

Contribution to the upcoming report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing on COVID-19 and housing

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, June 2020

COVID-19 has quickly evolved from a global health emergency to become “a [housing emergency](#)”. For internally displaced people (IDPs), who already face difficulty in accessing adequate housing and essential services, the impacts of the pandemic [are expected to be significant](#). Although it is too early to establish clear correlations between the impact of COVID-19 on housing for IDPs, IDMC considers that asset loss from displacement, limited access to steady income, the threat of discrimination and lack of protection afforded to IDPs combine to increase the risk of evictions and difficulty in accessing adequate housing.

Poor housing conditions can [increase IDPs’ vulnerability to Covid-19](#). Lack of space and privacy can also exacerbate the psychological impacts of the pandemic and lead to higher levels of anxiety. Among the [basic protective measures](#) against the new coronavirus, the World Health Organization advises everyone to wash their hands frequently using soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub, maintain social distancing and isolate if sick. [None of these are easy to achieve](#) in overcrowded displacement settlements [where IDPs often lack access to water and sanitation](#). This is especially true in under-serviced displacement camps, sharing limited space with host communities, in emergency shelters or informal settlements.

Loss of income due to Covid-19 may also expose IDPs living in rented accommodation to a heightened risk of eviction. Rent is one of the most significant costs for IDPs, and many already struggled to [keep up their rent payments before the pandemic](#).

IDMC is currently [collating and triangulating information](#) from our many existing data partners on the ground to contribute to a better understanding of this evolving crisis. The insights below draw from current data related to the pandemic and our recent work on housing in relation to urban internal displacement.

Prohibitions on evictions

The UN’s Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement recognise that forced evictions “share many consequences similar to those resulting from arbitrary displacement” as defined in the Guiding Principles. They also highlight the fact that forced evictions violate the right to housing. The guidelines, together with the right to adequate housing, constitute a strong normative framework to guide policy and practice on urban housing and neighbourhood regeneration that prevent displacement and reduce its impacts.¹

Despite this, IDMC regularly record instances of evictions-related internal displacement, including in the context of COVID-19. Our monitoring has identified numerous caseloads of

forced evictions due to fear of COVID-19 infection. These include: doctors have reportedly been evicted from their homes due to fears they may spread COVID -19 into their communities²; similar cases have been reported in the United States in which nurses have been evicted from their places of residence³; in Guangzhou, we have recorded a caseload of displaced Africans being evicted from their place of residence after local authorities announced that five Nigerians had tested positive for COVID-19. Within days, a campaign was launched to test and track all Africans in the port city⁴.

These instances of evictions already occur, regardless of a pandemic, against the backdrop of a global urban phenomenon in which urban space increasingly reflects social and economic inequalities. For example, in Nairobi, one of the fastest growing cities in the world, demographic growth, international migrants and refugees, IDPs and internal economic migrants have all contributed to shaping the urban landscape and demography.⁵ Ethnic, political and economic disputes over land and property have also played a part in the Kenyan capital's development for decades and over time, these dynamics have created a city divided by income and ethnicity.⁶ As a result, half of the population of Nairobi is concentrated in just two per cent of the metropolitan area and evictions are a regular instrument in maintaining and accelerating that trend.⁷

IDPs are facing similar eviction challenges in Mogadishu, Somalia, where evictions still represent a significant proportion of the new and secondary displacements. More than 578,000 new displacements associated with conflict and violence were recorded in Somalia in 2018, the highest figure in a decade and the result of three main factors.⁸ Evictions from urban centres, mainly of IDPs, accounted for about 44 per cent of the figure. Driven by a lack of adequate housing and informal tenure agreements in increasingly crowded areas, the number of evictions reached a record high. In 2019, more than 264,000 IDPs were evicted, many of who suffering onward displacement, i.e. having already fled from conflict or disaster previously.⁹

Returning IDPs can also face difficulties and the risk of further evictions. In Nigeria, in 2018, at least 86,000 people returned to partially damaged housing seeking alternative shelter in often precarious conditions, facing the threat of eviction.¹⁰

In Kabul, Afghanistan, people who flee to urban areas to escape conflict face similar challenges to those displaced by disasters. IDPs in the Afghan capital of Kabul struggle to secure tenure over adequate housing, which puts them at constant risk of secondary displacement, mainly in the form of evictions.¹¹ Kabul's IDPs tend to have significant protection concerns and often live in sub-standard housing in marginalised areas of the city. Policy initiatives such a 2006 white paper on tenure security and community-based upgrading and a 2013 policy on the upgrading of informal settlements point in the right direction, but adoption and implementation remain a challenge.

Protecting residents in informal settlements

National health strategies to contain the spread of COVID-19 focus on testing, detecting, isolation and hospitalisation. These steps are serious challenges for internally displaced persons, especially those who have settled in informal settlements where the reach of public health services is limited or non-existent. The ambiguous legal status of many IDPs is considered an additional risk in engaging in formal systems. Increasing demands to reveal personal information for tracking and monitoring the spread of the virus, are heightening the risk for displaced persons using anonymity for personal security. IOM recently commented that trust was crucial to ensure people can report their symptoms and receive healthcare without fear of arrest or deportation¹².

