

A six-year-old Somali refugee waits at the airstrip to board a plane to Mogadishu, Somalia. She is one of the tens of thousands of refugees who have left Kenya's Dadaab camp in 2016 to return back to Somalia.  
Photo: NRC/Fredrik Lerneryd, September 2016



# PART 2

## OFF THE GRID

Are today's IDPs tomorrow's refugees and migrants?

It is often assumed that many refugees were at some point internally displaced at the beginning of their journey, even if only for a short period or in transit, and that IDPs are prime candidates to become refugees or migrants.<sup>160</sup> Despite these assumptions, there is still insufficient data to determine how many of the people who flee or migrate across borders were IDPs before doing so. Nor is there sufficient understanding of the processes that lead from internal to external displacement and migration, and the specific vulnerabilities that might contribute to onward movement. This represents a major gap in current knowledge.

An evidence base that establishes how many IDPs cross borders as migrants, refugees or displaced people, and why they do so, would indeed be critical at this juncture. It would allow governments, policy-makers and responders on the ground to better meet displaced people's immediate protection and assistance needs at their points of departure, transit and arrival. Understanding the degree to which cross-border movements reflect inadequate protection and assistance in countries of origin could be significant in shaping preparedness and response efforts throughout the displacement cycle, and in addressing the long-term political and development challenges brought about by unresolved internal displacement.

This section focuses primarily on displacement associated with conflict and violence, and considers three broad questions:

- | What is the available evidence on the link between internal displacement and cross-border movement?
- | Are refugees and migrants who return to their countries of origin at risk of finding themselves living as an IDPs, whether for the first time or anew?

*"The difficult choice to leave their country comes only when all other options for safety have been exhausted. Without fully addressing their human rights, needs and internal protection, today's internally displaced persons will be tomorrow's refugees and trafficked or smuggled migrants."<sup>159</sup>*

– Former Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs

- | Under what circumstances do IDPs cross a border rather than try to find safety in another location within their own country?

The objective of this section is to examine existing knowledge gaps with a view to informing better responses in the future. Efforts to understand when, how and why IDPs cross borders should not be used to legitimise the closing of borders or the creation of policies to contain them in their own country. People have a fundamental right to freedom of movement, which includes being able to move within and leave their country.<sup>161</sup> Those who face threats to their lives and safety because of conflict and persecution have the right to seek asylum in another country.<sup>162</sup> It should also be made clear that internal displacement is a pressing issue in its own right, and that IDPs' plight should be recognised and addressed whether it is linked to cross-border movements or not.

# KEY FINDINGS

| The total global number of IDPs has been roughly twice that of refugees in recent years, and the gap between estimates for the two groups has been growing over the last 20 years. Data on conflict-related displacement shows that many of the top refugee-producing countries are also home to the highest numbers of IDPs. Six of the ten countries that produced the most refugees in 2016 – Afghanistan, Colombia, DRC, South Sudan, Sudan and Syria – were also among the ten with the largest numbers of IDPs.

| While the return of refugees to their country of origin is often regarded as a viable and politically preferred solution, returnees may in fact return to situations of questionable security and stability and risk becoming displaced again, this time internally. The return of refugees from Pakistan to Afghanistan and the announced returns from the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya to Somalia are cases in point. Similarly, escalating and violent conflicts such as that in South Sudan can mean that people become caught up in a revolving door of circular cross-border displacement that is difficult to monitor.

| The phenomenon of IDPs moving onwards across borders is not systematically measured, and there is insufficient quantitative and qualitative data and analysis to inform effective policy and operational responses. Cross-border displacement by disasters is also not systematically recorded and while estimated to be lower in numbers, does occur and needs to be better understood.

| Available evidence suggests that the push and pull factors for internal displacement from areas affected by conflict are similar to those reported by refugees. Overall, there is currently not enough research or data to understand the exact relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movement and return. A research and policy agenda is needed to:

- a) capture more accurately the scale and proportion of IDPs who cross borders, and how these vary across different contexts and crises: this requires the alignment and interoperability of data collection systems, with joint collection exercises to monitor displacement trajectories, including across borders, over longer time periods;
- b) understand the combination of factors that determine IDPs' onward and cross-border flight: understanding how and when people make such decisions and the different influencing factors is a prerequisite for planning and preparedness;
- c) better understand the circumstances in which people return to their countries of origin, and a measure of the risk this carries for future displacement: monitoring returnees' trajectories and gathering data on the indicators for durable solutions over time are essential.

# Internal to cross-border displacement

## A SCANT EVIDENCE BASE

Just as there is insufficient data on IDPs' progress toward durable solutions and the processes that lead to the end of displacement, there is also a lack of data and information when it comes to the scale, scope and patterns of IDPs' flight across international borders and the factors that prompt or inhibit such onward movements.<sup>163</sup> It is currently impossible to determine the global number or proportion of IDPs from areas or countries affected by conflict who eventually cross international borders. The available evidence, based on a small number of case studies, indicates that figures depend largely on the context. This, combined with the fact that we do not know how representative the studies are, makes it impossible to extrapolate to generate even regional estimates.

IDMC's data on internal displacement associated with conflict does point to a correlation between IDP and refugee movements: many of the countries that produce the most refugees are also home to the highest numbers of IDPs. Six of the ten countries that produced the most refugees in 2015 – Afghanistan, Colombia, DRC, Sudan,

South Sudan and Syria – were also among the ten with the largest numbers of IDPs (see figure 2.1).<sup>164</sup>

