Driven apart
How repeated displacement changes family dynamics in eastern DRC
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November 2015
Acknowledgments

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Cover photo: A woman hosting IDPs in Lweba, Fizi, South Kivu, explains how displacement has impacted her family. Photo: IDMC/M. Kesmaecker-Wissing, March 2015

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191 respondents in North Kivu
135 respondents in South Kivu

Total displaced for North Kivu: 744,500 IDPs
Total displaced for South Kivu: 322,300 IDPs

IDPs and project research activities in the Kivus As of June 2015

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on
this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IDMC.
Figures source: OCHA
Introduction

This is the second in a series of thematic papers that contribute to a project undertaken by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, International Alert and Climate Interactive to increase the resilience of people who have been repeatedly displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The project aims to improve understanding and establish an evidence base on how multiple displacement impacts the resilience of those affected in order to improve humanitarian responses to the phenomenon.

Millions of people have been forced to flee their homes in DRC since the 1990s, both within and across its borders. As of 30 September 2015, the country was home to at least 1,662,500 internally displaced people (IDPs), 1,066,800 of them in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu. Armed violence in eastern DRC has decreased over time from the regional wars of 1996 to 2003 to the transition to democratic rule in 2006 and since, but it remains widespread – the result of weak governance and the presence of various domestic and foreign armed groups with evolving agendas and criminal motives.

The results of the project’s first year of research show that repeated displacement has an impact on family composition, relationships and roles. This second thematic paper looks in more detail at how the phenomenon affects the dynamics within displaced families and their ability to cope with the consequences. The analysis is based on data collected in the territories of Masisi in North Kivu and Fizi in South Kivu in March 2015. Thirty-one focus group discussions were held with 182 women and 144 men from both displaced and host families, and key informant interviews were conducted with seven members of displaced and host families, and six leaders of local and displaced communities. The analysis also draws on desk research and data collected for the overall project, such as narrative reports, contextual studies and workshop reports.

Many families who took part in the research, both IDPs and hosts, had been displaced several times between 1992 and 2014, in some cases as many as seven times. Some people even found it hard to remember how many times they had fled.

The main reasons both groups cited for their flight were conflict and clashes between the government and armed groups including CNDP, AFDL and RCD in Masisi, and the Mai Mai Yakutumba in Fizi. IDPs said they had arrived in their current places of refuge between 2008 and 2015 and had been living there since. Those in North Kivu had generally stayed longer in one place than those in South Kivu. Most host families had also been displaced at some point in their lives, but had since returned.

For purpose of this research, the term “family” is based on the definition of “ménage” or “household” in article 700 of DRC’s family code, in which it “refers to spouses, their dependent non-married children and all individuals for whom spouses are responsible for feeding”. Following discussions with NRC’s national staff in DRC, the final definition used was “spouses and their dependent non-married children”. The research also included single-headed households, unmarried couples with children, widows and widowers.

Figure 1: Focus group discussion participants
The research for this paper shows that security, access to land and economic opportunities, the presence of social networks and host communities' solidarity were the main factors that led IDPs to choose their current place of refuge. This finding reinforces the conclusions of the first thematic paper of this project, which highlighted the factors that drive IDPs' decisions in choosing when and where to move.9

The distance travelled between places of origin and refuge varied from person to person. Some had fled only a few kilometres, but others had walked for two nights to reach their new location. Some IDPs in Birere in North Kivu, and Nundu and Swima in South Kivu, fled further in their latest displacement than previously, when they took refuge in the bush, because the situation closer to home had become unsustainable in terms of insecurity, food shortages and lack of hygiene.

All of the IDPs we met in South Kivu, where there are no displacement camps, were living with host families, as were many in Kibabi, North Kivu. Living arrangements vary, with some hosts receiving as many as five families at a time. Some IDPs occupy a room in the host family’s house, sometimes against the payment of rent, while others sleep with their hosts in the same rooms. Lack of space forces some to divide their children up between their host family and their neighbours.

Some IDPs in Kibabi in North Kivu, and in Nundu and Swima in South Kivu, who have been living with host families for more than a year, have been allocated a plot of the household’s land to build a small shelter. In Birere and Katale in North Kivu, focus group participants had been living in makeshift shelters on displacement sites since their arrival.

