



FARSIGHT

Displaced People *Where is the real crisis?* The numbers behind the noise

Research exploration
September 2016

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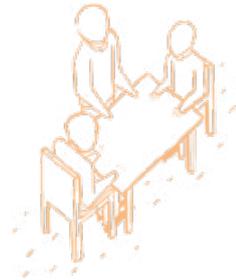
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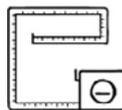
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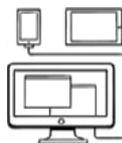
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INTRODUCTION

UNHCR's portrayal of current displacement levels as the **'highest ever since World War Two'** have been reported all over the globe. Yet, even as the Iraq and Syria conflicts have driven considerable numbers from their homes, the emotional approach of the media –illustrated by images of drowned refugees trying to reach European coasts—paints a picture of crisis dependent on sensationalism, not facts.

This reporting has alarmed publics around the world, and particularly in refugee-hosting countries. As the UNHCR states that 'a climate of xenophobia has taken hold in Europe' due to the 'migrant crisis', other commentators have argued that displacement remains **'a small and relatively stable proportion of world migration'**. So where does the truth lie?

This report examines how globally reported 'refugee' numbers often conflate categories of displacement, while lacking any reference to the world's growing ability to host refugees. A fuller exploration on how displacement has changed since the 1950s clarifies the true nature and extent of displacement today.

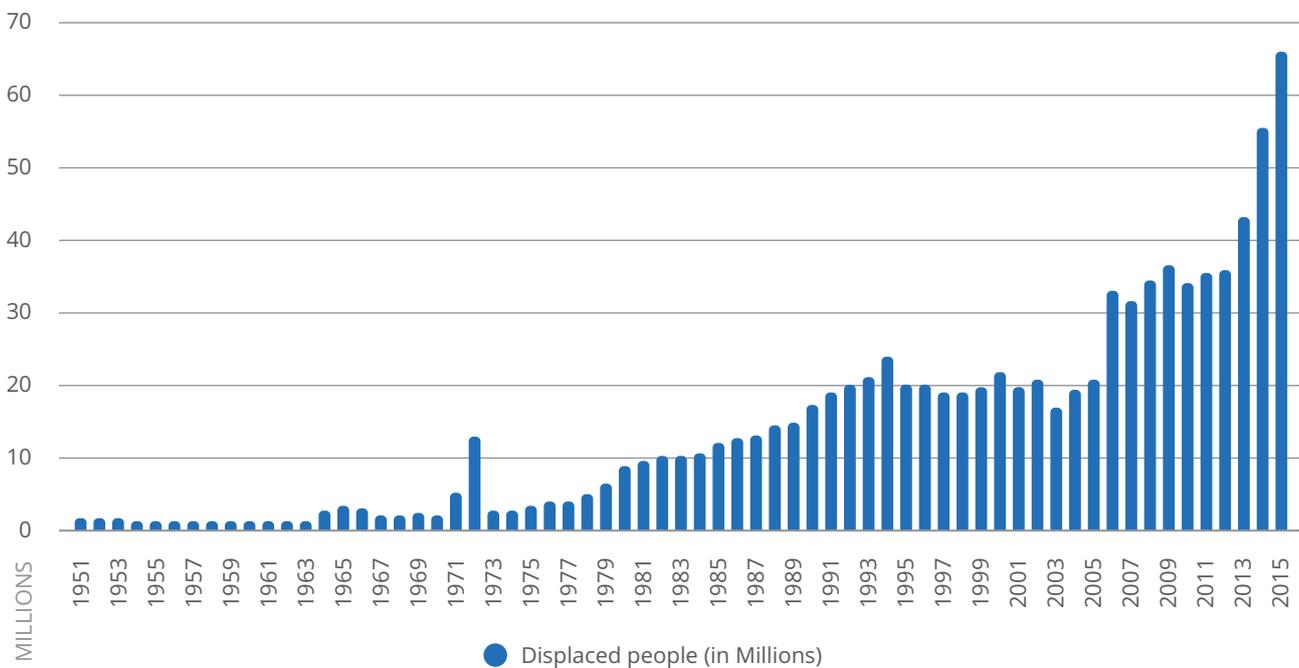


MEASURING DISPLACEMENT BETWEEN 1960 AND 2015

The UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) were created in the aftermath of the Second World War to find durable solutions for displaced Europeans. In the 1960s, the conflicts accompanying decolonization produced a significant number of refugees and UNHCR and IOM started delivering assistance to populations on the African continent. As these international organizations began gradually deploying help and assistance to displaced people worldwide, they also started to keep systematic records on the number of refugees.

At the end of 1960, the total number of displaced people worldwide recorded by UNHCR was 1.6 million. According to UNHCR, in 2015, **“65.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. As such from 1960 to 2015 the number of displaced people increased by 40 times”**.

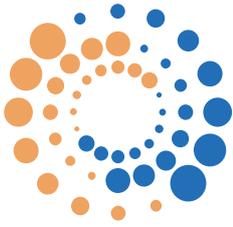
Figure 1: Number of displaced people from 1951 until 2015
Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>



However, the absolute numbers presented by UNHCR obscure a more complex story on displacement record-keeping. The 65 million displaced people registered in 2015 belonged to different categories than those recorded in 1960. In 2015:

- 21 million were recognized refugees: 16 million under UNHCR's mandate and 5 million under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA);
- 3.2 million were asylum seekers; and
- almost 41 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs).

There are also many migrants who do not fit into any of these categories who might also have an effect on the total number. Understanding the differences between these categories is crucial for the analysis of displacement needs.



DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS OF DISPLACEMENT

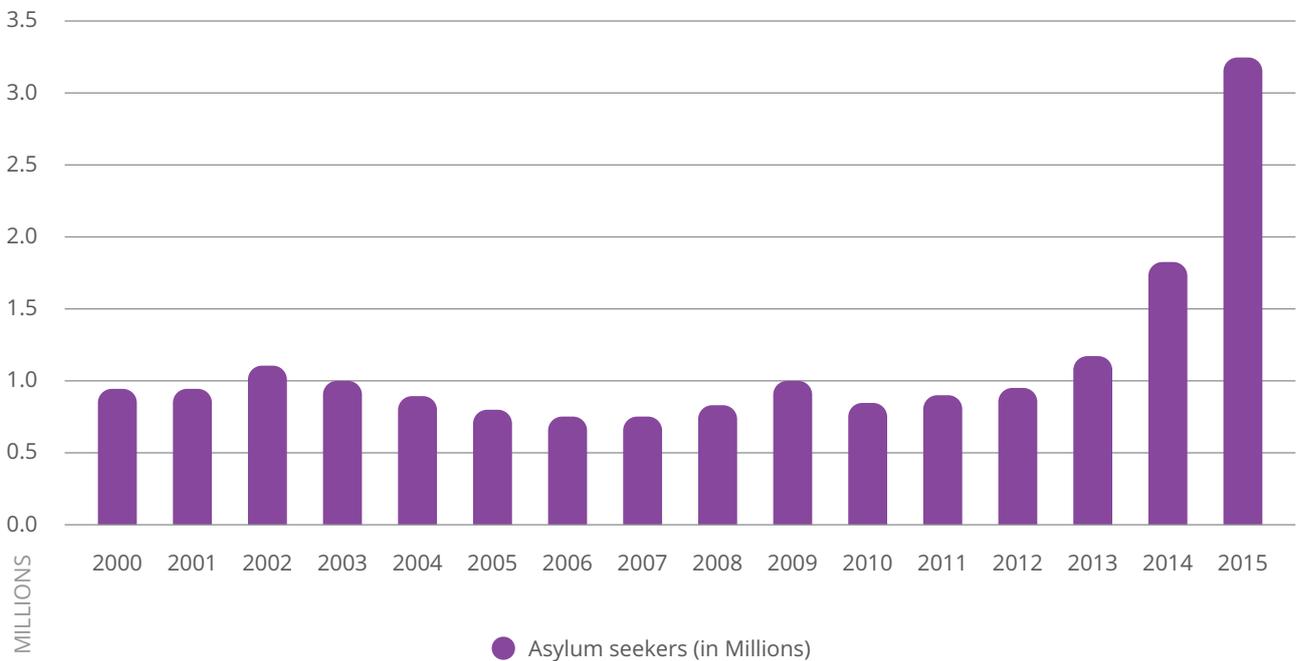
To understand the implications of these numbers, we have to look at each type of displacement.

ASYLUM SEEKERS

Asylum seekers are individuals who have sought international protection and whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined, irrespective of when/where they may have been lodged. Records on asylum seekers published by UNHCR start in 2000, when the total number of asylum seekers recorded was slightly less than 1 million. The absence of data prior to 2000 means that we cannot rely on asylum seeker figures to support claims of historically high displacement.

Figure 2: Asylum seekers from 2000 to 2015

Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>



The number of asylum seekers reached its peak in 2015 at 3.2 million individuals. We can thus see that the number of asylum seekers tripled in 15 years. However, this record number of asylum seekers represents only 4% of the total number of displaced people recorded in 2015.

As such, the increase in the number of asylum seekers does not affect the total number of displaced people in a significant way.



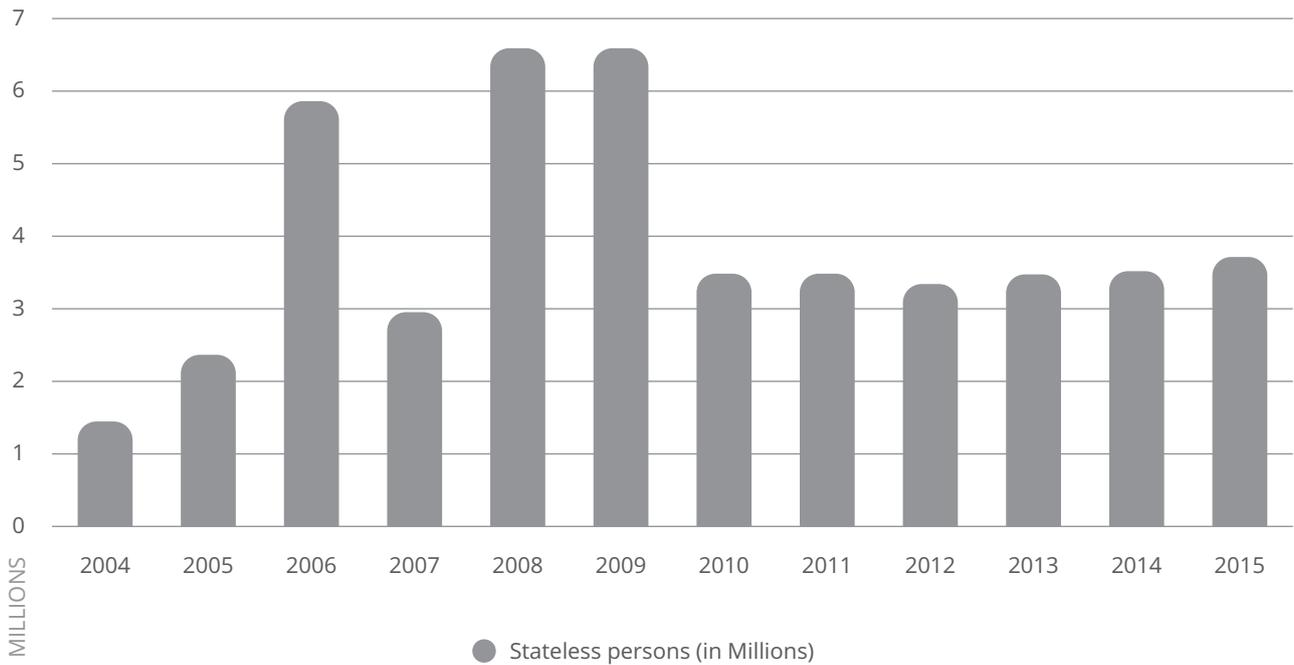
STATELESS PEOPLE

Stateless people are defined under international law as persons who are not considered nationals by any state under its national law. The UNHCR was formally mandated in 1995 to identify and prevent statelessness.

Data on stateless people shows that numbers peaked in 2008 and 2009 at 6.6 and 6.7 million respectively.