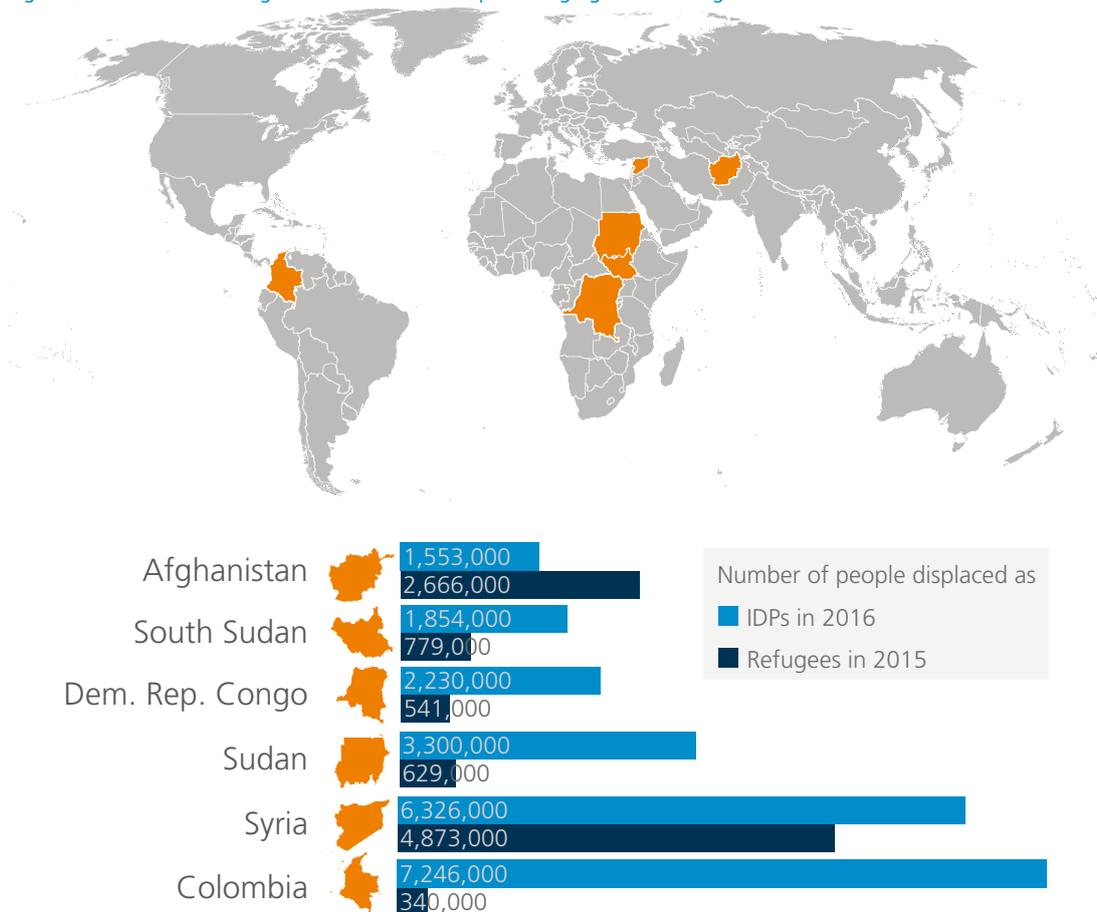
A large part of Afghan and Syrian refugees, around 55 and 85 per cent respectively, interviewed in Greece in early 2016 said that they had not left directly their areas of origin, the implication being that they had formerly been IDPs, refugees in other countries or another type of migrant before arriving in Europe.<sup>165</sup> Despite Syria's relentless conflict, the number of IDPs dropped by more than a million from 2014 to 2015, partly the result of some crossing international borders to seek protection outside the country.<sup>166</sup> Nearly 70 per cent of female asylum seekers from countries in Central America's northern triangle (NTCA) were also internally displaced before making the decision to flee abroad.<sup>167</sup>

In other countries and contexts, however, this ratio can differ significantly. For example, in a survey of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe via the western Balkans between December 2015 and May 2016, 90 per cent of the interviewees

Refugee children at the Depethe camp in Chios, Greece. Photo: NRC/Tiril Skarstein, April 2016



Figure 2.1: Countries with high numbers of IDPs and producing significant refugee flows



Source: IDMC, with UNHCR data

said they had left directly from their areas of origin, the implication being that only 10 per cent may have formerly been IDPs, refugees in other countries or another type of migrant before arriving in Europe.<sup>168</sup>

There are conceptual and methodological challenges in producing global statistics on the number of people internally displaced by conflict who eventually cross a border. The question of whether every refugee or asylum seeker should be considered an IDP from the time they flee their place of residence until they cross an international border is but one example. In addition, not all IDPs who cross international borders fit the legal definition of a refugee, are granted official status with UNHCR or seek asylum. While UNHCR also registers such people, here again there is little quantitative evidence to suggest how many may have been internally displaced first.

Asking people the right questions is important, because not all displaced people have the same concept of their plight, or would even have considered themselves to have been internally displaced. Some may respond to survey questions in certain ways for other reasons – if, for example, they think that providing certain information may give them a better chance of securing assistance. Others may cross a border unwittingly, for example when borders are porous and poorly marked, and others still may cross knowingly but then deliberately withhold their personal information to protect themselves or to seek asylum in other countries where conditions are more favourable.

# UNRECOGNISED AND UNRECORDED

## Cross-border displacement by disasters

SPOT  
LIGHT

It is widely accepted that the vast majority of displacement by disasters tends to take place internally, but comparisons with cross-border movements have not been quantified with any precision.

IDMC's data does not yet capture global trends in terms of where people are displaced to, including to other countries, and where they eventually settle again. Nor does it capture all types of disaster that displace people. Those driven by slow-onset hazards such as drought and other human-made technological and environmental hazards are not included.

That said, increasing knowledge about cross-border disaster displacement shows that when people cross borders, most tend to remain in countries in the same geographical region.<sup>169</sup>

The assumption is supported by preliminary research into more than 100 disasters that occurred in 2016 using a range of displacement-related reporting terms to identify cross-border cases. Basic data was found to be scarce, incomplete and difficult to interpret because this type of displacement is not systematically monitored and reported on from the local to the global level. Evidence remains case-based and anecdotal as a result.<sup>170</sup>

The flood and landslides in the Ayeyarwaddy and Bago regions of Myanmar nearly destroyed Daw Tin Ngwe's house. She fled to higher ground when the flood hit, surviving without proper shelter for weeks. Her crops were badly affected by the flood. Photo: NRC/Hla Yamin Eian, October 2016



The small number of cross-border displacements that were identified appears to support the assumption that while numbers may in some cases be significant, they are relatively small compared with those for people displaced internally. Factors that drive people to cross borders include the extent of the damage wrought by a disaster, poor access to basic services and recovery assistance and the proximity and porosity of the nearest borders.

The severe food crisis or famine brought on by recurrent drought against a backdrop of poverty and insecurity in some parts of the Horn of Africa illustrate both the importance of understanding that cross-border displacement can be key to the survival and resilience of vulnerable populations, and the limited nature of the data and information available. This is discussed further in the spotlight on South Sudan.

Even when cross-border disaster displacement is monitored or quantified, common frameworks and methodologies for doing so are lacking. People who flee beyond their own countries for reasons other than conflict, generalised violence or persecution do not fit the legal definition of a refugee or asylum seeker. The fact that someone displaced across a border by a disaster does not exist as a legal category makes it less likely that they will be systematically recorded or identifiable in official data and statistics.

