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The legacy of the UN Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement: How to maintain political momentum after the mandate expires

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SWP Comment

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The Legacy of the UN Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement

How to Maintain Political Momentum after the Mandate Expires

Nadine Knapp and Anne Koch

In June 2022, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) published the “Action Agenda on Internal Displacement”. It aims to fundamentally reform the way internal displacement is addressed. On the one hand, the focus must shift from short-term humanitarian aid to more development-oriented approaches. On the other hand, the governments directly affected must be more actively involved in the search for durable solutions. A UN Special Adviser, Robert Piper, has been entrusted with the implementation of the Action Agenda. Over the past two years, he has initiated positive developments in a number of countries and contributed to better coordination between relevant UN organisations. Beyond the mandate of the Special Adviser, which expires at the end of 2024, the progress he has achieved thus far must be secured. To this end, Germany should advocate for sustainable governance structures and campaign for internal displacement to be systematically taken into account in development and climate financing.

The topics of migration and cross-border displacement are omnipresent in the public debate in Germany and many other EU member states. Much less attention is paid to internally displaced persons (IDPs), i.e., people who left their place of origin involuntarily but remain in their own country. This category includes well over half of the approximately 117 million people worldwide who were fleeing persecution, violent conflict, and human rights violations at the end of 2023. In addition, there are people who have been forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters and extreme weather events caused by climate change. The total

number of IDPs is rising continuously. A new high of almost 76 million people was reached at the end of 2023.

Unlike cross-border refugees, IDPs are not entitled to international protection. Their support and care are the responsibility of the respective government. However, there is often a lack of the necessary capacities and/or political will. The latter is frequently the case when state actors themselves are a party to the conflict and therefore (co-)responsible for displacement. Against this backdrop, the bulk of support is usually provided by humanitarian actors. These actors, however, lack the political leverage



to work towards longer-term solutions. As a result, the restrictions and disadvantages arising from internal displacement often persist for years and the dependence of those affected by humanitarian aid is perpetuated. This not only constitutes an immense burden for the chronically underfunded humanitarian system, but also represents a heavy development toll for the respective countries.

Key challenges to achieving durable solutions

The need for action in the area of internal displacement is well known. In addition to acute emergency aid, it is crucial that international support is geared towards creating durable solutions from the outset. In principle, there are three options: IDPs can return to their original place of origin, integrate locally in the area where refuge was sought, or settle in another location. Regardless of which of these three solutions is pursued, it should always be ensured that the protection needs and discrimination associated with displacement are eliminated. Yet, the corresponding tasks often go beyond the mandate of humanitarian actors. They include, for example, recovering identification documents, ensuring access to a regular education and healthcare system, supporting the reconstruction of homes and infrastructure, as well as undertaking comprehensive peace and reconciliation work, including the resolution of land conflicts. The search for solutions is therefore a complex process that brings with it challenges in the areas of human rights, humanitarian aid, development, reconstruction, disaster prevention, and peacebuilding. A coordinated and timely engagement of various actors is critical – in line with the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus. In practice, however, durable solutions regularly fail due to a number of political and structural obstacles.

Lack of government commitment

As a general rule, durable solutions for large groups of IDPs can only be achieved if the government directly affected takes ownership of this goal and actively pursues it. Without its leadership, the endeavour is doomed to fail from the outset. But this is precisely what is lacking – protracted internal displacement in particular can often be traced back to state culpability or government deficits and is therefore highly politically sensitive. International efforts to address the plight of IDPs more systematically are therefore often rejected by affected governments as unacceptable interference in internal affairs. Donor countries, on the other hand, hardly prioritise the issue: Unlike in the case of cross-border displacement, wealthy states are not directly exposed to the consequences of internal displacement in other regions of the world. Accordingly, the phenomenon has long been ignored in key international processes. It is not adequately reflected either in the UN 2030 Agenda's 17 Sustainable Development Goals or in the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration.

Inadequate linking of international support

Another challenge lies in the structure of the international aid system. Despite longstanding efforts to achieve greater synergies, the humanitarian and the development sector continue to follow their own logics of action and priorities. This often hinders joint data collection and analysis, planning, and programming – with the result that short- and longer-term support services in the area of internal displacement are insufficiently interlinked. In addition, the implementation of the third pillar of the HDP Nexus, peacebuilding, which is urgently needed for durable solutions in cases of conflict-induced internal displacement, so far remains inadequate. Furthermore, the institutional responsibilities for IDPs within the UN system are unclear. This leads to conflicts over mandates, par-

ticularly between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Financing gaps

Durable solutions are costly and can hardly be realised without adequate financial resources. The most significant hurdle is not a lack of overall humanitarian funding. Instead, the main problem is that the concerns of IDPs are not sufficiently taken into account in development financing and that there is a lack of financing instruments specifically aimed at addressing internal displacement. As a result, many of those affected no longer receive adequate support once humanitarian emergency aid runs out. This threatens to perpetuate the disadvantages and vulnerabilities arising from displacement, leading to protracted internal displacement. There is a lively debate within the international community as to whether it is more expedient to treat internal displacement as a cross-cutting issue or to create separate instruments for this purpose. However, there is consensus that protracted internal displacement has serious negative development impacts and that it is therefore necessary to make more development funding available for sustainable solutions.

