



Strengthening global UN leadership on solutions to internal displacement: proposal to establish a Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General

Discussion Paper

I. Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the Secretariat of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement as a backgrounder for discussions on the best way to ensure a strong focus on solutions to internal displacement in the UN system and, specifically, the potential value of creating the position of a Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) on the issue. The paper draws on inputs received from a wide range of stakeholders through submissions, bilateral consultations, research and other academic inputs provided to the Panel.

The paper is part of a series developed by the Panel that examine how action and accountability on internal displacement could be strengthened within the UN and the international system.¹ The Panel recognizes the primary responsibility of states to address internal displacement. At the same time, it is reflecting on recommendations needed to strengthen coordinated international responses to sustainably support national responses. It has explored this objective along three axes: (1) an international humanitarian system optimized to respond to internal displacement, including in providing principled humanitarian assistance and protection and laying the groundwork for solutions;² (2) leadership and coordination arrangements for solutions at country-level;³ (3) opportunities to further strengthen leadership and engagement on internal displacement at the global level, in particular on solutions, which is the object of this paper.

¹ "International system" is used in this context to describe the broader ecosystem of international actors that are involved in prevention, response, and solutions to internal displacement. This could include international NGOs, other non-UN international organizations such as ICRC and IFRC, and development contractors, among others.

² This is the subject of separate research and discussions by the Panel.

³ This is addressed in a separate paper, see the Panel issue paper "UN Leadership and Coordination for Solutions at Country-Level", available on the Panel's website.

The ideas set out in the paper are offered for further exploration and debate and do not, at this stage, represent definitive conclusions by the Panel. The Panel also highlights that the ideas explored in the paper are offered without prejudice to the primary responsibility of states to provide humanitarian assistance, protection, and durable solutions to their populations and to the important, ongoing leadership already provided by the respective UN entities on these issues. Rather, the proposal discussed below responds to the need for increased high-level engagement with affected governments, regional organizations, IFIs and donors to accelerate solutions to internal displacement, as well as to support a coherent and predictable engagement from the different parts of the UN system. It highlights the importance of a strong humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, and to deliver more predictable, systematic engagement with states and other actors. The Panel welcomes all views and new ideas, including those which may differ from the propositions in the paper.

I. Context

Over the past year, the Panel has received over 100 submissions from governments, UN entities, NGOs and think tanks, consulted over 12,000 IDPs and host communities in 22 countries with the help of partners, received original research pieces, and led over 50 bilateral thematic consultations and participated in over 20 events. From this body of work, the Panel has observed, for purposes of the elements relevant for this paper, the following:

- **Internal displacement is still mainly addressed as a humanitarian issue** despite now being widely recognized as a multi-dimensional challenge that needs to be addressed at all angles and levels, including by development, peace and security, human rights and disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation actors.
- Despite the **UN Secretary-General's call at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 for internal displacement to have been halved by 2030** in line with international standards, in practice displacement has continued to increase, with **very limited progress in resolving existing or preventing new situations.**
- **IDPs do not have real visibility beyond the humanitarian sector.** This is despite the **central role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC)** on the coordination of internal displacement in humanitarian settings,⁴ the essential role of the **Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs ("Special Rapporteur")** on inclusive dialogues with States, capacity building and mainstreaming of the human rights of IDPs into the UN system and

⁴ The ERC mandate is based on UN General Assembly Resolution (UNGA) 46/182 which created the humanitarian system. As part of its Reform Agenda, the UN SG designated in 1997 the ERC as the focal point on internal displacement. UNGA Third Committee Resolution 74/160 on the protection of and assistance to IDPs "*Emphasizes the central role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator in the coordination of the protection of and assistance to internally displaced persons, inter alia, through the inter-agency cluster system*".

the **strong operational role of agencies** delivering humanitarian assistance and protection to them.