As with other types of displacement, nor are there any universally recognised criteria to determine whether a person's flight across a border as a result of disaster should be characterised as forced or voluntary. For the purpose of providing protection and assistance, the Nansen Initiative suggests criteria that include the directness and seriousness of a disaster's impact on the person in question, and their pre-existing vulnerabilities.

It also suggests benchmarks that consider solidarity with an affected country temporarily unable to assist and protect all of those in need, whether international humanitarian access is possible or not, and the extent of the people's ties with family or diaspora communities in the destination country.<sup>171</sup> An alternative approach might be to consider whether obliging people to return would be realistic, legal or morally responsible.<sup>172</sup>

Before any such criteria can be applied and priority given to those in greatest need, the systematic collection and sharing of data must overcome conceptual, technical and political obstacles to monitoring and reporting.<sup>173</sup> Addressing data and knowledge gaps is the first of three priorities identified in the Nansen Initiative's protection agenda for people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change. This is reflected in the 2016 to 2019 work plan for the Platform on Disaster Displacement, a state-led multi-stakeholder initiative taking forward the agenda's implementation.<sup>174</sup>

In support of the protection agenda and work plan, and in order to better quantify and understand displacement associated with disasters, IDMC is gradually broadening the scope of its global monitoring to capture data and build knowledge about both internal and cross-border flows. Its work also supports the agenda's comprehensive approach, which recognises the need "to reduce vulnerability and build resilience to disaster displacement risk, facilitate migration out of hazardous areas, conduct planned relocation and respond to the needs of internally displaced persons."<sup>175</sup>

# Common patterns and trajectories

## IDPs CROSSING BORDERS

Anecdotal evidence from countries where cross-border movements of IDPs fleeing conflict and persecution have been reported – across the Middle East, parts of Africa and Central America – indicate various factors that help to determine their decision to leave. These include their proximity or otherwise to a border and their financial resources. Others may be unable or unwilling to cross a border, despite the absence of security or basic services in their own country.

Syria was the most visible example in 2016 of the connection between human suffering inside a country's borders and exodus abroad. During six years of civil war, more than half of the country's pre-war population of 22 million have been displaced within or across its borders (see part 1, Syria spotlight).<sup>177</sup> As reported by the 2017 humanitarian needs overview: "All areas of the country, north, south, east and west, are impacted by the continuing conflict, which has grown more violent over the last year, resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries, increased internal displacement, large-scale migration to Europe and beyond, lost livelihoods, mounting humanitarian needs and diminished humanitarian access to many areas."<sup>178</sup>

Faced with such levels of violence and chaos, displacement is a survival strategy for people with the means and opportunity to escape.<sup>179</sup> Many IDPs have been compelled to move within the country multiple times in search of safety in recent years, because a single move has not protected them from constantly changing battle lines and the breakdown of basic services.<sup>180</sup> One study reported families moving anything from two to 25 times.<sup>181</sup> Increasingly desperate for a safe haven, many eventually made the now infamously perilous journey abroad as refugees and asylum seekers.

Figures for IDPs sheltering inside Syria and refugees leaving point to 2012, and the battle for Homs in particular, as a tipping point in the dynamics, scale and nature of displacement when the number of people began to rise exponentially.<sup>182</sup> Figures for the next four years support a World Bank hypothesis that the number of IDPs and refugees tends to increase or decline

*"Each time, we tried to return to the house, but we could not stay because of the bombing ... We had to move to other cities where the armed forces had agreed not to attack. But the agreement was always broken and we had to move again. There is no safe place in Syria."<sup>176</sup>*

– 20-year-old Syrian refugee, displaced four times

in tandem,<sup>183</sup> although increases in the number of refugees lag behind slightly as more people start to leave the country altogether for safety abroad (see figure 2.2).

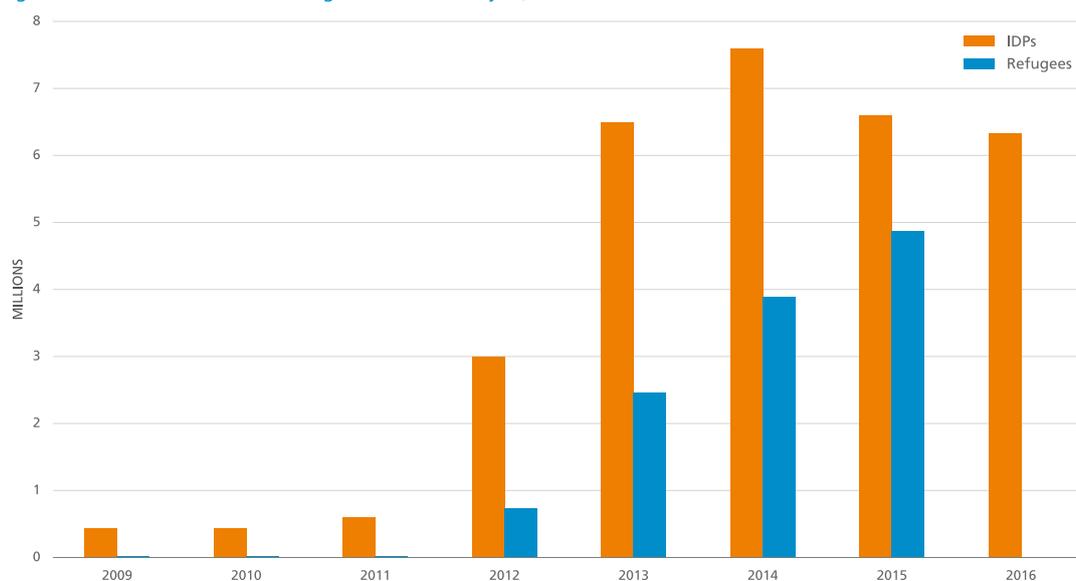
The patterns observed in Syria of people being displaced internally various times only to flee the country altogether when they are unable to find safety can be seen elsewhere. In neighbouring Iraq, a growing percentage of displaced people have also been displaced more than once.<sup>184</sup> Protection needs are most severe in governorates with high numbers of IDPs and areas where return movements have been observed.

