



Interrogating the Person and Process of Internal Displacement in Nigeria

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Abstract

Human displacement is a forced migration of people from their homes, communities and livelihoods to seek refuge in a safer environment. Internal displacement – the internal form of human displacement has become a global issue affecting many countries of the world. The phenomenon of internal displacement is not new. In recent years, the tragic plight of its growing number of victims has become a global concern. Despite its global presence, it is the responsibility of each national government to protect and cater to the needs of its internally displaced population. Thus, it is a global issue because it is not limited to any country or continent and not because there is a global solution to its attendant problems. The burden of internal displacement is borne by many countries in the world. Despite the difference in its volume, the concept of internal displacement is the same across the globe. Nevertheless, the instances of such displacements are not uniform. This paper, employing both primary and secondary sources of data, enumerates the peculiar causes of internal displacement in Nigeria. It adopts the Guiding Principles definition of internally displaced persons, examines the process of displacement from the flight to the return of IDPs. The paper concludes that the duration of internal displacement is not fixed and can range from days to years. Also, there is no generally accepted marker to indicate the end of displacement.

Keywords: Human displacement, Internal Displacement, Internally Displaced Persons, Humanitarian Disaster, Nigeria.

I. Introduction

Migration, whether voluntary or forced, has always been a characteristic of individual and

collective human behaviour.¹ It occurs as a response to economic development as well as social, cultural, environmental and political factors. It has effects on areas of origin as well as destination. People tend to move away from a place due to the need to escape violence, political instability, various dimensions of congestion and perceived or actual persecution. Human displacement is a serious outcome of humanitarian disasters and it may result from both natural and man-made disasters.² The severity of human displacement during disasters ranks next to fatality. Human displacement and fatality are dependent on the intensity of the humanitarian disaster. It is important to state that displacement does not necessarily have to accompany humanitarian disasters.

The essential preconditions for human displacement are:

- i. Lack of shelter arising from the destruction of habitable structures as a result of natural disasters such as earthquakes, landslides, volcanoes, bushfires, floods, tsunamis, landslides, cyclones, tornadoes and other geophysical hazards. Shelters can also be lost during man-made disasters such as wars, chemical explosions, etc.

¹ E. Newman, "Refugees, International Security, and Human Vulnerability: Introduction and Survey" in E. Newman & J. van Selm, (eds.), *Refugees and Forced Displacement: International Security, Human Vulnerability, and the State*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003, p. 3.

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), "Displaced Person/Displacement", available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/glossary/displaced-person-displacement/> (accessed 7 November 2019)



ii. Unsafe environment arising from threat of armed conflicts and wars, adverse physical conditions or the occurrence of famine, drought, plunder, soil infertility, biological hazards such as infestation, disease epidemic, infections, oil spillage, gas leak, etc.³

Human displacement can occur within and outside the border of a recognised state.⁴ The people who are displaced and have sought shelter outside the border of their country or their country of habitual residence are known as 'refugees' while those displaced and seeking refuge within are called 'internally displaced persons'. Human displacement is not a modern phenomenon. Famine, war, flood and disease epidemic have displaced peoples and communities hundreds of years before the creation of the Nigerian state. Nevertheless, it has become a growing menace in the globe.⁵ The rate of human displacement has grown globally over the years in both cases of internal and external displacement. This is largely due to population increase, conflicts and climate change, all of which have compounded environmental stress.

II. Discussion

Internal displacement is the involuntary or coerced movement of persons who have fled their homes, communities and livelihoods as a result of disasters such as war, violent conflicts, human rights abuses, persecution, repression and natural phenomenon but have not sought refuge in another country. It has become a major global phenomenon of the modern world that is obtainable in many countries and regions.⁶ Most times, it is the outcome

of violence and gross human rights abuse which may lead to dramatic changes in family structures and gender roles, severe hardship, suffering, destitution, vulnerability, social deprivation, need for protection and assistance and death of the displaced persons.⁷ Globally, a significant number of people live displaced within the borders of their country or country of habitual residence. The rate of internal displacement in any country is determined by multiple factors which may include the country's political stability, respect for the rule of law, intrinsic natural disasters and government responsiveness *inter alia*.

