Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement

The challenges of internal displacement in West Africa
by Jessica Wyndham

West Africa has been heavily affected by displacement. Internal conflicts based on ethnic tensions and rivalries, political instability, disputes over the control of natural resources, natural disasters, poverty, food insecurity and the imperatives of development have all resulted in significant population displacement:

- As a result of the outbreak of civil war in Liberia in 1989 and 14 years of intermittent conflict, most Liberians fled their homes at least once.
- Eleven years of civil war in Sierra Leone led to a third of the population being internally displaced at the height of the conflict.
- Spill-over effects of these conflicts – and also conflict in neighbouring Guinea-Bissau – caused mass displacement in Guinea.
- 1.2 million people were displaced in Côte d'Ivoire by the end of November 2005.
- A rebellion in the southern Casamance province of Senegal has led to major displacement.
- Religious, ethnic and resource-related conflicts in Nigeria are thought to have displaced hundreds of thousands of people.
- Political crisis in Togo in 2005 led to the displacement of thousands.

In the past four years the end of civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia has permitted several million IDPs to return home or resettle elsewhere. However, as many as one million are estimated to still be internally displaced by conflict, mainly in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo. There are significant risks of further large-scale displacement.

The extent and complexity of internal displacement in West Africa provided the impetus for the First Regional Conference on Internal Displacement in West Africa, held in Abuja, Nigeria, from 26 to 28 April 2006. The Government of Nigeria hosted the event, which was organised by the Brookings-Bern Project, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Walter Kälin,[1] UNHCR and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – a regional association of 15 member states with headquarters in Abuja.[2]

In an opening statement Walter Kälin noted that African IDPs are among the world's most vulnerable, at high risk of ongoing armed attack, malnutrition, sexual violence and exploitation, enforced military recruitment, and disease including HIV/AIDS. Following the end of conflict, many struggle to return or to resettle and reintegrate in situations in which infrastructure is lacking and access to basic goods and services, including health and education facilities, remains limited. The internally displaced often face discrimination, and are unable to access food, education and health care. Too often, they lack basic documentation and the ability to exercise their political rights

Participants noted the chronic lack of comprehensive and reliable data. Information on the number and location of the displaced and research on the causes of displacement, the risks and vulnerabilities faced by the displaced and their specific protection needs are vital for devising response strategies. However, in West Africa such data either does not exist or is collected by diverse groups, often with differing priorities, who produce conflicting information.

Participants also drew attention to inadequate support for host communities. In West Africa those displaced often receive shelter and assistance from families and local communities. While this can relieve state and international authorities from having to provide shelter, it can also become a burden when large numbers of people are displaced over extended periods. In the long term there is the potential for exacerbating rather than relieving economic and social tensions and thereby further contributing to the cycle of displacement.

Further challenges that were identified included: the lack of institutional capacity and adequate resources at the national level; a lack of coordination among stakeholders which often led to duplication of efforts; insufficient inclusion of IDPs themselves in decision making; and the need to address root causes and find durable solutions.

Participants called for:

- wider dissemination of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement within the ECOWAS sub-region and formulation of national laws derived from them
- states to guarantee access by civil society partners and international agencies to those requiring protection and assistance
- appointment by each ECOWAS member state of a national focal point with responsibility for internal displacement
- strengthening of ECOWAS's capacity to advocate on issues of internal displacement
- training members of the ECOWAS stand-by force on the Guiding Principles
- building capacity of national institutions and civil society organisations to address internal displacement
- ensuring protection and assistance programme address the needs of host communities
- inter-regional dialogue on internal displacement, particularly among national human rights institutions.

Conference documents are at:
www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/
idp/conferences/contents.htm

1. www.ohchr.org/english/issues/idp
2. www.ecowas.int