As a last resort, some Iraqis embark on journeys facilitated by smugglers and traffickers in search of safety and a better life further afield. At least 52,000 people sought refuge in Europe in 2015.<sup>185</sup> One group of 500 who did so described themselves as an exception, because they had been able to afford to make the journey while most other IDPs could not and were left behind in vulnerable conditions.<sup>186</sup>

In the NTCA countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, persistent targeted violence including harassment and threats appears to be a primary tipping point that forces people displaced internally various times to eventually cross international borders. Women targeted by gang members said they had moved frequently within their countries before going abroad.<sup>187</sup> Two-thirds of female refugees from NTCA said they had tried to find safety elsewhere in their own country before fleeing further afield.<sup>188</sup>

Across some regions of Africa affected by conflict and violence, a different pattern has been

Figure 2.2: Number of IDPs and refugees in and from Syria, 2009 to 2016



Source: IDMC, with UNHCR and UNRWA for refugee data (2016 figures not yet available)

observed, a type of circular cross-border displacement. This occurs when people flee back and forth in response to the ebb and flow of hostilities, particularly when they take place close to borders or are part of regional conflicts in countries with a number of borders.<sup>189</sup> In north-east Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad basin, displaced people cross the border repeatedly to escape attacks by Boko Haram and heavy-handed military operations against the group.<sup>190</sup> One family had to flee within Nigeria and across the border to Cameroon and back seven times in 18 months.<sup>191</sup>

In east and central Africa, porous borders and a lack of coordination between countries have facilitated circular cross-border displacement, with people moving back and forth between the Central African Republic (CAR), DRC, South Sudan and Sudan when they are unable to find safety (see South Sudan spotlight). The four countries were hosting 7.8 million people uprooted by conflict and violence as of the end of 2016 – almost one in five IDPs worldwide. As of September 2016, more than 660,000 refugees from the four countries were living in one of the others.<sup>192</sup>

In countries already struggling to meet their IDPs' needs, an influx of refugees risks triggering a vicious cycle of population movements within and across borders, as resources wane and tensions rise across the region. Violence in host countries in central and eastern Africa has also forced refugees back inside their own borders, putting them at risk of becoming internally displaced upon their return.<sup>193</sup>

In the absence of systematic monitoring it is difficult to assess the extent to which such patterns are generalised, but there is a consensus that displacement is often a complex process involving more than one episode. The onward trajectory of an IDP, as with other people on the move, depends on a number of factors ranging from the location of friends and relatives to the accessibility of safe areas.<sup>194</sup> For people displaced various times internally before fleeing abroad and those caught up in circular displacement, each new movement depletes their resources further, deepens their impoverishment, creates new vulnerabilities and makes existing ones worse.<sup>195</sup>

# SOUTH SUDAN

## A revolving door of displacement

SPOT  
LIGHT

After three years of sustained conflict, more than 1.8 million people were internally displaced in South Sudan as of December 2016, an increase of around 230,000 since November 2015.<sup>196</sup> Many report being displaced various times as they flee the shifting violence in search of protection and assistance, and in response to seasonal flooding.

The southern Greater Equatoria region has become a significant new area of displacement in the country's ever expanding and deepening crisis. It alone was hosting more than 414,000 IDPs as of the end of the year.<sup>197</sup> More than one in four South Sudanese people are now displaced either inside or beyond the country's borders, and some have been caught up in circular, cross-border displacement patterns.

South Sudan's refugee population became the largest in Africa in 2016, with more than 1.5 million people estimated to be living in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda.<sup>198</sup> Around 760,000 people sought asylum during the year, almost 50 per cent of them under the age of 11.<sup>199</sup> It has tended to be women and children who flee, while young men stay behind in an attempt to safeguard their families' livelihoods. In doing so, they risk being recruited by armed groups or being displaced to avoid that fate.

The spread of conflict into Greater Equatoria created new waves of displacement during 2016, with the majority of new refugees from South Sudan fleeing into Uganda. Around 16,000 people did so between 16 and 22 July alone, and Uganda is now the largest host of South Sudanese refugees.<sup>200</sup> The movements echo the displacement of people from what was then southern Sudan into Uganda during the civil war of 1983 to 2005.

As with displacements into Ethiopia from Jonglei and Upper Nile states, they also continue the pattern seen in the past of IDPs moving to areas where they have ethnic links. Despite the high number of people from Greater Equatoria who became refugees in 2016, between 70 and 80 per cent of the displaced population fled into

the bush. Those that did cross the border into Uganda had lived there before.<sup>201</sup>

The triggers and push factors for people to flee both within and beyond the country's borders vary, but insecurity is cited as the main reason for displacement. The activities of groups such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army and Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition, armed ranchers and bandits have heightened tensions and pose a significant threat to civilians.

There are repeated reports of rape and forced recruitment, including of children, and the wanton destruction of civilian property. The situation has fuelled speculation about ethnic cleansing among the country's 64 ethnic groups, and the UN's special adviser on the prevention of genocide, Adama Dieng, recently reiterated his concern about the potential for such an atrocity in South Sudan.<sup>202</sup>

Food insecurity is also a major issue, and the situation continues to deteriorate with 4.9 million people, or about 42 per cent of population, estimated to be severely food insecure in early 2017. The figure is projected to increase to 5.5 million by July. These numbers are unprecedented, and farmers face significant challenges in planting to ensure a harvest later in 2017.

For others schooling has been a factor. Fifty-two per cent of people moving from Akobo in Jonglei state into Ethiopia in early 2017 identified a lack of education opportunities as their main reason for doing so.<sup>203</sup> More than 30 per cent of South Sudan's schools have come under armed attack at least once.<sup>204</sup>

The increasing fragmentation of the conflict, shifting frontlines and ethnic segregation make the provision of assistance difficult, and there is a growing need to negotiate access with various groups at the local level. The same factors also make it more dangerous and unpredictable for people to access markets and livelihoods. Traffic on many of the country's transport arteries, including river routes and the main road to Uganda, are prone to attacks by armed



Three years on, internally displaced people remain at the UN Protection of Civilians site in Juba, South Sudan. Photo: NRC/Albert Gonzalez Farran, November 2016

groups and bandits. Such attacks have disrupted commercial traffic and humanitarian access in the south of the country significantly.

OCHA estimates that 7.5 million people in South Sudan will require assistance in 2017, and the humanitarian community faces extraordinary challenges to reach them before the rainy season begins in May and populations become cut off.<sup>205</sup> Armed groups tend to step up their activity before the rainy season, looking to make territorial gains before it sets in and vast swaths of the country become inaccessible by road for up to six months.

The flow of people out of South Sudan, including those already internally displaced, is likely to continue and may increase in 2017 unless at least some of these issues are addressed. At the same time, there are concerns that some of the most vulnerable groups such as elderly and disabled people and those with no material assets are unable to make the journey across the border or access the assistance they need inside the country.