Internal displacement has become one of the most pressing humanitarian, human rights and security problems confronting the international community. Internally displaced persons can be found in all continents but are present in significant numbers in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East. A large percentage of the displaced persons are usually women and children who make up the vulnerable group. In 2010, Internally Displaced Persons across the world (IDPs) was estimated to be 27 million.⁸ In 2018 alone, 13.6 million people were newly displaced. Today, the population of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the world is estimated at over 100 million, the highest since the Second World War.⁹ There are more Internally Displaced Persons while refugees exceeds 27 million.¹⁰ The estimate of human displacement in Africa as at 2017 was 24.2 million and the countries of concern were South Sudan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Nigeria and Sudan.¹¹

³ O. A. Adeleye, "A Historical Analysis of United Nations Interventions on Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria, 1967-2020", Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University, 2021, pp. 1-2.

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), "Refugees and Internally Displaced persons", available at: <https://www.ipu.org/about-ipu/structure-and-governance/governing-council/committee-promote-respect-international-humanitarian-law/refugees-and-internally-displaced> (accessed 7 November 2019).

⁵ R. Cohen, *Refugee and Internally Displaced Women: A Development Perspective*, Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 1995, p. 1.

⁶ O. A. Adeleye and S. O. Osadola, "International Aid in Managing IDPs: The Case of United Nations in Nigeria", *SIASAT*, 2022. Vol. 7 (3), p.235.

⁷ E. E. Ansa, "The Challenges of Resettlement and Reintegration of Bakassi Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)" M.A Thesis, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2010, p. 12.

⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), "Internal Displacement – Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2010", p. 9.

⁹ RFI. "UN says global population of displaced persons now exceeds 100 million". May 23, 2022.

¹⁰ Refugee Council of Australia, "How many refugees are there in the world? available at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/how-many-refugees/> (accessed 10 November 2022).

¹¹ Reliefweb, "Update of UNHCR's operations in Africa, 14 September 2018", available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/update-unhcr-s-operations-africa-14-september-2018> (accessed 8 November 2019).



Over time, refugee flows and internal displacement have continued to be causes, features, and consequences of conflicts within and between communities in the world.¹²In Nigeria, more cases of internal displacement have occurred because of violent conflicts which are closely connected with ethnic, religious and political factors. Thousands of people are internally displaced annually as a result of natural disasters including flooding in the North and West, erosion in the East, oil spillage and other man-made factors such as development projects, etc. Insurgency and armed conflicts in Nigeria have caused many casualties and deaths.¹³The Nigerian experience of armed conflicts and human rights abuses is rigorously carried out by the Boko Haram sect in the Northeast.¹⁴At present, the activities of this sect are responsible for over 90 percent of the internal displacement in Nigeria, with less than 10 percent of the displacement caused by natural disasters. This situation stemmed from the terrorist activities carried out by the Boko Haram sect which has led to the rising number of deaths of innocent citizens and security officials.¹⁵As it can be observed, a number of internally displaced persons and refugees are essentially created by the same root causes which are, armed conflicts and human rights abuses.¹⁶

¹² E. Newman, "Refugees, International Security, and Human Vulnerability: Introduction and Survey" in E. Newman & J. van Selm, (eds.), *Refugees and Forced Displacement: International Security, Human Vulnerability, and the State*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003, p. 3.

¹³ V. C. Obikaeze & C.B. Onuoha, "The Nigerian-State and Management of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS) from 2012-2016", *African Journal of Politics & Society*, 2016, Vol. 2, No. 3, p.5.

¹⁴O. A. Adeleye, "A Historical Analysis of United Nations Interventions on Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria, 1967-2020", Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University, 2021, p. 3.

¹⁵ N. E. Lenshie & H. B. Yenda, "Boko Haram Insurgency, Internally Displaced Persons and Humanitarian Response in Northeast Nigeria", *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 2016, Vol. 4, Issue 8, p.141.