- More specifically, at global level, there is **no single entity within the UN system with the mandate to provide leadership on IDP solutions, leading to unclear responsibilities and ad hoc action by the UN when it comes to supporting solution efforts.**
- Connected to the above, while the importance of a joined up approach in the **overall humanitarian, development and peace work of the United Nations (the so-called “nexus”)** has been underlined as crucial to address internal displacement comprehensively – in particular to prevent displacement and enable solutions - there is **no one to ensure that this link is made on a predictable, sustained and accountable basis.**
- At country level, Resident Coordinators whom the Panel consulted said they **struggle to find someone to predictably call upon for strategic advice** on solutions to internal displacement, including engagement with the highest levels of Governments, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), UN agencies and regional organizations.
- Affected governments, regional organizations, IFIs and donors have similarly highlighted to the Panel uncertainty as to whom to turn for **high-level advice on internal displacement** within the UN system, particularly on solutions. Indeed, solutions are to a large extent outside of the ERC’s powers and competencies. Also, the Panel found that beyond the UN, the central role of the ERC on internal displacement is not well-known. While the role of the Special Rapporteur is better known, this is an independent human rights expert with a mandate from the UN Human Rights Council to advise and report on the human rights of IDPs.

The Panel is encouraged by the different parts of the UN system that are already stepping up to address internal displacement (including by adopting specific policies and enhancing capacity on the issue), and the Panel hopes these efforts will continue. The Panel believes, however, that given the scale of the work required to strengthen action to address the gaps described above, the current set-up is not enough to enable significant change. The Panel has therefore looked at several options to help overcome the challenges and gaps described above.

One such option is the proposition that has been made to the Panel that the mandate of the ERC should be expanded to cover solutions to internal displacement. The main difficulty with this idea is however, first, that the ability of the ERC to be an outspoken advocate on issues linked to independent humanitarian action needs to be distinctively preserved. On the other hand, working in close partnership with governments to pursue solutions requires a strong development and peace approach as well. The two roles are not mutually exclusive; however, there are undeniable differences in approaches that could create tensions if the same person were to hold both. Also, OCHA’s time is already stretched in carrying out critically important advocacy and fundraising on the world’s humanitarian crises and providing internal leadership on humanitarian response. In the Panel’s view, it would be challenging to expect the ERC to also take on a greater role in driving nexus-oriented action on solutions and provide continuous mentorship and diplomacy with states on issues pertaining to displacement that sit outside the immediate humanitarian sphere. Such a

role would for example include support to set up the systems, policies and tools to incorporate IDPs into national development plans. Given the critical importance of both functions, the Panel believes that it is best to retain them as two distinct but mutually reinforcing roles.

A second option the Panel has heard from a very limited number of interlocutors is that **a single agency should be created to deal with internal displacement comprehensively including solutions**. While this option would provide more predictability to the response, it encounters several problems. First, advancing solutions is inherently multidisciplinary and multi-actor, so designating a single entity would run counter to the overwhelming advice the Panel has received. Second, a range of UN agencies, including UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, WFP, FAO, UNFPA, UNDP, UN Habitat and UNDRR, are already playing crucial roles in responding to internal displacement. Isolating IDPs from their work would certainly complicate, fragment and greatly diminish the quality of the response.

A third option is to formally give to the UN Deputy Secretary-General (DSG) the responsibility to advance efforts within the UN to deliver a nexus approach to solutions. The Panel agrees that there is merit in this option. However, the Panel sees two potential shortcomings in this approach: first, the DSG already has extensive responsibilities and is unlikely to be able to dedicate the considerable time that will be required to truly deliver a change on solutions to internal displacement within the UN system. Second, as mentioned above, the gap identified by the Panel relates not only to internal workings of the UN, but also to the need for consistent, high-level diplomacy and engagement with states and other actors on solutions to internal displacement. While the DSG can undoubtedly contribute to these efforts, given their broader mandate and competing priorities we do not believe that they would be able to provide the level of predictable or sustained engagement that is needed to bring about change.

A fourth option considered by the Panel is the **setting up of an SRSG position and small office on the issue of Solutions to internal displacement** which is elaborated in the remainder of the paper.