Others have returned from Uganda because the significant devaluation of South Sudan's currency has reduced their assets and the value of their

remittances to the point that their situation was no longer sustainable. Others still have gone back to reunite with family members or for security reasons.

South Sudan also hosts almost 300,000 refugees from neighbouring countries. Ninety per cent live in the northern states of Upper Nile and Unity, which continue to be two of the worst affected by conflict and displacement. The vast majority of the refugees, 92 per cent, are from Sudan, and the remainder from CAR, DRC and Ethiopia. In June 2016, assistance was provided to Ethiopian refugees in Jonglei state for the first time since 2009.

As the conflict escalates and spreads South Sudan continues plummeting to new depths of violence, displacement and food insecurity, and people are likely to resort to ever more desperate measures to seek safety and assistance. Increasing numbers are continuously on the move, and their high degree of mobility combined with the lack of humanitarian access make their situation difficult to monitor. It is clear, however, that the country's borders have become a revolving door of displacement.

# Same risks, different destinations

## PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

There is a wealth of research and first-hand testimony on the reasons people flee their countries.<sup>207</sup> For those recognised as refugees, they are part of their legal definition and status. The circumstances under which people already displaced internally end up crossing a border are much less clear.

The little research available on why IDPs who have fled conflict and violence cross borders suggests their push and pull factors are largely similar to those refugees report. Beyond such a binary interpretation, however, it is important to remember that displacement and migration are multifaceted and interconnected processes. They sit on a continuum from movements that are predominantly forced or obliged, to those which are predominantly voluntary and depend on a host of social and geographical factors, steered by human agency and very personal decisions.<sup>208</sup>

Whatever the label or status assigned to them, people's displacement tends to share the same causes and they have the same need for safety, dignity and a secure home and livelihood. Differences in their options, resources and access to protection and assistance may lead them to seek refuge and solutions in different places over time, either within and beyond their own country.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that direct attacks or threats to personal safety are the main reason IDPs flee across borders. Nine out of ten Syrians arriving in Greece from Turkey in January 2016, the vast majority of whom had been internally displaced before embarking on their journey to Europe, said in interviews that they had left the country because there was no safe haven from the conflict and violence.<sup>209</sup> Almost three quarters of Afghans, of whom 55 per cent had initially been IDPs, also said lack of safety was their main reason for leaving (see spotlight, p.61).<sup>210</sup>

*"Refugees and IDPs are fleeing the same risks by going to different destinations."*<sup>206</sup>

– World Bank, 2016

Once IDPs attain a degree of safety, access to livelihoods and basic services appear to be main factors in deciding whether to stay within their country or start a new life abroad. A survey of families preparing to leave Iraq, a third of whom were IDPs, found that their primary reasons for moving on related to their lack of income, high cost of living and inability to access basic services.<sup>211</sup> Syrians and Afghans arriving in Greece in early 2016 identified a lack of economic opportunities as their second most important reason for leaving after personal safety.<sup>212</sup>

Pull factors, the things that attract people to a particular location, tend to mirror push factors. Safety is a key draw to a new country for many IDPs.<sup>213</sup> Others are attracted to their new home by potential economic opportunities and access to services, including education for their children. Nearly half of one group of displaced Afghans interviewed in Greece said education was their main consideration in choosing their destination country.<sup>214</sup> Their Syrian counterparts said education was their second most important consideration.<sup>215</sup>

Social networks, including reuniting with family members, are also a significant pull factor. Almost half of the Syrians interviewed in Greece said family reunification was their main consideration in choosing their destination country.<sup>216</sup> They put joining communities of other Syrians third.<sup>217</sup> One group of Afghans said family reunification was their third most important consideration.<sup>218</sup>

# Returning refugees and migrants TOMORROW'S IDPs?

*"If their livelihoods are not met, IDPs will move and become refugees ... Equally, those who may be returned and don't go back to their place of origin – if they are not integrated, they will become IDPs."*<sup>219</sup>

– Former Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs, 2016

Along with local integration and resettlement, return or voluntary repatriation is considered a durable solution to the refugee cycle. Evidence from across the world, however, points to many returnees becoming internally displaced once they return to their countries of origin. According to the World Bank, large-scale returns were mirrored by a considerable increase in the number of IDPs in 46 per cent of cases between 2000 and 2016. Of the 15 largest return events since the 1990s, around a third were followed by renewed fighting within a few years, either because the conflicts concerned had not been properly resolved before people returned or their arrival derailed a fragile recovery.<sup>220</sup>

The two highest profile cases of large-scale returns in 2016 presented considerable risks and indeed evidence of internal displacement. Around 600,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan to a country that was already experiencing high levels of internal displacement.<sup>221</sup> UNHCR estimates that around half of them were unable to return to their place of origin (see spotlight, p.61). Evidence from Somalia also suggests that people returning from Kenya face a real risk

of a continued cycle of displacement, whether within or again beyond the country's borders (see spotlight, p.64). These two cases highlight how shortsighted return programmes can be. Rather than bringing displacement and vulnerability to an end, they simply shift it from one place to another.

Research indicates that security and access to services, housing and livelihood opportunities are returnees' primary considerations. Without them in place, returns are unlikely to be sustainable.<sup>222</sup> Each of the conditions is, however, highly subjective. Reductions in threats or a peace agreement are unlikely to be sufficient indicators of security for all, and minorities and direct victims of violence are less likely to feel safe to return.<sup>223</sup>

Even if the conditions were in place, studies show that return is not always the favoured solution, and that preferences vary depending on people's age, gender, education, economic status, occupation and political affiliation, the duration of their exile and the remoteness of their place of origin.<sup>224</sup> Only 32 per cent of Somali refugees living in Ethiopian and Kenyan camps in 2013 expressed willingness to return. For Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 2011 the figure was 16 per cent, and for Iraqi refugees in 2008 a mere 10 per cent.<sup>225</sup> Young Afghan refugees were found to be far less interested in returning than the older generation, and were mainly concerned about access to education and employment.<sup>226</sup>

Young boys use canoes to take IDPs and locals to Turiel Island from Thonyor, in South Sudan's Unity State. People move back and forth in search of food and livelihoods. Photo @UNHCR/Rocco Nuri, February 2016



# AFGHANISTAN

## Cross-border return to internal displacement

SPOT  
LIGHT

Continuous armed conflict, insecurity, human rights violations and recurrent disasters mean that flight and mobility have become a familiar coping strategy for many Afghans for almost four decades. Large numbers of people have experienced some form of displacement in their lives.