Figure 3: Stateless people from 2004 to 2015

Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>



For the last five years (2011-2015), the UNHCR reported the number of stateless people consistently at around 3.5 – 3.7 million individuals. The number of stateless people is therefore far from unprecedented. Furthermore, according to UNHCR, most [stateless people have never been displaced](#). The majority of people are in a stateless situation because of conflicting national laws, as a result of discrimination (e.g. states in which nationality is defined by ethnicity and a person falls outside of the definition), as a result of the secession of a state, or as a result of administrative and practical barriers to official registration. **As such, it is questionable whether stateless people as a category should be included in data on displacement at all, even if included in UNHCR's mandate.**

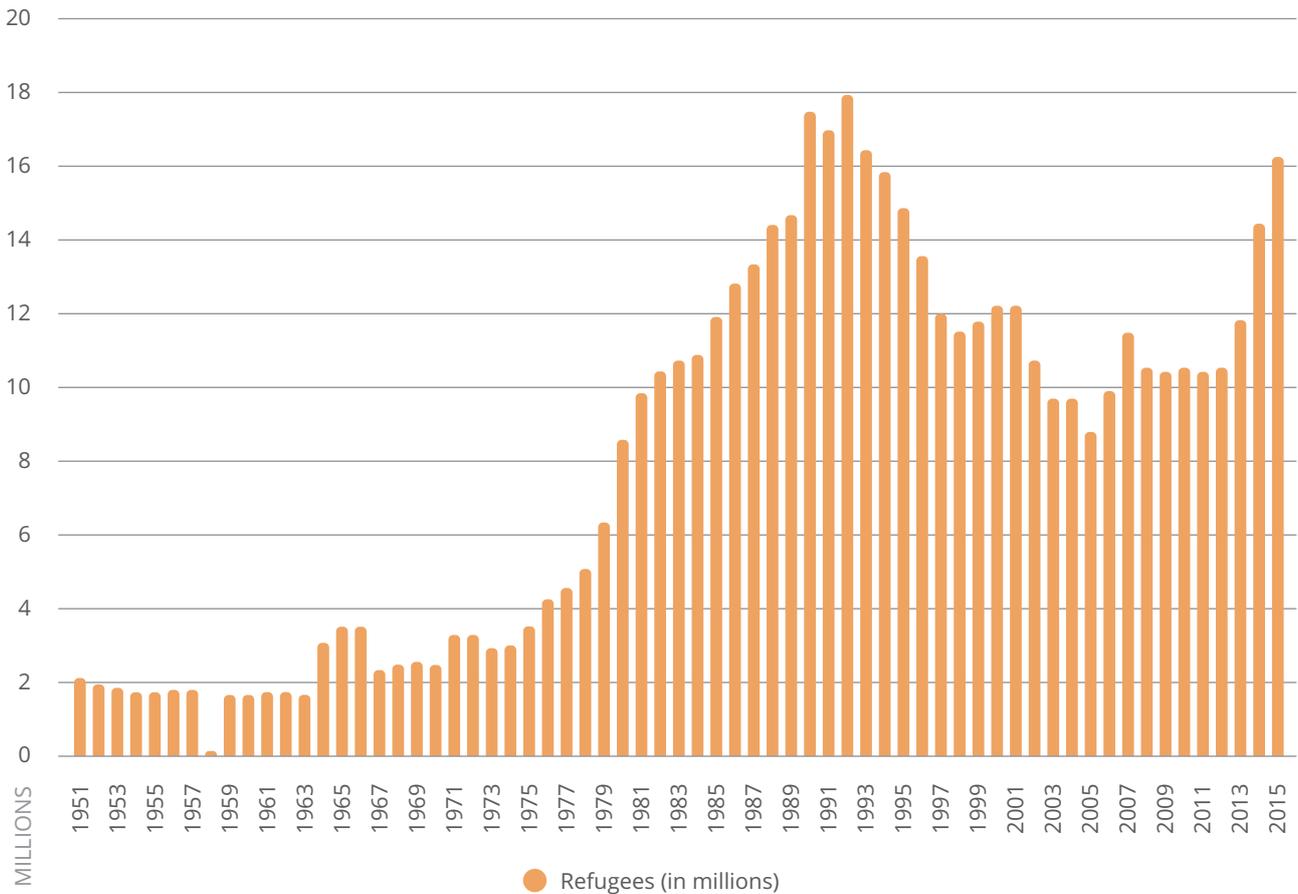


REFUGEES

Refugees are individuals fleeing their country of origin who have been granted refugee status pursuant to the 1951 Geneva Convention, its 1967 Protocols or the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention governing specific problems on refugees in Africa. It should be noted that UNHCR includes certain additional populations under this category too. Among them: refugees recognized under the UNHCR statute, individuals granted temporary protection, and those in 'refugee-like' situations.

From the start of records in 1951 to 2015, the number of refugees increased, peaking in 1992 at 17.8 million.

Figure 4: Refugees from 1951 to 2015, UNHCR
Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>



Since then, the number of refugees as recorded by UNHCR has decreased and in 2005 it was as low as 8.7 million - around the levels of the 1980s. Despite the rancour with which the media reports the displacement and chaos around the world today, refugee numbers are actually lower than in 1990.

