

By IDPs, for IDPs: Rethinking Food Insecurity Responses in Internal Displacement Contexts

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Introduction

For decades, the main approach to tackling food insecurity among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) has been through direct food assistance. While this is critical and must remain central to addressing acute food insecurity among those who have been internally displaced by conflict and disaster, we must also acknowledge the limitations of food assistance – originally intended to be short term in nature – given the increasingly protracted nature of internal displacement, and the need to better orient humanitarian assistance towards laying substantive foundations for lasting solutions to internal displacement.

There is growing recognition across the humanitarian system that we must do better in listening to and being guided by the needs and priorities of the people we serve. This includes internally displaced populations, whose voices are often among the least heard. They are asking us to do better. We must therefore respond with concerted action to better reflect what IDPs want, not what we as humanitarian actors think they need. Across the world, people who have been, and remain internally displaced are calling for greater autonomy and investment in their ability to be more self-reliant, and less dependent on external assistance. In order to achieve this, a radical rethinking is needed of current approaches to addressing food security in humanitarian settings and beyond, which in turn, requires a rethinking of what we as humanitarian actors, donors and partners consider to be the critical “lifesaving” measures required to address food insecurity. Part of this requires acknowledging the critical role early investment in livelihoods and agriculture, together with food assistance, can and should play in addressing and preventing acute food insecurity, reducing long-term dependency, and laying the foundations for IDPs to better integrate and eventually thrive within their host communities, or when safe to do so, successfully reintegrate into their communities when they decide to return home.

We must move beyond erroneous assumptions that agriculture and livelihoods investment is only of value as a strategy for addressing food insecurity within development funding cycles, and for small numbers of IDPs located in rural areas. This is not reflective of the reality; a significant proportion of IDPs are or have been reliant on agriculture as their primary source of income, or become more reliant on agriculture after being displaced. An upcoming *Land Availability and Use Assessment in northern Mozambique* by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) found that almost 80 percent of IDPs rely on crop production as their main source of income. An almost equal number, when asked about their livelihood before being displaced, also reported this as their main source of income. In addition, the study found livelihoods were more diverse at the places of origin, including trading and business activities, livestock keeping and fishing. Similarly, in Somali Region of Ethiopia, agriculture, in combination with other practices such as livestock keeping, beekeeping and petty trade, were the major sources of livelihoods before displacement. After being internally displaced, agriculture became the primary source of livelihoods for IDPs.¹ Likewise, agricultural livelihoods can be equally valuable to those IDPs who have never been farmers, and have no previous background in agriculture, but now find themselves in displacement sites in situations of food and livelihood scarcity, which, if not addressed, can induce them to return before it is safe to do so, putting their physical safety at risk.

We need to better understand who IDPs are, and what they need and want. Indeed, IDPs have themselves asked for a more active and direct role in decision-making, and to have more frequent, face-to-face opportunities to engage.² This means rethinking the use of participatory approaches currently being employed in humanitarian response, which may have good intentions, but often seek to reinforce a system characterized by pre-determined, short-term, standardized humanitarian assistance priorities. The result of which can devalue the central role agricultural livelihoods play in the lives and livelihoods of so many IDPs, and underestimate the huge opportunities that exist to create and strengthen livelihoods, household income and food insecurity in all IDP environments, whether in urban, peri-urban or rural settings.

¹ FAO, 2021.

² United Nations High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement Secretariat, 2020.

Missing IDP voices, missing IDP data

There are two critical aspects that are largely missing from our current response to food insecurity amongst internally displaced populations and the search for solutions to internal displacement that warrant our attention and flow from our failure to listen, understand, and meet the needs of IDPs who face acute food insecurity.