Many IDPs struggle to make ends meet because they are no longer able to pursue their usual economic activities and have difficulty in establishing new ones that pay well enough. Some in North Kivu said that previous displacements had been less hard on them because they received more humanitarian assistance.

This paper focuses on the distribution of roles and responsibilities among displaced families, and the impact of displacement on relationships within them. We demonstrate a shift in the responsibilities of men, women and children and describe how relationships evolve during displacement. We also look at safety nets and the role of the extended family, and we show that family relationships and cohesion are key to establishing and strengthening the resilience of individuals and communities as a whole.

Given our findings, the paper suggests that:

- Family cohesion should be considered an integral part of the concept of individual and community resilience
- Programmes that aim to build resilience should take aspects of family cohesion into account during assessment, design, implementation and evaluation
- The monitoring of changes in displaced families’ dynamics and the collection of disaggregated data on the impacts of displacement on men, women and children are key to developing targeted programmes, and to understanding how resilience and coping capacities evolve and can be strengthened over time
Shifting roles and responsibilities

Displacement triggers a number of distressing events as people who are forced to flee leave not only belongings and memories but also family members behind. Flight and its consequences often change a family's composition. Many of the people interviewed for this research had been separated from their families, abandoned by their husbands or had lost loved ones. Researchers also met unaccompanied children, and displaced adults who take care of their young nieces and nephews.

Even when families are able to stay together, the difficulties they face in establishing a degree of security and community solidarity affects them. Whether they take refuge with host families or find a spot on a displacement site, they need to find a way to support themselves. An influx of IDPs puts pressure on the local job market, however, and demand for employment often outstrips the work available. Job opportunities tend to be few and far between.

Local resources, which are often already scarce, also come under extra strain. Host families share their food, goods and land with IDPs, putting an additional burden on them, which becomes particular acute in areas that experience multiple influxes of IDPs. The scarcity of work and resources has a direct impact on both displaced and host family dynamics. It can lead to shifting roles and responsibilities, and changing relationships within and across them.

Altering of traditional roles

Family roles are clearly defined before displacement. As heads of household, men are responsible for planning the family’s day, taking all important decisions, undertaking physically challenging work such as heavy agricultural labour, and raising livestock. Women are responsible for the care of the household and children, less demanding agricultural work and some petty trade. Children go to school if the family can afford it, help their parents in the fields and collect water. Girls assist their mothers with household chores.

This distribution of roles and responsibilities changes significantly as a result of displacement. Men find it more difficult to get work because their skills may not appropriate in an overstretched local job market, and they are not part of the informal networks that might provide them with income-generating opportunities. As a result, they struggle to provide for their families, which undermines their role as head of household.

IDPs in Masisi, North Kivu, said that families who had been forced to move a number of times found such obstacles increasingly difficult to overcome. Not only are the practical challenges repeated with each displacement, but they may also move ever further from their homes and fields, damaging their confidence in the future and their willingness to start again from scratch.

Where before some tasks were carried out jointly, during displacement all family members are compelled to look for work on their own, which reduces a man's degree of control over his family. Women often perceive men's difficulty in finding enough work as laziness, which further erodes their authority. Women, meantime, take on extra responsibilities for earning income in addition to their role of maintaining the household. They may also have more success in finding work, given that they tend to be cheaper to employ while men may face more restrictions on their freedom of movement.

Children are often taken out of school to save money, and to help the family in its efforts to get by. Our research for this paper suggests that girls have to abandon their education before boys. According to a displaced woman in Swima, South Kivu, girls’ education is not considered a worthwhile investment because they leave the family when they marry. That said, our broader research also reveals that sometimes girls’ schooling is kept up on the expectation that educated women attract higher dowries.

With this gradual shift in family members’ status, decision-making responsibilities in both displaced and host families also changes, eroding men’s role as head of household still further. Significant decisions, such as whether to spend larger sums of money, or when or where to flee, remain with the man, but some IDPs said that women and occasionally children were consulted more often.
Displaced men in Lweba, South Kivu, linked their loss of authority to NGOs’ awareness campaigns on women’s rights in their places of refuge, but other focus group participants saw it as a result of their inability to provide for their family. Some young men said they no longer respected their father’s decisions for this very reason.