Realignment of international engagement

In response to these different needs for action, the UN Secretary-General published the “Action Agenda on Internal Displacement” (hereinafter: Action Agenda) in June 2022. The Action Agenda contains 31 UN commitments to promote durable solutions, prevent future displacement crises, and ensure protection and assistance for IDPs. In order to advance the implementation of the Action Agenda, the post of UN Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement (hereafter, Special Adviser) was created for a period of around two and a half years. The main task of the incumbent

is to initiate appropriate changes within and outside the UN system.

Developing concrete solution pathways

One of the main objectives of the Special Adviser was to develop solutions for up to 10 million IDPs in 15 pilot countries by the end of 2024: Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Libya, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Vanuatu, and Yemen. On numerous trips to these countries, Piper engaged in high-level lobbying to promote the understanding that a decisive commitment to finding durable solutions for IDPs would have a positive development impact on society as a whole. This, in turn, would be an important contribution to the 2030 Agenda. As a result, some tangible successes have been achieved. For example, governments in the Central African Republic, Colombia, Ethiopia (Somali region), Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, and Somalia have committed to place around 8.5 million IDPs on solutions pathways. This amounts to a commitment to gradually restore the equal economic, social, and political participation of affected IDPs. To this end, strategies and roadmaps have been developed at the national or sub-national level. These strategies are particularly valuable if they have a clear link to national development plans and, in the form of costed plans, not only identify priority areas for action, but also the expected costs that will be incurred through sector-specific measures. Some also contain financial commitments by the governments concerned. For example, the Nigerian states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe have pledged to use between 5 and 15 per cent of their respective budgets for the implementation of their respective action plans over three years.

Despite such progress, considerable challenges remain — even in countries whose governments have signalled commitments through solution-oriented strategies or action plans. The Iraqi leadership, for example, is prioritizing the rapid closure of IDP

camps by offering IDPs money to return to their respective homes. The individual displacement situation is then officially considered to be over, although serious security risks and a lack of sources of income often force people to move again. There are similar problems in the Nigerian state of Borno, which is still largely inaccessible to humanitarian actors due to the presence of Boko Haram militias. Due to the poor security situation, an actual return is often not possible. Instead those affected find refuge in regional urban centers, without access to arable land or other sources of income. Here, the UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda threatens to be misused as a rhetorical justification for the premature closure of IDP camps. The Ethiopian government is also pushing for the return of IDPs after the end of the conflict in Tigray – even to regions where the security situation remains critical and public infrastructure is barely functional.

These examples share a number of commonalities: governments often push for the return of IDPs without respecting their freedom of choice between different solutions and without involving them in relevant planning and decision-making processes. The focus is therefore on the physical relocation of IDPs and not on restoring their rights or strengthening their capacity to act. The ongoing marginalisation of those affected points to the highly political nature of conflict-related internal displacement, in particular. Purely technical support from the international community can make an important contribution to finding durable solutions. However, displacement-specific disadvantages can only be comprehensively eliminated if corresponding measures are systematically integrated into peace and reconciliation processes and are accompanied by viable compromises e.g. in land conflicts.

An additional stumbling block at the country level is inadequate data. Despite the pioneering work of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there is a lack of reliable data on the extent of internal displacement in many places, as well as on the specific vulnerabilities, needs, and

capacities of IDPs and host communities. In addition, there is a lack of national monitoring and evaluation systems that could be used to measure success in the implementation of solutions. There has been considerable progress in this area, for example, in the form of a development-oriented indicator system developed by the Joint Internal Displacement Profiling Service and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). However, there is still a lack of reliable socio-economic data and standardised analysis. In some country contexts, UN actors and (sub)national governments also work with competing data sets and inconsistent definitions of when exactly a displacement situation has been resolved.

