



Policy brief #4

Social integration of internally displaced people in urban settings

Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society (VVI)
and Groupe Jérémie.

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Colophon

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Policy brief #4

Social integration of internally displaced people in urban settings

Executive summary

People who flee from protracted conflict sometimes have to stay in displacement for years on end. The longer displacement takes, the more important it is to become socially integrated in the host community; not only because it enables people to regain their lives and to achieve some empowerment, but also because social integration reduces the risk of tensions between displaced people and members of the host community. This policy brief describes different ways in which internally displaced people (IDPs) integrate in the social settings of an urban host community in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Paradoxically, social connections that existed prior to displacement, i.e. connections with relatives and other people with a shared origin, are the connections that are most pertinent in building up one's social capital in the new place of residence. Once IDPs feel well connected in the new setting, they are also able to take more actively part in the social life of the city and will feel more accepted.

Introduction

When people flee in search of security, they need to adapt to their new environment. Divides can be big: people from rural areas might have to get used to an urban environment; people from a certain ethnic group might have to get used to the rules and norms that are prevalent among another ethnic group; their language might not match the language of the new locality. If displacement is only temporary, adjustments might not be urgent. However, in situations of protracted conflict with high levels of population mobility such as in the east of the DRC, refugees and internally displaced people might need to seek further social integration in their new environment, as part of their survival strategy. While some people might be well prepared to do so, and might plan to settle durably in their new environment, others remain hopeful to return as soon as the security situation allows them to. Such longing might refrain them from taking the necessary steps towards successful assimilation.

Principles 28-30 of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement pay particular attention to return, resettlement, and reintegration (UNOCHA 2004). They have been elaborated further in the IASC Framework on durable solutions for internally displaced persons (IASC 2010). In this brief we look especially at what happens when people try to build their lives anew in displacement. How can the process of social integration be best promoted to reduce conflict potential? Since social integration is a two-way process, attention is paid to both the IDPs and the members of the host communities that have to get used to newcomers in their environment. Social integration in the new context is important because it provides a person with a feeling of belonging, and of being at home. The research on which this brief is based showed that the respondents who were most outspoken about 'not feeling at home' in displacement, were often also the ones that felt stigmatized and discriminated. When the process of integration unfolded, such feelings would usually reduce.

This document elaborates on some of the challenges concerning social integration faced by urban IDPs in Bukavu, a city located in the east of the DRC. Our research has shown that urban IDPs are often more vulnerable and therefore have particular needs that members of the host community do not have (Jacobs & Kyamusugulwa, 2017). Without claiming generalizations, we are convinced that many of the findings are relevant to understand the situation of urban IDPs in other countries across the globe. Vignettes provided below are drawn from interviews with respondents in Bukavu.

The rationale of social integration

One might be inclined to think that IDPs come to a city only temporarily and therefore do not really need to integrate. Yet, in contexts of protracted conflict, the urban flight of IDPs is often not simply a temporary, short-term solution. Many IDPs stay in the city for years and without integration the potential for conflict with members of the hosting community or with other IDPs is ever-present. This urges one to think about ways in which the process of integration can be promoted. The following quote by an urban IDP about experiences with residents is illustrative in underlining the importance of integration to avoid further tensions:

“Sometimes, some of them manifest discrimination. They say that we, the people from N., are too many and that we’re permitting ourselves too much. They say they will send us back. It is especially at the public services, for instance if we fetch water or want to wash our clothes. And if we want to sell things on the small markets along the route, the residents do not want to make any space for us. They tell us that we have our own place in N. but not here. In cases like this, if you are not really patient, this can result in violent conflict and they can throw away your things. Such situations can be very volatile”

Different ways to integrate: family, connections with origin, churches, ‘mutualities’

As for access to housing and employment,¹ family ties and connections with people of the same origin are essential for social integration too. Such relations are instrumental in helping people to find their way around in the city.

Clearly, employment in itself can also function as a way to become better integrated, as new contacts are made through interactions at work.