The management of household finances also changes with displacement. Where previously women kept the money but men decided when and how to spend it, many IDPs – both men and women – admitted that they kept some of their income to themselves, sometimes without telling their spouse. Faced with the many economic challenges inherent in displacement, women do so to be able to buy food and household items, an indication both of men’s reduced earning power and shifting responsibilities.

Men’s status is further undermined by the distribution of humanitarian and development assistance following displacement. Providers tend to treat women as the head of the household and target them accordingly. Most IDPs, including men, see such practices as justified given women’s role as carers, and because it helps to guarantee that the assistance reaches the family and is not used for personal benefit. Respondents also said that in cases of polygamy, men were not appropriate beneficiaries given that they would have to choose between their wives, making less assistance available to each family.

When asked, however, whether they felt empowered by such targeting, many women said they did not, though some men said their wives had challenged their authority as a result of it.

Our research found that shifting responsibilities within the household are not reflected in changes in representational roles at the community level. Men continue to be families’ main representative before local authorities and in the resolution of disputes. Women only participate if community leaders specifically invite them and if a given issue directly concerns their family. Widows tend to be accepted as being able to represent themselves, but in the absence of their husbands married women may have to rely on their oldest sons.
Coping with changing responsibilities

Displaced and host households adapt to displacement, its hardships and changes in family composition and roles in a number of ways. If a member dies or becomes separated during displacement, a relative takes on their tasks and responsibilities. If a man is absent, it is usually his spouse who replaces him. Some women, however, said they were unable to undertake all their husband's tasks, such as construction, and so had to ask their oldest son or neighbours for help.

In some cases, as in Nundu in South Kivu, the oldest son automatically replaces his father in his duties. In Lweba, also in South Kivu, respondents said a widower might send his children to live with other family members because female relatives were seen as being better placed to take care of the children than the father.

The distribution of activities by gender and age also changes as families try to generate enough income in displacement. All of our focus groups with IDPs revealed that women take on activities previously reserved for men, including physically demanding tasks such as clearing fields and other agricultural work, transporting heavy goods and repairing and in some cases even building houses and shelters. Men, in contrast, tend not to engage in activities previously reserved for women, unless a woman has been taken ill or died.

"If the man does not honour his commitments, such as buying clothes, then we argue."

- Displaced woman living with a host family in Kibabi

The extent to which children take on tasks previously carried out by adults is less clear. Some IDPs said children become more active in the household and contribute to income generation while continuing to carry out their previous activities. Others said that girls are called upon to transport goods and boys to dig latrines.

Some adolescents respond to their families' economic difficulties, whether the result of displacement or increasing poverty in the area in general, by establishing their independence earlier. Knowing that their family is struggling to make ends meet, they look for their own sources of income, and in some cases move into their own shelters or homes.
Changing relations: a cause of family disarticulation

Definition of family disarticulation

For the purpose of this study, we took the description of social disarticulation in Michael Cernea’s impoverishment risk and reconstruction model, and applied it to the family unit. Cernea states: “Forced displacement tears apart the existing social fabric. It disperses and fragments communities, dismantles patterns of social organization and interpersonal ties; kinship groups become scattered as well. Life-sustaining informal networks of reciprocal help, local voluntary associations, and self-organized mutual service are disrupted.”

Relationships between family members can shift significantly as a result of displacement. As the woman becomes the breadwinner and receives assistance on behalf of the household, the man’s role challenged, his authority weakened and his self-esteem eroded. This redefinition of traditional roles may create tensions and drive further changes.

Disruption of family cohesion

Our research found that when the man’s role is undermined, it can destabilise the relationship between husband and wife in a number of ways. The man may feel depressed, marginalised and a “loss of personal value” or emasculation, which in turn may affect the couple’s intimacy. He may struggle to accept the questioning of his role and authority, and resort to negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, which causes further disruption.

A number of respondents said alcohol consumption had risen since displacement, particularly among men, as a way of dealing with their distress and concerns. Not only may men come home drunk, they may have spent the money they earned instead of contributing to the family’s wellbeing, prompting disputes and in some cases domestic violence. Some respondents said domestic violence against both women and men had also increased during displacement.