Strengthening internal UN coordination

A second field of action for the Special Adviser is to sensitize relevant UN actors along the entire HDP Nexus to the importance of the development policy implications of internal displacement. This goes hand in hand with the aim of integrating corresponding solutions more effectively into existing UN processes and mechanisms. Concrete progress has also been made here. While only IOM and UNHCR had developed institutional strategies for addressing internal displacement before the Special Adviser took office, this is now the case for eight UN organisations. UNDP, in particular, is committed to greater institutional responsibility in the area of internal displacement – both in terms of solutions and prevention – and is thus closing an existing gap in the UN's commitment in this area. At the same time, a Steering Group for Solutions to Internal Displacement (hereafter Steering Group) was established in line with the Action Agenda. It consists of eight relevant UN organisations (as well as the World Bank as an observer), promotes their exchange at the global level, and thus improves the coordination of UN activities regarding internal displacement.

Realizing such coordination at the country level is proving to be much more challenging. UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) play a central role here. As the highest-ranking representatives of the UN development system, they lead the UN country teams and also act as humanitarian coordinators in times of crisis. In line with the Action Agenda, the UN Secretary-General has further strengthened their role in order to effectively coordinate efforts on the ground and support governments in developing solutions to internal displacement. RCs in all pilot countries (except Vanuatu) are supported by Solutions Advisers who are funded by various donors through a dedicated facility (the so-called Solutions Advisers Deployment Facility) established by UNDP — currently France, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland. As capacities in RCs' offices are often limited, Solutions Advisers play a key role in coordinating and promoting solutions work at the country level. This is done through strategic and technical advice to RCs and UN country teams, high-level advocacy work, and country visits by the Special Adviser, as well as through steps to engage humanitarian, development, climate, and peace actors.

As an additional instrument, the Special Adviser launched the Internal Displacement Solutions Fund (IDSF) in August 2023. This is a new fund designed to provide a fast and flexible source of catalytic funding for collaborative and cross-sectoral program work by UN country teams that promotes durable solutions. The fund's resources are still far from the target of US\$100 million. So far, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland have pledged a total of just under US\$19 million. Nevertheless, the projects financed by the fund can strengthen practical collaboration between different UN organisations and contribute to thematically focused capacity building of state authorities in individual country contexts.

Once the mandate of the Special Adviser has expired, the main responsibility for the UN's internal realignment and the newly created structures (including the steering group and fund) is meant to rotate between

UNDP, IOM, and UNHCR. This is an indication that these three organisations could form a functional "leadership trio" in the area of durable solutions in the future. Despite this progress, internal UN coordination at the country level remains difficult. The ongoing competition for financial resources, which is increasing due to dwindling funds, often perpetuates clearly separate humanitarian and development activities without common objectives being developed or pursued.

Systematic involvement of multilateral development banks

The Special Adviser sees great untapped potential for a solutions-oriented approach to internal displacement with international financial institutions, above all with multilateral development banks (MDBs). Piper has therefore used his term in office to engage MDBs in strategic dialogue and campaign for greater consideration to be given to IDPs in the design of financing instruments. The results in this area are mixed. The Asian and the African Development Bank have each initiated processes to identify suitable entry points for solution-oriented program design or for additional investment in the collection and analysis of relevant data. A significant development at the World Bank is that IDPs have been included in the new internal target system ("World Bank Group Scorecard"). The issue of internal displacement is also gaining increasing visibility, for example, as part of the annual World Bank Fragility Forum. However, the Bank's management has so far rejected the idea of creating a separate financing instrument for countries affected by internal displacement or host communities. One reason for this is that the responsibility for IDPs lies clearly with the respective government and their support is therefore — unlike the reception and care of cross-border refugees — not considered a contribution to the global common good. In addition, the World Bank generally seeks to avoid the strong earmarking of funds made available to it.

Establishing sustainable governance structures

Another area where the work of the Special Adviser has so far fallen short of expectations is the long-term anchoring of the issue of internal displacement in the agenda of the international community. The Action Agenda proposes the establishment of an intergovernmental platform for UN member states to exchange experiences, progress, and best practices, but so far this has failed due to the lack of commitment from member states. This points to a central dilemma of Piper's comparatively short mandate. He has prioritized concrete progress in pilot countries based on the reasonable assumption that such tangible successes are essential to create political momentum for the international community to address internal displacement. At the same time, however, this came at the expense of efforts to establish a sustainable governance structure that could sustain momentum beyond the end of his mandate.

The fact that states are holding back here is in part due to a lack of attention and resources resulting from a multitude of competing issues. However, there is also a fundamental scepticism on the part of states towards a global public debate on internal displacement, which is due to the inherently political nature of the issue. This applies not only to cases in which governments as parties to the conflict have directly caused or contributed to internal displacement. Rather, long-lasting displacement situations, regardless of the original triggers, signal that the respective government is neglecting the task of restoring the rights and participation of the affected people, thereby failing to live up to its responsibility towards its own nationals.

