

Geneva, 14 May 2020

Submission to the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement

Data for what?

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“More needs to be done, however, to generate reliable data on IDPs’ location and demographics and the patterns and duration of their displacement. Without such information, neither governments nor humanitarian and development stakeholders are able to plan effective interventions to reduce the impacts of displacement or the risk of it happening in the future” (IDMC, 2020)

The above quote is from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID) 2020, the latest major publication on internal displacement data. But it might as well be from the documents prepared for the 1994 San José Declaration on Refugees and Displaced Persons, the Norwegian Refugee Council’s 1998 Global IDP Survey, or any document on internal displacement data to be written after this year’s UN World Data Forum. The ubiquity of such recommendations and statements about evidence on internal displacement is not due to a lack of progress on IDP data over the past two decades. There has in fact been much progress on this front, as the GRID 2020 illustrates. Instead, it illustrates an issue of the internal displacement information management (IM) sector: **the failure to systematically assess the value and the use of internal displacement related data, and the consequent lack of understanding of the impact the production and analysis of data has on the response to internal displacement and ultimately on IDP’s realities.**

This submission addresses that issue. It is based on initial conversations with colleagues and on my personal experience working in policy design with national Government, as well as in the production and analysis of internal displacement data. It represents my personal views and will hopefully be followed up with the type of research into the impact of internal displacement data that I recommend the Secretary General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (HLP-ID) to encourage. I will first elaborate on the need for a more rigorous understanding of the value, use, and impact of internal displacement related data and data processes and then suggest actions the HLP-ID could take to improve this understanding.

1. The need for a more rigorous understanding of the value, use, and impact of internal displacement related data and data processes

Statements like the GRID 2020 reference above are not often questioned publicly and neither are claims about how internal displacement data informs decisions, and thus about how it creates change. This might be due to the often-broad nature of the statements and recommendations about internal displacement IM (around improving the quality of the data; making it more reliable, interoperable, and actionable; harmonizing it; etc.); it might also be due to the technical nature of the topic that in some cases can act as a deterrent for non-data experts to question what seems to be considered established expert knowledge; it might be that there are limited or inadequate incentives for anyone to question statements about the value and use of data; finally, it might be because some of those statements are by nature hard to verify - for example, in order to test whether a specific set of information on IDPs informed the development of a particular IDP law, in principle we would need to have insight into the legislative process, know what the law would look like without the data, or find another way to compare to a counterfactual scenario.

To be clear, my point is not to diminish the value of evidence for an adequate response. There are cases where civil society organisations' gathered information has clearly proven valuable. The Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH), the Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES) in Colombia, and the Fundación Cristosal in El Salvador have been carrying out work based on a self-established evidence base and successfully contributed to holding the government accountable and to establishing a legal framework for the response to internal displacement. The CMDPDH has been systematically monitoring internal displacement in Mexico since 2014; it has published reports giving visibility to the subject, provided psychosocial and legal accompaniment to IDPs, and successfully carried out strategic litigation that has led to court decisions ordering different levels of government to take concrete actions in favor of IDPs (Décimo Tribunal Colegiado en Materia Penal del Primer Circuito, 2018). CODHES created Colombia's first IDP information system in the mid 1990s before the Government created its own; they are also quoted as sources in several Constitutional Court rulings that have set the basis for the country's normative protection of IDPs (Corte Constitucional, 2004). Cristosal has been supporting IDPs in El Salvador and working on setting up a regional monitoring system on internal displacement for Central America; they also legally represent IDPs, notably in a series of cases that lead to a Supreme Court ruling in 2017, ordering the Government to recognise internal displacement and take measures to respond to it (Cristosal, 2018). Cristosal also supported the drafting of the recently adopted IDP law. The evidence base established by these organisations has arguably played an important role in their achievements improving the situation of IDPs in their countries. This role can and should be understood by finding ways to track the relationship between the evidence base and court decisions, policy, discourse, decisions, among others.

