

For richer or poorer

PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT IN JAPAN AND HAITI

Most of the protracted displacement associated with disasters is in low and lower-middle income developing countries, but there have also been significant cases in some of the world's richest and poorest countries which reveal some striking similarities and differences.

Japan's Fukushima IDPs

In March 2011, a devastating magnitude 9.0 earthquake and tsunami struck Japan's Tohoku region, triggering the meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant and major radiation leaks. The disaster displaced around 470,000 people.

Five years later, tens of thousands of people whose homes and villages were destroyed across three prefectures have yet to re-establish their lives in new or former homes and communities. Plans to rebuild destroyed homes and relocate displaced communities to higher ground or other areas have been reduced by 30 per cent over the past three years and in some cases abandoned, the result mainly of soaring construction costs and the time local authorities have taken to overcome land issues and prepare plots on new sites.

Those able to afford it, most often younger families, have rebuilt their lives elsewhere, but others have been unable to afford reconstruction and have moved into rental accommodation provided by the government.⁷¹

In Fukushima prefecture, 99,000 of the 160,000-plus people evacuated from contaminated areas around the crippled nuclear plant are still living in displacement.⁷² They face a difficult decision in whether to return home or not to areas where government evacuation orders have been lifted, but where radiation risk remains a concern, particularly for younger generations. Those affected also worry about the lack of basic infrastructure such as schools and hospitals in their former home areas, and about becoming isolated given that few of their family members, former neighbours and friends plan to return.⁷³

A lack of trust in official information and poor consultation with affected communities have also delayed solutions for IDPs unable or unwilling to return, and social tensions with host communities have left social and psychological scars. A 2015 survey of evacuees revealed that many were suffering from anxiety, loneliness and depression.⁷⁴ In Fukushima, the number of people who have killed themselves or succumbed to health problems related to the disaster exceeds the death toll from its direct impacts.

Temporary housing complexes such as this one are still a common sight one in Iwate prefecture.
Photo: IFRC, March 2016
<https://flic.kr/p/E9K941>
(edited contrast and brightness)





Haiti's earthquake IDPs

In January 2010, a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti, killing more than 160,000 people and displacing nearly 1.5 million. Six years later, there were still nearly 62,600 people living in deteriorating conditions in 36 displacement camps in and around Port-au-Prince. IDPs in 16 of these camps are highly vulnerable to the impact of future natural hazard events.⁷⁵

Living conditions in the camps were always poor, but have become worse still as basic services are wound down. There is ever less humanitarian funding available and fewer organisations providing assistance.

People living in the camps are exposed to criminal gang violence, abuse, exploitation and forced eviction that displaces them again. Women and girls have been particularly susceptible to increasing insecurity and health hazards. IDPs' lack of civil documentation also continues to hamper their access to basic services, their children's enrolment for school exams, and their right to own land, vote and open bank accounts.⁷⁶

Obstacles to urban integration and other solutions for camp residents include the poor conditions in the neighbourhoods where they lived before the earthquake and high unemployment levels. Unemployment among IDPs is estimated at 83 per cent, more than double the rate for the urban work force.⁷⁷ Some, meantime, are gradually turning their temporary shelters into more permanent, unplanned informal settlements.

Ultimately, real solutions for Haiti's remaining IDPs and as many as 3.5 million others living in urban poverty with similar vulnerabilities will depend on reducing socio-economic deprivation, insecurity and disaster risk. Improving national capacity to plan and manage land issues to complement the implementation of the 2013 National Housing and Habitat Policy would enable access to safe, affordable housing and tenure security for Haiti's poorest people, including IDPs.⁷⁸ Political instability and declining development assistance, however, have wide-reaching implications for the responses required, without which the risk of another major disaster is high. As the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the country has said: "Haiti cannot afford to become a forgotten crisis."⁷⁹

One of the victims of the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, waiting to be relocated. Photo: © Frédéric Loward, April 2015