The first is insufficient systematic efforts on our part (as humanitarian and development actors) and of research institutions to understand **who IDPs are and what they do and do not want**. This was flagged in recent findings by the UN High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, which noted that when consulted, *“Many IDPs and host community members reported that they do not feel heard by their governments. IDPs also reported challenges in being heard by response organizations.”*

Linked to this is a failure to adapt our responses to these concerns, which instead have proven to be largely inflexible and standardized in their focus on the “basic needs” of IDPs, unable to deliver on stated goals related to helping them achieve greater independence and self-reliance, and furthermore is insufficient to meet the day-to-day needs of IDPs, which they expressed as a critical priority.³ This is well reflected in a recently released United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)/Ground Truth Solutions Report: *“Listening is Not Enough”*, which called for greater transparency and independence in data collection and stated:

“Participation goes hand in hand with longer-term solutions. People do not want to be aid reliant. To improve people’s trust in humanitarian action joint planning- or at least better advocacy with development actors based on people’s preferences is essential, particularly in protracted crises. A package of assistance that is better linked to longer term structures to support affected people to get closer to a future independent of aid not only aligns with what people want but makes financial sense for humanitarians, so they can phase out of some contexts and move onto others.”⁴

But what does this have to do with the ability to deliver longer-term food security to IDPs? Based on what we already know about IDP food insecurity – everything. We continue to ignore IDP calls for greater prioritization of access to livelihoods and income generation, which we know directly impacts their ability to feed their families. As noted in the High-Level Panel findings, *“across both conflict and disaster settings, IDPs stressed the importance of being able to earn an income and be self-sufficient”*.

The second critical aspect to improving how we respond to IDP food insecurity is **data**. What data do we currently have (consistently!) and what does it tell us? And do we use this evidence to inform our actions? For the most part, we know IDPs face a daily challenge to access sufficient, nutritious food. Their heavy reliance on humanitarian assistance (whether from host communities or aid organizations) and limited livelihood options leaves them extremely exposed to rapid deteriorations in food security, whether that be due to conflict, disaster, climate change impacts, food price increases, or ration reductions. Yet, little is known about the degree to which they face severe hunger, as data on the food security situation of displaced people is haphazard, at best. Existing food security analyses rarely disaggregate based on displacement status, preventing us from understanding the true prevalence and severity of food insecurity in internally displaced populations. This is especially so for IDPs who live in rural, remote areas, or areas where conflict, violence, threats, or looting created significant challenges in assisting the most in need.⁵

There has been some progress in developing food security monitoring and warning systems that specifically speak to the food security needs of IDPs. For example, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for Somalia has identified IDPs in some settlements as being particularly exposed to hunger extremes, with famine projected for displaced populations in Baidoa town of Bay region and in Mogadishu between April and June 2023, while IDP settlements in three further areas (Garowe, Galkacyo, and Dollow) also face a heightened risk.⁶ However, this is a rare and highly localized example. Somalia is one of the few contexts in which there is some data collection and analysis that specifically looks at IDPs (in camps, settlements and within host communities) and examines their food security relative to host populations.

At the global level, however, a huge gap remains in availability (and advocacy around) reliable and regular data collection and analysis on the food insecurity status of IDPs versus host communities. At present, the food security sector – which leads global efforts to monitor the food security status of populations in acute food insecurity and advocate for their needs – collects data, conducts analysis and communicates acute food insecurity in largely, non-disaggregated, homogenous terms. This means that global food security monitoring and warning systems have not systematically integrated a lens of vulnerability with regard to IDPs (or equally for refugees), who we know, through ad hoc data collection, suffer disproportionately from acute food insecurity in conflict and disaster contexts. While there

³ World Food Programme, 2022.

⁴ OCHA, [Listening is not enough](#): People demand transformational change in humanitarian assistance, 21 December 2022

⁵ UNOCHA, [Ethiopia Situation Report, 5 August 2022](#); Human Rights Watch, [“Myanmar: Junta blocks Lifesaving Aid”](#), 13 December 2021; Human Rights Watch, [World Report 2022, Somalia Events of 2021](#)

⁶ IPC, [Somalia Acute Food Insecurity Snapshot](#), October 2022-June 2023

can be significant barriers to collecting IDP data, this should not serve as a justification for the exclusion (albeit, inadvertently) of millions of IDPs, who are suffering disproportionately from food insecurity in comparison to their host populations.

