

Consulting IDPs: Moving Beyond Rhetoric

[Human Rights](#), [Global Governance](#), [Internal Displacement](#), [Governance](#)

Meeting on Consultation Mechanisms for Internally Displaced Persons, Geneva, Switzerland

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The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement convened a meeting on “Consulting IDPs: Moving beyond Rhetoric” from 15-16 November 2007 in Geneva, Switzerland. On the first day of the meeting, representatives of nine organizations shared their experiences in consulting with IDPs. On the second day, these participants were joined by other representatives of the humanitarian community to learn about UNHCR’s Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations and to consider draft guidelines for consulting with IDPs.

In early 2008, the Project will publish the background study for the meeting, together with the case studies and revised draft guidelines for consulting with IDPs. The present report does not attempt to capture all of the proceedings of the meeting, but rather to highlight some of the themes which emerged in the two days of discussion.

Why consult with IDPs?

Participants affirmed the importance of consulting with IDPs for both normative and instrumental reasons. On the normative side, participants noted that:

Just listening to IDPs helps to restore their dignity. Consulting with them sends the message that they are important and the fact that IDPs are able to speak out makes them visible.

It is a basic human right for people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Consultation on potential solutions creates ownership among IDPs; without ownership, solutions are unlikely to be durable.

Consultation with IDPs is a concrete way of ensuring accountability to beneficiaries.

Governmental consultation with IDPs can help governments gain legitimacy. When people have been consulted and feel that they have a voice, they are more likely to see the government as legitimate. It is thus in governments’ interests to consult with IDPs.

Consultations are also good practice and lead to better programs and policies. Critics who are concerned about the costs of consultation – in terms of time, resources and the potential risks to IDPs – often need to be persuaded of the instrumental value of consulting with them.

Consulting with IDPs can:

Lead to better relations between IDPs and the host community. When the host community is engaged with IDPs, they can come to see IDPs not as 'others,' but as fellow citizens.

Prevent sexual exploitation and abuse of IDPs by providing opportunities for relief agency staff to get to know IDPs and to respect their views.

Lead to greater efficiency and concrete economic/financial benefits. It is cost-effective to consult with IDPs.

Create an environment of trust with the local population which can reduce security threats to staff of humanitarian agencies.

Discussion of the relationship between normative and instrumental reasons for consulting with IDPs was lively. Some participants rejected the idea that consultations should be justified in cost-benefit terms, but rather affirmed as a basic human right.

Participants agreed that consulting with IDPs is important at different stages of displacement, including:

- Assessing their needs and designing appropriate programs
- Implementing, monitoring and evaluating programs
- Developing durable solutions for their displacement
- Involving them in peace processes to ensure that their concerns are addressed and that the peace process is sustained.

However, several participants noted that consulting with IDPs is not a priority for donors who often don't appreciate consultations: "they are more interested in deliverables than process."

Flexibility and Context

A theme running throughout the meeting was the importance of consulting with IDPs in ways that are appropriate for the particular context. There is no 'one size fits all' model for consultations. Rather than being a one-off event, consultation should be an on-going process. In this regard, several participants noted that "drinking tea" with IDPs is an important way of getting feedback from IDPs in their natural environments. As one participant said, "you can't consult with IDPs by sitting in an office" while another bemoaned the practice of some aid professionals who sweep in with their white land rovers once or twice a year and consider that they have consulted with IDPs.

Consultations will be affected by the political context in which displacement occurred. In some contexts, for example, it is important for governmental representatives to be included when IDPs are consulted; in other cases, particularly when the government is perceived as being part of the reason for the displacement, including them would make it more difficult for IDPs to be open in their comments and could place them at risk. Moreover, in cases where the government is not trusted, IDPs may feel little ownership of the consultative process. In other cases, IDPs may interpret participating in consultations as abdicating a particular political or nationalist agenda.

One participant noted that it is easier to consult with IDPs when there is an IDP community while another observed that it is more difficult to consult with urban IDPs, who are dispersed among host populations than with IDPs living in camps.

Expectations

The importance of being transparent with IDPs about the consultative process was another theme running through the meeting. Being honest about the process and about expected results is needed in order to prevent distrust from miscommunications and/or raised expectations. "We have to be honest with IDPs from the beginning," one participant affirmed. "We know what we can and cannot do. If our organization's capabilities and mandate are not clearly understood, IDPs may ask for assistance that is beyond our capacity."

