Data Roundtable Summary

The Role of Data in Supporting State Commitment and Capacity on Internal Displacement

Introduction

On February 5th, 2021, the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement convened a roundtable discussion on the role of data and evidence in supporting commitment and capacity to address internal displacement. The discussion was attended by approximately 30 individuals representing governments affected by internal displacement, UN agencies and NGOs, international financial institutions, and donor governments. Participants came from a diverse range of backgrounds spanning the humanitarian, development, and statistical communities.

The roundtable built on a Concept Note and Background Paper prepared by the High-Level Panel Secretariat and Expert Advisory Group that put forward a series of ideas and questions for discussion. In line with the focus of the Panel’s work on data, these questions centered principally on the potential use of national internal displacement data systems and the types of support that may be needed from international actors to enable such systems to be successful.

The objectives of the roundtable were threefold:

1. To seek feedback on the ideas put forward in the background paper
2. To identify new ideas or issues for the Panel’s consideration
3. To gather inputs on the best way to approach or frame the Panel’s recommendations on data and evidence to lay the foundation for follow-up

The roundtable was opened with remarks by Panel Member Mr. Per Heggenes and was subsequently facilitated by members of the Panel’s Expert Advisory Group and Secretariat. The discussion was initially organized in two sessions, the first looking at national data systems and the second looking at the role of international actors, but both topics were discussed throughout the roundtable.

This summary captures key points from the discussion and goes on to highlight a few takeaways for the Panel and next steps. Because the discussion in the two sessions naturally merged, this summary brings together points from both sessions. The discussion took place under Chatham House rules and as such, remarks are not attributed to individuals or the bodies they represent.

Summary of discussion

**Nationally owned data and data systems**

- A number of governments, as well as other actors, expressed their support for national ownership of internal displacement data and for the development of systems to manage the collection, analysis, and use of data. Participants highlighted that for states, ownership of data can lead to greater ownership of displacement challenges broadly and can contribute to an increased likelihood that action will be taken to respond to the needs of IDPs and host communities.

- Participants also noted that data can have a central role in building a common ground within the government and with international actors, enabling effective targeting of people in need of assistance and facilitating evidence-based budgeting and planning.
• One state also highlighted that data can be helpful in tracking progress to address internal displacement and can assist in generating accountability. The state noted the particular value of having an independent mechanism or institution that uses data to monitor steps that have been taken to address displacement and the extent to which they have achieved solutions.

**Acknowledging the diversity of contexts and managing data sensitivity**

• Participants noted that while data can contribute to political will to address displacement, a certain amount of political will is needed to establish data systems in the first place. Participants suggested the need to be honest about the different types of contexts and the varying degrees of government readiness to put in place such systems.

• Participants highlighted that in many current internal displacement settings, governments may not yet be able or willing to put in place mechanisms to collect, analyze or store data in a manner consistent with international standards. They noted that even where there is a willingness, it can take years for data systems to become operational.

• Linked to the above, many participants highlighted concerns about the sensitivities of IDP data, and the potential “protection tradeoffs” that could emerge from moving towards greater government ownership of internal displacement data, particularly in contexts where the government is a party to conflict.

• A number of humanitarian actors supported the idea of establishing minimum standards that must be met by the government before the international community prioritizes support to national data systems or shares sensitive data with government actors. There was also a strong call by humanitarian participants to ensure that the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence continue to be respected and preserved as the guiding framework by which humanitarian data actors operate.

• One government noted some of these protection concerns can be mitigated by putting in place tiered access systems to manage data, wherein the level of access is determined by the function and information needs of the individual. Whereas anonymized statistics and needs assessment data can and should be widely available, personal information about IDPs should only be accessible to a select few.

• Linked to the above, the same official highlighted that it can also be useful for governments to work with actors who are trusted by the local community, and also leverage existing national institutions as part of a checks-and-balance process. They noted that if IDPs fear the government, displaced persons may be unlikely to respond to data collection efforts or may not provide authentic answers, which can result in data that is unusable. The official suggested that until the government is able to rebuild this trust, data partnerships can be a valuable tool.

**Data systems and processes**

• Related to the issue of trust, one participant suggested the need to focus on data processes as much as data systems. Having processes that are collaborative, transparent, and are intentional about building trust and inclusion are far more likely to be effective and sustainable. This collaboration requires engagement both within governments (e.g. across relevant technical ministries and federal/local levels) as well as outside of governments (e.g. with affected communities, civil society, and experts). It also often requires a long-term approach and commitment. In considering capacity support needs, participants suggested that providing technical assistance to states to ensure a strong and collaborative process is as important as technical assistance focused on the data itself or the infrastructure of the data systems.

• A number of actors recommended that as far as possible, national systems for internal displacement data should draw on what is already existing – for example, data systems for reporting on the SDGs – rather than creating new systems from scratch. They highlighted that this can help to promote the inclusion of IDPs into the other reporting mechanisms and can also support uptake of IDP data if the other systems are already
familiar to different ministries and in active use. However, using mainstreamed approaches to IDP data also creates the risk of IDPs receiving less dedicated attention, and as such, further exploration of this issue may be needed.