This lack of data that speaks to the specific needs of IDPs (and those needs relative to the host communities’) means that our food security responses cannot be sufficiently tailored to these needs, nor to those of host populations. Current approaches neither target the specific vulnerabilities of IDPs nor the existing and emerging needs of host communities. As one IDP told FAO in an upcoming Land Availability and Use Assessment in northern Mozambique:

“They don’t ask anything. They just make their plans and come and talk to us. Then we see them just bringing things.”⁷

Put simply: if we are to fully understand the gravity, nature and impacts of food insecurity on IDPs, we must adapt our food security monitoring systems to the current contextual realities of internal displacement and systematically disaggregate food security data by IDP status both in analysis and, importantly, in our advocacy.

Generic, non-disaggregated food insecurity messaging encourages generic targeting that does not reflect the severity of needs of IDPs and returned IDPs. In Sudan, for example, food insecurity has been reported to be considerably higher among IDPs (64 percent) compared to the host population (31 percent).⁸ Yet, most advocacy on the food security crisis in Sudan and elsewhere does not reflect this disparity, nor does it reflect the greater degree of food insecurity experienced by IDP women (70 percent of IDP women compared to 57 percent of IDP men are highly food insecure).⁹ This is also the case for other major IDP contexts such as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Somalia, where various studies have shown IDPs suffer disproportionately from food security^{10,11}. Likewise, in Yemen in a context characterised by widespread acute food insecurity, we know that IDPs are more vulnerable to food insecurity. Yet coverage of IDP populations in terms of humanitarian assistance is poor¹², data on the specific food security needs of IDPs scarce, and advocacy from food security actors around the heightened vulnerability of a severely underserved IDP population, is limited at best.

While exceptions exist, in most countries affected by internal displacement, food security advocacy continues to be largely silent on the specific food security status of IDPs versus the host population, with references only to numbers of “displaced populations” or “refugees” or, at best, generic references to the number of IDPs in a country, which goes no further beyond vaguely implying inclusion of this population in overall numbers of the food insecure.

Better responses: based on who IDPs are and what they themselves want

In order to better understand and act on the priorities of IDPs, we must see them as not just IDPs, but as people with unique skills, histories and aspirations for their future, whose lives should not be put on hold and characterized by aid dependency, simply because they have had the misfortune of being internally displaced. When people are internally displaced, they often lose their identities in the eyes of those attempting to assist them, and become “IDPs”, with very little effort made, beyond generic, often quantitative surveys, to understand who they are beyond their situation of internal displacement and their short-term needs. As noted in the UNOCHA/Ground Truth Solutions report, “*The sense that people can influence aid provision through a survey, or even have a say, remains foreign to many*”.¹³ Importantly, the report also observes that many beneficiaries, including IDPs, feel disempowered by the assistance they are receiving and that “*when assistance is not relevant to people’s needs and their views are disregarded, people feel disempowered and deprived of dignity*”. As one IDP from the Democratic Republic of the Congo told researchers: “*we don’t have a decision on the assistance we can receive*”.

While the profiles of IDPs are incredibly diverse, there are commonalities that must be acknowledged if we are to provide food security interventions tailored to their needs and priorities and help them move towards independence and self-reliance. As one IDP community leader recently told FAO:

“it’s very painful, because where [IDPs] are coming from... they were doing small business. Some they were tailors, some were carpenters, so these are the livelihoods they used to have where they were coming from, but here they

⁷ FAO, unpublished.

