Internally displaced woman with two children in street shop. Photo: Bishnu Raj Upreti (2006)

Addressing issues and concerns of Internally Displaced Persons in Nepal

NCCR north south

Case studies featured here were conducted in Nepal.

Policy message

- Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are not necessarily a homogeneous group, and not all are poor. The present definition of IDPs fails to include certain important groups.

- Displacement accelerates the process of rural–urban migration and the changing livelihoods that this entails. Most IDPs prefer to stay in urban areas rather than return to their place of origin.

- The socio-political status of women changes after displacement. Such changes should be institutionalised through programmes and policies at the macro level.

- Intervention packages must be guided by the actual needs of the displaced people, not by standardised "basic needs" concepts. Local contexts must take precedence over the mandates of the intervening agencies.

Internal displacement poses an unprecedented global challenge in terms of its scale and complexity. In 2010, 27.5 million people in 54 countries were displaced by conflict alone. In Nepal, around 250,000 persons were displaced by the Maoist conflict (IDMC 2006). Studies by humanitarian agencies have largely guided the interventions for IDPs so far. This has established an image of IDPs that is not always correct, and masks important but very different local contexts. To design suitable interventions, the livelihoods of IDPs need to be analysed from a broader socio-economic and political perspective, and local contexts must be adequately understood.

IDPs are not a homogeneous group

IDPs have a diverse socio-economic and political status even after they are displaced. So they have different needs and ideas on possible solutions after displacement. We can distinguish the following three groups.

Political and socio-economic elites, like local leaders and landlords, are often able to support themselves. Their main concern is to have their confiscated property returned and to regain their lost status. However, in the present situation, they prefer to live in urban areas and visit rural areas to maintain their property and political status.

Professionals like teachers and health workers have specialised knowledge and skills, so can get relatively well-paid jobs in towns and cities. If they are displaced for a long time, they use

available opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills, and draw on their networks. Their main concern is to establish themselves in the urban areas and gain access to urban facilities.

Low-skilled people often live in precarious conditions, and can scarcely afford to cover their basic needs. For most, their farming skills become irrelevant in the cities. They have few other assets useful to support themselves. Weak social and political capital impedes their access to support agencies. Their main concern is to have better income opportunities so as to fulfil their basic needs. As they have no significant assets to lose in their home villages, many would rather stay in the urban area.

Absolute return cannot be achieved
Table 1 summarises the characteristics of 270 IDPs in Nepal. It is based on in-depth

Featured case study

Changing space of women in labour market

In Nepal, many internally displaced women have started driving three-wheeler vehicles and microbuses, serving as public transport in the Kathmandu Valley – a job until recently done only by men. Now, private offices also hire women as drivers. Some internally displaced women have started working as vehicle licence brokers. This is a big change in the labour market. Similarly, women work as security guards and vendors selling clothes, vegetables, and fruits. Some sell water, cigarettes, and sweets on the street and at bus stops.

Reconsidering "basic needs"

Light and power are an important factor for survival. For internally displaced people, electric light can extend their working hours, so improving their general well-being. But light does not fall into the standard category of basic needs, and none of the agencies supporting IDPs provides lighting for displaced people. In one case, aid agencies started a school for children of 1,200 displaced families, very close to an existing community school. The IDPs said that they needed electricity more than the new school because their children could go to the community school nearby. But getting electricity connected to their residences is not in the support agencies' list of basic needs.

qualitative research with IDPs living in urban areas after displacement due to the Maoist armed conflict. The interviews focused on recording their perspectives and attitudes to returning to their areas of origin. Among them, 72 percent did not want to return home, while 14 percent were not sure about what they wanted to do.

The path of displacement coincides with the natural migration flow from rural to urban areas. It brings a major shift in livelihoods for the people who are displaced. They move out of farming and take up trade and informal services in urban areas. They form new social networks, and discover new livelihood options and integrate into the urban environment.

The integration of IDPs in urban areas changes their attitudes towards returning home. Young people, especially, wanted to stay in the urban areas (Table 2) due to opportunities for education, access to infrastructure and employment. Mothers wanted to stay in urban areas because of better education and health facilities for their children. For men, however, their socio-political status in their area of origin was important. Elderly people wanted to return home because it was hard for them to adjust to life in urban areas.

Experiences of internally displaced women

In rural Nepal, bartering traditions mean that a cash income is not essential for people to get goods and services. But in urban areas, cash is needed for daily life. To earn cash, displaced women often move out of their houses and become economically active. This expands their role within the family, changes the household division of labour, and redefines family and socio-economic relations.

This is a significant change from their employment and household roles in rural areas. It is necessary to recognise this

change in addressing the situation of internally displaced women, since their new position changes their personal skills and knowledge, as well as their capacities to pursue various livelihoods. It also changes their emotional landscape – things like fear, anxiety, and their orientation towards their future livelihoods.

Similarly, there is also a change in women's participation in the community. This is particularly prevalent in communities which are emerging – like slum settlements. Through women's groups, displaced women become involved in social activities in their communities. These changes create a basis for redefining the division of labour and their roles in society in women-friendly ways. Such changes have yet to be recognised at the macro level.

Lack of coherence between "needs" and "assistance"

Responses to internally displaced people are determined by the mandates and time frames of agencies that provide assistance, rather than by the needs of the displaced people. While the IDPs expected assistance that would help build their livelihoods – such as getting a sustained source of income – the intervening agencies provided short-term humanitarian assistance based on the agencies' predefined mandates.

