



BRIEFING PAPER

When land, knowledge and roots are lost: indigenous peoples and displacement

The life and identity of indigenous peoples is inextricably linked to their land. Land holds deep emotional, cultural, social, philosophical and religious values for them. For many indigenous peoples migrating is also part of their life, an expression of their identity, culture, and livelihoods.¹ Conflicts, development projects, urbanization, land rights violations, disasters and climate change, however, can force communities from areas where they have habitually lived.²

This paper is intended to improve the understanding of the unique risks, challenges and impacts indigenous peoples face in displacement and highlight how these communities can help achieve durable solutions. It also explains why better data on displaced indigenous peoples is essential to more inclusive responses.

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT RISK

Indigenous peoples make up 6.2 per cent of the world's population but account for 15 per cent of its poorest people and almost 19 per cent of the extreme poor.³ Their poverty is exacerbated by economic or political structures that often marginalise them and discriminate against them. These factors make them more vulnerable to the risk of displacement amid conflict and violence, disasters, climate change and development projects.

| CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

The presence of indigenous peoples in strategic and resource-rich areas can lead them to be affected by armed conflict and violence that can trigger displacement. Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities have been, along with rural communities, among the people most affected by the conflict in Colombia and its resulting displacement, for example.⁴ The production of illegal drugs, together with the exploitation of gold, oil, emeralds, coca, coal and fine woods in the territories where they live have led to their displacement. The regions most endowed with natural resources are those where most conflict occurs and where the highest number of displacements occur.⁵ Many indigenous peoples in Colombia have been forced to move to cities where they have faced a dramatically different life, with few livelihood opportunities and great inequalities.⁶ A chapter was included in the 2016 Colombian peace agreement to recognize the disproportionate impact of the conflict on indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities and the need to include them in peacebuilding efforts.⁷ This was an exception, however, as indigenous peoples are rarely included in conflict resolution processes, leaving their lands unprotected and potentially setting the stage for displacement.

Displacement can also result from militarization, by which military influence and priorities are extended to civilian life, including indigenous peoples. These communities are

particularly at risk of forced recruitment in more isolated areas with less support from civil society. Since the late 1980s, for example, the militarization of the Mindanao, Zambales and Pampanga regions of the Philippines has caused the displacement of the Aetas and Lumad indigenous communities.⁸ Their displacement has become protracted, as illustrated by the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs in Mindanao in 2016.⁹

Attacks on human rights defenders of indigenous peoples have increased in recent years.¹⁰ Conflicts involving indigenous peoples over land, territories and resources can lead to a heightened risk of displacement.¹¹ Exclusion may also lead to the violence and conflict that triggers displacement.

I DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Indigenous peoples are among those who have contributed least to climate change. They are also, however, among the people most at risk of displacement linked with climate change and disasters.¹² Many of them are disproportionately affected because they depend on ecosystems that are particularly prone to the effects of a warming climate and extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, wildfires and cyclones.¹³

In the Pacific Islands, for example, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for indigenous communities to adapt in situ to environmental threats such as coastal erosion and sea level rise.¹⁴ Pacific island peoples rely heavily on a stable climate for their livelihoods, especially with regards to tourism, agriculture and fishing. The scarcity of land and other resources as a result of climate change also makes indigenous peoples in the Pacific vulnerable to escalating conflict.¹⁵

Because of their dependence on natural resources, indigenous peoples are especially vulnerable to being displaced by drought, flooding, desertification, fresh water pollution and seismic or volcanic activity. They can also be driven from their lands by storms, erosion, reduced hunting grounds and fisheries, changing rainfall patterns, wildfires, coastal erosion and sea-level rise.¹⁶ Drought affected tribal communities in southern Ethiopia between 2015 and 2017, triggering the displacement of more than 300,000 pastoralists in the eastern part of the Somali region.¹⁷ Torrential rains in Suriname in 2007 resulted in major floods that displaced thousands of indigenous people.¹⁸ The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported in 2003 that most of Alaska's more than 200 native villages were affected by some degree of flooding and erosion. These phenomena, exacerbated by the growing impacts of climate change, led to 31 such villages facing an imminent threat of displacement.¹⁹ In Chile, the Mapuche communities living in the Andean foothills have historically been exposed to extreme weather. They also have the country's highest levels of vulnerability in terms of income, basic needs and access to services. The scarcity of water, reduction

of agricultural production and invasion of plants have triggered the displacement of these communities.²⁰

I DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Economic activities that do not recognize indigenous peoples' land rights can also cause displacement. Such activities include energy projects, megaprojects involving food for export, fracking and the extraction of minerals, gases, oil or water.²¹ A significant proportion of those displaced by development projects are indigenous people.²² Mineral exploitation has become a driver of displacement for Peru's indigenous communities in the Andes and along the coast.²³ Displacement and forcible evictions of indigenous people have occurred over dam construction projects in Brazil, Peru, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Uganda, India, Vietnam, the Philippines and China, among others.²⁴

In Israel, Palestinian Bedouins have been displaced by urbanization, the expansion of industrial zones, and military installations in the Negev-Naqab Southern Region. From the early 1950s to 1966, they were concentrated in a restricted area known as al-Siyāj under Israeli military administration. This represented only 10 per cent of their ancestral land. Traditionally, the Bedouins were organized into semi-nomadic tribes that derived their livelihoods from livestock and seasonal agriculture. Some of the displaced Bedouins were resettled and now live in government-planned towns. Others still live in traditional villages, which are not recognized by Israel, and face the demolition of their houses.²⁵

Wildlife protection and the creation of national parks and conservation areas can also displace indigenous peoples.²⁶ That is the case of the Batwa, hunter-gatherers in the forests of south-west Uganda. They were evicted from their ancestral forest home in the 1990s to make way for a national park. They are now part of a growing group of conservation refugees worldwide.²⁷ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Batwa of Kahuzi-Biega in South Kivu were also evicted in the 1970s from what would become a World Heritage Site.²⁸ There is a misconception that the only way to conserve forests is to remove all humans. Indigenous peoples have shown that they can manage forests in a sustainable way.²⁹ Deforestation and the escalating destruction of the Amazon has increased displacement risk for the indigenous communities that live within it.³⁰

IMPACTS OF DISPLACEMENT

Many indigenous peoples live in sensitive ecosystems and are heavily reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods and wellbeing. When they are displaced to areas with different environmental conditions, the loss of access to water, food and land can severely disrupt their lives and social order.³¹ Their displacement can also have negative consequences on the

lands they have managed as protectors of biological diversity and traditional forms of work and affect their individual and collective rights.³²

Uprooted indigenous peoples may lose traditional knowledge, the spiritual connection they have with the land and with their languages and cultures.³³ Moving away, temporarily or permanently, means sacrificing a part of their identity. It can result in depression, anxiety, and suicide, as well as other impacts on their physical and psychological health.³⁴

The change in environment is often significant, particularly when indigenous communities leave rural homes for the cities. Indigenous peoples displaced in urban settings face various challenges, including the non-recognition of their cultural identity, exclusion and marginalisation. This has been particularly documented in Asia, but can also be seen in other regions, like Latin America.³⁵ Indigenous peoples displaced to urban centres require dedicated support so they can access economic opportunities and employment. They may also require legal assistance.³⁶

Under certain circumstances urban displacement can represent an opportunity, for instance by allowing indigenous women greater personal autonomy. Women in cities can earn their own money and move beyond the social stratifications of their community of origin.³⁷ In two villages of West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya (India), where indigenous men have been displaced from traditional areas, indigenous women are managing the community economy.³⁸

Indigenous people are not always able to receive the support they need in displacement.³⁹ Because they often find refuge in remote locations, it can be difficult for authorities to provide them with aid. Aid must also be culturally appropriate and sensitive to gender and age. Indigenous people, for instance, often have cultural traditions regarding food and housing.⁴⁰

Achieving durable solutions may also be more difficult for displaced indigenous communities as a result of housing, land and property rights issues. In countries where ancestral lands are not recognised, their property may be unprotected

from land grabbing or exploitation, making it impossible for them to return.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Ensuring the participation of indigenous communities in internal displacement policies is essential. When it comes to climate change, for instance, there is growing awareness that they are not only among the first victims of displacement, but that they are also agents of environmental conservation, adaptation and mitigation.⁴¹ Their understanding of nature's cycles, the environment, livelihoods, and food systems, as well as their adaptation to changing environmental patterns, contributes to the protection of biodiversity and the reduction of displacement risk. Their ancestral knowledge, passed down intergenerationally, can play an important role in prevention, forecasting and response efforts (Box 1).⁴²

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION AND PREPAREDNESS

Ancestral practices have helped these communities prevent disaster displacement for thousands of years. There are several examples from around the world of how a symbiosis with nature and understanding of it have helped them prepare for and prevent disasters. After the 2004 Asian Tsunami, a plethora of research was conducted on indigenous disaster risk reduction (DRR). This is because the Moken communities of Surin island in Thailand, the Simeulueans in Indonesia, and many island populations of Nadaman and Nicobar successfully predicted the tsunami and employed their traditional strategies to effectively survive it.⁴⁶

In Malawi, the high presence of the stemborer moth, mbozi, is an indication of the coming drought in Mpasu and Mphampha communal areas, allowing these communities to take preventive measures to avoid having to move forcibly. In the Msinga villages of South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal communities use tradi-

BOX 1: What is indigenous knowledge?