There are currently around 1.6 million IDPs in the country and their number continues to grow, primarily as a result of conflict. There are also millions of registered and undocumented Afghan refugees living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, and a significant number who have sought international protection elsewhere, mainly in Europe and Australia. Overall, Afghanistan continues to be the second largest source country for refugees, behind Syria.<sup>241</sup>

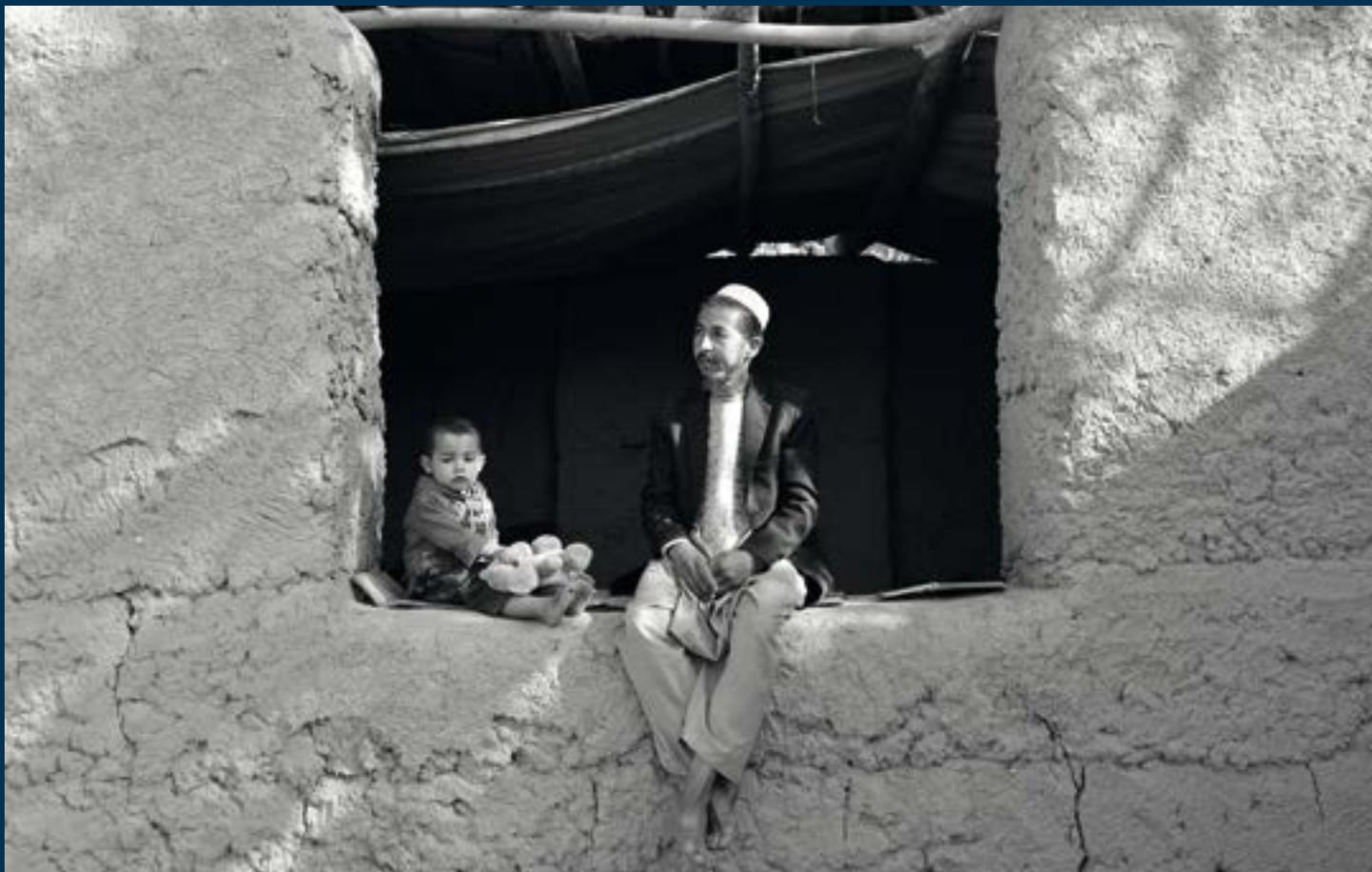
Many Afghans have been displaced more than once, whether within their own country or by

becoming refugees and then returning to find they are unable to resettle sustainably at home. The reasons for their plight are manifold, but those most commonly cited are the struggle to find a place to live, a lack of livelihood opportunities and pervasive insecurity.

Their inability to re-establish their lives in their places of origin has led many to undertake dangerous journeys further afield. More than half of those who entered Europe via Greece in the first three months of 2016 said they had initially been displaced internally, and another quarter were first or second generation refugees who had never lived in Afghanistan.<sup>242</sup>

More recently, however, Afghans' migration options have narrowed considerably. The adoption of restrictive border control measures and deterrence policies in 2016 means that Europe

An internally displaced man, having returned from Pakistan three years ago, works on full-day duty in a government school as a watchman and earns \$70 dollars per month. Photo: NRC/ Enayatullah Azad, October 2016



is no longer seen as a viable option for those seeking protection abroad. Asylum acceptance rates have also dropped sharply and an EU declaration signed in October 2016 has paved the way for at least 80,000 Afghans who have had their applications rejected to be returned.<sup>243</sup>

A major campaign has also been underway in Pakistan to push Afghan refugees back home. More than 600,000 registered and undocumented returnees arrived in eastern Afghanistan between July and December 2016. Asylum space in Pakistan and Iran has been shrinking for some time, and new refugee registration exercises have not been conducted in either country since 2007.<sup>244</sup>

These large-scale returns, whether forced, spontaneous or assisted, have prompted UN agencies and NGOs to warn that significant secondary displacement is likely, and the humanitarian country team for Afghanistan has said this will create considerable needs.<sup>245</sup> Undocumented and involuntary returnees are at particular risk, because they tend not to be monitored or assisted, but rather fall off humanitarian agencies' radar soon after returning. As such they are far less likely to reintegrate into their communities.<sup>246</sup>

Afghanistan's national policy on IDPs is clear that returnees, including those coming back from outside the country, should be counted as internally displaced unless they are able to settle sustainably in their places of origin.<sup>247</sup> So far, however, there has been no concerted effort to assess the impact of large scale returns on the number of IDPs in the country, nor has it been possible to record the true extent of secondary displacement more generally.