Another participant emphasized that IDPs are resourceful and will take advantage of that knowledge. She noted that when IDPs are aware of an organization's mandate, they will ask for what they can get. "If they know you can only build schools, they'll ask for a school."

One participant noted that it is harder to justify getting information from IDPs which will be used for advocacy than for designing humanitarian assistance programs. "It's one thing to say, 'I want to hear what your needs are so I can get you better services' and another to say 'I'm going to use what you are telling me to advocate for political change which may or may not occur.'"

Still another participant argued that it is also important not to idealize consultations with IDPs: "while they know their world better than anyone, they can be unaware of institutional constraints or larger political factors which may affect response to their situation."

When to consult?

Consultations with IDPs are often not possible in the initial stages of an emergency and it is important to be sensitive to the emotional state of persons in the immediate aftermath of disaster and flight. One participant noted that consulting with IDPs in Aceh, Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami was initially very difficult because people were traumatized although it became easier later on.

Although insecurity may prevent consultations in areas of active conflict, IDPs should be consulted in the initial assessment phase whenever possible. They should be involved in beneficiary selection and in decisions about distribution of non-food items. Several participants noted that while there is increasing consultation with IDPs in assessment missions, agencies are less likely to consult them about the effectiveness of existing programs. The inclusion of IDPs in monitoring and evaluation of programs is an important, and largely untapped, resource.

Accountability in the form of follow-up meetings is crucial to maintaining trust with IDP participants. But one participant confessed that her typical pattern is to go a camp for a week or

two – or sometimes for a day or two – to meet with IDPs selected by the government. “I don’t have much time,” she said, “and am rarely able to give them any feedback.”

With whom to consult?

IDPs are not a homogeneous group; rather, they represent a diversity of experiences, capacities, needs, and interests. Recognizing the diversity of the population is central to developing effective consultative processes.

In some settings, there are clear representatives of IDP communities who are a natural interlocutor for consultative mechanisms. But IDP leaders can also serve as ‘gatekeepers’ and prevent certain groups from expressing their views. In particular, IDP leadership tends to be male and most participants agreed that it is important to have a way of consulting with women IDPs as well. This provoked a lively debate about the issue of gender in consultative processes.

“Why should we expect that 50% of our consultations will be with women when our own organizations are far from being models of gender equality?” asked one participant.

Another cautioned that while consultations can be used to promote women’s leadership, agencies should not expect to effect massive change in gender constructions by insisting on consulting with women.

Some discussants expressed concern for the lack of attention to male-specific vulnerabilities and were concerned that the tendency to see “gender” in terms of “women” can lead to serious miscalculations. For example, one participant noted that the tsunami had skewed the gender balance as more women were killed than men. “This meant that men were charged with caring for their families and, in some cases, were responsible for newborn babies. But our policy was not to distribute milk powder because we wanted to encourage breastfeeding. I’m sorry to say that in some areas, babies died because of our policy. Being gender-sensitive means more than addressing women’s issues.”

Another noted that as with other marginalized groups, targeting women for participation may put them at risk for social stigmatization. “There’s so much consultation with women that it creates tension with other groups.” Another commented that consulting with women may actually undermine traditional leadership within the IDP community – precisely at a time when such authority is needed. Still another emphasized the need to identify male-specific vulnerabilities, including sexual violence. “Sexual violence against men is an unrecognized problem.”

Participants seemed to agree that it is important to ensure women’s participation in consultative processes, but noted that women are more likely to be consulted in needs assessment than in negotiations to bring about peace negotiations.

Another concern related to involving children in consultative processes. Children are often more open than their parents and provide important insights into programmatic needs. Yet interviewing children requires particular sensitivities and expertise. Some participants insisted on the importance of asking permission of parents before interviewing their children while others did not routinely do so.

There are also cases where consultations take place with IDPs, but the community is divided. This may cause a dilemma when 90% of the IDPs want one outcome, but are blocked by the 10% who insist on a different option.