Indigenous knowledge is a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission. It concerns the relationship of living beings, including humans, with one another and with their environment.⁴³

Indigenous peoples have relied on such knowledge to inform their decisions in managing, among others, climate risks based on their long-term observations of plants, animal behavior and astronomy. Indigenous knowledge includes an understanding of the relationship between society and nature that has been tested over time and proven to be sustainable and successful in limiting the effects of hazards.⁴⁴

Indigenous knowledge originates in the relationship between a community and a unique natural environment, and to a historic continuity in a specific location, developed over several generations.⁴⁵

tional knowledge to predict, prevent, mitigate and cope with drought, including through the cultivation of drought-resistant crops, seasonal migration, and the diversification of the crops they sell.⁴⁷ In the Gandak River Basin of India, community members interpret observations of ant activity, fish behaviour, river levels, water colour, rainfall, wind direction and the orientation of rain-related star constellations to forecast floods.⁴⁸ In the Amazon Delta, farmer-fisherman of mixed indigenous and European ancestry, or caboclos, classify estuarine floodplain landscapes based on the frequency and duration of flooding, and manage land use and vegetation to promote preferred hydrologic flows.⁴⁹

Indigenous knowledge of weather and climate is important for addressing internal displacement via disaster risk reduction and preparedness. Used for generations, this knowledge is passed on orally and is in danger of being lost as a result of displacement.

I CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

Indigenous knowledge and ancestral practices can also help communities adapt to climate change's effects and avoid displacement.

The internal displacement of Alaska Native communities is caused by an unprecedented warming rate, resulting in the combination of decreased Arctic sea ice, thawing permafrost, and repeated extreme weather events. No governance framework in the US currently addresses the essential issues around deciding when a preventive relocation should occur and who should make the decision that a relocation is warranted. Community-based, integrated socio-environmental assessments can create multilevel, multidisciplinary knowledge with local communities leading the data gathering effort. Such assessments can be a critical component of a new governance framework.⁵⁰

Forest-dependent villages in rural parts of Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand and Vietnam have been affected by a reduction in natural resources and agricultural production or by changing weather patterns that influence their migrations. Communities have adopted several adaption measures, such as changing planting times, using new technologies, and modifying the number of livestock they rear. They have also employed new cultivation techniques, modified their crop composition, and employed vaccines and pest- and disease-prevention measures.⁵¹

Local communities in the Omasuyo Province of Bolivia have traditionally relied on the observation of local bioindicators to reduce drought displacement. This provides a type of local agrometeorological service that has produced reliable guidance over centuries for mitigating the impacts of extreme climate events on crops. The validity of bioindicators is monitored by communities who fill in cards every day describing the local weather.⁵²

Peru in April 2018 became the first country in South America to pass a climate change law that acknowledges the voice of indigenous groups in adaptation and mitigation measures.⁵³ Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national representative organisation for Inuit in Canada, released in 2019 the National Inuit Climate Change Strategy, the only comprehensive, climate change strategy focused on the Arctic in Canada.⁵⁴

I DURABLE SOLUTIONS THAT ARE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE

Durable solutions should always be developed with the participation of displaced communities, and especially so in the case of indigenous communities. Governments, as well as international organizations and civil society, should engage in a constant dialogue with indigenous IDPs and host communities, taking into account language barriers in information access and decision-making processes. Indigenous peoples should be able to exercise their rights to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) prior to any development project leading to displacement. FPIC, a specific right recognized in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), allows indigenous peoples to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or their territories.⁵⁵

Many indigenous IDPs want to return to their traditional lands, but this is impossible in many cases. Resettlement can be an alternative if achieved with the full participation and agreement of the communities. Integration into the host community can be difficult if IDPs are expected to do so through assimilation and the loss of their cultural identity. Proposing solutions for specific individuals or households is not advisable if they are not centred within the indigenous community.⁵⁶ Culturally appropriate durable solutions involve dialogue that ensures dignity in local integration and guarantees rights, without resorting to assimilation or the cultural annulment of displaced individuals and peoples.⁵⁷

Safeguarding land tenure is also a key component of the solutions to displacement for indigenous peoples. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) recommends that governments simplify land titling procedures to allow them to gain recognition of their land. It also says governments should take action to prevent their displacement.⁵⁸ In Bolivia, where 21 per cent of the land is collectively owned by indigenous peoples, 36 indigenous territories have begun the procedures necessary to become autonomous governments.⁵⁹

A CALL FOR BETTER DATA

Indigenous peoples represent between 370 and 500 million people worldwide, about 45 per cent of whom are between 15 and 30 years of age.⁶⁰ Distributed across 90 countries, they live in all geographic regions.⁶¹ Nearly 70 million depend on forests for their livelihoods, and many more are farmers, hunter gatherers or pastoralists.

