



Data for what? Informing policymaking for forced displacement

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As we mark the [World Statistics Day](#) on October 20, 2020, the global displacement crisis is at its all-time high. Currently, one per cent of the world's estimated 7.8 billion people are forcibly displaced persons^[1] who have been forced to flee their homes or communities in search of safety within or across borders, escaping persecution, violence, armed conflict, terrorism, human rights violations and abuses, the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, or a combination of these factors. Among these are almost 16 million refugees trapped in protracted refugee situations – meaning situations in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for at least five consecutive years in a given host country. At the same time, the number of refugees who are able to return home is declining: only 3.9 million in the last decade, well below the 10 million of the previous decade and the 15 million who returned home in the 1990s.

Forcibly displaced people are not just numbers. But data matters. At the international and regional levels, effective and comprehensive response to displacement and its impacts has become an increasingly complex enterprise that requires data for effective and efficient interventions. The effects of the displaced population go beyond countries or regions, and have assumed an ever-increasing global relevance. The influence of the concept of a 'humanitarian-development nexus' has put a sharp spotlight not only on the plight of the forcibly displaced people but also on the impact of displacement on host communities. The new paradigm shift to incorporate development has increased the number of sectors, programmes and actors involved in responding to displacement and its impacts. Interventions involve a range of sectors, such as protection, health, education, social

and economic integration. National and local governments have to operate, often in partnership with regional and international organizations, to address the needs of those forcibly displaced as well as their host communities. This complexity of interventions calls for effective policymaking and coordination, requiring accurate, robust and timely data, in order to avoid duplication, overlaps and potential conflicts between actors.

Data is truly the new oil. This rings true of the forced displacement space, a reality that clearly emerged from a recent seminar organized by the [World Bank–UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement](#), and part of the program of the [UN World Data Forum 2020](#).

At the initial stages of response to displacement crises, data allows those receiving the displaced to identify them and assess their immediate needs. This information, often collected through registration data, is critically important for the development of effective strategies to protect and safeguard the human rights, personal security and dignity of the displaced. Data at this early stage is collected, compiled and curated by various intergovernmental organizations and national agencies responsible for refugees.

As displacement situations become protracted, more extensive data collection is critical to aid the process of defining, planning and implementing comprehensive strategies to enhance the self-reliance of refugees, in line with the 2018 [Global Compact on Refugees](#). The Compact is a global framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing in the search for durable and sustainable solution to refugee situations.

At this stage, data on displacement – typically collected through a combination of population censuses, household surveys, border counts, administrative records and beneficiary registers – is critically important to ensure effective integration of refugees in the economic and social structures of the host communities. This demands the recognition of the displaced persons in official statistics of local and national governments that inform the provision of services and social support systems. In this respect, the inclusion of those forcibly displaced in national censuses and surveys as well as labor force and household surveys is a critical step in designing policies and interventions that effectively address the needs of the displaced and their host communities.

The 2017 [Nairobi Declaration on Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees and Reintegration of Returnees in Somalia](#), later applied to all refugees in the Horn of Africa region, exemplifies a comprehensive regional response to forcibly displaced persons that has stressed the need for data to inform interventions. In line with the Declaration, countries in the region such as Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya have made efforts to include refugees in their national statistical systems as a way of recognizing their civil rights. Moreover, these efforts can have important use beyond

the simple quantification of the presence of forcibly displaced in a certain territory. Specifically, gathering up-to-date and detailed micro-level socioeconomic data is the starting point for the assessment of individual skills and abilities, itself a necessary step in creating opportunities for education, jobs and effective integration of the displaced in the economic structure of the host society. In this respect, data represents a fundamental link in the policy chain aimed at empowering displaced people and transforming their presence from a burden into a catalyst for socioeconomic development.

Simply put, reliable and timely data is necessary to underpin sound response strategies. Credible evidence is indispensable to inform and guide action, and in designing viable policies for long-term political and social investment in those forcibly displaced and their hosts. Evidently, data gathered using reliable and unbiased procedures that respect the highest technical standards is a real public good, and to do it on refugees is a global public good.

Data collection exercises do not occur in a vacuum. Political fragility, conflicts and health emergencies can affect the quality of surveys and the data collected and its immediate availability. New technologies have revolutionized the way data is collected, complementing traditional methods and forming the basis for the implementation of new forms of monitoring and data gatherings. High-frequency phone surveys, mobile tracking and geo-spatial data are examples of these methods. On the whole, their adoption can help create and maintain robust datasets, and enhance the pervasive role that data can and should play in generating evidence-based policies and responses for the benefit of those forcibly displaced and their hosts.

[1] UNHCR, “[1 per cent of humanity displaced: UNHCR Global Trends report](#)”, June 18, 2020, Retrieved, October 19, 2020.



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