

Addressing Internally Displaced Persons in a Peace Process: Why and How?

December 14, 2007

By Khalid Koser

http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2007/1214_peace_koser.aspx

My presentation today draws on a report recently published by the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement entitled [Addressing Internal Displacement in Peace Processes, Peace Agreements and Peace-Building](#), which is available on our website. For the purposes of this afternoon's presentation I'll focus on just one aspect of the report, on addressing internal displacement in peace processes – or negotiations for peace.

An ethnic Tamil mother holds her child at a camp for the internally displaced, in Sri Lanka.



[View Larger](#)

I'd like to convey three fairly straightforward messages:

1. First, there are convincing reasons to address internal displacement in most peace processes from an early stage.
2. Second, the best way to do this is through direct participation by the displaced, but there can be obstacles to effective participation.
3. Where the participation of the displaced is either not possible or not desirable, alternative or complementary strategies for addressing their needs are required.

Why is it important to address internal displacement in peace processes?

Resolving displacement is often inextricably linked with achieving sustainable peace, for a number of reasons:

1. Most fundamentally, IDPs – like all other war-affected civilians – have rights grounded in international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and states have an obligation to protect those rights.
2. Numbers: In one quarter of the countries currently in conflict, over five percent of the population is internally displaced. There are over one million IDPs in Colombia, the

Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. In countries such as these the sheer scale of displacement makes it simply unrealistic to plan for the peaceful future of the country without incorporating the needs of the displaced and ensuring their active participation.

3. Helping displaced populations to return and reintegrate can simultaneously address the root causes of a conflict and help prevent further displacement. For example, the return of displaced populations can be an important signifier of peace and the end of conflict, and can play an important part in validating the post-conflict political order. The return of displaced populations can be a pre-condition for peace if they are politically active. And the return of displaced populations can make an important contribution to the recovery of local economies.
4. In some countries IDPs have become parties to the conflict, and their inclusion is therefore necessary for conflict-resolution.
5. One reason why IDPs may require special attention in peace processes is that they often have specific needs. More often than refugees, IDPs remain close to the zone of conflict and thus more vulnerable to violence; the provision of humanitarian assistance to IDPs is often more difficult than for refugees; and unlike refugees IDPs are not singled out for specific protection in international law. In contrast to other war-affected civilian populations, IDPs need shelter; may be unable to replace or receive identity cards and other official documents; and often encounter serious problems regarding land and property left behind.
6. Including displaced populations at an early stage in peace processes can initiate momentum for them to be active participants in post-conflict peace-building.
7. More widely, broad-based civil society participation in political processes – including peace – is increasingly seen as good practice. A variety of UN and other international conventions and agreements recognizes the rights of children, youth and women to participate in political processes that affect their lives.

An initial observation I would make is that this list combines factors that are IDP-specific, with those that apply more widely and are IDP-relevant. That is a distinction it may be worth returning to in discussion.

Direct participation

The best way to address the concerns of IDPs in peace processes is through their direct participation. But that has often proved difficult to achieve.

There are very few examples of formal participation of refugees or IDPs in 'track-one' processes, and there are three main obstacles. First, 'track-one' processes are often exclusive and high-level, and work to short deadlines, which largely precludes civil society participation and time-consuming consultations. As a consequence, however, they often lack the specialized contribution and sense of ownership that can be gained through civil society participation.

Second, displaced populations often have specific disadvantages as regards their potential for participating in 'track-one' processes: They may belong to minority groups and lack resources, education, political skills and influence. They may also lack leaders who can represent them.

A third obstacle relates to circumstances of IDPs that can hinder their participation specifically. They often do not live in camps and are dispersed; they lack an international regime to support their rights; and they may be more vulnerable to reprisals from their government when they do mobilize.

It is exactly because of these sorts of obstacles that parallel 'track-two' initiatives have gained legitimacy. On one hand some advantages of direct participation in 'track-one' negotiations cannot be replaced – for example they usually set the timetable and agenda for peace processes. On the other hand 'track-one' processes often rely on 'track-two' processes, to provide insights into local contexts and a less formal forum for problem-solving.