There has also been a sharp increase in the number of IDPs in Afghanistan in recent years. Every province currently either produces or is hosting IDPs, and the country is already struggling to respond to their protection and assistance needs.<sup>248</sup> Addressing those of the huge influx of returning refugees in the east of the country and a predicted surge in 2017 in the number of refused asylum seekers coming back from Europe will be a major challenge.

For those who do return, it is often a process of trying to build new lives in a transformed environment rather than re-establishing their previous existence.<sup>227</sup> Many do not go back to their places of origin, moving instead to urban centres in search of security, livelihoods and educational opportunities. This was true for almost two million South Sudanese from largely rural backgrounds who returned following signature of the peace agreement to end the second Sudanese civil war, doubling the population of Juba between 2005 and 2011.

From Kabul to Monrovia and Abidjan, returning refugees have joined large numbers of IDPs from rural areas in rapidly expanding urban areas.<sup>228</sup> They face many of the same problems as the urban poor, but the trauma of being uprooted (often more than once), discrimination, lack of documentation, fractured support networks and poor employment prospects all combine to make them more vulnerable still.<sup>229</sup> The scale of urban returns is not clear. It is difficult to differentiate between those who return to live as IDPs and those who migrate internally in search of better opportunities.

Despite the emphasis in the 1951 Refugee Convention on the principle of *non-refoulement*, which is recognised as the cornerstone of repatriation policy, large-scale returns are often politically driven and less than voluntary.<sup>230</sup> In South Sudan, the impetus was to have as many returnees as possible back in time for the 2008 census that paved the way for the referendum on independence. In Cambodia, the motivation was people's participation in the 1993 elections. In Europe, political pressure from European Union (EU) countries hosting Bosnian refugees played an important role in early returns in the 1990s.

In such circumstances, return is often prioritised over other courses of action that may be more conducive to durable solutions. It tends to be rushed and under-resourced, which reduces the likelihood of returnees being able to rebuild their lives and contribute to society.<sup>231</sup>

Large-scale repatriation schemes are usually managed under assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes, but there are doubts about how voluntary such initiatives are when they are undertaken in close partnership with host governments that have an interest in reducing refugee numbers. Whether repatriation undertaken under the threat of forcible removal can be deemed voluntary is clearly questionable.<sup>232</sup>

The US, EU and other countries have increasingly used deportation as a tool to manage migration.<sup>233</sup> The practice mushroomed in the US between 2009 and 2015, when around 2.5 million people were expelled, mainly to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Research suggests that many of the deportees faced severe social stigma on their return and struggled to meet their basic needs in terms of shelter, health-care, food and employment.<sup>234</sup> Others were exposed to exploitation and extreme danger.<sup>235</sup>

The EU signed a multilateral "readmission" agreement with the Afghan government in October 2016 that focussed on deportation. Afghans were the second-largest group of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015, with almost 200,000 applications. The EU is said to have threatened to strip Afghanistan of aid if it failed to cooperate.<sup>236</sup> The use of aid as a lever is part of a growing migration management strategy, the most controversial example being the March 2016 deal the EU struck with Turkey to take asylum seekers and migrants (mostly of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi origin) back from Greece and improve border controls in exchange for 6 billion Euros. Bilateral deals are also increasingly common in Europe. Finland deported just under 3,000 Iraqi asylum seekers in 2016.<sup>237</sup>

If deportees are forced to return before they choose or are ready to do so, their reintegration is likely to be difficult, if not impossible. They face deepening economic losses, growing debt that they are unable to pay off, a lack of social networks and the stigma of failure and suspicion in the eyes of the communities they return to.<sup>238</sup> Research suggests there is often a revolving door of migration amongst these groups, in which they tend to move on again whether within or beyond their borders.<sup>239</sup>

Refugees and migrants who become internally displaced when they return home eke out a living in squatter camps or shanty towns, and may be compelled to move again in an effort to meet their basic needs or escape fresh rounds of fighting. They clearly cannot be considered to have found a lasting solution to their displacement, and much more research is needed to understand, document and respond to their plight.<sup>240</sup>

# SOMALIA

## Returning 'home' from Dadaab camp

With nearly 900,000 refugees from Somalia living mainly in Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen, the cross-border displacement of Somalis is a regional phenomenon.<sup>249</sup> Another 1.1 million people are internally displaced within the country, more than 890,000 of them in south-central areas, and Somalia hosts significant numbers of refugees from other countries.<sup>250</sup> All of these factors both contribute to, and are a result of its persistent insecurity.

There were 324,000 Somali refugees registered with UNHCR in Kenya at the start of 2017.<sup>251</sup> Many arrived in search of protection as long ago as 1991. Others have been born and raised in the country. Life, however, is extremely precarious, particularly for those in the Dadaab refugee camps. The Kenyan government announced in May 2016 that it would make further attempts to close the camp complex and disband its Depart-

ment of Refugee Affairs, which had previously been responsible for the registration, coordination and the revocation of prima facie refugee status for Somali refugees.<sup>252</sup>

These moves have increased pressure on Somalis to return to their country via a voluntary repatriation scheme established under a tripartite agreement between UNHCR and the Kenyan and Somali governments in 2014. The scheme helped more than 33,000 to do so in 2016, compared with 6,000 in the preceding two years.<sup>253</sup> The Somalia Protection, Return and Monitoring Network (PRMN) recorded a further 28,355 spontaneous returns outside the repatriation scheme.

This brings the total number of recorded returns in 2016 to more than 67,000. A UNHCR survey in mid-2016, however, found that 74 per cent of Somali refugees in the Dadaab camps did

A Somali family looks on as a plane arrives in Dadaab refugee camp to take them back to Mogadishu, Somalia. They were one of 40 families returning that day as part of a voluntary return programme.  
Photo: NRC/ Fredrik Lerneryd, September 2016



not want to go back.<sup>254</sup> A subsequent survey of Somali Dadaab residents conducted by Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) put the figure even higher, at 86 per cent.<sup>255</sup> Among the reasons for their reluctance to return in the UNHCR survey, 66 per cent cited fears of insecurity and ten per cent their inability to access shelter.<sup>256</sup> Of those who did return under the voluntary repatriation scheme in 2016, the vast majority moved to three of 12 designated return areas – 50 per cent to Kismayu, 22 per cent to Baidoa and 19 per cent to Mogadishu.<sup>257</sup>