III. The Case for the Function of an SRSG on Solutions to Internal Displacement

The Panel believes that there is a need for a senior official to drive HDP nexus-oriented action on solutions, including by **connecting the various parts of the UN and leveraging a coherent whole-of-UN approach on solutions**. The Panel believes that an SRSG would be well placed to connect the various parts of the UN and provide continuous mentorship and diplomacy with states and other relevant stakeholders to set up the systems, policies, and tools to drive collective and development-oriented efforts to find durable solutions for IDPs, and set the long-term actions necessary to prevent repeated or new displacement in the future. Of course, the ERC, DSG, the Director of DCO, the UNDP Administrator and other senior UN officials engaged in the different aspects of internal displacement can and should support this high-level leadership work, particularly as it relates to ensuring the inclusion of internal displacement in development and

nexus approaches. They can also assist the work of RCs on these issues at country level. All these actors however have other significant mandates that limit the amount of time and attention they can dedicate to driving change on internal displacement. Engaging with states on internal displacement issues is itself a full-time job and country operations have made clear that they need more predictable global level support to engage authorities at the highest levels on these issues. While along with prevention and response, the Special Rapporteur engages on solutions (on law and policy making, the development of the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions, the indicators library on durable solutions, thematic and country visits), the role is limited by the fact that it is unpaid, voluntary, independent, and very thinly staffed and resourced. Also, the Special Rapporteur reports to the Human Rights Council which may dissuade some countries from inviting this mandate for a visit for fear of having their human rights record on the issue examined. None of this augurs well for the predictability of engagement or authority needed to drive real change on the varied range of questions pertaining to solutions.

The Panel is thus exploring the **establishment of the position of an SRSG** that would work with all relevant actors to promote solutions to internal displacement. Reporting to and representing the UN Secretary General, it would be a full-time position with a staffed office to kickstart and lead strengthened efforts on solutions. It would be a time-bound position and could be phased out in line with specific benchmarks, once a solutions approach is more firmly embedded within the ways of working of different actors across the UN system – including in increasing the predictability of high-level UN engagement with states on solutions. It would focus on **accelerating solutions to internal displacement** in the SDG decade of action⁵, by ensuring that IDPs benefit equitably from development progress and are not left behind.

The position would have a twofold approach. First, it would provide **a single point of leadership and accountability within the UN to ensure joined up approaches to solutions** to internal displacement across the humanitarian, development, and peace and security communities (including early and consistent engagement of development and peace actors in responses). Second, it would ensure **predictable, continuous engagement with states to promote national ownership**, but also with IFIs, the private sector and other actors to catalyze effective action on internal displacement. The SRSG would complement and further reinforce the critical work of OCHA, DCO, the Special Rapporteur and the range of agencies which respond to the needs of IDPs and host communities including UNHCR and IOM. Because of her/his senior rank, the SRSG would be able to call together development and peace actors at the highest levels.

Looking first at the role of the SRSG in relation to the UN and international system, the SRSG would serve as a **champion of nexus approaches to internal displacement**, promoting joint planning, programming and financing, and would proactively work across the UN and its partners to support each set of actors (e.g. humanitarian, development, peace and security and climate change among others) to consider their role in advancing solutions to internal displacement. This would be done in close partnership with the DSG. The SRSG would also provide, as needed, the technical support to assist them to fulfill this role. The SRSG could support Resident Coordinators,

⁵ See [UNSDG | Decade of Action](#)

UN Agencies, and country-level Solutions Working Groups⁶ as requested, as well as organizations at global level that are mobilizing resources and driving change to support solutions on internal displacement within their organizations. The SRSG's office could be a hub of technical expertise on solutions to internal displacement, particularly in serving **a network and connector function** that assists in directing support requests to existing capacities across the UN and international system. It could map solutions and identify innovative approaches to be scaled out or replicated across countries and regions.