Our review found no examples of IDP-specific 'track-two' processes, however there are a number of examples where IDPs and other displaced populations have participated in wider 'track-two' processes – in Burundi, Colombia, Georgia and Liberia. Coalitions with women's groups appear to have been a particularly effective tactic.

An advantage of wider engagement is the added leverage of a broader coalition. One disadvantage is that IDP-specific issues can be subsumed within the wider demands of coalitions. A second disadvantage is that it can be easier for formal parties to marginalize or exclude coalitions rather than resist pressure from numerous separate lobbies.

'Track-three' or 'grassroots' initiatives can also play an important role in peace processes, and probably provide the greatest scope for direct participation by IDPs. These initiatives can have a number of advantages: they encourage ownership of the peace process at the local level; they can provide a safety net in that if formal negotiations fail progress can still be made locally; 'track-three' participants can have access to local knowledge denied to other levels of peace negotiations; and grassroots initiatives have often been the main outlets of women's peace activities.

Often, however, there is no clear impact of 'track-three' processes on national level peace processes, and alone they cannot be relied on to ensure that IDP concerns are represented in full-scale peace processes or agreements.

The need for alternative or complementary strategies

There are clearly a number of obstacles to the effective participation of IDPs in peace processes.

1. As we have seen, there are often practical obstacles that hinder the participation of IDPs – lack of education, resources and political skills – and these can also apply to participation in ‘track-two’ and even ‘track-three’ processes.
2. Even where IDPs do participate directly, their particular needs may be diluted, and they may not impact on national level processes.
3. The mobilization and participation of IDPs can entail risks for the displaced. In Colombia, for example, armed actors have used threats, assassinations, and ‘disappearances’ to dissuade IDPs from mobilizing. There are reports that IDPs are also being threatened with reprisals in Darfur.
4. IDPs often do not have democratic structures to nominate representatives. In Georgia, certain self-appointed IDP leaders have incited violence and raised false hopes among IDPs.
5. The direct participation of IDPs and other displaced populations can be associated with ‘spoiling’ tactics that can hinder, delay or undermine peace processes.

Another distinction worth highlighting here is that sometimes the direct participation of IDPs is not possible, and sometimes it is not desirable. Again we might return to this distinction in discussion.

Our report makes a series of recommendations for overcoming these obstacles and thus enabling the direct participation of displaced populations – for example through establishing democratic structures to nominate legitimate representatives, and providing training and capacity-building for civil society coalitions for peace.

At the same time there is clearly a need to develop alternative or complementary strategies to direct participation. The report identifies three main options:

1. First, international mediators can prompt political leaders to incorporate displacement issues in peace negotiations. This was largely a successful strategy in Mozambique and Bosnia. Our Project is working on a handbook for international mediators on exactly this topic, in a series being coordinated by USIP and the Mediation Support Unit of the UN Department of Political Affairs. At the same time unless mediators directly consult with displaced populations, they may not actually understand their priorities. One of the recommendations of our report is that mediators should consult wherever possible.
2. A second complementary strategy is to focus on the legal rights of IDPs, especially as advocating for agreed standards should not require direct consultations. There are often international, regional and national mechanisms that can be harnessed to promote the protection of IDP rights as a contribution to the pursuit of peace. There is a clear role here for the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons.
3. Third, there may be a role for UN agencies and other international actors, as well as NGOs, to collect and provide information on displacement issues to ‘track-one’ actors. They are likely to have good understanding of local issues, and to have either direct or indirect access to peace negotiations. They can be effective substitutes for the displaced themselves.

Conclusions

I'll conclude by looking forward to our discussion.

1. First, there is clearly a wealth of experience and expertise in this room, and I would be very interested to hear from you about specific examples of the involvement of displaced populations in peace processes – including obstacles and how to overcome them.
2. Second, I flagged two distinctions that it might be worth retuning to. One was between IDP-specific and IDP-relevant issues in peace processes. The other was between when IDPs cannot, and when they should not, participate directly.
3. Finally, I would welcome discussion on alternative or complementary strategies to direct participation.

Thank you

[Listen to the audio from this event](#)