For 25 per cent of the returnees, however, the three areas are not their place of origin or previous residence.<sup>258</sup> They are also located in south-central Somalia, which hosts the vast majority of the country's IDPs, and there are concerns that many returnees are simply adding to their number. High levels of acute malnutrition persist in most settlements of IDPs across Somalia.<sup>259</sup>

The likelihood of returnees being forced to move again in search of basic assistance, services and sustainable livelihoods is high. Much of Somalia is suffering the effects of recurrent and severe drought on pastoral and agricultural livelihoods and food insecurity, and there are warnings of impending famine if the situation does not improve. Returnees are coming back to a country where around half of the population are in need of emergency food assistance, and all 12 designated return areas are affected by food insecurity.<sup>260</sup>

Former refugees previously registered in Dadaab are already among an increasing number of Somalis crossing into Ethiopia.<sup>261</sup> PMRN has also recorded incidents of refugees previously registered in Ethiopia returning to Somalia only to cross back into their former country of refuge.<sup>262</sup> The same has also been reported of Somalis returning to Dadaab, a phenomenon which has continued into 2017: 500 refugees arrived in Kenya's Dadaab camp in March, 100 of whom who had previously received UNHCR support to voluntarily return to Somalia.<sup>263</sup>

Accounting for returned Somali refugees remains a challenge since some settle in IDP camps, where they may not be distinguished from people who had not crossed an international border. Returnees who remain in Somalia temporarily before moving on again to their prior country of refuge, or another country, are also not accounted for in the year-end headcount since they have not remained within the borders of their country.

To complicate matters further, UNHCR considers much (if not all) of the displacement in Somalia to be the same people being displaced repeatedly and, as a result, did not update its stock figure during 2016. Indeed, despite the number of new displacements and cross-border returns, UNHCR reported the exact same number of IDPs (1,106,751) in January, February, March, April, May, June, July and December 2016.<sup>264</sup>

It appears clear that Somalia is not in a position to support sustainable returns on the large scale already seen from Kenya, and numbers could increase dramatically if the government in Nairobi goes ahead with its decision to close the Dadaab complex in 2017. Unless the Somali government, the local authorities in Jubaland and international organisations scale up their relief and reintegration efforts, backed by multi-year funding, the upshot may be increased internal displacement, circular movements back into Kenya and more cross-border movements into Ethiopia.

# Building the evidence base

## A PREREQUISITE FOR ACTION

A concerted effort is required to advance our understanding of the dynamics of internal and cross-border displacement, returns and onward movements and the relationships between them. A number of questions need to be answered if national governments, policymakers and humanitarian agencies are to meet the needs of all forcibly displaced people, regardless of whether they flee within or across borders. Such an evidence base is also a prerequisite for reducing the risk of new, onward and repeated displacement in future.

to more cross-border movement than others, and at what point do IDPs decide to flee beyond their own borders? More systematic data would allow us to analyse both historical and forward-looking trends, and to make comparisons between countries and regions. These in turn would be useful planning tools for governments and humanitarian and development agencies to better prepare for and respond to large flows of people such as those Europe has experienced over the last few years.

First, we need to get better at capturing how many IDPs cross borders, and where and when this happens. What proportion of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants were previously IDPs, and how does this vary across different contexts and crises? Do some types of crisis lead

To achieve this, data collection will have to be more joined-up. At the very minimum, datasets on IDPs, migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers need to be aligned and interoperable, and based on complementary definitions, standards and methods that are systematically applied. Those gathering data should strive for joint and regular

A pickup truck filled with Afghans leaving for neighbouring Iran makes its way through the rough Nimrozi landscape. Civilians trying to escape the insecurity in Afghanistan are paying smugglers to take them all the way to Europe. Photo: NRC/ Jim Huylebroek, August 2016



collection and profiling exercises, and to monitor people's situations and trajectories, including across borders, over longer periods of time. If donors are serious about improving responses, they should invest in bringing data collection agencies together and piloting such a system. This could be done for crises such as Iraq, South Sudan or the countries of Central America's Northern Triangle, where mixed migration is a feature and urgent attention is required.

Second, we need more qualitative data and clarity on the combination of factors that determine IDPs' onward and cross-border flight. Understanding how and when they make such decisions and which issues weigh heaviest on them is key. Is physical safety and security their prime concern, which would reflect a clear failure to protect them at home? How important are social and economic considerations, when livelihoods, employment and education options have all but disappeared and people have no choice but to seek opportunities elsewhere? To what extent are decisions taken by individuals or within families? Or are they driven more by external pressure, rumour or the appeal of destination countries based on their border and asylum policies or socioeconomic conditions? A clear understanding of the push and pull factors that drive people to flee is a prerequisite for national and international responders to prioritise resources and offer the right type of support when and where it is needed.

These questions can be answered with systemic analyses and system dynamics models of the environmental, socioeconomic, political and security variables that prompt, force or hinder cross-border movement. Such work has to be a collaborative effort between regional experts, humanitarian responders, economists and development specialists. Qualitative information is also required, including the anonymised interview transcripts and profiling data that different agencies currently collect at different points of transit and arrival but as yet only share inconsistently. These exercises need to be prioritised, expanded and adequately funded to increase the current coverage and allow for the collection of more data over longer periods of time. Countries such as Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, South Sudan, Sudan and Syria would be prime candidates for this type of analysis.

Third, we need a much better understanding of the circumstances in which people return to their countries of origin, and a measure of the

risk this carries of future displacement. We need insights into the proportion of people who return voluntarily or under external pressure, those who return to their home areas or find themselves living in internal displacement camps, and those who eventually conclude they have no choice but to go back to their country of refuge or move on to a third country. Thorough contextual analyses of the exact conditions in designated return areas, and the ability of national and local authorities to respond adequately to the needs of those in them, will be key to measuring the sustainability of returns and the risk of onward movement or displacement.

To achieve this, agencies and authorities on the ground need to monitor returnees' trajectories over time, not just at drop-off but much further into the settlement and reintegration process. We also need to reach a consensus on the notion that a returned refugee who faces conditions of insecurity and precariousness and is unable to integrate sustainably in their place of origin or elsewhere becomes internally displaced, and qualifies for protection and assistance as any other IDP would.

This means gathering data on the full range of indicators contained in the IASC framework for durable solutions systematically, comprehensively and longitudinally, and in ways that are collaborative and interoperable. It goes without saying that much greater political will and financial investment is required to reach this objective, and to ensure the needs of all those displaced are met until they have fully recovered from their plight and re-established stable and sustainable lives.