, temporarily forfeiting, scorching and more.

**To protect indigenous services** they may adapt or adopt skills that put service delivery on a conflict footing, emphasising information gathering and assessment, sensitive communication and safe movement. The architecture of service delivery is often altered, using remote and low-profile practices, deconstructing services into more discreet and mobile forms, downsizing infrastructure, dispersing supplies, staff and beneficiaries, and delegating work.

Better consultation reveals the capacity of local providers and populations to make wise risk-benefit calculations that differ from those of outsiders. The Cuny Center report, *Preparedness Support*, outlines one such process of consultation. Preparedness support rests on the abilities of local counterparts and communities for self-preservation and on our ability to help them cultivate their capacities and shorten the time it takes them to learn in life-threatening circumstances. It is based on listening to what they know, supporting what already works, and – perhaps – advising on additional tactics from which they can choose and then mobilise. Locals deserve this support.

Casey Barrs [cbarrs@mt.gov](mailto:cbarrs@mt.gov) is a Protection Research Fellow with The Cuny Center [www.cunycenter.org](http://www.cunycenter.org)

1. Sorcha O'Callaghan and Sara Pantuliano, *Protective Action: Incorporating Civilian Protection into Humanitarian Response*, HPG Report No. 26, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, December 2007; pp 4 and 35 [www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/1640.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/1640.pdf)

2. <http://tinyurl.com/HowCiviliansSurvive>