¹⁶ L. T. Lee, "Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Internal Conflicts", *Journal of*

While the problem of internal displacement is as old as war and the nation state itself, providing protection for those affected has only received international attention recently.¹⁷Until the beginning of the nineties, internally displaced persons were defined negatively and in relation to refugees as people who had fled their homes, but who were not refugees because they remained in their country of origin. The international attention for Internally Displaced Persons was attained when the world saw a dramatic increase in the numbers of internal armed conflicts. As a consequence of these new conflicts, the numbers of Internally Displaced Persons rose from 1.2 million in 11 countries in 1982 to 20-25 million in 40 countries just ten years after.¹⁸

Several international laws recognise the welfare of internally displaced persons as the responsibility of the State. This does not in any way ensure that all states would live up to their responsibility to protect and provide for their internally displaced since the failure of the state to protect the citizens is usually a common theme that runs through displacement situations.¹⁹ A state's responsibility starts with the prevention of internal displacement and protection from displacement. When displacement cannot be averted, national governments are responsible for protecting and assisting IDPs, and supporting them in their search for durable solutions. When national capacities are stretched or overwhelmed and the government is unable to protect and assist all IDPs in need of support, or if it is unable to access certain areas of the country, international support may play a critical role in an effective response. Requesting and accepting international support is an expression of a

International and Comparative Law (ILSA), 1997, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 529.

¹⁷ S. Bagshaw & D. Paul, *Protect or Neglect? Toward a More Effective United Nations Approach to the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement and the Internal Displacement Division, OCHA, November 2004, p. 19.

¹⁸ R. Cohen, "Developing an International System for Internally Displaced Persons", *International Studies Perspectives*, 2006, Vol. 7, Issue 2, p. 89.

¹⁹ R. Jones, "State Failure and Extra-Legal Justice: Vigilante Groups, Civil Militias and the Rule of Law in West Africa", *New Issues in Refugee Research*, UNHCR Research Paper No. 166, October 2008, p. 1.



government's responsibility towards its displaced population.²⁰

National authorities have the primary responsibility to assist and protect those displaced within their borders, sometimes states are considerably weak and unable or unwilling to provide adequate support. As opposed to the protection regime established for refugees under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the international regime for IDPs is made up of non-binding frameworks and policies that recognise the primary role of States and call on international support, as required.²¹ States hold the primary responsibility for protecting the rights of those displaced and addressing internal displacement within their jurisdiction. Such rights include protection from physical violence and severe forms of discrimination. In addition, displaced persons encounter threats to social and economic rights, including the right to access basic necessities of life such as food, water, shelter and clothing.²²

Internally Displaced Persons

There exists no legal or universally accepted definition of Internally Displaced Persons as different scholars have espoused different versions of the concept. The concept has been expanded and contracted to accommodate or restrict certain sets or groups of persons based on the scholars' perspectives. In other situations where a set of scholars adopt a common definition, there has been different understanding and interpretation of the terms inherent in such definition. For the purpose of this study, the Guiding principles' definition of Internally Displaced Persons will be adopted.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) according to the Guiding Principles are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to

avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.²³

The basic distinguishing components of the definition are:

- i. involuntary movement of persons as a result of insecurity, and that such movement takes place
- ii. within national borders.

In addition to persons forced to move from their homes as a result of violence, the definition of internally displaced person also encompasses people leaving their homes because of natural and man-made disasters. This is primarily intended to mean cases of displacement caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and flooding. As to displacement caused by man-made disasters, this will also include situations of people arbitrarily displaced by development projects.²⁴

Thus, a person, persons or group of persons can only be considered as internally displaced when forced migration has taken place within a country in a bid to escape disasters of any form. This definition has streamlined and narrowed down the conditions that are necessary for persons to be considered as internally displaced persons. Their migration from their communities must have been forcefully induced by natural or manmade disasters. This does not remove the personal will of these persons as obtained in cases of abductions and kidnappings, but the need for survival which propels them from danger to a safer environment. It is worthy of note that this migration must not transcend the borders of the country.