Still another concern relates to 'over-participation' – when the same IDPs are repeatedly consulted by different aid agencies/governments and are compelled to tell their stories over and over again. This may happen when a limited number of IDPs speak English or another European language. When there are multiple agencies wishing to consult with IDPs, it is incumbent upon them to share information and coordinate their actions with other agencies. In fact, this may lead to strengthened partnerships because, as one participant expressed "we shouldn't be competing with each other for access to IDPs."

Who should do the consulting?

The meeting had a lively debate on the question of whether consultation should be the task of a specialized unit or of everyone in the organization. Those arguing in favor of a specialized unit noted that engaging in consultations requires a very specific educational and professional background, and even personality. "It is unrealistic," one participant said, "to expect that all humanitarian aid workers have the personal and professional qualifications to undertake what is essentially anthropological work." Others advocated that consultations be carried out by staff in all sectors of an agency. Consultations should be expected of everyone and not separated from the day-to-day work. Consulting with IDPs, they argued, is part of a broader strategy of participation which should be mainstreamed throughout all aspects of an agency's work. As one participant said, "it's not about more tools and manuals. It's about our skills. We need to develop our skills of active listening, consulting and observing."

One participant questioned the assumption that consultations should be organized by 'outsiders,' noting that that affected communities often have extensive capacities and can organize their own consultations. Several participants stressed the importance of language and of trained interpreters to facilitate the consultative process. One warned that words can have very different meanings to different groups of IDPs. For example, the word 'peace' can mean the status quo for some IDPs while for others it means return.

In deciding on who should consult with IDPs, it is important to respect the social structures and norms of the communities. For example, in some situations expatriate men simply can't talk with IDP women without violating community values.

“They’re not ‘our’ beneficiaries,” one participant observed. “We have to learn to let go and we have to expect negative feedback as well. Deciding to consult does not mean that we will receive only positive assessments and attainable solutions.”

The role of civil society

While civil society can play an important role in working with IDPs, participants warned that there are sometimes problems in including them in the consultative process. Sometimes, civil society organizations have political agendas which don’t match IDP needs. For example, some civil society organizations may oppose improvements in IDPs’ living situations, viewing these as assimilation policies which will hurt a greater political cause. Problems can develop when the civil society organizations are seen by outsiders as the sole representatives of the IDP community. Occasionally local NGOs may be threatened by strong IDP voices. And sometimes too there is a gap between civil society organizations which are usually based in urban areas and IDPs living in rural settings which can lead not only to difficulties in communications but to differences in perceptions.

Ethical issues

Participants discussed a number of ethical concerns about consulting with IDPs. As several participants noted, there is always a power differential between those in positions of authority and IDPs. “If we’re honest,” one participant noted, “consultation is based on our values. For example, we thought it was important to talk with women and the male leaders accepted this because we had the money, not because they agreed with the methodology.”

Consultations can pose risks to IDP participants. In some situations, they can be targeted simply for speaking to aid agencies on the ground. Efforts to involve IDPs in management and evaluation can have negative consequences. For example, community monitoring is good in principle, but there are cases where those monitors are pressured by others in the community and community power relations are affected,

Consulting with IDPs should focus on actionable issues that will benefit IDPs. But sometimes there is little that can be done to remedy the problems and it is disturbing when IDPs discuss the same issues – such as violence in Darfur – over and over again when there is little prospect that the consultations will bring about the needed change. Similarly, participants noted that it is troubling when IDPs learn that they have rights, but aren’t able to exercise those rights, for example, in places like Colombia, Sri Lanka and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is often difficult to determine an appropriate response when the requests which IDPs make are unattainable; too often agencies tend to side-step the unpleasant task of being honest with IDPs when the response is negative. One participant for example, asked “what do you do when IDPs want to return and pursue their former livelihoods but it’s no longer possible for them to do so?”

Follow-up

Participants were encouraged to learn about tools which have been developed for consultative mechanisms – particularly UNHCR’s Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations – and agreed that it would be useful to develop a set of general guidelines which could be shared with governments, UN agencies and NGOs to encourage them to develop appropriate ways of consulting with IDPs. Participants reviewed draft guidelines which will be widely circulated for comments and suggestions. A consensus seemed to emerge that consulting with IDPs should be standard practice for all those working in this field, but that understanding and creativity are needed to ensure that consultative processes are developed in a way that is beneficial to all concerned.