Preparedness &
Displacement

This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.

Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.

The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.

Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.

Avert displacement.

1. It may be so obvious as to be overlooked, but the best time to deal with displacement is before a cycle of flight, exile, and return starts. And the crux of the displacement issue is—preparedness.

2. As noted in companion papers in this series entitled, there is a great deal that locals do to reduce conflict. This does not necessarily mean they can save themselves from being displaced. But in reducing conflict and its impacts they may indeed be able to stay in place—if that is appropriate. As stated at recent ICRC-InterAction forum, "understanding communities' self-protection methods can inform actions to mitigate… displacement." [1] Even if they must flee, they might at least exert more control over the depth and duration of their displacement than we likely realize.

3. When families and communities have contingency plans for better ensuring their *safety* as well as life-critical *sustenance* and *services*, they frequently forestall or even avert displacement. To be clear, preparedness support *is not* biased toward staying in situ per se. It simply helps broaden civilians' options. This helps them either avoid displacement—or arrange displacement with more foresight. The key to either is having vigilant leadership with a range of informed options.

4. Contingency planning for possible flight often begins even while civilians are accommodating dangerous power or probing for peace. They begin double lives and sequenced displacement. Provisional "family split up" and "commuting" options are often chosen before full flight, as is the tentative, reversible stripping and transfer of some assets. Temporary flight and hiding until marauders leave the area is another practice used. These partial steps do not commit them to full displacement. A "be prepared" frame of mind is not predisposed either to flight or to staying in place—it just expands choices.

5. Sometimes there is no safe exit out of a conflict zone. Other times there can be severe costs to leaving one's home area. "Civilians may be exposed to deadly threats in their attempt to flee to safety." [2] Some find "from a health perspective, the best option is to avoid human displacement." [3] One report by the Centers for Disease Control found that displaced populations "may have death rates 60 times higher than non-displaced populations." [4] From a livelihood perspective, flight "undermines productivity and self-sufficiency." [5] Moreover, the survival knowledge and skills specific to one's land might be rendered obsolete by flight to distant or urban areas. [6] And those who flee then return months or years later can find it harder to rehabilitate their livelihoods compared to those who never fled. [7] In terms of social cohesion, kinship support groups might become scattered in flight. Finally, regarding security, the destination thought to be safer often turns out to be deadly as well. [8] "In the 1990s, between a third and half of African refugees sought asylum in neighboring countries that were suffering from civil war" as well. [9]

6. "Any strategy that can help reduce displacement is an important element in reducing the number of deaths." While there will always be exceptions, Fred Cuny noted that "comparisons of mortality among refugees and those who remain behind in conflict areas, show that, in most cases, people have a better chance of survival in war zones." [10] Bearing in mind that physical violence usually accounts for a small portion of civilian deaths in a war zone (bigger killers being a lack of food security or of preventive health), one can better understand why civilians often chose to stay where they are. [11] If in a given situation both staying and going seem equally dangerous choices—then familiarity with one's home ground might be a decisive argument for staying.

7. Still, the field craft of preparedness would make it easier for at-risk civilians, should they choose, to *reach* the sanctuaries of aid workers and peacekeepers who often fall back on "Come-to-us" methods of deployment. So again, none of this argues for a predisposition toward "making civilians stay" in situ or for abdicating their rights to relief and asylum elsewhere. The basic tenet of preparedness is that there be more messaging and mobilization so civilians can more ably make their own informed choices.

Arrange displacement.

8. When all else fails, then flight can make the most sense. Preparations in this regard focus on getting *social units* and *economic assets* out of harm's way. The better preserved these two things remain—then the less the severity and length of subsequent displacement might be.

9. It is not as though time is lacking. Armed groups might build their readiness for months or years. Without foresight, civilians might have only hours or minutes. Rather it is often information, vigilance, and preparedness that is lacking. "Displacement" is something that *happens to* civilians. But self-displacement is something that civilians can make happen with a greater degree of control.

10. Whether fleeing to relatives, strangers' villages, or anonymous urban ghettos; whether to hidden bush sites, IDP camps, or refugee asylum—advance planning will help civilians arrive at these destinations with a bit more autonomy and self-reliance. For instance, if they flee to relatives (commonly their true "first responders") or generous host villages, they can arrive with more of their economic assets intact. This is vital because such networks often become exhausted, thus requiring displaced persons to make more dangerous secondary and tertiary flights.

11. As noted in the briefing paper *Preparedness and Conflict Management*, in order to retain what wealth of theirs they can, civilians preemptively strip (document, cache, disperse, dismantle, diversify, liquidate, redeem) and transfer assets. Nothing in the experience of aid work inclines us to help civilians do this. It may feel like we are actually helping the belligerents—until we realize the opposite is true: attacks often leave civilians dead, destitute, or displaced. But

civilians who take preemptive steps can deny belligerents the first two goals and better control the terms of the third.

12. Still, for development workers who have long dedicated themselves to asset building—asset *stripping* sounds very counterintuitive, even heretical. Until recently. A central tenet of the new "emergency livelihoods framework" is that "asset ownership can be a key determinant in vulnerability." [12] Belligerents often provision or profit themselves with civilian wealth—and this puts locals with visible wealth directly in harm's way. So moving those assets to trusted networks has multiple benefits. First, it protects family wealth. Second, it removes resources that actually invite attack and harm. Third, it keeps that wealth out of the hands of criminals or belligerents, thus giving less inducement and strength to their asset stripping. Fourth, it puts those resources into the hands of trusted relatives or hosts, strengthening those networks. All of this has enormous implications for displacement.