In her article Before the War, I was a Man: Men and Masculinities in Eastern DR Congo, Desiree Lwambo explains that domestic violence may be “used to control threats to masculinity” such as the woman’s growing role as the family provider and decision-maker.

Some of those we spoke to during our research said also that women who would not have dared raise their hand against their husband in their home village were sometimes the first to do so in disputes, possibly demonstrating a loss of respect for their partner or a sense of empowerment given their new roles and responsibilities.
Respondents said there were more arguments and disputes than before within both displaced and host families, mainly over the lack or shortage of resources. The hardship displacement entails undermines confidence between men and women, as evidenced by the fact that many women would not trust their husbands to collect humanitarian assistance for fear they would sell it and spend the money on themselves, including alcohol.

Some of the displaced women who took part in focus groups in Birere in North Kivu described men as bandits in this sense, and even some of the men said they would not trust themselves to collect assistance. It might not have mattered previously that men spent money on alcohol because the family had enough resources, but the shortfalls associated with displacement make it harder for women to accept such selfish behaviour. Participants also revealed similar trust issues over the management of household finances, saying that both men and women had started to hide their earnings from their partner.

Some respondents identified lack of intimacy as a disruptive influence that puts considerable strain on the family unit. Aside from the fallout from arguments and disputes, hosts and IDPs share limited amounts of space and families are sometimes forced to sleep apart. In conjunction with the many other stresses associated with displacement, it may contribute to fragmentation, separation or divorce, further reducing people’s ability to cope.

Two focus groups said the lack of space increased the risk of sexual violence when boys and girls, including siblings, were forced to share the same bed.

**Estrangement between children and parents**

Children’s relationships with their parents also appear to deteriorate as a result of displacement. Children may lose their points of reference when their parents’ roles change, particularly when their father’s authority is undermined by his inability or unwillingness to provide for his family. His decisions and advice may be ignored and both children and fathers seem to become emotionally distant, sometimes trying to avoid each other.

Economic hardship also dictates that many displaced children are unable to attend school, and some are forced to work to help support their families. This often translates into a decline in children’s respect for their parents, and the latter’s difficulties in handling them. Some adult focus group participants referred to children as “bandits”.

That said, children’s relationships with their mothers tend to be more robust, and their trust more enduring, particularly in terms of money matters. Young men who took part in focus groups in Birere and Katale, North Kivu, said they would give their earnings to their mothers rather than their fathers. Some suspected their fathers would use it to buy alcohol.

**Disconnection from extended family**

Displacement not only affects relationships within the immediate family, but also among other relatives, including adult brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins. To gauge the state of extended family relationships, we looked at the pattern of visits during displacement, and most IDPs said they received and paid fewer than previously. Those living in Swima and Nundu in South Kivu, who had been displaced for less time than their counterparts elsewhere, were exceptions.

Respondents gave a number of reasons for receiving fewer visits, including their inability to offer a decent welcome given their lack of resources and space, embarrassment about their living conditions and the distance relatives had to travel. They said distance was equally a factor in their paying fewer visits, along with lack of time because they had to work harder to support themselves. The fact that in some cases extended family members had fled and their location was unknown was also mentioned. IDPs in Kibabi, North Kivu, said they received fewer visitors than during previous displacements because they received less assistance and so had less to share.

Host families in Kibabi highlighted what they saw as the importance of maintaining relationships with their extended family members so as to be able to rely on them as a safety net. They said they had reinforced such ties given their role as hosts and their own potential for displacement.

IDPs in Uvira in South Kivu and Masisi in North Kivu said they had tried to make up for the loss of family ties by establishing new ones and building cohesion between displaced and host communities. It was noted that some young women had married men from well resourced host families as a coping mechanism.

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I’m not doing this (for you), I’m not even studying anymore.

- (Example of children’s disrespect towards their fathers)
- Displaced man in Birere
An IDP’s extended family members can play an important role as a safety net during their displacement. They may act as hosts, provide land for cultivation and shelter, and be a source of credit in times of economic hardship.