Hundreds of millions of self-identified indigenous peoples live in places exposed to conflict, disasters, climate change and development projects, and they face a high, but vastly underreported risk of future displacement. IDMC's Global Internal Displacement Database (GIDD), the most comprehensive source of information on internal displacement worldwide, only counts 27,000 conflict displacements and 46,000 disaster displacements of indigenous people between 2017 and 2021. There are major data gaps, however, and this is a significant underestimate.

The countries for which IDMC has the most data are the Philippines with 24,000 conflict displacements of indigenous people, Canada with 31,000 disaster displacements, and Colombia with 14,000. According to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), however, 73,200 indigenous people are displaced from their lands in Colombia alone.⁶² In Israel, half of the 200,000 Naqab Bedouins were displaced from their homeland.⁶³

Better data is needed on the prevalence, location, support needed and resources of displaced indigenous peoples to enhance efforts to achieve durable solutions to their displacement. Better data can also illuminate how intersecting factors, including age, disabilities, sex and gender affect their displacement experiences. If accurate information is to become available, their communities and the governments of the countries where they live must see the benefits of correctly monitoring displacements.

Data is also needed on the conditions of displacement, such as why communities are displaced, where they are displaced from, where they go, and ultimately when to consider that their displacement has ended. Addressing these unique situations and developing solutions will require collecting the data and evidence of the impacts, as well as the voices and experiences of the communities.

Disaster displacement is commonly viewed as a temporary phenomenon. It is, however, not uncommon for it to become protracted when return is impossible and measures to relocate or locally integrate IDPs are limited or absent.⁶⁴ This is especially the case for indigenous communities whose connection to their lands may have social, economic and cultural implications when they are forced from their homes. Their risk of displacement will be determined by how historical and current policies and processes have shaped and will influence their exposure and vulnerability to hazards or climate impacts. As a result, actions to address and respond to their displacement requires dialogue, support, and resources at all levels, including the systematic monitoring and collection of data.

Some communities and governments have taken steps to address this issue. In Canada, for example, First Nations indigenous communities are often affected by disasters to a greater extent as a result of their remoteness, lack of critical security infrastructure, resources and capacity.⁶⁵ They may live on reserves or off them. Either way, however, there is a substantial disparity when it comes to emergency preparedness, response and management between First Nations and non-native communities of similar size and circumstances. At a minimum, the government, through Indigenous Services Canada and its partners, systematically monitors and collects data on indigenous peoples living on reserves who are affected by disasters. This includes the triggering event, the location where the displacement occurred, the location of temporary shelter, and the duration of displacement. Data collected for the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020 found that there were 38 disasters in the country in 2019 and that they triggered more than 41,000 displacements. About a third of these disaster displacements took place in First Nations communities living on reserves.⁶⁶

Challenges related to data as well as knowledge gaps limit a collective understanding of the needs of displaced indigenous peoples and the best ways to assist them in overcoming their displacement. They also curb the ability to assess the full impact of displacement and help plan for and mitigate the risk of it. The data that is available today, though incomplete, must be shared to a greater extent and consolidated at a global level to highlight the particular issues discussed in this paper. IDMC is committed to expanding its collection and analysis of data on IDPs from indigenous communities worldwide, and is calling for more investments to help these communities achieve durable solutions to the displacement phenomenon.

Cover photo: Indigenous Warao face humanitarian crisis. Ongoing shortages of medicines and lack of medical professionals are having dire consequences for Warao indigenous communities. January 2020, Delta Orinoco, Venezuela. OCHA/Gema Cortés

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NOTES

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- 1 Indigenous peoples are descendants of the populations who inhabited a territory when its present boundaries were established. They retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, irrespective of their legal status. Tribal peoples distinguish themselves from other sections of the national community through their social, cultural, and economic conditions. For practical reasons, this paper uses the term "indigenous peoples", which is also the most commonly accepted term and the one used in other international instruments (International Labour Office (ILO), [Handbook for ILO Tripartite Constituents, International Labour Standards Department](#), 2013.
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