Introduction

The concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P) developed in large measure from efforts to design an international system to protect internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The explosion of civil wars emanating from and following the Cold War brought into view millions of persons inside their own countries who were uprooted from their homes and in need of international protection and assistance. Many had little or no access to food, medicine or shelter and were vulnerable to assault, sexual violence, and all manner of human rights abuse.

When first counted in 1982, 1.2 million IDPs could be found in 11 countries; by 1995, the number had surged to 20 to 25 million.1

The international system, however, set up after the Second World War, focused almost exclusively on refugees – persons who fled across borders to escape persecution. The 1951 Refugee Convention and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provided international protection to people who were outside their countries of origin and deprived of the protection of their own governments. As UNICEF's Executive Director observed, 'The world has established a minimum safety net for refugees,' but 'This is not yet the case with respect to internally displaced populations.'2

In the displaced persons camps set up after the Second World War in Europe, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, a predecessor of UNHCR, protected both refugees and IDPs. But during the Cold War, borders became sacrosanct and concepts of non-interference in internal affairs overrode most efforts to protect people inside their countries.3 During the Biafra civil war in the 1960s, the High Commissioner for Refugees restricted help to IDPs with the explanation that: 'my Office is not in a position to deal with situations affecting nationals who find themselves within a territory of their country.'4

It was not until the 1990s that this gap in treatment was challenged and the international community began in a concerted way to try to assist and protect people uprooted inside their countries. UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar pointed the way in 1991 with these words: 'We are clearly witnessing what is probably an irresistible shift in public attitudes towards the belief that the defense of the oppressed in the name of morality should prevail over frontiers and legal documents.'5 Concepts of human security, sovereignty as responsibility and the
responsibility to protect developed in large measure in response to the need of IDPs and other affected civilians for protection from the gross violations of human rights perpetrated in civil wars and internal strife.

This article examines the origin of R2P from the perspective of IDP protection and identifies the problems that arise in applying the concept to displaced persons. It then offers suggestions for reconciling R2P with IDPs so that the concept may benefit displaced persons, as was intended.

Read the full report.