Our research shows, however, that family is not the only safety net and often not the most important one. Friends, neighbours, members of the same church and people from the same ethnic group also play an important role. The presence of family members is a pull factor when IDPs choose where to flee, but it appears that considerations such as security, proximity to their home village and land, and access to economic opportunities take precedence.¹⁸

Solidarity: one way to cope

When IDPs arrive in their place of refuge, one of their most immediate needs is for shelter, and their extended family can play an important role in providing it. Many of the focus group participants living with hosts, though not the majority, said they had been housed by members of their wider family, including that of their parents.

That said, hospitality extends beyond family ties. Hosts in South Kivu said that displaced family members sometimes arrive with their friends and neighbours. As such, one host family may share their home with as many as five displaced families, only one of which is related. Aware that they themselves may be displaced one day and need to rely on strangers, hosts also said that the absence of family links was not a reason to refuse to take in IDPs. Indeed, more than half of the IDPs in our focus groups were hosted by strangers, highlighting the extent of solidarity beyond family, friends and other pre-existing ties.

Once IDPs have found temporary shelter, recovering their autonomy, living under their own roof and growing their own food become prime considerations. In many cases, however, they no longer have access to their own land, either because it is too far away or their home areas are insecure, they need to find a new plot of land, for which family links can be beneficial. Most IDPs in our study who had lived with a host family between a year and 18 months had been allocated a plot of their land to build their own shelter in an effort to relieve the burden on the hosts, restore intimacy and avoid disputes.
Host families in Kibabi, North Kivu, tended to be more willing to cede land to their relatives than those in other areas. In Lweba in South Kivu, however, where there has been repeated displacement and inheritance issues prevent host families from giving up part of their land, the opposite is true. Here IDPs live on land that is part of hosts’ children’s inheritance, potentially reducing their own offspring’s future livelihood.

The extended family is often the most important safety net when it comes to caring for those with special needs, such as older people, orphans and people with disabilities. Parents or the oldest child tend to assume the role of carers. Those without such support depend on neighbours, “people with a good heart” or begging, according to focus group participants.

In Birere in North Kivu, IDPs living in the displacement camp helped those with special needs who did not have relatives, building them shelters and designating a neighbour to help them find enough food. Such initiatives can also be important in terms of providing moral support. As members of host families in Kibabi, North Kivu, pointed out, displacement implies an increase in the number of people in need of emotional or mental health support.

Access to credit through family links

Given the economic hardship associated with displacement, access to credit can be important to IDPs and host families, both in meeting their daily food needs and covering unforeseen outlay such as healthcare costs and other emergencies.

The extended family is not the only and often not even the primary provider of loans, but some IDPs still cited it as a source of credit, particularly the woman’s family, along with friends and neighbours. That said, family members may have been displaced themselves and hosts may be overstretched, in both cases meaning that resources are scarce. Established systems of lending and borrowing may be disrupted by displacement and many IDPs said they struggled to obtain credit if they were able to at all.

Trust between the lender and the borrower is also an important prerequisite, but such confidence is sometimes undermined as family relationships deteriorate. Men from the host community in Katale in North Kivu, who had been displaced in 2013, said they were no longer able to borrow money from their wives’ family because their relationship had worsened both during their own displacement and while hosting IDPs. In some cases, men’s irresponsible behaviour towards their spouses’ family was also an issue.

I’m ashamed of going to visit them.
- Displaced man at the Katale site

Before displacement, traders may have accepted assets such as livestock as loan guarantees, but many IDPs lose their animals as a result of their flight. When all financial credit lines dry up, they tend to borrow in kind, mainly food in return for labour. Young IDPs tend not to borrow for concern about their ability to make repayments, unless they are heads of family. Some women also said that the lack of reliable and familiar sources of credit increased the risk of gender-based violence, with those unable to make repayments forced to “reimburse in other forms”.

If a person has no family, then everybody around them helps them.
- Woman from host family in Kibabi

If a person has no family, then everybody around them helps them.
Displacement has significant effects on family structures and dynamics. The most visible impact is the separation of members, the risk of which increases with each displacement. Less visibly, the distribution of roles between family members also shifts, cohesion is undermined and the traditional status of men and women within the unit may be dramatically altered.