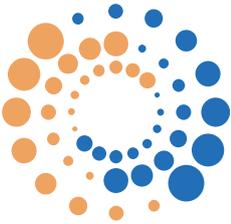
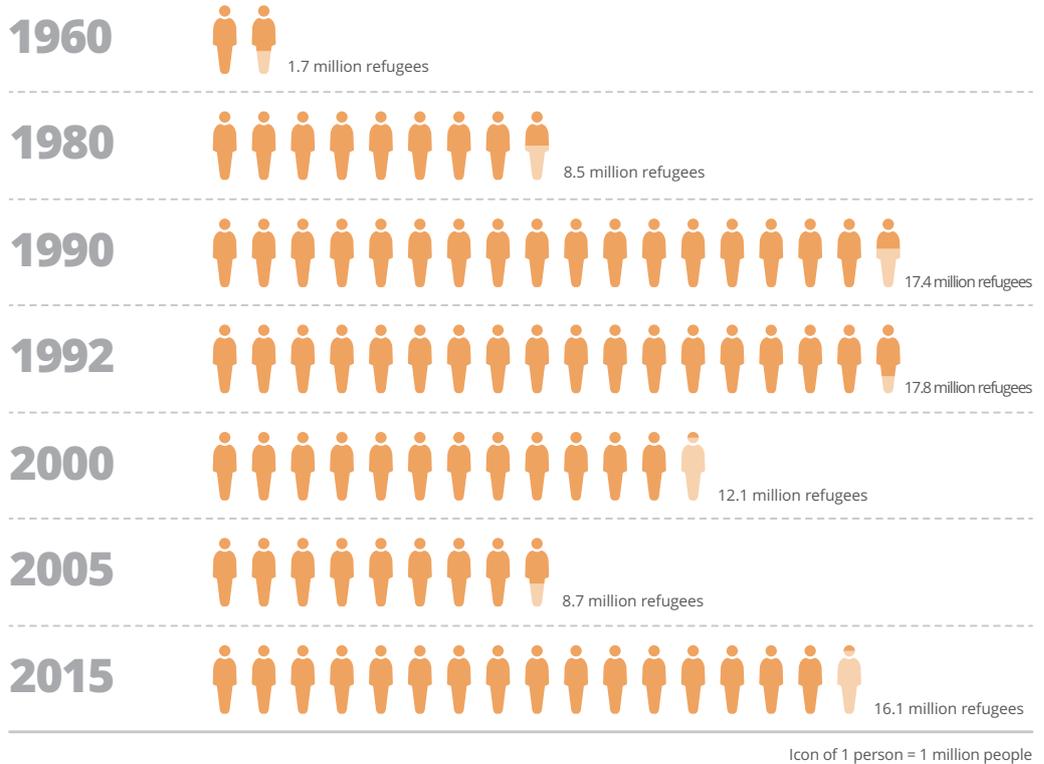


Figure 5: Number of refugees recorded by UNHCR
Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>

NUMBER OF REFUGEES RECORDED BY UNHCR DURING DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS



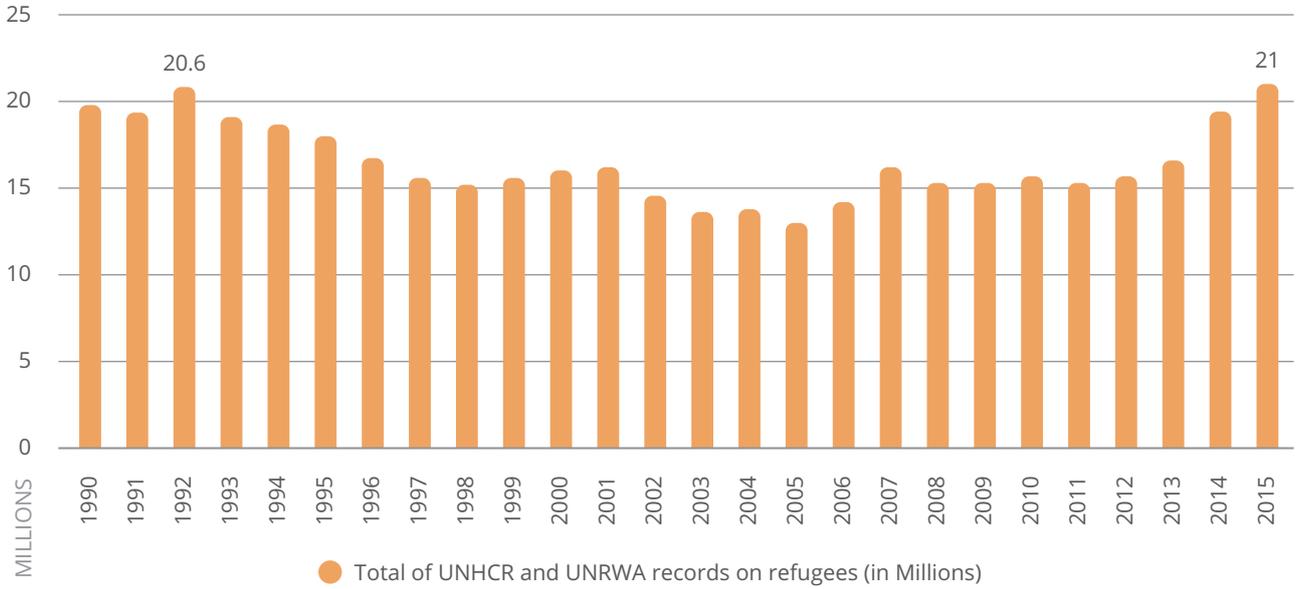
Palestinian refugees have been recorded separately by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) since its founding following the Israel-Palestine conflict in 1948. However, their numbers generally do not feature within UNHCR official records, and historical records are not easily accessible to the public. In 2015 the number of Palestinian refugees reached 5.15 million people. The total number of refugees in the world could be considered to include these people, which would bring the refugee total to 21 million people.

The total number of UNHCR refugees Palestinian refugees reached the 20 million mark in 1990. By 1992, recorded refugees exceeded 20 million, slightly less than the levels reported today.



Combining UNHCR and Palestinian refugees generates a record number of 21 million people displaced in this category, beating the previous known record by 2%. 25% of the total are Palestinian refugees supported by UNRWA. The difference of 2% could be considered within the margin of error related to the difficulties in gathering accurate data on refugees.

Figure 6: Refugees (total of refugees recorded by UNHCR and UNRWA)
Data Source: IDMPC Database; <http://www.internal-displacement.org/database/>



In summary, we can say that this is the highest number of refugees recorded since 1951, but this risks overstating the change over 20-25 years, which has been small.



INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS)

Internally displaced persons are people or groups of individuals who have been **forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence and who have not crossed an international border**. IDPs are generally split into two categories:

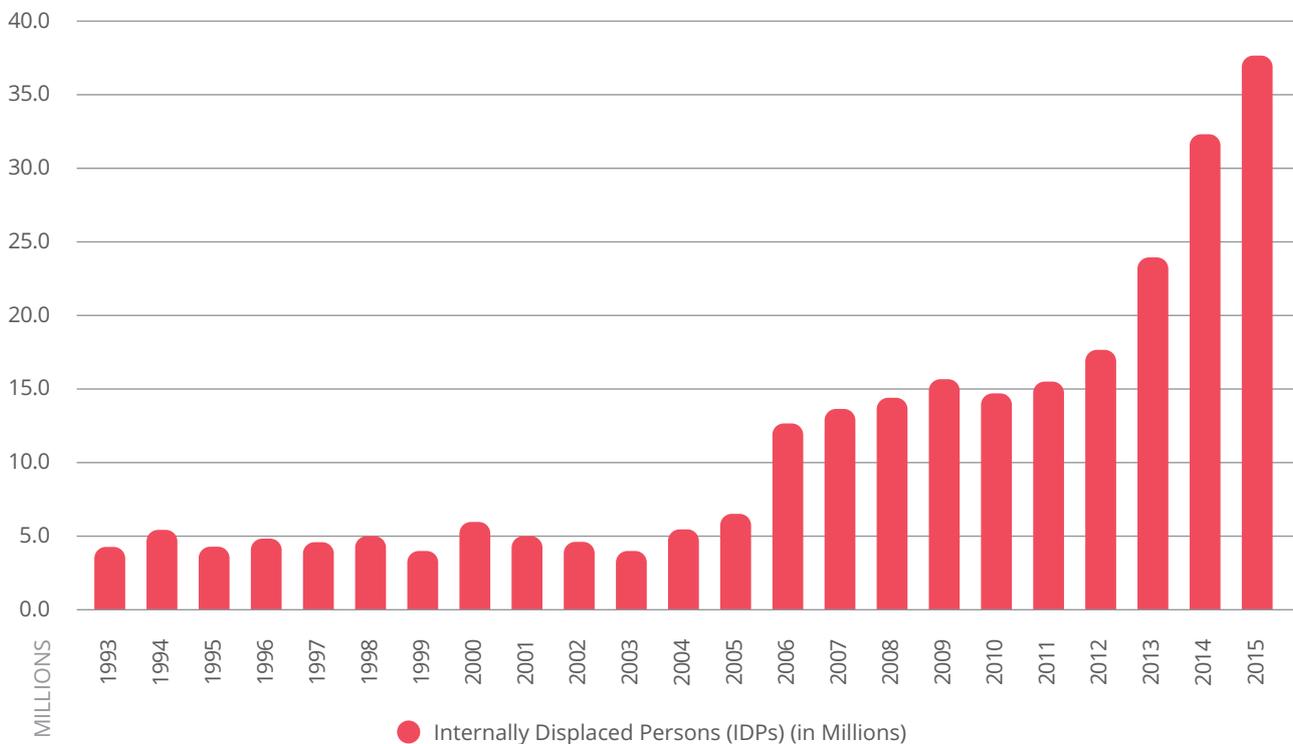
1. conflict IDPs - those fleeing armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, and violations of human rights, and
2. disaster IDPs – those displaced as a result of or natural or man-made disaster.

The number of IDPs has been recorded since 1990 only, in part because IDPs do not benefit from any binding historical international legal framework which might have mandated an international organization to keep records. In 1998, the United Nations developed the ‘Guiding principles on internal displacement’, which included the definition on IDPs. Since then, IDPs have been progressively recognized by the humanitarian community as a neglected group with specific and urgent needs – and data collection has improved accordingly.

In 2015, the total number of IDPs recorded by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement worldwide, recognized and endorsed by United Nations General Assembly resolutions since 1998, and part of the Norwegian Refugee Council) exceeded 41 million, including both conflict-related IDPs and disaster-related IDPs. This is the highest rate of IDPs since records officially began in 1990.

Our analysis focuses on conflict-related IDPs, as their records are used in UNHCR statements on displacement.

Figure 7: Internally displaced persons due to conflict from 1990 to 2015
Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>



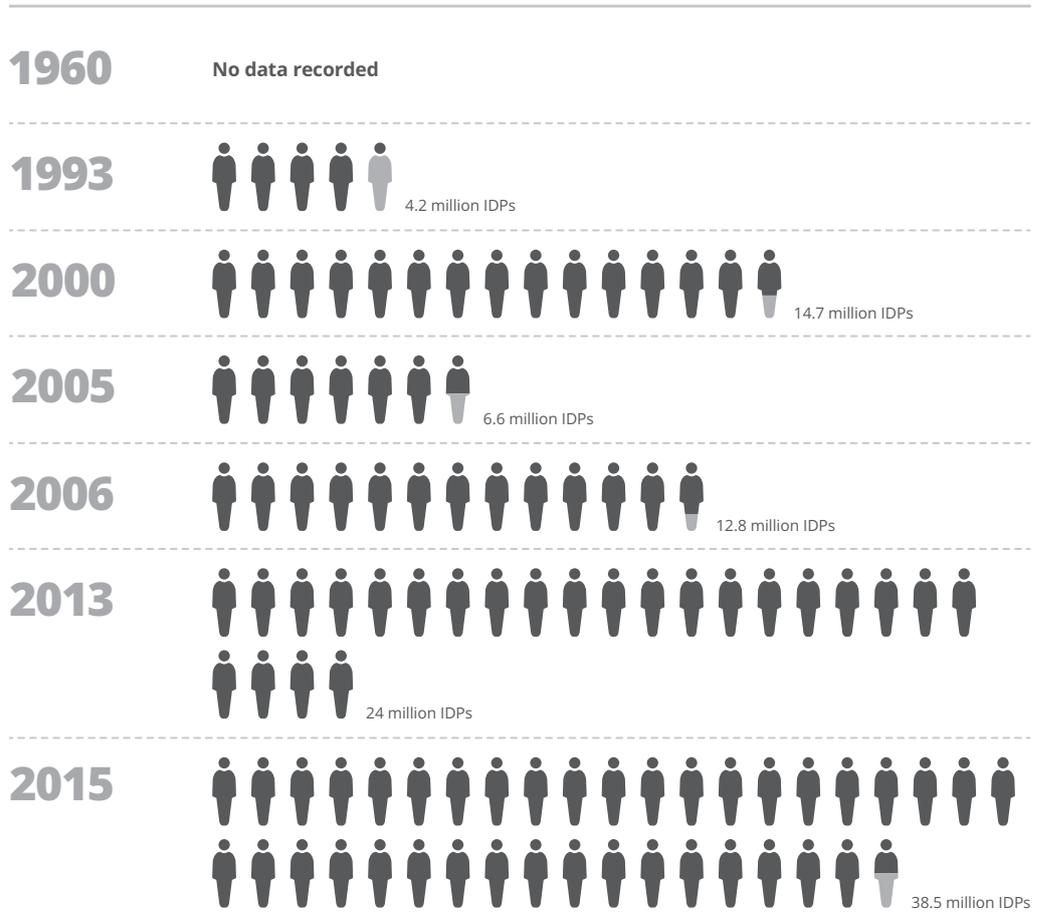


The number of conflict-related IDPs has increased since 1993. An important boundary was crossed from 2005 to 2006, where the number of conflict-related IDPs almost doubled. During these years, the number of refugees was at its lowest level since the 1990s. Three main reasons responsible for this substantial increase in 2016 are¹:

- New registrations of IDPs were recorded in Colombia, Iraq, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Timor Leste.
- The adoption of a “cluster” approach for better management of humanitarian activities saw UNHCR expanded its activities in areas where IDPs are a target population and thus has a better access to them. UNHCR is a leader for the clusters of protection, emergency shelter, camp coordination and management.
- Since 2006 UNHCR statistics have include numbers of IDPs population in more countries than previously. The cluster revolution allowing better access in some new areas allows UNHCR to collect more accurate data in countries where estimates were previously vague. This led to some estimates being revised upwards. For example, when UNHCR undertook a survey in Côte d’Ivoire, its estimate of IDPs in the country increased from 38,000 to 709,000.

Figure 8: Number of conflict-related IDPs recorded by UNHCR
Data Source: UNHCR Population Statistics, <http://popstats.unhcr.org/>

NUMBER OF CONFLICT-RELATED IDPs RECORDED BY UNHCR DURING DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS



Icon of 1 person = 1 million of IDP

¹ Source : UNHCR 2006 Global Trends : <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/4676a71d4.pdf>



The number of conflict-related IDPs is a significant contributor to the total number of forcibly displaced people. Yet, with only two decades' worth of data, statements about 'unprecedented' levels of displacement must be taken with a pinch of salt. Internal displacement due to armed conflicts, generalized violence, human rights violations and natural or man-made disasters was certainly prevalent prior to the 1990s, but IDPs were not recorded as such. Moreover, the tracking of internal displacement has often relied on states' willingness to collect their own data.

As states are often the perpetrators of internal violence and human rights abuses, or simply lack the resources or know-how to generate reliable data, this method is unreliable.

Deeper insights into each category of displaced person shows clearly that the biggest driver of 'unprecedented' numbers is internally displaced people, who have not been monitored for many years and whose numbers and definition are not strictly monitored today.

Current figures on displacement given by UNHCR are not technically wrong, and come as the result of long internal debate about how best to represent highly complex statistics. However, announcements of "displacement" reaching an all-time high are problematic when translated in public debate as refugee movements reaching unmanageable levels. In reality, changes in the number of refugees have been a secondary contributor to growth in the number of displaced people. Lumping them all together gives a false sense of the scale and the nature of the challenge.



DISPLACEMENT IN AN EXPANDING WORLD

Setting the absolute displacement figures collected by UNHCR against world population also gives a sense of how the relative challenge of displacement has changed in contemporary times. The world population increased by 250% between 1960 and 2015, from 3 billion to 7.4 billion people.

Figure 9: World population and number of refugees in different time period
Data Source: World Bank Open Data : <http://data.worldbank.org/>

Year	World Population	Number of Refugees recorded by UNHCR	Refugees as part of world population (in %)	1 refugee per how many individuals?
1960	3.035 billion people	1.7 million refugees	0.06 %	1.666 persons
1980	4.437 billion people	8.5 million refugees	0.19 %	526 persons
1990	5.283 billion people	17.4 million refugees	0.32 %	313 persons
2000	6.115 billion people	12.1 million refugees	0.20 %	500 persons
2005	6.514 billion people	8.7 million refugees	0.13 %	770 persons
2015	7.347 billion people	16.1 million refugees	0.22 %	454 persons

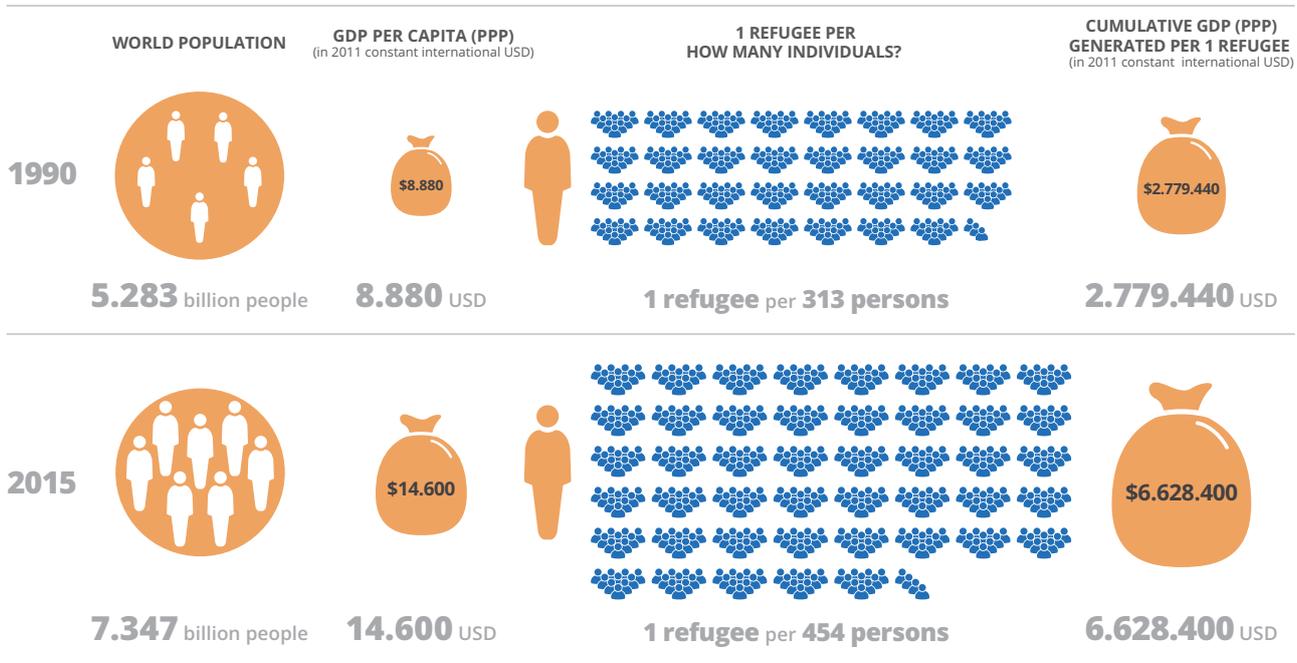
Figure 9 shows refugees as a proportion of the total world population in a given year. The ratio reached its peak in 1990, when refugees corresponded to 0.32% of a world population. During this year the total number of refugees worldwide was similar to the number of inhabitants of Iraq and Uganda, countries whose populations ranked 45th and 46th globally in 1990.

