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### Far Away but Surprisingly Similar: The Invisible Worlds of Internally Displaced Persons Across the Globe

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## Abstract

Over 50 million people across the globe, or more than 50% of all forced displacements, are internally displaced. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) encounter precarious living conditions but remain largely invisible due to the absence of a coherent international framework. This study compares IDPs' experiences across three geographical settings (Ethiopia, Mongolia and the Philippines) and thereby seeks to contribute to the international debate on IDPs.

Ongoing and completed work by the researchers is presented and compared to gain insights into causes of displacement, issues at destination and governance of IDPs across these three unique settings. We move beyond the assumption that constricts the concept of IDPs as people who flee conflict. Causes of displacement appear to be context-specific; although, some overarching reasons are observed: (intercommunal) conflicts, human right violations and disasters. Despite peculiar cultural, social and economic backgrounds, risks faced at the destinations are surprisingly similar. They lack access to appropriate housing, jobs, food and common public resources, while also encountering difficulties connecting to local social networks. IDPs generally settle in marginalised areas of big cities where they need to spend more time and money on daily commutes for basic services. Our comparative analysis shows that none of the investigated countries has a holistic approach to IDPs which results in ad hoc governance, characterised by reactive and partial responses focused on assistance rather than protection, empowerment and coping capacities. We conclude that there is an urgent need for an increase in research efforts on IDPs and to create a robust, international framework to enhance the recognition, protection and assistance of IDPs across the globe.

### Keywords:

Internally displaced persons, Internal migration, Vulnerability, Marginalisation, Recognition.

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## Introduction

Armed conflict, violence, human rights violations, natural and man-made disasters are drivers that lead to forced displacement and are seeing an alarming, global growth (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2019). Most academic research and policies on human mobility involve cross-border displacement. However, over 50% of forced displacements do not involve any border crossing and are thus, considered internal displacement. Labelled as internally displaced persons (IDPs), more than half of the total number of displaced people are underrepresented in the international discourse (Global Report on Internal Displacement [GRID], 2020).

Yet with a total of more than 50 million IDPs globally, there is little attention on the experiences and narratives of IDPs. This is disturbing as they are often confronted with precarious living conditions (Orchard, 2016). IDPs are vulnerable since they face issues of landlessness, joblessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, loss of resources, loss of social networks, and a lack of access to quality education. Some people labelled as 'internal migrants' face similar problems, yet these issues are not recognised since they do not belong to the group of internationally displaced (Terbish et al, 2020). This reveals the difficulties and impact of the IDP label since there is no global consensus on who is considered as an IDP. The commonly used definition of IDPs is based on the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal displacement (1998). According to this definition, people displaced by conflict, violence, and disaster are often immediately considered as IDPs, perceived as an offshoot of the "refugee" narrative (Cohen & Bradley, 2010). Consequently, people displaced by other causes, such as forced government resettlement, development and infrastructure projects, and slow-onset disasters, generally remain invisible or ignored by international humanitarian actors (Regasa and Lietaert, forthcoming 2021).

This absence of a robust, clear framework complicates and multiplies the existing vulnerabilities of those IDPs (Olanrewaju, Olanrewaju, Alabi, & Amoo, 2019). Attributed to the steady rise in the number of IDPs over the years and ever intensifying vulnerabilities, there is a high need for academia to investigate into the experiences of IDPs as well as to add diversity by adopting more localised perspectives (Adeola, 2020).