Confronted with such changes, a lack of intimacy and scarce resources, family members become estranged, mutual understanding breaks down and the risk of domestic violence increases. Children may also lose their points of reference, distance themselves from their parents or be forced to take on adult roles or become independent earlier. The disruption of the family unit may affect the mental health of all of its members. The more often people are displaced, and the longer their displacement lasts, the more serious such issues tend to become.

Without family, friends or neighbours to rely upon for support, it becomes more difficult for IDPs to cope with the challenges they face and to deal with future shocks. Solidarity, including that of strangers, can help them to cope and rebuild their day-to-day lives.

Resources accessed via such ties have impacts well beyond family dynamics, and some are vital to IDPs’ resilience and wellbeing. Social networks may help them to find work and provide for their families’ basic needs in situations where they are unable to practice their usual livelihoods. If they have access to land, they may be able to make use of their agricultural skills and re-establish their livelihoods. Credit may help them replace lost capital.

It is also important to recognise that family cohesion improves quality of life in and of itself.

**Implications for policy and practice**

- Family relationships and cohesion are key to establishing and strengthening resilience at both the individual and community level. As such, they should be a factor in understanding and analysing the concept of resilience.
- Programmes that aim to improve community resilience should include family cohesion issues during their assessment, design, implementation and evaluation phases.
- Those whose family dynamics have been disrupted should receive better focussed and tailored support, including psychosocial care. This might include training sessions, discussion forums and smaller, more intimate platforms, and the establishment of local associations and support groups, including through churches.
- In the absence of strong family or social support systems, people with special needs should receive particular attention and help to cope with their displacement, including through spontaneous local initiatives.
- The monitoring of changes in displaced families’ dynamics and the collection of disaggregated data on the impacts of displacement on men, women and children are key to developing targeted programmes and to understanding how resilience and coping capacities evolve and can be strengthened over time.
Notes

1 For more information on the project, please see the project paper, available at http://goo.gl/kM5gDL and our first thematic paper, IDPs’ decision-making in the DRC: Defining a framework to support resilience in humanitarian responses to multiple displacement, 30 April 2015, available at http://goo.gl/QovkTT
2 OCHA, September 2015.
3 For more information, please see the forthcoming annual research report for the project
4 In Masisi, North Kivu, the specific locations were Birere/Nyabiondo, Katale and Kibabi. In Fizi, South Kivu, they were Lweba, Nundu and Swima.
5 The National Congress for the Defence of the People (Congrès national pour la défense du people, CNDP)
6 The Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre (Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre, AFDL)
7 The Rally for Congolese Democracy (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie, RCD)
8 Family code, book three, article 700, available at http://goo.gl/yLiuLa
9 For more information, please see our first thematic paper, IDPs’ decision-making in the DRC: Defining a framework to support resilience in humanitarian responses to multiple displacement, 30 April 2015, available at http://goo.gl/QovkTT
10 Desiree Lwambo, Before the War, I was a Man’: Men and Masculinities in Eastern DR Congo, Heal Africa, 2011, p.15, available at http://goo.gl/M43o2e
13 Ibid, pp.4, 9 and 15
14 Ibid, p.17
15 See also Anjalee Kohli, Family relationships and social integration in post-conflict South Kivu province, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: A Mixed Methods Study with Women from Rural Walungu Territory, October 2013, p.54, available at https://goo.gl/lc6JRX
16 IDMC et al, IDPs’ decision-making in the DRC: Defining a framework to support resilience in humanitarian responses to multiple displacement, 30 April 2015, available at http://goo.gl/QovkTT
17 For the purposes of this study, credit includes all formal and informal monetary and in-kind mechanisms
About IDMC

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement. For the millions of people worldwide displaced within their own country, IDMC plays a unique role as a global monitor and evidence-based advocate to influence policy and action by governments, UN agencies, donors, international organisations and NGOs.

IDMC is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent, non-governmental humanitarian organisation.

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The Norwegian Refugee Council is an independent, humanitarian, non-governmental organisation, which provides assistance, protection, and contributes to durable solutions to refugees and internally displaced people worldwide.

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