Outside the UN system, the SRSG would serve as a clear **point of entry for governments, IFIs, and other relevant stakeholders** seeking advice or technical support on solutions to internal displacement, requests which the SRSG could then transmit to relevant actors or respond to directly as appropriate. The SRSG would likewise **proactively seek out and engage governments, IFIs and other actors on solutions to internal displacement** including at the request of Resident Coordinators and the UN Secretary-General. This would complement the advocacy carried out by the ERC and Special Rapporteur and could focus specifically on elements such as supporting states and other actors to recognize internal displacement as a political and development priority, working with authorities to support the adoption of whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, and sharing firsthand learnings from other contexts on how solutions can be realized.

The Panel believes it is important to preserve, respectively the ERC's central humanitarian coordination role and related OCHA support functions;⁷ the Special Rapporteur as defender of the rights of IDPs; and the crucial role of operational UN agencies in relation to internal displacement. The Panel believes that as a complement to these, a senior official who can represent the UN and engage with leaders as peers on the issue of solutions to internal displacement would offer a unique opportunity to raise the importance of this issue. **This time-bound position would ensure dedicated leadership to enable the implementation of the Panel's recommendations on solutions.** It would help to drive real change as early as possible both in affected States' agendas and within the United Nations, through **mentorship, diplomacy and advocacy**. The SRSG could also work with other actors to **convene multi-stakeholder and state-to-state engagement** to build momentum, visibility, and capacity on issues pertaining to solutions to internal displacement. Crucially, a key function of the SRSG would be helping to take the Panel's other recommendations forward, providing the dedicated attention and follow-up that will be required to ensure that the current momentum is sustained.

Throughout these different responsibilities and tasks, the SRSG would work closely with the ERC and the SR in line with their respective mandates on internal displacement, as well as with Principals in relevant UN offices and agencies, Governments, and IFIs, among others. **The SRSG on solutions to internal displacement is therefore neither a new incarnation of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of IDPs (RSG)⁸ nor a**

⁶ See the Panel's paper on *Leadership and Coordination for Solutions at Country-Level* for more on this

⁷ As per OCHA's on Message on internal displacement, these functions include field coordination, policy development, advocacy, information management and humanitarian financing.

⁸ Appointed by the SG in 1992, he RSG enjoyed a high standing and profile with senior government officials. and SRSG IDP because they were appointed by the SG enjoyed a high standing and high profile with senior government

coordinator competing with the role of the ERC. Rather, the SRSG, ERC, Special Rapporteur, and relevant UN agencies would have complementary but distinct roles. While some additional costs are necessary in establishing an SRSG and her/his supporting office,⁹ the Panel believes that these costs would be justified and even made up for through the additional efficiencies gained in having more predictable and coherent approaches to internal displacement within the UN system and in the more proactive engagement by governments, IFIs, the private sector, and other actors on solutions. The establishment of the SRSG's Office should be accompanied with the drafting of a timed work plan/road map that would set out the deliverables (and in fact the phase out plan) of her/his Office.

IV. Discussion questions

Do you agree that there would be value in establishing a function of an SRSG on Solutions to Internal Displacement?

- If so, why? Do you have any specific views on how the SRSG could best complement and work alongside other existing roles within the UN system?
- Should the mandate be linked to the UN DSG and the overall development architecture?
- Do you agree with the functions highlighted above? Do you agree that it should be time-bound and be discontinued once specific benchmarks have been achieved?
- Should the SRSG convene a network of UN agencies on solutions to internal displacement?

If you don't agree, why? Are there alternative options you believe would be more effective in driving progress on internal displacement within and outside the UN system, particularly as it relates to solutions?

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officials. The RSG, much like the SR afterwards focused on building normative frameworks, capacities, inclusive national dialogues and advocacy. Like the SR, the RSG de facto full-time positions but unpaid, unstaffed, except for supported by think tank and other staff funded by donors.

⁹ Achieving the different functions and outcomes needed would require the SRSG to be supported by a dedicated team of technical specialists from across a range of disciplines, as well as a small but high-quality administrative and organizational staff.