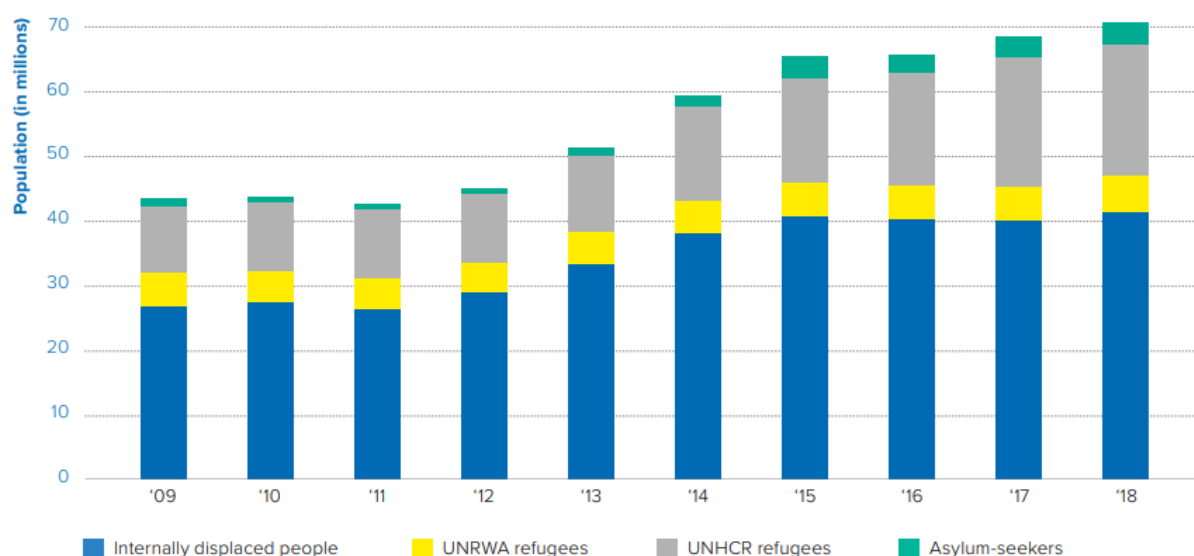


Figure 1. Global Forced Displacements (UNHCR, 2019)

Regardless of this being a global phenomenon, internal displacement is unevenly distributed with developing countries being the most affected. Most of the IDPs are in a few countries characterised by poverty and a low standard of living. At the end of 2018, Ethiopia and Philippines were the countries with the largest new displacements due to conflict and disaster, respectively (IDMC, 2019).

This working paper presents the insights brought forward during an UNU-CRIS webinar, focussed on comparative research findings of situations and experiences of IDPs across three different contexts: Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia) and Davao City (the Philippines).

The input on the Ethiopian context was brought by Dereje Regasa relying on data collected in the frame of a PhD research project focusing on the lived experiences and agency strategies of urban IDPs in Ethiopia. Dereje's research explores the experiences of people who flee ethnic violence and are settled by the government in Addis Ababa and surrounding suburbs. The research project tries to discover the consequences of the displacement on the IDPs; the socio-spatial and institutional context in which IDPs find themselves after displacement. It includes how IDPs make a living in a 'new' urban setting; how they relate to each other and to the host communities, and how they access resources for their adaptation and integration into urban life.

Insights in the Mongolian context were presented by Bayartsetseg Terbish. Her insights rely on data from her PhD study on the lived citizenship of internal migrants in the city of Ulaanbaatar's largely isolated areas, where newly arrived internal migrants settle in traditional felt tents known as *gers*. *Ger* is a traditional dwelling used by Mongolian people throughout history and is one of the oldest types of tenancy in the world (Terbish & Rawsthorne, 2016). This research aims at understanding the internal migrants' shift in their sense of belonging, coping strategies and aspirations - by combining a range of urban ethnographic methods like qualitative content analysis, structured observations and informal interviews, illustrated by participatory spatial mapping practices.

Lastly, Dan Orendain presented the case of IDPs in Davao city, based on his Master thesis about the integration of urban IDPs in Davao. This research approached urban internal displacement within the frame of sustainable and inclusive cities by studying the marginalisation and exclusion of urban IDPs and resulted in ten key points for integrating them in cities.

By presenting and comparing the findings of the ongoing and completed work by these researchers in these three unique settings, this paper draws attention to the complex and challenging living situations of IDPs. More so, by comparing these geographical settings and challenges in conceptualisation, the working paper seeks to contribute to the international debate on IDPs.