With this in mind, there is a need to differentiate between different types of data and data processes, as well as purposes for which information is produced and analysed. The value of multi sector needs assessments feeding into Humanitarian Needs Overviews, and thus being used for Humanitarian Response Plans, is undeniable. The value of data gathered and

analysed by organisations to design their own programs is also clear. But there remains a wide range of information, where the link to its use isn't as clear cut.

Global organisations working on internal displacement have a professionalised information management staff, technically specialised on the gathering and analysis of data. Some of these organisations work exclusively on information management; some receive resources from donors and the UN; some play increasingly important roles within the internal displacement response. All of them should operate based on evidence. That is, all their information-gathering and analysis activities should be planned, executed, and assessed based on evidence about how they contribute to the response to internal displacement. There needs to be a clear understanding of how their work's output leads to outcomes and impacts.

The relationship between data production and impact is often assumed. For example, it is often assumed that policymakers use internal displacement data. IDMC was created in 1998 and *"informs policy and operational decisions that improve the lives of the millions of people living in internal displacement, or at risk of becoming displaced in the future"*¹. IOM set up the DTM in 2004 and it has *"proven to be highly effective as a preparedness tool, as well as in support of the recovery and transition phase of the response"*². UNHCR itself has been increasingly involved in leading profiling exercises that focus on internal displacement and (among other things) publishes data on Global Trends which is *"extremely important in order to meet the needs of refugees and other populations of concern across the world and the data help organizations and States to plan their humanitarian response"*³. Finally, the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) *"was set up in Geneva in 2009 as an inter-agency body to provide support to governments and humanitarian and development organisations seeking to improve locally owned information and analysis about displacement situations"* and the profiling exercises carried out with its support *"can be used to support policy initiatives, programme development and advocacy efforts"*⁴. In some cases, it might be true that policymakers make use of internal displacement data, but it is a strong assumption that yet needs to be rigorously tested. The same applies for other assumed uses and consequent impacts of data.

The extent to which information is used and effectively "influences" or "informs" is hard to measure. But there are other sectors that are finding ways to measure the effect of information, for example advertisers in the private sector or media impact evaluators in the non-profit world. The internal displacement IM community needs to build on these examples and be more proactive in finding ways to understand the contributions of their work.

Calls for more and better data, for increased harmonisation, interoperability, actionability of the evidence, investment in technology, etc. have always been important and will continue to be necessary. But the HLP-ID has an opportunity to do more than that. It should be critical and question the assumption that all the data produced by the internal displacement IM community is of value and that the hypotheses underpinning their work are true. By doing so

¹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/about-us>

² <https://dtm.iom.int/about>

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>

⁴ <https://www.jips.org/about-jips/>

it could create mechanisms and practices that lead to a more careful assessment of the purpose of data and data processes. This is an important step towards an improved understanding of how the internal displacement IM community's work is having a positive impact on the lives of the internally displaced and ultimately to improved internal displacement IM practices.

2. Suggestions for what the HLP-ID could do to improve the understanding of the use and impact of internal displacement data and data processes

Given the relevance and the potential to create change that evidence has, the internal displacement IM community cannot delay taking actions to better understand how data and data processes on internal displacement change the reality of the response to the phenomenon and ultimately the lives of the internally displaced – for reasons of accountability, but also in order to learn and maximize their own impact. The latest major reunion of the internal displacement community has already pointed towards the importance of *“critically asking why data is needed, rather than collecting data for data’s sake”* (Wilton Park, 2019) and the HLP-ID has a unique opportunity to steer the internal displacement IM community in the right direction. To do so, I encourage it to consider the following actions:

- **Review the current assumptions made by the internal displacement IM community regarding the use of data to initiate a more open conversation about this topic.** Publishing data and assuming it *“informs policy and programming”* is just not sufficient. Documents and presentation stating *“X evidence informed Y policy”* abound, while explanations and evidence of how these processes occur are rarer. Occasionally, *“informing”* doesn’t mean more than *“I discussed my data with someone who was somehow connected to the policy process”*. In order to increase accountability and understanding of the impact of data production and analysis, the internal displacement IM community has to adopt a clear and more transparent discourse. Organisations should be concrete when speaking about the use of the data they helped producing and clearly state what their assumptions are - so they can be tested. The HLP-ID can encourage this by including a baseline of assumptions made about the use of data in their report. In the previous GRID (IDMC, 2019), one section (Part 2 - internal displacement data: from challenge to opportunity)⁵ suggested different purposes of internal displacement data as well as a list of actors who use it. A similar list should be used to match users and purpose with existing information products according to what data producers claim⁶. Assumptions could be identified and made explicit, as well as any evidence underpinning them. This would be the first step to testing these assumptions.

⁵ Pp.53-55

⁶ Some organisations may have a theory of change where these connections between data production and use are made explicit. Some might already map uses and impact of their products internally, it would be good to make this information public to promote an open debate about it.

- **Review incentive structures:** Part of the reason for a lack of questioning and even for a lack of clarity regarding the underlying assumptions about the use of data is that the incentives are not set the right way. Practitioners are systematically required or pressured to justify their value to remain relevant and to secure funding. Unfortunately, requirements and pressure do not always lead to rigorous explanations, in part because organisations lack the resources to adequately study their work's outcomes. In the scramble to justify value, rigor may get lost; low quality or inconsequential work is published, promoted, and celebrated. Organisations producing, analysing, and more widely working with data can be subject to a bias towards justifying and perhaps overselling their work instead of being critical, and this is clear from the current practice and discourse. This needs to change and the internal displacement IM community needs to operate in an environment that incentivises critical questioning of their own work. While some organisations are hired and funded by the final users of the data, there are many examples where user and funder differ. This has an effect on feedback mechanisms and accountability, and it might create gaps that contribute to this lack of rigor in the understanding of how evidence is used and improves the response to internal displacement. The HLP-ID could review these reporting, funding, and incentive structures in the production of data in order to promote a more open community of practice, as well as transparency and accountability.

- **Highlight alternative effects of data processes:** the process through which data is gathered and analysed can have indirect impacts on the response to internal displacement: it can serve to establish coordination platforms, create pressure and incentivise political will, and create democratic spaces. For example, every year during the week the GRID is launched, internal displacement is addressed in major newspapers around the world. JIPS' support to country partners and the profiling processes it supports contribute to establishing a collaboration that is essential for the response to internal displacement. These potential impacts might be just as important, if not more, than those achieved through the direct use of the data for decision making. And they, too, have to be questioned and studied.

- **Suggest ways of assessing the different impacts of data and data processes:** How can it be assessed if a set of information "informed policy"? When is "gender and age-disaggregated data" actually used, how, and by whom? What does that mean for the allocation of resources that are scarce? The internal displacement IM community doesn't seem to have clear and common standards for this. Setting such standards will be challenging, but it is a necessary step towards more transparency and accountability, and a better understanding of the value of production and analysis of data on internal displacement. The internal displacement IM sector wouldn't be the first to venture measurements and understanding of "informing" and "influencing". As mentioned above, there are examples from the media to understand the value of the information they produce and publish⁷. The HLP-ID has a unique opportunity to

⁷ See for example the [Media Impact Project](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/can_we_measure_media_impact_surveying_the_field) or (Schiffrin & Zuckerman, 2015) https://ssir.org/articles/entry/can_we_measure_media_impact_surveying_the_field

push for the adoption of such standards and for the adoption of concrete practices⁸ among the internal displacement IM community to study (or to facilitate studying) the use and value of their work.

While a lot is yet to be done in holding policymakers, humanitarians, and the development community in general accountable, the discourse about governments and program-operating organisations is more critical. Such organisations are more often questioned and the requirements of proof of impact are higher than for the production and analysis of data – where value is often assumed. The HLP-ID has an opportunity to change this and hold the internal displacement IM community to a higher standard, and it should not shy away from doing so.

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⁸ An example of such a practice would be the inclusion of a budget category for an impact assessment within all grants for the production and analysis of information.