13. Planning thus enables civilians to uproot with more of their human and financial capital intact. As more active wardens of their own "self-displacement" they are less likely to become the abject wards of others. This does not make them fully self-sufficient. But it does leave them with more resources—and the safety, sustenance, and services which that can buy. Clearly, civilians who flee in "more intact" fashion will have a different experience with displacement than those who run ill-prepared with nothing but the shirts on their backs.

14. The ultimate duration of their displacement—a grave concern of the international community these days—depends on many factors. But, security allowing, those who have kept their social units and economic assets most intact have a better chance navigating the costs and demands of returning home and rebuilding their lives earlier.

15. Preparedness support can help populations either avoid displacement—or arrange it with the most mitigation possible.

Endnotes

[1] *Outcome Report: Trapped in Conflict: Evaluating Scenarios to Assist At-Risk Civilians*, July 2015;. Found at: https://protection.interaction.org/trapped-in-conflict-evaluating-scenarios-to-assist-at-risk-civilians/.

[2] Victoria Holt, "The Military and Civilian Protection: Developing Roles and Capacities", *Trends and Issues in Military-Humanitarian Relations*, HPG Report 21, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, March 2006; p. 53.

[3] Xavier Leus, et. al., "Internally Displaced Persons", *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, special report, July-September, 2001; pp. 75 and 76. Found at: http://pdm.medicine.wisc.edu. The authors note that "displacement exposes IDPs to new hazard dynamics." The hazards cited are infectious agents and vectors, poor quality water and sanitation in temporary settlements, food shortages, psychosocial harm, hazardous behaviors, weather vagaries, loss of assets, entitlements, social networks and more.

[4] Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action*, Polity Press, Cambridge MA, 2007; p. 91.

[5] Sue Lautze, *Saving Lives and Livelihoods: the Fundamentals of a Livelihoods Strategy*, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, March 1997; p. 29.

[6] Edward B. Rackley, "Displacement, Conflict and Socio-Cultural Survival in Southern Sudan", *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 30 August 2000; p. 5 of article.

[7] Patricia Justino, *The Impact of Armed Civil Conflict on Household Welfare and Policy Responses*, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex-Falmer, Brighton, May, 2009; p. 11. The author states that, "Slowly emerging evidence has shown that productivity levels of returnees tend to be lower than those that stayed, which may cause difficultites in terms of reintegration of these individuals in their original communities."

[8] Barry N. Stein and Fred C. Cuny, The Contemporary Practice of Voluntary Repatriation: Repatriation during Conflict, Reintegration amid Devastation, Michigan State University and the Center for the Study of Societies in Crisis, 22 February 1994; p. 12. The authors state that our "protection concerns are almost exclusively directed at the country of origin whose persecution caused the exodus. For too many refugees, however, the greater and more immediate danger comes during their exile. The danger comes from the threats, pressure, and attacks by the host or elements within the host society." **See also:** Jesse Newman, *Protection Through Participation*, background paper to the conference, "Voices Out of Conflict: Young People Affected by Forced Migration and Political Crisis, Cumberland Lodge, England, 26-28 March 2004; p. 26. This work suggests that low-grade but protracted periods of poor sustenance and uncertainty (conditions typical to many refugee camps) can take a greater tool on youth than intermittent violence back home. It reads "studies suggest that the most devastating threats to young people's well-being often result from prolonged conditions of poverty and insecurity—which result in malnutrition and difficulties accessing health care and education—rather than from exposure to violence."

[9] John Stedman and Fred Tanner, Editors, Refugee Manipulation: War, Politics and the Abuse of Human Suffering, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2003; p. 8.

[10] Frederick C. Cuny with Richard B. Hill, *Famine, Conflict and Response: A Basic Guide*, Kumarian Press, West Hartford, Connecticut, 1999; pp. 147 & 150. **See also:** *Violence, Health and Access to Aid in Unity State / Western Upper Nile, Sudan*, Médecins Sans Frontiérs, April 2002; p. 13. This report states, "Since the 1970s and the growth in refugee movements, it is clear that displacement increases vulnerability and mortality… People normally experience high mortality rates following displacement."

[11] James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hofmann, *According to Need? Needs Assessment and Decision-Making in the Humanitarian Sector*, Humanitarian Policy Group, HPG Report 15, Overseas Development Institute, London, September 2003; p. 13. The report states that, "People may be more likely to die from the consequences of prolonged internal displacement than from the direct effects of violence." **See also:** James Darcy, talking points for presentation at the Wilton Park conference, West Sussex, February 2005; p. 1. In regard to trying to avoid threats through flight, Darcy states that "Angola and DRC show just how deadly that option can be: far more are reckoned to have died from the effects of displacement—exposure to disease, lack of adequate food or water, lack of health care—than from violent attacks."

[12] Susanne Jaspers, Sorcha O'Callaghan, and Elizabeth Stites, Linking Livelihoods and Protection: A Preliminary Analysis Based on Review of the Literature and Agency Practice, HPG working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, London, December 2007; p. 36.