“My communication with the population became better when I started to better master the Swahili language, thanks to the exercises I did with my ‘brothers’ who also engaged in petty commerce.”

Churches are another source of social integration. Some people automatically seek adherence to the same church as they used to attend in their home community. But since churches generally have a more inclusive character than many other networks that people can draw on, it frequently happens that people attend a different church in Bukavu than the one in their home community. Churches are relatively neutral institutions that are accessible to all. Churches sometimes provide limited (but some) material support to newcomers in the city, or enable access to other services such as schools.

¹ See policy briefs # 2 and # 3.

“In Bukavu, I attend the same church [...], just like in K., and my wife is a chorister in this church during Sunday worship, where she goes with my two children. It is thanks to her attendance that my children were enrolled at the primary and secondary school of the church.”

Churches play even a bigger role in providing moral support and consolation that can help people to embrace their new life. Churches with a longer history, such as the Catholic Church or some of the Protestant churches, have their own Justice and Peace Commissions that can help people in case of conflicts or when facing injustice. Our respondents perceive mediation or socio-legal assistance that is available for adherents of these churches as easily accessible and very effective. In addition, churches provide people with a sense of belonging in their new place of residence. This facilitates social integration. Through new contacts outside the social network of family and people from ‘home’, displaced may obtain access to new livelihood opportunities.

An alternative way to become integrated into social life in Bukavu is through the so-called ‘mutualities’. In these self-regulated solidarity groups, members belong to the same ethnic group or come from the same territory. They meet every now and then, and share information about job opportunities, among others.

“I found this work through my father, who had contacted the group of craftsmen of my tribe. These craftsmen knew each other from our mutuality.”

Such associations may represent important entry points to become connected in the city to people with a shared origin. It is an outspoken aim of the meetings to promote the cultural heritage of a group in displacement, as there is a fear that in the urban setting of displacement the heritage might otherwise get lost. In a city in which ethnicity and origins are determinant in obtaining access to labour, housing, or other opportunities, connections with the ethnic group can be key. Apart from connecting to one’s heritage, or from receiving information about the situation in the community of origin, possible labour opportunities constitute an important reason for people to attend meetings organised by the ‘mutualities’. In this way, such groups facilitate social integration. At the same time, however, such associations reinforce and perpetuate the ethnic dynamics and maintain the barriers that exist for people not belonging to a particular group. Another factor to point out is that some of these ‘mutualities’ (but not all) are only accessible for men and not for women. Hence, female-headed households are excluded from the possibilities provided by these solidarity groups.

Markers of integration

While most IDPs plan to stay in the new city for a long time, many urban IDPs continue to long for their place of origin. This longing is not only fed by a desire to be back home, but also by disappointment about the everyday struggles of life in the city, that not all people are easily able to cope with. In Bukavu, younger IDPs are more inclined to remain in the city than older people. For youngsters, the city represents a new world with more opportunities than the rural area has to offer. They are more likely to consider themselves as inhabitants of the city.

“I now consider myself a resident of Bukavu because here, just like in any environment, as long as you do not have your own house you are considered a stranger; because at any moment you can still change your environment and settle elsewhere.”

People who plan to stay for a longer period in the city are also more prepared to take steps to further integrate. The purchase of a house can be seen as the ultimate step towards integration that turns ‘somebody from the mountains’ into a resident. This step is closely related to one’s socio-economic position.

“Pejoratives of all kinds are used, but as soon as a displaced person becomes economically very strong, everything changes and people forget that he came from somewhere.”

Obviously, the majority of IDP is not able to take this step for lack of financial means, even when aspirations exist. They therefore have to find other ways to integrate and to feel at home.

Employment is clearly another marker of integration. Whereas some people would take steps to become active in the urban labour market, others still draw on resources coming from their home communities and regularly go home to collect charcoal or agricultural products. In so doing, they maintain strong ties with home and are less oriented towards integration in the city.