Recent internal displacement in Lagos, Nigeria, and the lack of protection thereof, provides a case in point. Although we have yet to verify a total figure, it is estimated that the number of IDPs currently exceeds 100,000¹³. Existing structural inequalities and discriminatory policies make them susceptible to further vulnerabilities and human rights violations, including deportation back to their regions of origin.¹⁴

Self-isolation recommendations to contain the spread of the virus fail to consider the variety of housing¹⁵ arrangements many IDPs are forced to negotiate. These may include sharing spaces with multiple families, necessary movement between homes and sharing sleeping spaces in shifts. The care for children is often shared, and rests with older family members while adults pursue livelihoods, elevating the risk for transmission to vulnerable elderly populations. The UN identifies the heightened vulnerability of children living in formal settlements or under displacement conditions in face of nation-wide lockdowns. A recent report highlights the potential of a catastrophic new children's rights issue that require urgent attention.¹⁶

Provisions for basic services during lock-down

Lock-down restriction on the use of public space not only compromise the possibilities of daily wage labour and livelihood earnings, but also access to daily food supplies and essential provisions. Informal markets and street food vendors are essential daily infrastructures for IDPs in non-camp settings, as many households have little capacity to safely store food supplies.¹⁷

Community level action

Evidence shows that agile, decentralised, and highly local responses to the crises, are offering timely support to those marginalised by formal urban services.¹⁸ Much attention has been given to the analysis and comparisons of national top-down emergency health strategies, however, action initiated at the community-level has played a vital role in filling the gap where prescriptive public health strategies fail to reach.

In many informal settlements, a lack of formal oversight and control has led a range of local groups and community organisations to manage and control the spread of the virus. Be it delivery of basic services, producing local sanitizers, to delivering trusted messages. A further case in point is the UNOPS partnership with the Government of Iraq called the Iraq

Information Centre¹⁹. UNOPS usually implement communications between beneficiaries and humanitarian stakeholder, however, during field work restrictions due to the pandemic, they maintained constant public communications by radio. Alongside gathering information on how IDPs were impacted by COVID-19 and disseminating WHO's COVID19 prevention tips, they shared key messages on the humanitarian assistance programs.

[Protection for those living in Homelessness, for renters and mortgage payers](#)

The relationship between displacement and homelessness is difficult to define and differentiating between homeless people and IDPs can be difficult, particularly in urban settings.²⁰ Yet, it is unlikely that most homeless people would be considered IDPs, and many displaced people have shelter and do not consider themselves homeless. The two groups do, however, tend to suffer similar discrimination, marginalisation, impoverishment and human rights violations.²¹

The loss of income due to COVID-19 may expose IDPs living in rented accommodation to a heightened risk of eviction. Rent is one of the most significant costs for IDPs, and many have already struggled to keep up their rent payments before the outbreak of the pandemic.²² The example of Mogadishu is a case in point, where even before the outbreak of the pandemic, IDPs found themselves caught in precarious tenure rental agreements. In addition, in situations of large influxes of displaced people over a short period of time can have adverse local effects on local economies. These effects may, at least initially, drive down wages while increasing rents, making it particularly difficult for IDPs to settle temporarily or permanently.²³

[Protecting housing from financialization and building back a better future](#)

The relationship between gentrification and displacement generally is complex, and its drivers, patterns and impacts poorly understood.²⁴ However, emerging spatial visualisations of COVID-19 data²⁵, are revealing an alarming disparity in infection and mortality rates across cities. These indicate clear spatial correlations between wealth distribution, health service locations and vulnerability to infection.

1 OHCHR, “Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development based Evictions and Displacement”, 2007; UN Habitat, UNCHR, “The Right to Adequate Housing: Fact Sheet No. 21/Rev.1”, November 2009.

² <https://tinyurl.com/yczrz3oq>

³ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/coronavirus-nurses-face-eviction-housing-discrimination-from-scared-landlords?ref=scroll>

⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-16/china-coronavirus-black-african-evictions>

⁵ Ngetich et al., “Policies and strategies for tackling informal settlements: lessons for Kenya”, April 1, 2016;

Patel, “Figure of the week: Africa is home to the 10 fastest growing cities in the world”, October 5, 2018.

⁶ Metcalfe et al., “Sanctuary in the city? Urban displacement and vulnerability in Nairobi”, September 2011;

Omari, “From rhetoric to practice: a study on the right to accessible and adequate housing in Kenya”, March 18, 2015; Mwangangi, “Elections Related Evictions in Urban Slums: The Case of Mukuru Kwa Njenga Nairobi, 1991-2013”, December 2017.

⁷ OHCHR, “Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development based Evictions and Displacement”, 2007; UN Habitat, UNCHR, “The Right to Adequate

⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019. GRID 2019.

⁹ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/somalia>

¹⁰ GRID 2019.

¹¹ GRID 2019.

¹² https://twitter.com/health_iom/status/1233323502758961152

¹³ https://www.internal-displacement.org/expert-opinion/displaced-and-isolated-the-realities-of-covid19-for-internally-displaced-people-in#_ftn1

¹⁴ <https://www.internationalboulevard.com/in-lagos-deporting-fellow-nigerians-to-nigeria/>

¹⁵

https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15121/SSHAP_Social_Dimensions_nCoV_outbreak_response_meeting_report_Feb2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁶ <https://apnews.com/55cec3e5bcb2c7each5b445febdca0b6>

¹⁷ <https://www.globaldashboard.org/2020/03/27/how-to-tackle-coronavirus-in-slums/>

¹⁸ GRID 2019.

¹⁹ https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/Iraq_UNOPS_IIC_Newsletter-March-2020.pdf

²⁰ GRID 2019.

²¹ The Homeless Hub, “Pushed Out - The Hidden Costs of Gentrification: Displacement and Homelessness”, 2009.

²² <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/201810-literature-review-economic-impacts.pdf>

²³ GRID 2019.

²⁴ Zuk, Chapple, “Case studies on Gentrification and Displacement in the San Francisco Bay Area”, July 2015.

²⁵ <https://news.trust.org/item/20200409080843-2cien>