To compare, in 2015 UNHCR recorded 16.1 million refugees globally, 0.22% of the world population. Their total number is similar to the population of Ecuador, ranked 65th in the world by number of inhabitants. **Thus, in relative terms, refugee displacement is actually less than 1990 levels.**

To measure growth in the world economy, we can use The World Bank calculations of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) - a commonly used indicator to determine economic performance. If we take GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, we have a general idea of the spending power of countries, according to their wealth, population, and the local cost of living. Thus the GDP per capita (PPP) gives us better insight on how living conditions are evolving over time.



Figure 10: Comparison of Refugees per population ratio with GDP per capita PPP (2011 constant international USD)
 Data Source: World Bank Open Data : <http://data.worldbank.org/>



By comparing the ratios of refugees to population with refugees to GDP per capita (PPP), we obtain an idea of how global wealth is increasing or decreasing relative to the number of refugees and the population.

Globally, GDP per capita (PPP) was almost two times higher in 2015 than in 1990, while the ratio of refugees to world population was lower in 2015 than in 1990. In 1990 there were 313 persons per refugee and a GDP (PPP) per capita of 8 880 USD.

From this, we can calculate the wealth and size of the global population relative to the number of refugees. The total 'wealth capacity per refugee' generated by the global economy can be found by multiplying these two figures together, giving 2,779,440 USD. In 2015 there were fewer refugees per person (454 people per refugee) while GDP (PPP) per capita almost doubled to reach 14,600 USD. The refugee to population ratio (1 refugee for every 454 persons) therefore sees a total of 6,628,400 USD, over two times the 1990 levels of 'wealth capacity per refugee'. In short, in 2015 a greatly enlarged world capacity to host refugees—in population and wealth terms—was tasked with dealing with a relatively much smaller challenge.

However, the capacity to absorb refugees varies by country. Using the same method as above, we can determine the distribution of refugees by country, in relative terms.

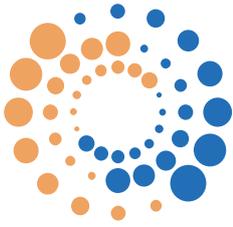
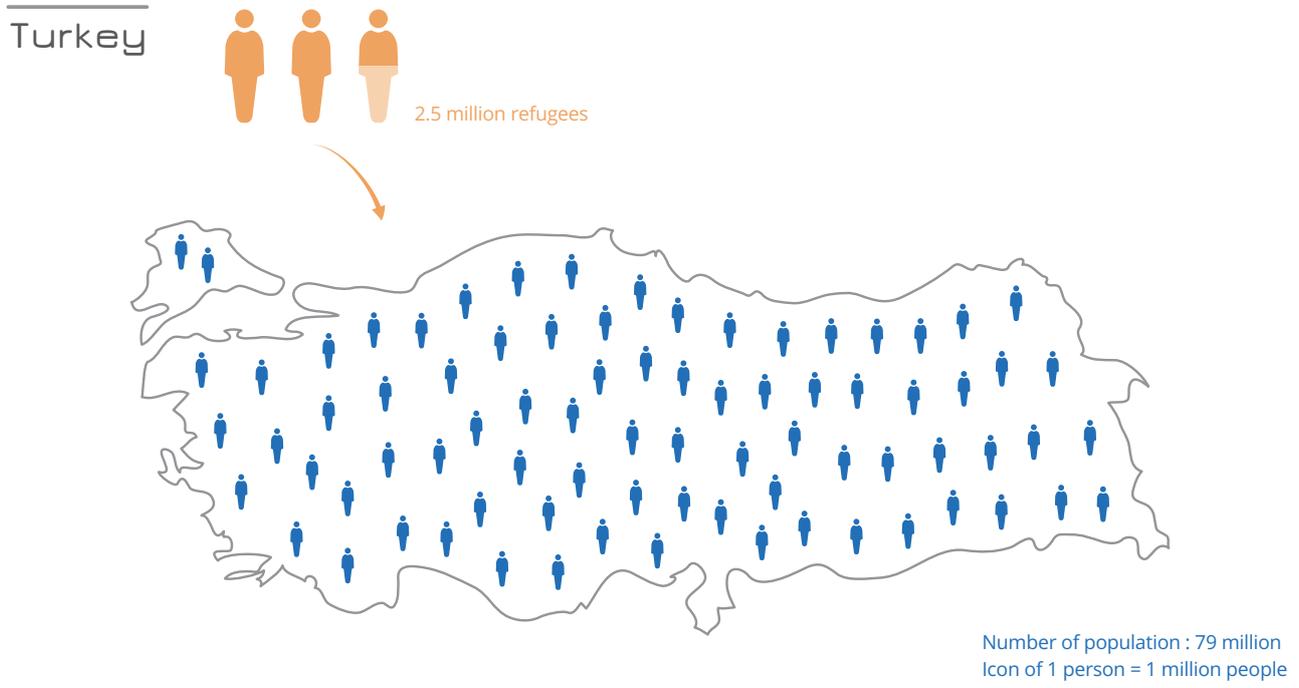


Figure 11: Comparison of Refugees per population ratio with GDP per capita PPP (2011 constant international USD) in Turkey
Data Source: World Bank Open Data : <http://data.worldbank.org/>



1 refugee per
31 Turkish
citizens



Pursuant to UNHCR data, in 2015 Turkey hosted the largest number of refugees with 2.5 million people. With approximately 79 million inhabitants, one refugee corresponds to 31 Turkish citizens. The World Bank states that Turkey's GDP per capita (PPP) in 2015 was an above-average 18,959 (2011 constant international) USD - 60th place in the world. 'Wealth capacity per refugee' can therefore be calculated at 587,729 USD, less than a tenth of the world average, reflecting the disproportionate number of refugees hosted by Turkey relative to its population.

