

Input for UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement Call for Submission issued on March 12, 2020.

Rationale/background:

Displacement in the context of technological disasters tends to be extremely protracted, often due to lasting impacts of environmental contamination resulting from these events. Yet, displacement in such situations has received very little international attention so far, since technological disasters are considered to be rare events. Once such disasters happen, however, their impacts tend to be severe, complex and long-lasting. Moreover, intensification of disasters resulting from climate-change related extreme weather events pose greater risk to infrastructure at critical industrial facilities that are rapidly ageing in many parts of the world, while rapid urbanisation and industrialisation mean that greater amounts of populations are more likely to be exposed to such disasters. Seen in this light, there is a greater need for international policy discussion on internal displacement to reflect on the existing lessons of displacement triggered by technological disasters.

This submission seeks to bring for the Panel's attention the experiences of IDPs displaced by the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan, based on the research that I conducted as part of the United Nations University's (UNU) [Fukushima Global Communication Programme](#) between 2014 and 2016. The dominant perception among high-income countries, including Japan to this day, is that displacement only affects countries in the developing world. While the largest share of IDPs is indeed recorded in developing countries, Fukushima IDPs serve as a stark reminder that displacement becomes a very difficult issue to handle and resolve even for the world's richest countries. Towards this end, this submission provides concrete examples that could assist the Panel in its work to raise awareness about disaster displacement as an issue of global relevance to all countries.

Key lessons from protracted displacement caused by Fukushima nuclear disaster:

- Evolution of vulnerability
 - Protracted displacement due to technological disasters, which render one's habitual place of residence and/or native homeland to be uninhabitable for years (if not decades) to come, involves a complex, painful process of loss and recovery for the affected people and communities. Marking more than 9 years since the incidence of the nuclear catastrophe, Fukushima is a "living example" illustrating that over the years, the vulnerabilities intensified by the disaster and displacement become inseparably linked with pre-existing, structural issues. This submission highlights three such issues, which are not unique to Japan, but are essentially endemic in the societies of many industrialised and developing countries alike:
- 1) Regional inequalities:
 - Regional inequalities have been prominent in Japan already before the 2011 disasters, but they are becoming more pronounced in the recovery process from 2011 disasters. Variations in disaster damage, coupled with frequent delays in reconstruction, have led to uneven pace of recovery across the affected areas. The presence of areas contaminated by radioactive fallout is complicating the recovery process in Fukushima, when compared with other prefectures that were severely affected by the earthquake and tsunami.
 - The towns and villages surrounding the damaged nuclear plant in Fukushima have experienced significant demographic changes. By 2018, only 15% of the pre-disaster population returned to the areas where evacuation orders had been lifted, and half of returnees are elderly residents above 65.

- Protracted displacement inevitably diminishes the hopes of resuming a normal life in the original place of residence. While there are those, for the most part elderly residents, who wish to return as soon as possible, others — especially younger generations with children — have had to start rebuilding their lives elsewhere and had no plans to return. Most notably, there is an increase in those who feel that there are too many uncertainties to decide what to do. Many IDPs question whether return is a viable option, when original livelihoods have been disrupted, and communities have been geographically dispersed and socially divided due to differences in contamination levels, compensation payments and attitudes towards return.
- The fact that it is mostly elderly residents who have returned to the towns and villages where evacuation orders have been lifted led to significant labour shortages, and severely impacted on the recovery of critical socio-economic functions in these communities. Such delays have been further diminishing the return prospects for working-age residents. Some towns and villages have thus shifted focus to attracting new-comers by setting up economic incentives from the recovery funds, but the sustainability of such schemes remains highly questionable.
- Some of the areas surrounding the nuclear plant host large number of workers contracted for decontamination and decommissioning activities at the plant. This brought some economic dynamism, but it has also promoted dependency on the so-called “recovery bubble” that is unsustainable in the longer-term. On the other hand, some towns in Fukushima prefecture experienced high concentration of IDPs, which led to a spike in land and property prices and put a strain on the capacity of locally available services, thus adding to the tensions between displaced populations and their host communities.

2) Economic marginalisation

- A significant portion of Fukushima IDPs experienced decrease in their income levels and many continued to find themselves in difficult financial situation years after the disaster. Even when IDPs could secure employment after being displaced, they often ended up in positions that were less paid and less secure in comparison to their pre-disaster jobs.
- Whether or not IDPs have been entitled to compensation from TEPCO, the utility company in charge of the damaged nuclear plant, does affect the degree of economic hardship they experience. Nonetheless, IDPs on both sides struggle to re-establish their livelihoods, and some have experienced outright economic marginalisation.
- The mandatory evacuation zone drawn by the government in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster included different types of evacuation zones, distinguished based on the average level of radiation recorded in each district, despite the fact that radiation has not spread evenly and there are radioactive hotspots within as well as outside the evacuation zones and even outside Fukushima prefecture. The gradual reorganization of these evacuation zones has led to creation of different categories of “mandatory” evacuees, who have received compensation according to the type of evacuation zone their pre-disaster residence was located, the value of any property they owned in that area and their pre-disaster employment status. According to the government policy, compensation payments stop a year after the evacuation order is lifted.
- Most IDPs from the mandatory evacuation zones saw their pre-disaster livelihoods completely destroyed and have since heavily relied on the compensation to make their ends meet, which puts most of them in difficult situation once compensation payments stop.
- In addition to IDPs from mandatory evacuation zones, there are also people who fled from other areas where radiation increased, but which were not designated as evacuation zones. These people, referred to as “voluntary” evacuees, received only limited one-time payments and are not entitled to the same assistance as mandatory evacuees. Many of such evacuees are considered to be mothers who evacuated to protect the health of their children, which led to split households, straining finances and relationships.