⁸ World Bank, *Informing durable solutions for internal displacement in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan*, 2019.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Abdirahman Ahmed Muhumed, Elizabeth Stites, Elizabeth Alexion, Delia Burns, “*Livelihood Components of Durable Solutions for IDPs: Assessment of three cases in Somali Region, Ethiopia*”, 2021

¹² IASC, *Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis*, 2022

¹³ Ibid; OCHA, *Listening is not enough: People demand transformational change in humanitarian assistance*, 2022

have nothing, they have never been given support to start small business, so if someone could, like supporting some households, once the business start, others would adjust or have a way of also starting.”¹⁴

IDPs living in crisis situations do not live in a vacuum. Even in the most extreme situations, people have a livelihood on which they depend, or have depended. They have knowledge and skills. For the majority of those suffering acute hunger, this means some form of agriculture-based livelihood (such as farming, pastoralism or agropastoralism).

We know that many IDPs living in some of the most chronic, protracted internal displacement contexts, characterized by recurrent conflict and climate change impacts, rely on or have relied upon agricultural livelihoods as a source of income. In Somali region in Ethiopia, for example, the source of income for the vast majority of IDPs is agriculture, with pastoralism the primary occupation for a majority of displaced households (64 percent of IDP sites), followed by agropastoralism (25 percent).¹⁵ In Sudan, the World Bank found that “most Sudanese who are currently displaced (95 percent) previously depended on agriculture as their main source of income; however, after being displaced, less than half of IDP households depend on agriculture” and that “even if IDPs largely generate their own income, it is barely enough”. Therefore, investment in “business skills development and better access to employment opportunities, mainly for agricultural IDPs” was seen as critical for durable solutions in Sudan.¹⁶ Likewise, IDP reliance on agriculture as a primary source of income can also be seen in Somalia, where “most displaced people in southern Somalia as well as the majority of victims in the two recent famines come the Digil and Mirifle/Rahanweyn and the Somali Bantu” who are “more sedentary farming and agropastoralist populations as well as those dependent on agricultural labour from the riverine and inter-riverine areas”.¹⁷

Above all, IDPs have a desire to provide for their families, and re-establish their self-reliance after being displaced. For many this means preserving, continuing and improving their agriculture-based livelihoods, in the face of climate change impacts. For those without an agricultural background, this means developing new skills and accessing resources to create sustainable agricultural livelihoods, which allow them to generate an independent income and feed their families. Yet, instead of protecting these critical means of survival with the same urgency as other essential needs, the humanitarian system in its current shape mostly offers few solutions beyond bare survival for those who have been internally displaced. IDP self-reliance cannot be achieved without substantive investment in livelihood support, which is sufficiently flexible to be tailored to IDPs’ expressed needs, early in the humanitarian cycle, and which goes beyond the traditional food assistance and provision of seeds and tools. This traditional approach has proven insufficiently suited to providing foundations for solutions to internal displacement, unless it is accompanied by early, at-scale investment in areas crucial to successful agricultural livelihoods that facilitate access to land¹⁸ and water, which are critical to many IDPs’ livelihoods and to markets, agribusiness capacity-building and climate change adaptation. Importantly, IDPs, returnees, host communities and other often-excluded groups, particularly women and youth, must be consulted early on and involved in the decision-making processes of allocation and management of land and water resources to ensure access and use of resources critical to sustainable agricultural livelihoods, avoid triggering disputes and ensure sustainable, climate-smart management of these precious resources.

The humanitarian system is failing IDPs: radical reform is needed to deliver on solutions

Much has been said by donors and humanitarian actors on the need for increased prioritization of programmes that contribute to “economic self-reliance” and orienting Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) in IDP contexts towards “durable solutions”. Unfortunately, this is often without any clear articulation of a theory of change that concretely identifies how “food security” measures within HRPs can contribute to solutions to internal displacement, be that local integration, return or resettlement. Likewise, there is a lack of transparency within HRPs as to whether “food security” measures constitute immediate food assistance and short-term distribution of agricultural inputs or include longer-term, more sustainable investments in livelihoods and agriculture.