- Participants also highlighted that having a strong normative framework on internal displacement can create a valuable foundation for data systems to build upon. In countries that have a strategy or policy to organize their support to displaced persons, for example, organizing the data system or integrated data indicators around those benchmarks makes it easier to monitor progress.

**Data quality and interoperability**

- The quality of data was a central issue highlighted by a number of participants. They noted that reliable data requires ensuring that actors know what is being measured and are using the same definitions and standards. It also requires a strong and rigorous methodology. Continuing to promote the roll out and implementation of the International Recommendations on IDP Statistics will be important in this regard, including through the next phase of work of the Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics.

- Linked to this definitional issue, participants highlighted that it is important to align data indicators as far as possible between data collection actors and across different target populations. This includes aligning the questions and indicators used in internal displacement contexts with those used in other national surveys of the non-displaced populations, which will help to clarify how the situation of IDPs compares to other communities. Critically, data collection efforts should include both IDPs and host communities.

- Also related to data quality, participants noted that while avoiding duplication in data collection is important, some duplication can be helpful for its triangulation potential. Data from different sources allows verification of data as well as analysis through triangulation.

**Statistical offices, other data partners, and support**

- A number of participants noted that even where full operational data systems may be lacking, statistical offices are often in place and can be an important resource. National Statistical Offices often have strict confidentiality and protection protocols that can benefit broader data efforts.

- With regard to capacity support that can be provided to states, participants noted that the displacement community can borrow and learn from the efforts that are underway through EGRIS and in the statistical community, including in supporting the implementation of the International Recommendations on IDP Statistics. One participant suggested that EGRIS might be a good option for coordinating efforts towards capacity building among states given that EGRIS has an existing platform for this and capacity building is already a focus of EGRIS’ upcoming third phase of work.

- While recognizing the important work of National Statistical Offices and the EGRIS initiative, one humanitarian actor flagged that it is very rarely the NSOs with whom humanitarian organizations engage on issues relating to operational data. As such, it will be important that attention on internal displacement data also consider the broader types of government actors involved with internal displacement responses, including different line ministries and authorities at both national and local levels. Participants also flagged the need to better differentiate between registries, other types of operational data, and statistical datasets.

- Some states flagged that resourcing is a key issue in discussions of internal displacement data systems. Having effective data can be a critical tool in enabling more effective and robust financing for internal displacement responses, but setting up the systems to generate this data also requires resources in and of itself. Donors may need to commit to providing resources to help countries establish such systems.

- Participants noted other types of support that could be provided by international actors – for example, standardized tools that could be used as examples which governments could then customize. The example
was given of microdata libraries, which offer a standard template that countries can adapt. One government official said that this type of customizable tool is urgently needed to help governments in developing IDP registries. They also highlighted the value of potentially developing tools at the regional level that are already partially contextualized but could be refined further by individual countries.

**Strengthening coordination of international data actors**

- Some participants highlighted the need to strengthen the coordination, collaboration and vision of actors working on data issues at the national and international levels.

**Key takeaways**

- Having high-quality data and evidence is essential for effective action to prevent, respond, and achieve solutions to internal displacement. It can be a crucial tool in building commitment to address displacement, ensuring adequate information to develop policies and operational plans, and in making a case to receive appropriate funding.

- There is a need to recognize the diverse types of contexts affected by internal displacement and the varying degrees of willingness and capacity to establish systems for national ownership of internal displacement data. There is also a need to better differentiate between different types and uses of data, and the distinct actors that are involved with these varying functions.

- To better reflect some of these points of difference, it may be helpful for the Panel’s recommendations to distinguish between the priorities for different types of actors. To that end:

  - For governments, putting in place processes and systems to collect, analyze and manage internal displacement data should be recognized as an integral part of fulfilling responsibilities to respond to the needs of internally displaced persons, and as a valuable tool for enabling evidence-based decisions, policies, and fundraising. Priority should be given to ensuring that data systems are interoperable between different ministries and levels of government and aligned with other national and international reporting indicators and frameworks (for example, the SDGs and Sendai). Attention will be needed on building trust with affected communities and partners, putting in place protection safeguards, and ensuring high-quality data.

  - For international actors at country-level, there is a need to strengthen coordination of internal displacement data and adopt more comprehensive, long-term strategies. In many contexts, particularly those characterized by new or fluid displacement dynamics, international actors may continue to play a central role in data collection and analysis for the foreseeable future – it is important that recommendations acknowledge this. In that context, strengthened coordination will be needed across the range of data actors to develop a strategic and coordinated approach, including across the different phases of displacement.

  - For international actors at global level, there may be a need to bring together the different data communities (e.g. humanitarian data actors, development data actors, statistical actors, etc) to have a more joined up approach and vision on internal displacement data. There is a need to consider how data actors at global level can support capacities at country-level to strengthen the approach to internal displacement data, including among both governments and international actors.
Next Steps

The Panel is currently reflecting on the discussion from the data roundtable and refining its recommendations. The Panel continues to welcome additional inputs in writing and may reach out to actors on a bilateral basis to discuss specific points or seek further views on specific recommendations.

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