Food, potable water, medicine, shelter, and education for children are the "basic needs" identified by the international agencies for all IDPs, and they seek to apply this "basic needs" package everywhere in the world. This preconceived list has little room for modification. Interviews with the implementing staff of international agencies revealed a lack of flexibility to act according to the actual needs of IDPs, because they could not go beyond their agencies' mandates. In contrast, IDPs want flexible arrangements that provide a basis for improving their livelihoods or generating employment.

Similarly, decisions on when to stop assistance were not related to the conditions of IDPs but to their project time frame. The mechanical, rigid provisions of the agencies engaged in helping IDPs even creates problems for the IDPs. For example, some children had to discontinue their education in the middle of the term because the project supporting their schooling had phased out.

Excluded groups

Because of the conflict, some 400,000 Nepalis moved to India (Ghimire 2009). But because of the provisions of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, they have not been granted refugee status. Similarly,

Table 1: Classification of IDPs interviewed

Category	No. of individuals	%	General characteristics
Elites	15	6	Well-established livelihoods, good access to influential people in government and non-government organisations, and to policy and programmes at local and central level, and access to other support structures.
Professionals	153	57	Professionals with relatively stable source of income who are fairly well-established in the host community; with good access to support structures.
Low skilled	102	38	Poor and the vulnerable, with very little chance of livelihoods in host community. No, or passive, access to support structures.
Total	270	100	

(Source: Ghimire A 2009)

Indians coming to Nepal because of flooding are not given refugee status. As both these groups have left their own countries, they do not qualify for the status of IDPs either, leaving them without protection and support. There is no definition for such groups.
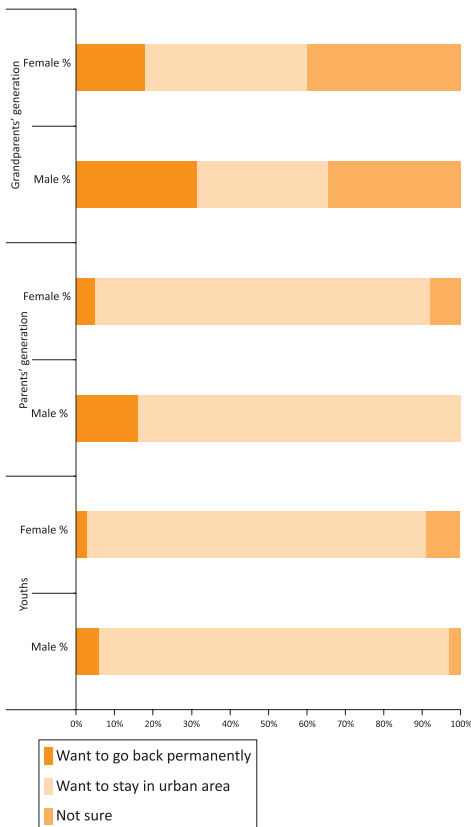
Incorporating internal displacement in a development agenda

Displacement changes the livelihoods and perceptions of the future for the displaced people. A lack of development in their areas of origin has led to the failure of return programmes. It is also a cause of recurring and protracted conflict and displacement. However, as displacement is seen as a purely humanitarian issue, it is not incorporated in development agendas. Integrating the IDPs' issues and concerns into the development agenda in their place of origin can have a dual effect. On the one hand, it would enable the individuals to build their own livelihoods and recover their loss. It would give them a sense of ownership in post-conflict development work and promote their physical and emotional well-being. For the state, on the other hand, it would provide much-needed resources and also ease population pressure in urban areas.

IDPs living with hosts in a slum area of Manahara, Kathmandu. Photo: Anita Ghimire (2008)

Definitions

Internally Displaced Persons
"Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border" (UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement 1998).

Host community
The community where IDPs come to live after being displaced. Host communities are usually communities that are perceived to be safer, have networks, and offer infrastructure and opportunities for livelihoods.

Table 2: Attitudes of IDPs to returning to their area of origin

Legend:
- Want to go back permanently
- Want to stay in urban area
- Not sure

Youths: 35 male, 35 female;
Parents' generation: 80 male, 40 female;
Grandparents' generation: 35 male, 45 female.

Internally displaced women learning about child health and sanitation issues in Nepalgunj, Nepal. Photo: Anita Ghimire (2007)

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Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

- Internal displacement is a relatively new challenge in Nepal. NCCR North–South research gives insights to concerned policymakers on how internal displacement can be better addressed. It has shown the following:

- Policies and programmes targeted towards displaced people are broadly guided by the rigid international "basic needs" framework (food, potable water, medicine, shelter, and education for children). It is essential to adapt this framework while supporting IDPs. The standard practice of lumping IDPs together as a homogenous group must change, enabling a response to IDPs in disaggregated ways based on their needs.

- There is also a need to adapt the existing definition of IDPs to include people who have been obliged to flee from their own country but who do not get refugee status because of inter-country agreements or because their host state has not ratified the International Refugee Law (1945).

- Displacement leads to changes in the individual abilities and responsibilities of women. These should be institutionalised by policies and practices at the national level.

- Intervening agencies should be guided by the specific local contexts and needs of the displaced people, rather than their own mandates or project constraints.

- Internal displacement should be integrated into the development agenda. Displaced people could be used as agents of development for areas where they originate and where they eventually settle. This would provide incentives to them to return and contribute to their rural origins.

Further reading

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