This definition does not capture those who migrate within a country for social, political or economic reasons because their movement has not been induced by coercion neither are they moving away from grave danger. Evictions are not considered as instances of internal displacement because they usually take place outside the emergency contexts of evacuation. Evictions may be authorised and carried out in accordance with the

²⁰ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, p.67.

²¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Framework for Addressing Internal Displacement*, Geneva: IOM, 2017, p.7.

²² O. A. Adeleye, "A Historical Analysis of United Nations Interventions on Internally Displaced Persons in Nigeria, 1967-2020", Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University, 2021, p. 6.

²³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, 22 July 1998, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3c3da07f7.html> (accessed 7 November 2019).

²⁴ E. D. Mooney, "The Concept of Internal Displacement and the Case for Internally Displaced Persons as a Category of Concern", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 2005, Vol. 24, Issue 3, pp. 12-13.



law, carried out in public interests, carried out when there is no alternative or carried out with just and fair compensation.²⁵ This definition also excludes those who are forcefully fleeing from danger but have crossed an international border. On the one hand, they are displaced but on the other hand, they are not internally displaced but internationally displaced and generally known as refugees.

Refugees and asylum seekers may become IDPs after returning to their country if they are forced to flee internally for safety reasons. Their status however remains if they are displaced in the country of refuge. They may become displaced within their country of refuge in the course of a disaster, but this does not alter their status or their rights as refugees. That is to say, that a displaced refugee while seeking refuge remains a refugee. Legal and illegal immigrants and stateless persons can become internally displaced persons if they have always lived in the country within which they are forced to flee. Displaced persons who transit through another country before returning to find refuge in a safer part of their own country are still considered IDPs. It is not their flight route that is decisive, but the fact that they found refuge within the internationally recognised borders of their country. Homeless persons are not considered as internally displaced persons because there is no coercion, disaster, home or flight involved in their case.²⁶

In recent times, natural disasters have displaced more people than conflicts. Globally, most of the 24 million new disaster displacements recorded in 2016 were linked to sudden weather hazards such as floods, storms, wildfires and severe winter conditions.²⁷ However, this can not be said of the situation in Nigeria which enjoys favourable weather condition except for some rare occasions and where displacement has been occasioned by unending violence. When there exist a serious and imminent threat to life and health of citizens, competent authorities have an obligation to protect the population under their jurisdiction, including in some cases through evacuation. This

usually takes place during emergencies and is a temporary measure to safeguard the life and integrity of people who would otherwise have been exposed to threats posed by conflict, violence or disasters.²⁸ IDPs live in a variety of circumstances, including in camps, in informal settlements, with host families and in independently rented or purchased accommodation. The majority of the world's IDPs take refuge outside camps and a single displacement can affect many communities. Communities that bear the burden of internal displacement include the host communities, communities in return areas, and those into which IDPs chose to settle in and integrate.

Internal Displacement Process

Internal displacement is not a static condition but consists of various events. It encompasses events from the flight of internally displaced persons to the attainment of durable solution, a period of time during which their needs and vulnerabilities continue to change. During displacement process, the responsibility to assist and protect those displaced within their borders lies solely on national authorities.²⁹ The period of displacement may vary from days to years depending on the trends and causes of displacement. IDPs may get displaced a number of times or live in protracted displacement for a long period before they are able to find a durable solution. Durable solution is a sustainable and lasting solution to the problems of displacement and displaced persons which goes beyond relief and shelter. It is a semblance of what they had prior to their displacement. Durable solution according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is when IDPs “no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement”.³⁰

²⁵ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, p.73

²⁶ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, pp. 63-64.

²⁷“Over 31 Million People Internally Displaced in 2016”, *The Guardian*, 24 May, 2017, p. 8.

²⁸ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, p. 73.

²⁹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Framework for Addressing Internal Displacement*, Geneva: IOM, 2017, p.7.