The urgency of linking immediate relief to lasting recovery was highlighted in the 2020 HRP for Syria: “It is fundamental for the sector that the short-term relief measures are linked to more sustainable food assistance responses to the protracted Syrian crisis”. Investments in humanitarian livelihoods response offer a lot of promise, but we need to take them further and fully integrate them with longer-term solutions. The fact remains that investment in sustainable

¹⁴ FAO, unpublished.

¹⁵ Abdirahman Ahmed Muhumed, Elizabeth Stites, Elizabeth Alexion, Delia Burns, “*Livelihood Components of Durable Solutions for IDPs: Assessment of three cases in Somali Region, Ethiopia*”, 2021

¹⁶ World Bank, *Informing durable solutions for internal displacement in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan*, 2019.

¹⁷ Nisar Majid, Mohamed Jelle, Guhad Adan, Aydrus Daar, Khalif Abdirahman, Peter Hailey, Nancy Balfour, Andrew Seal, and Daniel Maxwell. *Another Humanitarian (and Political) Crisis in Somalia in 2022*. Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2022.

¹⁸ Abdirahman Ahmed Muhumed, Elizabeth Stites, Elizabeth Alexion, Delia Burns, “*Livelihood Components of Durable Solutions for IDPs: Assessment of three cases in Somali Region, Ethiopia*”, 2021

agricultural livelihoods, capable of contributing to both household food security and income generation, are still considered more of a development priority, which in funding terms takes a back seat to humanitarian assistance in many food crisis contexts.

A key limitation of traditional food security responses within the humanitarian system has been this failure to consistently and sufficiently link short-term assistance (cash, food, agricultural inputs) with efforts to build resilient livelihoods. This reflects both a lack of the funds needed to invest in resilience in fragile contexts and an erroneous assumption within some parts of the system that more “comprehensive” forms of livelihood support belong squarely within the development sector, being “the next phase”. This approach, perpetuated by many humanitarian donors, and the extremely slow pace of adoption of more flexible, tailored funding models, has severely limited the ability of food security actors to give IDPs what they are asking for: long term self-reliance. As aid recipients in Haiti told researchers for the UNOCHA/Ground Truth Solutions Report: “*we can’t stay in a tarp our whole lives*” and “*we don’t want to be made into victims for a sack of rice*”.¹⁹ Calls for structural reform of the humanitarian system, which prioritizes comprehensive, at-scale, forward-looking livelihoods investment from the beginning of a humanitarian cycle, must be heard if we are to deliver solutions for those living in displacement or wishing to return to their origin communities. This means recognizing that “*in order to address the collective challenge of displacement, the dominant mindset that sees development interventions as a second-line response needs to be confronted*”.²⁰ Likewise, we must listen to the independent voices who have placed the evidence in front of us, which very clearly tells us that humanitarian responses are failing.

Some of the most important and credible calls for reform have come from the IAHE of the Yemen Crisis²¹ and the UNOCHA/Ground Truth Solutions Report, which highlighted the failure to listen to IDPs and the failure to invest in longer-term solutions to internal displacement. Despite enormous flows of humanitarian assistance to the food sectors in Yemen (over USD 6 billion between 2016 and 2020 – overwhelmingly to food assistance²²), acute food insecurity levels remain effectively unchanged (14.1 million people in IPC 3+ in 2016 compared with 16.2 million in 2020). This assistance has not changed the conditions of food insecure people, but rather contained their food insecurity. With further financial cuts looming, these people will find themselves in an even worse condition than in 2015/16 because little attempt has been made to reinforce their food security and self-reliance – clearly, a new approach is needed to halt and sustainably reverse these trends.