How can Piper's legacy be secured?

The position of Special Adviser has created a strong advocate for prioritizing solution-oriented approaches to support IDPs within and outside the UN system. Through his

high-level advocacy work, Piper has been instrumental in ensuring that relevant decision-makers in individual pilot countries have publicly promoted the development of durable solutions and have allocated financial resources for this purpose. Joint programming and internal UN coordination have been strengthened, particularly through the Steering Group, the Solutions Fund, and strengthened RC leadership. At the same time, the assessment above illustrates the limits of what UN-internal reforms and technical assistance can achieve in the politically charged area of internal displacement. As Piper's mandate will not be extended beyond the end of 2024, the question arises as to how the progress made in recent years can be secured and how the implementation of the Action Agenda can be further advanced.

Germany has an important role to play here, despite drastic funding cuts in humanitarian aid and development cooperation. On the one hand, the German government has long been promoting sustainable prospects for IDPs and host communities. Specific crisis instruments like the Special Initiative "Displaced Persons and Host Countries", the Middle East employment drive "Partnership for Prospects", and the "Transitional Development Assistance" serve this purpose. On the other hand, it has actively supported the implementation of the Action Agenda from the outset. The Federal Foreign Office recently reaffirmed this in its new Strategy for Humanitarian Assistance Abroad. In its new core area strategy on "Peace and Social Cohesion", the BMZ also advocates for further developing and strengthening its own portfolio on internal displacement in line with the Action Agenda.

With this in mind, the recommendations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on reforming the humanitarian system should be implemented. In addition, the continuation of the technical support structures established under Piper should be further promoted, including through payments into the Solutions Fund and to the Solutions Advisers Deployment Facility. It may

be possible to extend these instruments to other partner countries of German development cooperation that show potential for government-led, development-oriented solutions. In addition, the German government should step up its engagement in the areas outlined below.

Keeping IDPs on the international agenda

The so-called “Group of Friends” plays a decisive role in efforts to place internal displacement on the international agenda in the long term. It consists of the 15 pilot countries and 15 donor countries (including Germany) and has closely supported Piper’s mandate from the outset. The German government should work to maintain and expand this group, which meets in Geneva, and drive forward discussions on how and where the issue of internal displacement should be institutionally anchored. A forum where UN member states meet regularly would be conceivable, enabling affected countries to report on their experiences and progress, involving multilateral development banks and ensuring that the voices of IDPs are heard. Germany’s existing convening power could be further strengthened if the German government were to take over the co-chairmanship of the Group of Friends. In parallel to the primarily humanitarian discussions in Geneva, Germany could make a decisive contribution to mobilizing the international community in New York, where key development policy decisions are made. The fact that the goal of facilitating access to durable solutions for IDPs is included in the recently adopted UN Pact for the Future constitutes an important new point of access for related advocacy efforts.

Leveraging development and climate financing for IDPs

As a shareholder in international financial institutions and an important voice, particularly on the World Bank Board, Germany should advocate for the specific needs of

IDPs to be given greater consideration in development financing. This can either take the form of dedicated financing instruments to relieve the burden on particularly affected governments or by systematically taking the needs of IDPs into account in existing instruments. The ultimate goal is to create incentive structures that encourage state authorities in affected countries to recognize internal displacement as a development challenge and to make credible voluntary commitments. If such commitments exist in the form of costed plans, the respective government should be given access to viable additional sources of funding. In the case of disaster-related internal displacement, cross-financing from the climate sector is also conceivable. Among other things, the new Loss and Damage Fund established in 2023 takes the issue of internal displacement into account. The German government should work to ensure that this translates into de facto access to loans and grants for countries particularly affected by internal displacement. To contribute to the improved prevention of internal displacement, it should also work towards increasing funding for climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and resilience-building measures.

Strengthening participation and accountability

Protracted internal displacement represents a fundamental breach in the relationship between the government and its citizens. Durable solutions can only be achieved if those directly affected are included. This is often not the case, especially with regard to women, young people, and marginalised groups such as indigenous populations, LGBTQIA+ people, or people with disabilities. In line with its feminist foreign and development policy, the German government should ensure that related programs it funds are developed in a participatory manner, in line with the bottom-up approach according to the HDP Nexus. IDPs should thus be given the opportunity to choose among different solutions. To sup-

port implementation, it is essential to set up a transparent data, monitoring, and evaluation system in the respective country: Context-specific goals and indicators are needed to make progress towards durable solutions measurable and to ensure accountability on the part of state authorities.

Further Reading



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