When it comes to integration, people who belong to the same ethnic group as the major ethnic group in Bukavu might face less difficulties since their linguistic connection enables them to be seen as somebody that has a certain degree of proximity. Language skills have an impact on the range of opportunities people get, but also on the way they are perceived by others. People who master French, Swahili, or the language of the majority are more easily accepted.

Relations between newcomers and residents

“We, displaced, undergo all kinds of discrimination every day and under different circumstances. We are held accountable for all the evils in this city as if before our arrival the difficulties did not exist and that everything was rosy.”

“The culture of newcomers is not the same as ours.”

The continuous influx of IDPs to the city clearly has an impact on longer-term residents and their perception of security. The latter group often ventilated complaints that newcomers would fail to report themselves to the relevant authorities and that they were the source of banditry in the city. Significantly, our survey findings show that longer-term residents feel more insecure in the city than the IDPs. This can be partly explained by the traumatic experiences IDPs faced before and during displacement: experiences of the past allow them to appreciate the relative level of security in the new context. A sense of security that has to be understood within the fragile state context of the DRC where police presence is limited in some of Bukavu’s neighbourhoods after dark. Residents indicate feeling insecure because they do not know all the faces of people they meet in the streets. As a result, IDPs are often the first ones to be suspected by residents in case of theft and banditry. When IDPs experience such suspicions or accusations, they often do not know whom to address to prove

their innocence and they decide to withdraw instead of speaking out. In fear of becoming trapped in such situations some withdraw from social life, do not register themselves as new inhabitant to the local chief, and stay indoors most of the time. This behaviour reinforces the cycle of suspicions and mutual distrust that hinders social integration.

Conclusion and recommendations

“In the street I met other people who spoke my dialect and through them I was able to become part of the women’s association of transporters.”

The first days or weeks in displacement, most displaced in Bukavu rely primarily on relatives or people from their place of origin (and to a lesser extent on churches or solidarity networks) to meet their basic needs. But these networks of support get easily overstretched, urging IDPs to start making their own living, to regain stability and security in their lives, and to find their own way to integrate in the city. What appears to be key here, is the social capital that people are able to draw on. IDPs without such connections are more inclined to refrain from taking active part in the social life of the city and stay at home in fear of getting into troubles, sometimes also because of the stigmatisation that exists towards IDPs. Once they get better connected, for instance through participation in church, it also becomes easier for them to find proper housing, work, and access to basic services. A sustainable way of supporting IDPs would be to help them strengthen their social networks, also because life in displacement can last for many years.

Stronger social networks lead to empowered and more autonomous IDPs that are better able to make their own living without long-term external support. Significantly, such networks are often based on affiliations with people that originate from the same communities. This might sound paradoxical at first sight: relating to people that are connected to your place of origin to be able to better integrate in your place of refuge. It is nevertheless the strategy that is most commonly employed by people and the power of it should therefore not be underestimated. This raises the question, however, whether particular attention would be needed for people who come from smaller minority groups that cannot relate so easily to others that might have some influence.

Looking at the ways in which IDPs and residents talk about each other, it is clear that there is quite some stereotyping that is potentially harmful; because it could hurt somebody’s feelings, and because it could create further conflicts. It is therefore recommendable for policy makers and practitioners to take these relations into consideration and to adequately address concerns among both groups of people. Promoting dialogue is important for such purpose.

Our research shows that older people are generally more inclined to return to their place of origin in comparison to younger people. This makes the question of social integration more pertinent for younger people. Such voices for an alternative approach can be heard in Bukavu as well : taking efforts to make life in the rural areas more attractive for younger people who have gotten used to city life and the services and opportunities available in the city. This means that certain services (such as education, electricity, water and sanitation, health care, mobile phone networks) need to become more commonly available in the rural areas and that job opportunities should exist. Even if young people struggle to make ends meet in the urban setting of Bukavu, they often still prefer to stay because of the lack of certain conditions in the rural areas.

Further reading

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