The IAHE report also noted that IDPs in Yemen have become so despondent from the failure of humanitarian actors to listen and act upon their complaints that “*in all of the IDP sites visited, residents have given up using the complaint boxes provided*”. The Evaluation found:

“the underfunding of livelihoods activities has been a constant in the HRP’s between 2016–2021. This has limited the humanitarian response efforts to combine short-term assistance with longer-term strategies. The absence of multi-year funding has also prevented the interventions from reaching scale and has limited the ability of agencies to implement more comprehensive long-term livelihoods projects. The implementation of a longer-term strategy is critical if the humanitarian response is to enhance food security in a sustainable manner and to lessen the humanitarian caseload in the medium- to longer term.”

While this could be viewed as a general recommendation on the humanitarian response, and the humanitarian system as a whole, it cannot and should not be separated from the humanitarian system’s failure to deliver long-term food security and ultimately self-reliance to IDPs. After six years of back-to-back HRP’s, very little, if any progress has been made in moving IDPs towards self-reliance: “*the high dependence on aid and remittances, consistently low food consumption scores and the levels of vulnerability to disease and malnutrition all suggest precarious household income*”.²³ Despite this, underfunding of livelihoods continues in a mistaken belief that livelihoods constitute a “next phase” post-food assistance, ignoring the clear evidence that consistent failure to invest in livelihoods does greater long-term damage by eroding assets and the means to survive, leaving people entirely dependent on external assistance. Likewise, a lack of simultaneous investment in livelihoods continues to undermine both food security of IDPs and, notably, food aid distribution. One 68-year-old IDP in Saada Razeh District, Yemen said 12 years ago:

*“We are selling beans and baby biscuits we get from aid agencies to pay the rent. Where are we supposed to find YR 20,000 [US\$95] a month to pay rent when we no longer have livelihoods?... Dozens of families are selling food aid to get money to pay rent. They risk being thrown out in a few days’ time if they are unable to pay,”. When they arrived in the city, they had some funds from the sale – at low prices – of livestock”.*²⁴

¹⁹ OCHA, Listening is not enough: People demand transformational change in humanitarian assistance, 2022

²⁰ Samuel Hall/Norwegian Refugee Council, Policy Brief: The challenges displaced Afghans face in securing durable solutions, 2018

²¹ WFP, Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of Yemen crisis, 2022

²² Global Network Against Food Crises, Financing Flows Report – Yemen, 2021

²³ WFP, Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of Yemen crisis, 2022

²⁴ New Humanitarian, Selling Food Aid to Pay the Rent, 3 February 2010

Very little appears to have changed in Yemen for IDPs in the 12 years since. The findings and recommendations of the IAHE for Yemen, in combination with the UNOCHA/Ground Truth Solutions Report,²⁵ go to the heart of why so many IDPs feel ignored, and why those IDPs for whom we continue to provide humanitarian support have been unable to achieve self-reliance and remain dependent on food assistance and rations. The IAHE for Yemen²⁶ also points to the tendency of humanitarian assistance to target easier-to-reach IDPs in camp environments, suggesting economies of scale considerations are winning out over evidence-based decisions informed by IDP food security and nutrition data, to the exclusion of more remote areas with comparatively higher numbers of IDPs and higher levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. This trend of aid “following the tarmac road” was also called out in the latest State of the Humanitarian System report, which flagged that “Populations in remote locations often find themselves under-served as the humanitarian effort centres on well-worn routes”.²⁷

However, the onus of following through on badly needed structural reforms to address these issues should not rest solely with humanitarian and development actors, but also squarely with donors, who perpetuate outdated “short-termism” in terms of approaches to food insecurity, characterized by costly, short-term, one-year humanitarian funding cycles. For the humanitarian system to be truly effective in making substantial contributions to solutions to internal displacement, prioritization, programming, advocacy and funding allocations should be led by evidence and IDPs own priorities rather than political dynamics, funding calendars and individual agency considerations. Focusing primarily on the role of the development sector in delivering solutions to internal displacement, instead of also considering the necessary structural reforms of the humanitarian sector to do the same, risks reinforcing a status quo, where current food security interventions have proven not fit-for-purpose.