As such, these three studies aim to go beyond the existing 'taken-for-granted' assumption that constricts the concept of IDPs as people who flee conflict. In revising and challenging the existing understanding, the researchers come up with the on-ground realities of three different contexts about the phenomenon of internal displacement, its diverse causes and the way governments treat IDPs in the absence of *de jure* frameworks. These three contexts emphasise that the IDPs forced or obliged to leave their homes due to a variety of factors including not only armed conflict but also violence, human rights violations, natural and man-made disasters - sometimes stay within the country's borders in contrast to asylum seekers and refugees. In Mongolia, even though people move to urban areas due to similar

causes for displacements in Philippines and Ethiopia, the concept of IDPs does not exist. Instead, the situation is considered as internal migration. Considering this inconsistency in labelling IDPs and their varying circumstances, the mainstream UN definition needs re-conceptualisation and re-thinking to build momentum around a coherent international framework that better understands internal displacement.

## Causes of Internal Displacement

Within these hotspot regions, the main causes of displacement vary. In Sub-Saharan Africa, displacement is mainly caused by persisting and emerging conflicts, while in Asia (mainly South- and East Asia) disasters are the main trigger.

Ethiopia is a country particularly sensitive to migration due to interrelated pathologies from the past and present. Due to its cruel and violent history, millions of Ethiopian households have been migrating from rural areas to escape poverty. This history includes persisting communal conflicts and forced resettlements by three successive governments (Carter & Rohwerder, 2016; Maru, 2017). The latter included brutally pushing people from minority groups into trucks and moving them to faraway regions. The aim of the authoritarian governments was to disrupt existing power systems. Consequently, Ethiopia is now the largest home for refugees in Africa. Additionally, it is also the largest destination country for refugees who try to escape war and famine in their native countries. Even though Ethiopia itself is in a state of political turmoil, it is a better option for many people in the Horn of Africa (Hobbs, 2016). This complex situation is the reason why Ethiopia hosted the largest global IDP population of 3 million people in 2018 - of which 2.2 million were displaced due to conflict and violence.

The Philippines on the other hand, is an archipelago prone to extreme weather events, climate change, sea level rise and water scarcity, among others. Therefore, most displacements in this country are due to natural disasters. For instance, Typhoon Haiyan displaced 4 million Filipinos in 2013, which is only one example of at least twenty tropical typhoons hitting the Philippines annually (Dela Cruz, 2016). Apart from these disaster-induced displacements, conflict remains a major cause. The 2017 Marawi Siege, a five-month long conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) forces and terrorists connected to the Islamic State, led to 98% of the city's population being displaced. Even three years later, thousands of people remain displaced. Consequently, the Philippines has had to cope with intertwined disaster and conflict-related displacements.

When looking into Mongolia, the majority of internal migration occurs from rural to urban regions, with the main destination being the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. This migration has consistently increased in the past two decades, with an average of 103.000 Mongolians being involved in some form of migration since 2000. Owing to the influx of human movement, Ulaanbaatar witnesses a population increase of 21 000 people per year (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020). What induces this rising internal migration is neither persisting conflicts nor consecutive natural disasters like the two, previously highlighted countries. Instead, it is an interplay of push and pull factors fuelled by rising inequalities and a lack of regional development throughout Mongolia. The main push factors include limited social and economic resources and equitable access to basic services in rural areas. This is furthered by a lack of workspace and room for development, alongside the possible natural disasters that may occur during winter and early spring. In contrast, a promise of employment and educational opportunities, better access to public



resources and a concentration of socio-economic, political and cultural services have been pulling people towards the capital city. Thus, the primary overall drivers are, unequal regional development and the opportunities offered by the rural and urban city. A combination of these factors creates the situation to move to the city, in an aspiration for better alternatives.

While the causes of displacement are context-specific, some overarching dominant reasons can be observed. The majority of people displaced in these three countries are poor, rural inhabitants prone to poverty. The main causes for displacement within these settings are conflicts (in Ethiopia and the Philippines), human right violations (forced resettlements by the Ethiopian governments) and disasters (mainly in the Philippines and Mongolia).

## Issues at Destination

The researchers also reveal the specific issues that arise for IDPs and internal migrants at their destinations.