³⁰ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, pp. 26-27.



There are three different options in achieving durable solutions by IDPs. IDPs can be:

- i. reintegrated into their places of origin (return);
- ii. integrated into areas where they have taken refuge (local integration);
- iii. integrated into another part of the country (settlement elsewhere).³¹

These settlement options apply to all IDPs, whether they have been displaced by conflict and human rights violations, or other factors such as natural disasters. As citizens or habitual residents of the country in which they are displaced, they have the right to freedom of movement and to choose their place of residence. Significantly, this gives IDPs the right to make informed and voluntary choices about the resolution of their displacement.

The primary responsibility of protecting internally displaced persons, and all persons within the country lies solely on the national authorities of that country. National responsibility is a feature of the fundamental operating principle in the international community and responses need to be adapted accordingly.³² In the context of Internally Displaced Persons, response is “*a broad term embracing all activities and measures undertaken in the course of the displacement process. This includes measures to (a) prevent, prepare for and mitigate the consequences of displacement; (b) provide assistance and protection to IDPs; and (c) find and support durable solutions*”.³³ Response to displacement is a wide spectrum ranging from mechanisms put in place to avert displacement, through protection and assistance enjoyed by IDPs to durable solutions of resettling the IDPs in their choice areas and mitigating subsequent displacement. This responsibility is solely borne by the national government but can be relieved by Non-Governmental Organisations, foreign governments and international bodies. Responses enjoyed by IDPs from national government and other concerned parties can be seen as rights and privileges respectively.

³¹ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, pp. 26-27.

³² Global Protection Cluster Working Group, “Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons”, December 2007, p. 7.

³³ IDMC, *National Instruments on Internal Displacement: A Guide to their Development*, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2013, pp. 26-27.

III. Conclusion

The means of determining the end of displacement in relation to internally displaced persons is not as simple or straightforward as expected. It could be implied that, since the beginning of internal displacement is marked by the flight of displaced persons, the end should be their return or integration. There is no generally adopted formal process or manual for recognising the end of internal displacement as opposed to refugees who have their ‘cessation clauses’ spelt out.³⁴ Therefore, there is no consensus as to when someone stops being counted as an internally displaced person or the conditions to be met before internal displacement status can be terminated. The Guiding Principles’s position on end of internal displacement in (6)3 reads: “*Displacement shall last no longer than required by the circumstances*.”³⁵ This provision is not instructive and does not explicitly state when displacement should end rather, it implies that displacement process should not be endured for a period longer than is necessary.

Peace is often considered as a precondition for the end of internal displacement even though it does not in itself guarantee the end of the process because it may provide a conducive environment, it will not provide compensation for previous losses. Since there is no uniform or systematic approach adopted in deciding the end of internal displacement, different approaches have been employed in deciding this. At times, internally displaced persons abandon the camps when their needs can no longer be met at the camps. At other times, the unwillingness or inability of government and other relief providers to continue to provide protection and assistance, rather than actual end of displacement that is the deciding factor. The government may announce a date when IDP camps will be closed and all IDPs cease to be considered as such even if they still have peculiar needs based on their circumstances.³⁶ End of internal displacement

³⁴ C. Brun, “Research guide on internal displacement”, NTNU Research Group on Forced Migration, Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) Trondheim, Norway, p.14.

³⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, 22 July 1998, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3c3da07f7.html> (accessed 7 November 2019)

Jörnruud, M., “International Protection of Internally Displaced Persons: A field study of Internal



can be seen as the ability to establish a sustainable livelihood in an area of relative peace. Clearly put, “becoming ‘ordinary citizens’ with some degree of both legal and physical safety, some land and property rights and access to a sustainable livelihood – is the main precondition for the end of displacement”.³⁷ This suggests that when the needs and vulnerabilities that characterize displacement no longer exist, the displaced person ceases to be considered an IDP. Although no uniform criteria have been set up to facilitate the determination of when displacement ends, it can be said to end when durable solution has been achieved by the IDPs.

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