Underinvestment in livelihoods and agriculture undermines longer-term food security and solutions

Unfortunately, trends of under investment in livelihoods and the longer-term food security of IDPs have not been limited to Yemen, but can be seen across major IDP contexts. In Syria, for example, where over \$7.3 billion of humanitarian assistance has been allocated to the food sectors between 2016 and 2022²⁸ and where 6.7 million people remain internally displaced,²⁹ the 2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) for Syria warned that: “three-quarters of IDP households report inability to sufficiently meet their household members’ basic needs, citing lack of income as the primary reason (97 percent), and unaffordability of food and essential goods (86 percent)” and then unsurprisingly, points to the fact that “the majority of IDPs prioritize access to food and livelihoods support, which is comparable to overall trends”.³⁰ Furthermore, it states: “improved food systems and agriculture-based livelihoods, especially in rural areas, will be fundamental to sustainably reduce the humanitarian caseload and high food insecurity in Syria”. While this acknowledgement is important, similar statements have been made in past Syria HRPs, i.e. “agriculture and livelihoods responses were highly underfunded undermining prospects for economic recovery, stabilization of national food systems and improvement in household food security”.³¹ This suggests that despite 10 years of humanitarian assistance and food security responses and repeated calls for greater investment in livelihoods and agriculture, IDP households continue to be unable to meet their basic needs, let alone move towards self-reliance.

The same evidence of years of HRPs targeting IDPs, with very limited impact on their long-term food security and self-reliance, can be seen in the Somali region of Ethiopia. Here, despite five plus years of conflict, mass internal displacement and associated HRPs, IDPs remain highly dependent on food assistance and have little access to secure livelihoods that can help reduce such dependency. In fact, a recent study by FAO and Tufts University³² found that “in 79 percent of sites in Somali Region, food assistance was the primary means in which IDPs obtained food” and that “the average percentage of displaced households who currently have a source of income is 15.5 percent across all IDP sites in Ethiopia, and only 5.7 percent for sites in Somali region”. Once again, we see costly year-on-year, humanitarian assistance investment failing to reduce IDP dependency on food assistance and invest in sustainable livelihoods. Instead, in the absence of these investments, long-term food assistance dependency and increased exposure to external shocks are further reinforced.

²⁵ OCHA, [Listening is not enough](#): People demand transformational change in humanitarian assistance, 2022

²⁶ WFP, [Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of Yemen crisis](#), 2022

²⁷ ALNAP, [The State of the Humanitarian System](#), 2022

²⁸ Global Network Against Food Crises, [Financing Flows](#), 2022

²⁹ IDMC, [Country Profile – Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2022.

³⁰ UNOCHA, HNO: [Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2022.

³¹ UNOCHA, HRP: [Syrian Arab Republic](#), 2020.

³² Abdirahman Ahmed Muhumed, Elizabeth Stites, Elizabeth Alexion, Delia Burns, “[Livelihood Components of Durable Solutions for IDPs: Assessment of three cases in Somali Region, Ethiopia](#)”, 2021

Looking forward

We know that the current humanitarian system has proven itself unable to substantially contribute to longer-term food security and solutions to internal displacement. So where to from here?