In Mongolia - due to rapid urbanisation spurred by the previously discussed push and pull factors combined with forces of globalisation - ger districts on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar have expanded. These are not identical to slums, as locals would claim, but a delicate balance between nomadic culture and urbanisation (Choi, 2014). In the case of Ulaanbaatar, nearly 60% of inhabitants live in these ger districts spreading throughout the capital. Ger districts face, like many other underdeveloped areas worldwide, a range of issues like environmental pollution, pressures of modern infrastructure, healthcare challenges and other social issues (Terbish & Rawsthorne, 2018). On top of that, internal migrants arriving in Ulaanbaatar encounter issues faced by IDPs elsewhere - lack of land, jobs, access to health and education. They feel marginalised, which causes cultural impairment and low self-esteem. This in turn, leads to difficulties in connecting to new social networks (Terbish et al, 2020).



**Figure 2.** Ger district in Ulaanbaatar (Source: The Asia Foundation, 2019)



Despite the specificity of the *ger* districts in Mongolia, similar situations have been observed for IDPs in the Philippines. In Davao City, IDPs face an enormous housing backlog, due to a lack of available land and financing. Even when social housing is available, IDPs are not a priority. If they find a place to live, it is often far from the city centre which reduces their chances for a proper livelihood. Due to language and cultural barriers, they cannot find jobs and have to be self-reliant. Relocation and resettlement threaten their livelihoods in many ways.

Similar trends have been observed in Ethiopia, despite some differences. Internal displacement is becoming an urban phenomenon with 22% of nearly three million IDPs living in urban and peri-urban areas - with only 13.2% of Ethiopia's overall population living these regions (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2019). While most of the IDPs are settled by the Ethiopian government in a segregated IDP site, some live beyond this settlement site and merge into the urban poor to avoid confinement and marginalisation. IDPs arrive in already impoverished urban settings and share meagre resources with the urban poor. Population density, crowded settlements and informality related to lack of resources impair the capacity of urban areas to provide adequate social services that may address the needs of huge urban poor and IDPs. As a result, IDPs also end up in marginal housing situations combined with a lack of access to jobs, education and other resources and services. They are stigmatised by the population of host destinations, which makes connecting to social networks extremely difficult. A mismatch between the skills of IDPs and available employment opportunities in urban areas exacerbates their poverty and puts them in a perilous situation.

In the three investigated contexts, IDPs clearly face numerous issues when arriving at host destinations. Interestingly, it is observed that risks faced at the destinations have minute differences, despite their peculiar cultural, social and economic backgrounds. Finding appropriate housing is a considerable issue in all contexts, akin to finding a job, lack of access to educational institutions for their children and accessing sufficient food supply. The IDPs lack access to common public resources and have difficulties connecting to local social networks. They generally settle in marginalised areas of big cities, which results in more time and money being spent on daily commute to access basic services within the city. Explicit, subjective experiences and existing nuances should be considered, but recognising overall trends is important to enable a general understanding of issues faced by IDPs along the continuum. Due to a lack of strong legal frameworks, IDPs are in all cases barely recognised, and are thus given only basic emergency assistance and aid.

## Governance of IDPs

After comparing the causes of displacement and the livelihoods of IDPs at their destination, light is shed on the governance of IDPs within the three geographical settings. In each case, it is important to look at the role of the government for people forced to leave their original residence. This will give an opportunity to evaluate whether a coherent global strategy towards IDPs exists.

As for the Philippines, the country lacks specific policies or guidelines governing IDPs. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), addressing internal displacement is a national duty and responsibilities are shifted towards local

government units by law<sup>1</sup> (2010). IDPs then, fall under the responsibility of local governments that must deal with disasters and emergencies. Therefore, there are no specific strategies to protect IDPs because internal displacement is treated at par with other humanitarian emergencies and crises response. This lack of specific aid for IDPs increases their vulnerability in the cities of the Philippines. It is important to note that the Philippines made significant progress on issues like the social protection of indigenous groups, but in terms of empowering these groups after displacement, their strategies lack long-term and durable impacts.

