

# Lessons on Protracted Internal Displacement from the Herdsmen-Farmers Conflict in Benue State, Nigeria

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Since the 1980s, internal displacement has become a well-recognized humanitarian and development challenge.<sup>1</sup> The number of conflict-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs) grew from 20 to 25 million in the 1990s (Cohen, 2013), and to 62.5 million by the end of 2022 (IDMC 2023), with an additional 8.7 million internally displaced by disaster. In Nigeria, internal conflicts and generalized violence have uprooted more than 3.6 million persons (ibid.). While the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria has gained global attention for onslaughts against civilian communities, the lesser-known Fulani herdsmen-farmers conflict, which has uprooted crop farmers from their ancestral homes, cuts across all six of the nation's geopolitical regions. This essay focuses on IDPs from Benue State in Nigeria's Middle Belt also known as northcentral region or Central Nigeria, and the lessons it provides for responding to IDP populations elsewhere in the world.

## **Definition of internally displaced persons**

The growth in internal displacement created the need for a framework to guide permissible interventions and the responsibilities of stakeholders to affected populations. To that end, in 1992, the United Nations offered an initial definition of IDPs as “persons who have been forced to flee their homes suddenly or unexpectedly in large numbers as a result of armed conflicts, internal strife, systematic violations of Human Rights or natural or man-made disasters; and who are within the territory of their own country.” (Task Force on Internally Displaced Persons 1994, para. 17).

In 1998, the UN issued Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the first international instrument that provides normative guidelines for the protection and assistance of IDPs, which maintained most of the wordings of the 1992 definition of IDPs but eliminated “large numbers”

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<sup>1</sup> Internal displacement refers to forced movement within state borders. By contrast, refugees have crossed internationally recognized state borders.

to de-emphasize population size and to focus on the fact of displacement. The Guiding Principles define IDPs as:

“Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to 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 generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.” (OCHA, 1998, para 2)

Because IDPs have not crossed international borders, “National authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian assistance” to them, while international humanitarian agencies and other appropriate non-state actors also “have the right to offer their services in support” (OCHA 1998, principles 3 and 25). Moreover, governments bear responsibility to create necessary conditions and the means to facilitate the voluntary and dignified return, integration, and resettlement of IDPs (*ibid.*, principle 28). The Guiding Principles highlight the need to protect and assist IDPs based on the *fact* of displacement, and not *the cause* of displacement or the *size* of the displaced population. Additionally, they stipulate that support for IDPs by international organizations should not be construed as unfriendly or as an interference in the internal affairs of states.

### **Instruments on internal displacement**

Although the Guiding Principles are non-binding, they have been endorsed by states and adopted by the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of IDPs in Africa (known as the Kampala Convention) (African Union, 2009). The Convention legally binds all signatory states, including Nigeria. Nigeria’s National Policy on Internal Displacement draws from the Guiding Principles and the Kampala Convention. It adopts the UN definition of IDPs, recognizes the *fact* of displacement as a basis for protection and assistance, and acknowledges international humanitarian agencies as partners (National Policy 2021). This policy commits the Nigerian government to protect and assist IDPs wherever they are located in Nigeria, irrespective of the cause of their displacement or the size of the displaced population size.

### **Internal displacement in Benue State**

Most internal displacement in Benue State is caused by the herdsman-farmers conflict (SEMA, 2022). The Nigerian government and international humanitarian agencies disagree over the size of the IDP population in Benue State. While international agencies report a displacement

figure of 404,622 (IOM 2022), the state government argues that this population exceeds 1.5 million (SEMA 2022). This is not a harmless disagreement. Contrary to the UN Guiding Principles, international humanitarian agencies and government authorities have denied protection and assistance based on disagreements over the cause of displacement and the size of this population.

An international humanitarian organization expressed deep concerns over the situation in the Middle Belt States affected by the herdsman-farmers conflict. It lamented that while the conflict persisted and the humanitarian crisis was growing due to continued attacks and multiple displacements, most international humanitarian organizations had pulled out of the affected Middle Belt states, leaving the population in dire humanitarian crisis: “The crisis has not gone anywhere, but global attention and the humanitarian response has... Most agencies had already left by 2019.” (Doctors Without Borders 2020)

Roughly three-quarters of IDPs worldwide are in situations of protracted displacement (Ferris and Kerwin 2023), due to the inadequate solutions and competing priorities between stakeholders. This population is no exception. They have been displaced for different periods, some for about a decade without being provided sustainable opportunities for livelihoods, resettlement, or return (SEMA 2023). During this time, government authorities and international humanitarian agencies have been more interested in debating the cause of displacement and the size of the IDP population than in contributing to meaningful solutions to this crisis (CLHEI, 2021, 2).

As they toured displacement camps, officials from the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Norwegian Refugee Council, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) insisted they needed to validate data collection methodologies and “harmonize the information on displaced population” in order to develop programs to assist the IDPs (ibid.).