1. **We must hear and act upon what IDPs really want, not through predetermined surveys that perpetuate the status quo in humanitarian assistance delivery, but actively seek to embed IDP voices and respond to their needs by collecting perception-based IDP data.** It is critical that our food security monitoring, early warning systems and associated advocacy speak directly to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of IDPs. We must embed the substantive guidance of IDPs into every aspect of humanitarian project cycles, and with support from humanitarian donors, invest early in innovative approaches that can help them contribute towards their own food security and household income, no matter their geographical location or the fragile nature of the context in which they reside. If done to scale, this can respond directly to IDPs priorities and prevent or reduce their long-term aid dependency and associated exposure to external shocks, such as food price increases, food ration reductions, climate-related shocks and conflict, and importantly, reduce the need for decades-long investment in short-term food assistance in internal displacement contexts. Reorienting our humanitarian responses to allow for such investments in the food security of IDPs early on in the humanitarian cycle, and connecting these actions to longer-term development and peace responses, will be critical to securing long-term solutions for IDPs to live their lives in dignity and autonomy. Until all actors are willing to relinquish power to IDPs and make the necessary structural reforms to allow us the space to ask IDPs what they want, and the flexibility to give them what they are asking for, we will continue to be a barrier to the long-term food security of IDPs, and to finding lasting solutions to internal displacement.
2. **We must recognize the direct link between substantive livelihoods investment, long-term food security/economic independence of IDPs and long-term solutions to internal displacement.** IDP solutions are only possible when IDPs are able to reach a level of self-reliance whereby they are no longer dependent on aid for their survival. While there seems to be an acceptance that long-term food security of IDPs requires substantive investment in livelihoods/income generation, year on year, there is overwhelming evidence that we are failing to deliver this within and as part of the humanitarian cycle.
3. **We must accept that while reaching the most vulnerable can be more expensive upfront, it will be cheaper in the long run as we reduce people's reliance on costly short-term aid.** This requires a radical re-thinking of what constitutes a humanitarian cycle and what constitutes humanitarian assistance, including accepting the additional risks associated with investing in fragile contexts and the higher costs of deviating from the “tarmac road”. In particular in protracted crises, humanitarian cycles cannot remain short term (usually one year). Left as such, they will be unable to deliver genuine food security and self-sufficiency to displaced populations. We must recognize that in such contexts, we need multi-year humanitarian cycles that drastically increase the prioritization (and funding) for comprehensive livelihood and agriculture assistance, alongside short-term food and agriculture assistance.
4. **Within the life-saving humanitarian response, greater prioritization is needed for emergency agricultural interventions in IDP contexts given a significant proportion of IDPs are from rural areas, rely on agricultural livelihoods for survival and have an agricultural background.** In many displacement contexts, like Iraq, Somalia, Syria or South Sudan, people have fled with their livestock, making animal health campaigns a vital means to protect human health as well as a potential mechanism for self-reliance and enhanced nutrition. Agriculture as a whole offers enormous opportunities to quickly reduce humanitarian needs by enabling people to meet their needs themselves. For example, by taking agriculture-related Anticipatory Actions while pastoralist IDPs are on the move, or upon arrival to IDP sites, to prevent negative coping mechanisms such as selling of animals, or animal diseases which set IDPs on a path of long-term food-aid dependence. Likewise, we should not discount the role agriculture can play in income generation for IDPs who have never been involved in agriculture. **Agriculture is not just for farmers**, it offers huge opportunities for IDPs who have never farmed.
5. **We must address issues around IDP access to land and water, critical for long-term food security, and access to agricultural livelihoods in areas of origin and destination.** In addition to supporting food security, investments in granting and securing access to land early in humanitarian cycle can help to promote peaceful coexistence between hosts and IDPs and hosts and returnees, and crucially, ensure the viability of agricultural livelihoods. Ensuring host communities are consulted, heavily engaged and are receiving clear benefits from livelihood interventions is critical, particularly given the high rates of poverty of host communities in many host contexts. For example, the World Bank Study on Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan found that 8 out of 10 households in host communities live in poverty and almost half are highly food insecure.³³ Engagement of both communities is critical to ensuring peaceful coexistence and averting

³³ World Bank, *Informing durable solutions for internal displacement in Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan*, 2019

aggravating existing or creating new tensions. Poorly communicated interventions that do not deliver perceived benefits to a host community risk undermining social cohesion and exacerbating tensions between communities (including amplifying pre-existing conflict dynamics). Measures must be (and equally as important, be perceived to be) benefiting both host and IDP/returnee communities. Most IDPs are not in camp or camp like settings, therefore the need for investments in local-level peace/peaceful coexistence is even more pronounced.