The same goes for Ethiopia. The country has no specific framework or institution concerned with the protection of IDPs, despite hosting their largest global population. The main issue is that Ethiopia perceives the many IDPs as a temporal shock, based on which they assume that assistance for their return will solve the issue. However, in reality, most of the returned people will be displaced again. Specific for Ethiopia is also the previously explained forced, generational displacement of minorities over long distances by three successive governments. These forcibly resettled people are not even recognised as IDPs. In general, IDPs try to start over in Ethiopian regions that are (perceived to be) relatively well-off but end up in marginal areas where they lead tough lives.



**Figure 3:** Displaced people on the move (Kurokawa, 2019)

In Mongolia, the definition of IDP is not in use despite the increased migration from rural to urban areas. The city's municipality problematizes the expansion of *ger* areas in Ulaanbaatar as it raises numerous environmental and socio-economic questions (Lkhamsuren et al, 2012). Response actions have been driven by top-down and deficit-oriented policies including the construction of apartments so the number of inhabitants in *ger* areas - including internal migrants - reduces. The municipality even tried to halt the migration influx by issuing a decree (Ulaanbaatar City Mayor's Office, 2017). Despite these actions, the flow remains consistent and internal migrants face substantial vulnerabilities and risks in the city's suburbs. Social workers respond by implementing government welfare policies, but still lack explicit knowledge and methods to make a substantial

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<sup>1</sup> The Philippines' Local Government Code of 1991 empowers cities and municipalities to develop their own strategies in developing their territories. Thus, managing disasters, conflict, and human mobility issues often fall within their jurisdiction.

difference for the livelihoods of internal migrants. Overall, there is an intention by the government to help internal migrants which in itself is quite valuable, but this intention can be more useful when the mismatch between government policies and actual needs of migrants is eliminated.

None of the investigated countries have a holistic approach to IDPs or related laws. Ad hoc governance systems conceive internal migration as temporary. Their responses are mainly reactive and partial, which means that the focus is on assistance rather than protection, empowerment, and the enhancement of coping capacities. There is an urgent need for long-term, reverberating, and durable solutions to improve the life of IDPs.

## Conclusion

By investigating IDPs within three dissimilar-yet-comparable settings, the researchers found that Mongolia, Ethiopia and the Philippines face increasing forced migration and related displacements. In all three contexts, the ones staying within the country's borders aka the IDPs, face several risks related to property, mobility, access to social services and life in general, that are hardly recognised by their governments. None of the countries have a specific IDP framework. In Mongolia the term IDP is not in use. Internal displacement is generally perceived as temporary, and responses are thus reactive and fragmentary. Countries remain stuck in their social work traditions and practices, because of which an enquiry into measures that would actually be meaningful for the IDPs is often forgotten. In all three countries, IDPs or internal migrants face negative prejudices with all their consequences.

Overall, we can conclude that IDPs often remain ignored, underrepresented or even invisible at both, global and local scales. The general lack of dedicated research and knowledge on IDPs and their post-displacement, context-dependent situations has led to misconceptions about their vulnerabilities. Data and information on IDPs remain unreliable and incomplete - while a clear upward trend in the number of displacements is observed. As a consequence of this knowledge gap, there is a lack of well-founded policies and frameworks to protect and assist the IDPs.

In this new decade, it is important to cultivate more knowledge on IDPs to provide relevant data and information which can consequently drive informed policies and long-lasting, durable solutions. This research should include not only numbers and figures, but also qualitative research addressing the lived experiences of IDPs pre and post displacement to enhance their coping capacity and empowerment opportunities. It is important to recognise the drivers of displacement so governments can prepare for sudden shocks that may magnify these factors and further increase the already unmanageable flow of IDPs. Increasing risks and unequal exposure to climate change are predicted to induce more displacements in the near future (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2019). Issues regarding IDPs are a national responsibility but should also feature in the international agenda. This would facilitate a holistic approach that takes the existing and predicted global problems influencing internal displacement into account. In order to include the millions of IDPs across the globe, it is essential that research efforts on the narrative of forced displacement focus on internal displacement too.

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