The problem of non-adherence to the Guidelines in Nigeria extends beyond the herdsman-farmers conflict. Empirical studies conducted in 2014 and 2019 of IDPs who fled the Boko Haram insurgency from Borno State in northeast Nigeria to Abuja in the Middle Belt reveal

this displaced population has been deprived of protection and assistance based on the destination of their flight, not the fact of displacement (Olanrewaju, et. al. 2019 and Mirth, 2014).

A dedicated government institution exists for the socio-economic stabilization and rehabilitation of communities and persons affected by Boko Haram in the northeast, with the goal of facilitating their safe and dignified return (Presidential Committee on the Northeast Initiative 2016, Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette 2017, and Campbell, John 2018). By contrast, those displaced by the herdsmen-farmers conflict are excluded from Nigeria's humanitarian response plans (Andzenge and Iorbo 2022.)

To better understand the displacement of farmers in Benue State, the author conducted 14 in-depth interviews between July and November of 2021, with officials from the United Nations (UN) office in Nigeria, UNHCR, Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), Nigerian Federal Lawmakers, and CSOs. The interviews helped to illuminate the causes of this protracted IDP situation. They suggest how factual and operational disagreements between different arms of the government, humanitarian agencies, and other stakeholders, the failure of government to meet its legal responsibilities, and competing state priorities can impede effective responses to internal displacement and contribute to situations of protracted displacement.

Interviewees argued that Nigeria should develop immediate long-term approaches to internal displacement, including addressing root causes. They reported that the federal and state governments had prioritized humanitarian aid over durable solutions, and the federal government was not meeting its responsibility to prevent arbitrary displacement. Furthermore, state actors did not agree on durable solutions, had taken a political approach to this crisis and had not focused on funding solutions. The federal government had not prioritized providing infrastructure to IDP host communities to enable them to support IDPs, and to allow the IDPs to restart their lives. Moreover, they indicated that inter-government conflicts (between federal and state governments) and intra-state political differences impeded permanent solutions to IDPs.

For their part, international donors had reportedly provided most of the support to IDPs, but international humanitarian agencies had not fully engaged this problem because they sought to avoid being caught in the middle of political differences between state actors over assistance to IDPs. In addition, humanitarian agencies had prioritized – consistent with the federal government’s wishes – persons displaced by Boko Haram. Several reported that disagreements between stakeholders over IDP population estimates contributed to the protracted displacement and were used to justify stepping down support to IDPs. Additionally, the federal government resists data collected by humanitarian organizations: government officials think such data casts the government in a harsh light. Finally, government agencies often provide protection and assistance based on how the Nigerian Government defines the root cause of displacement, rather than by the fact of displacement, as required by law.

Other interviewees defended the government, arguing that the Boko Haram insurgency constitutes a more permanent challenge with a clear response plan, while the herdsman-farmers conflict in Benue State consists of seasonal, communal clashes. As a result, they argue, it is more difficult to provide permanent or resettlement assistance to those displaced by the herdsman-farmers conflict.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Fulani herdsman-farmers conflict offers a case study in how insufficient and poorly coordinated responses to violence and displacement can lead to large-scale protracted internal displacement. In this case, the poor relationship between government at the federal and state levels and the baleful federal influence on international humanitarian agencies have significantly contributed to unresolved conflict and inadequate support for affected populations and their communities. The response to this conflict also highlights the gap between policy and practice, caused by lack of synergy between government agencies, NGOs, and international humanitarian and development actors. It evidences how higher-profile crises, such as the predations of Boko Haram against civilians, can lead to a diminished response to a dire situation like the displacement of crop farmers in Benue State.

In addressing such situations (in Benue state and elsewhere) and their causes, it is imperative:

- To depoliticize the conflict and displacement crisis, and to seek diplomatic ways of communicating that the state cannot handle the situation alone.

- To adopt a whole-of-government approach and to mobilize national and international humanitarian agencies to assist displaced persons and affected communities, and not to let differences among stakeholders result in withholding support for IDPs.
- For humanitarian agencies to find ways to support vulnerable populations without becoming enmeshed in intra-government politics.
- For all stakeholders to work collaboratively, notwithstanding disagreement over the cause of displacement, disputes over its size, or the respective roles of stakeholders in responding to it.
- For all stakeholders to realize that one person displaced is one too many and therefore, population size should not be a determining factor for protection and assistance of IDPs.
- To prioritize responsibility sharing, not responsibility shifting or shunning.

In May 2023, Nigeria ushered in a new government and what may become an era of better relations between the federal and state governments. However, it is too early to assess if the new administration will diminish the herdsmen-farmers conflict and create appropriate permanent solutions for the displaced. Dr. Betta Edu, the new head of the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, visited the “unofficial” Ichwa IDP camp in Benue State on November 9, 2023. She decried its dangerous and deplorable conditions and called for a mobilization of humanitarian and development actors to Benue, stating that the state could not address this crisis on its own.<sup>2</sup>

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