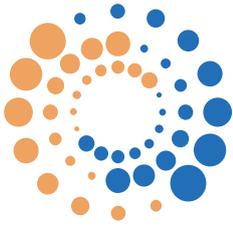
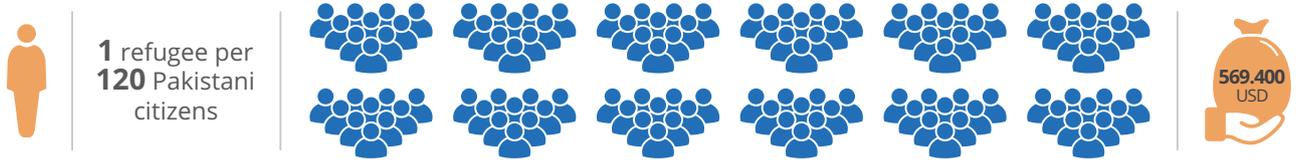
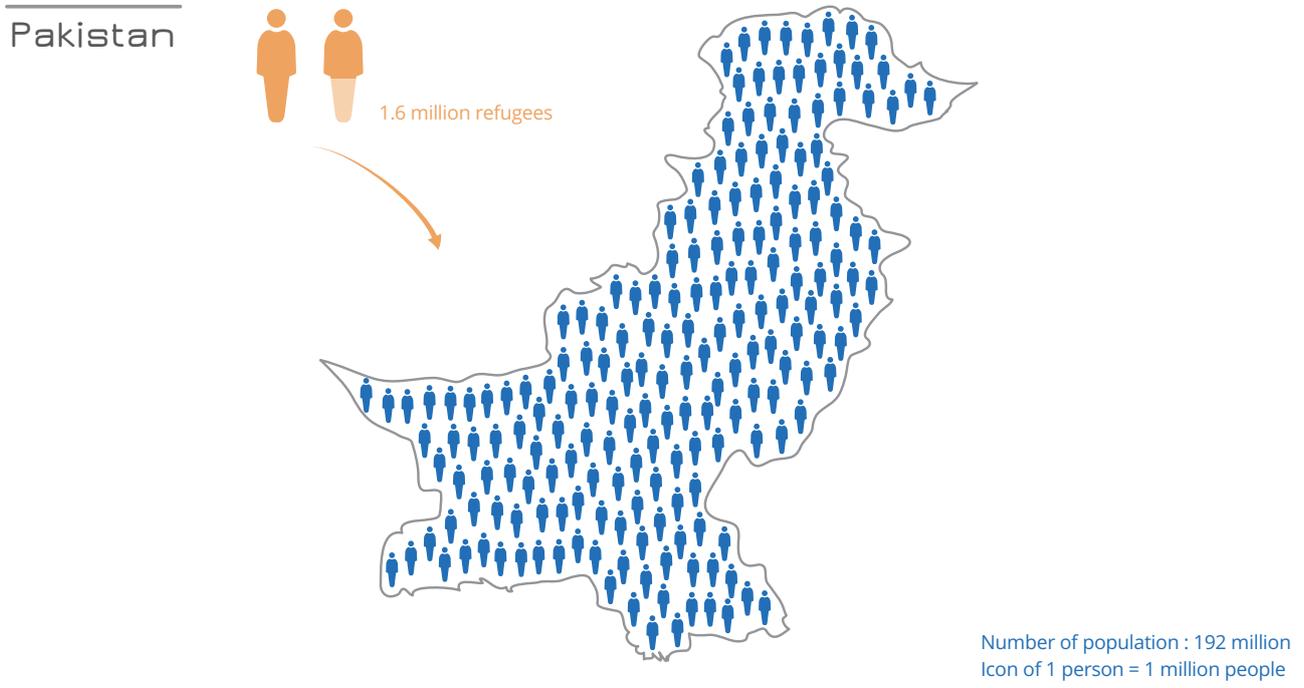


Figure 12: Comparison of Refugees per population ratio with GDP per capita PPP (2011 constant international USD) in Pakistan
 Data Source: World Bank Open Data : <http://data.worldbank.org/>



The country that hosted the second largest number of refugees is, according to UNHCR, Pakistan with 1.6 million refugees. With a population of around 192 million inhabitants, one refugee corresponds to 120 Pakistani citizens. Pakistan’s GDP per capita (PPP) in 2015 was 4,745 USD. Pakistan is placed 131st in The World Bank ranking of countries by GDP per capita (PPP). The ‘wealth capacity per refugee’ can therefore be calculated as 569,400 USD, slightly less than Turkey, indicating that despite hosting fewer refugees in absolute terms, Pakistan faces a greater challenge relative to economy and population.

The impact of refugees on host countries is relative to their capacity to cope with the demands placed on its resources – at least for the period that refugees can be expected to remain dependent on state or international support. The challenge is therefore less one of dealing with a mass of displaced people, but distributing the costs of providing protection accordingly.

When we see the numbers on displacement in full context and detail, the issue—while undoubtedly urgent—becomes less dramatic. Rather than the scale of displacement, it is the ageing refugee protection system as a whole that should become the primary concern, in order to better manage displacement according to countries’ relative wealth and population.



CONCLUSIONS

When we hear that around 65 million people have been displaced due to armed conflict, persecution, human rights violations or other generalized violence, we need to understand this number contains all categories of displaced people and makes no reference to the world's ability to cater to refugees.

While this emphasizes the existence of real needs, which may be useful as a method for building support for international protection, when the media communicates these figures without nuance, the numbers can become unclear and confusing. The lack of clarity can alarm publics in donor countries and paint a picture of unmanageable need, which could undermine support for humanitarian protection.

In reality, the majority of displaced people do not travel internationally. Rather, they are internally displaced persons still living in their country of origin. They do not need to be hosted by another country and do not represent an immigration 'threat' as many publics and populist politicians fear.

When we are clearer on different categories of displaced people, their different needs can be better understood and addressed. Such clarity also allow a better understanding of the different challenges various displaced populations are facing. Putting the displacement challenge into perspective in this way opens the door for sensible debate and pragmatic solutions on improving the international protection system– something sorely missing in migration debates of late.



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