- Both types of IDPs, however, struggled to rebuild their lives in their places of evacuation. In the height of the “recovery boom”, work related to decontamination or decommissioning was widely available inside Fukushima prefecture, but often it was not the type of work IDPs were seeking. For displaced business owners, making the investment required to reopen in a new location is both risky and costly, and would lead to conflict with similar local businesses.
- For mandatory evacuees who sought employment, it was not uncommon to be met with resentment from local residents, who saw them as competing for scarce jobs when they could live off compensation. Moreover, mandatory evacuees often felt pressured by policies aimed at pushing for return by lifting the evacuation orders and eventually terminating compensation.
- Many voluntary evacuees encountered employers unwilling to hire them because they did not know how long they could stay in their place of evacuation, and often being de-facto single parents, they had to take time off work when their children were ill. In many cases, evacuee mothers also felt pressured to return to Fukushima even if they were still concerned about radiation levels, due to economic and psychological pressures arising from prolonged separation from their husbands.

3) Social isolation

- The majority of people displaced by the nuclear disaster experienced multiple moves. A survey conducted in 2016 already showed that Fukushima evacuees have on average moved 4.6 times since the disaster. After being displaced from their original homes, most have experienced life in the collective evacuation shelters and then in temporary accommodation. Repeated displacement, however, often resulted in a change of household structure, with younger adults moving into different types of accommodation than older generations, splitting up extended families. Older people also tended to stay in pre-fabricated or other temporary housing arrangements for longer periods.
- From temporary accommodation people followed different trajectories: some have built new homes or settled in rented flats elsewhere, others moved into subsidized public housing, and a small share of mostly elderly residents returned to their native towns and villages once the evacuation orders were lifted. With each move, original community ties and relationships that people have eventually developed (while for example living side by side in the cramped temporary accommodation units) were wakened or lost. This has been particularly affecting the elderly, who have become increasingly isolated in the recovery process – regardless whether they remain in temporary accommodation, move into subsidised housing, or return to their native towns or villages.
- For older generations, the search for solutions, whether through return to their original communities, integration in their places of refuge or settlement elsewhere, can be further impeded by frail health, which often deteriorates while they are in displacement. In addition, many older IDPs, especially from the rural areas contaminated by radioactive fallout, have experienced soaring living costs. Many previously had land on which to produce most of their food and had often benefitted from rich natural resources available in their communities. Once displaced, their perception was that investing in buying new land and agricultural equipment was both too costly and risky due to persistent uncertainty over how long they would remain displaced and for how long they would live.
- For many of the elderly, the experience of being displaced and particularly the uncertainty resulting from protracted displacement, erodes their sense of agency, making them dependent on assistance from the government or their families. For some of the elderly IDPs, this has resulted in a feeling that they cannot independently decide where to spend the remainder of their lives. While many wished to return to their native homes and communities, they knew that their children and/or grandchildren are often unwilling to do so. This reflects the great inter-generational divide in the perception of return as a potential solution: the

elderly often saw return as more desirable than younger generations, who tend to be more concerned about risks posed by remaining radiation.

- Social isolation coupled with financial hardship can easily turn into outright socio-economic marginalisation. In fact, Fukushima is the only prefecture where the number of indirect deaths resulting from health issues and suicides related to the disaster has exceeded the toll from the direct impacts of the earthquake and tsunami. Older people are particularly affected, with those above the age of 66 accounting for 90% of such fatalities.

- Conclusions and recommendations

The above examples from Fukushima underline the importance of framing the search for solutions in the context of technological disasters, not through ad-hoc and piecemeal measures, but as a long-term resilience-building process, addressing pressing needs at the same time as tackling deep-rooted, structural issues. In practice, this calls for:

- Sustainability of measures to rebuild livelihoods, compensation mechanisms, relocation schemes and environmental remediation operations has to be carefully considered from the very early stages of recovery.
- Reducing and managing risks should be the core, guiding principle, both in the immediate response and in the long-term process of recovery. Risks here do not simply mean disaster risks, but a broader set of risks which includes the risk of deepening social divisions, economic inequalities and socio-economic marginalisation.
- Participation of affected people should be promoted and planned for as a core and central element in the process of formulating the recovery measures through allocation of sufficient resources, close coordination between the involved stakeholders and transparent moderation of any related consultation processes.

Taken together, this underlines the need for comprehensive reorientation of national approaches to internal displacement, led the by the following three realisations:

- Displacement has to be recognised not just as hypothetical risk but as a real and serious consequence posed by disasters that cannot be simply addressed by reactive adjustments once such disaster happens. It requires pro-active reforms in policy, legal and institutional frameworks to enable targeted and timely support tailored to the changing realities of the affected people and communities, the grow increasingly diverse over time.
- For this to happen, there is a need to promote close cooperation between all levels of governance and stakeholders involved and there has to be a genuine commitment on all sides to involve the affected people of all ages, genders and diversity backgrounds in policy formulation and implementation processes.
- Dealing with displacement in the context of technological disasters also calls for greater appreciation of its wide-ranging and divisive impacts on community and even household levels. In this sense, experiences of Fukushima IDPs emphasise that addressing psychological and social consequences is as important as reconstructing physical infrastructure and environmental remediation