

# Rethinking Internal Displacement: History, Concepts, and Contemporary Drivers and Challenges

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## Abstract

Internal displacement is a major humanitarian and human rights challenge in the contemporary world. Although often associated with armed conflict and disasters, it is neither a recent phenomenon nor one confined to emergency situations. This article rethinks internal displacement by examining its historical evolution, conceptual foundations, and contemporary drivers and challenges. Drawing on a qualitative, conceptual, and analytical approach based on secondary literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, the study traces the emergence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a distinct category within international human rights discourse. It explores the development of normative frameworks, particularly the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and distinguishes internal displacement from migration and refugee while recognizing their interconnections. The article further employs the drivers and triggers framework to explain how structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, inequality, weak governance, environmental degradation, and social exclusion interact with immediate shocks, including conflict, disasters, development projects, and conservation interventions, to produce displacement. The article argues that internal displacement should be understood not as an isolated humanitarian event but as a historically continuous and structurally embedded process linked to broader patterns of political, economic, and environmental transformation. By integrating historical, conceptual, and contemporary perspectives, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of internal displacement and highlights the need for rights-based, preventive, and long-term policy responses to address its growing scale and complexity.

**Keywords:** *Internal displacement, internally displaced persons, forced migration, human rights, displacement drivers, displacement triggers.*

## Introduction

Internal displacement has emerged as one of the most pressing humanitarian and political concerns of the contemporary world. Although its visibility in policy and academic debates has increased in recent decades, the phenomenon itself is not new. Populations have long

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Published: 30 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301155>

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been forced to move within national boundaries due to conflict, state formation, development processes, and environmental pressures. What has changed is the way these populations are conceptualized and governed within legal and policy frameworks.

The emergence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a distinct category gained clarity with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), which define IDPs as individuals or groups forced to leave their homes due to conflict, violence, human rights violations, or disasters without crossing an international border (United Nations, 1998). Unlike refugees, IDPs remain within their own country and therefore fall under national jurisdiction, producing a persistent protection gap in international governance.

Historically, internal displacement has been closely linked to broader processes of political, economic, and social transformation. From early state formation to colonial restructuring and modern development interventions, displacement has accompanied shifts in territorial control and resource distribution. This continuity suggests that displacement is not an exceptional outcome of crisis but a recurring feature of structural change.

This article rethinks internal displacement by examining its historical evolution, conceptual development, and contemporary drivers and emerging challenges. It argues that internal displacement should be understood not only as a response to immediate triggers but also as a structurally embedded and continuously evolving phenomenon shaped by long-term socio-political and environmental processes.

The existing scholarship has extensively examined conflict-induced displacement, legal protection frameworks, and contemporary displacement trends. However, relatively few studies integrate the historical evolution, conceptual development, and emerging drivers of internal displacement within a single analytical framework. This article addresses this gap by offering a comprehensive conceptual reassessment of internal displacement.

This article adopts a qualitative conceptual and analytical approach based on secondary sources. It draws on existing scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, including United Nations frameworks, IDMC data, and academic studies on migration and displacement. The study uses thematic analysis to examine three core dimensions: historical evolution, conceptual distinctions, and contemporary drivers and its challenges of internal displacement. No primary field data is used; instead, the paper synthesizes and critically interprets existing knowledge to develop a comprehensive analytical framework.

### **Internal Displacement: Concept and Historical Continuities**

While the previous section introduced internal displacement as a contemporary governance concern, this section examines its deeper historical continuities and conceptual foundations. It is commonly used to describe situations in which individuals or groups are forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or habitual places of residence without crossing an internationally recognized state border (Deng, 1999). Unlike voluntary migration, internal displacement is marked by coercion, the absence of meaningful choice, and heightened exposure to socio-economic and political vulnerability (Kalin, 2008). While the discourse of internal displacement gained prominence only in the latter half of the twentieth century, the

underlying social processes that generate displacement caused by environmental stress, armed conflict, political domination, economic restructuring, and state-led interventions have existed throughout human history. A historical approach to internal displacement does not imply the retroactive application of contemporary legal definitions to pre-modern societies. Rather, it seeks to identify recurring patterns of involuntary movement, dispossession, livelihood disruption, and social marginalization that closely resemble present-day displacement experiences in both their causes and consequences (Regasa & Lietaert, 2022). Situating displacement within a long historical continuum enables a deeper understanding of its structural character. It reveals how displacement is repeatedly produced during periods of political transformation, territorial consolidation, economic reorganization, and changing human environment relations. This perspective also helps explain why particular social groups, especially agrarian communities, indigenous populations, and economically marginalized households, remain persistently vulnerable to displacement across time and space. Within this framework, early civilizations, medieval societies, colonial regimes, and modern nation-states can all be examined for processes of displacement, even in the absence of formal human rights regimes.

### **Emergence of Internal Displacement as a Global Human Rights Category**

Internal displacement, while a longstanding social phenomenon, only emerged as a distinct analytical and policy category in the latter half of the twentieth century. Early manifestations of what we now recognize as internally displaced persons (IDPs) can be traced back to the Second World War, when large populations were uprooted but remained within their own countries. At the time, the term “IDPs” was not in use; international actors referred broadly to ‘displaced persons’, occasionally noting subgroups who had not crossed international boundaries (Dirikgil, 2022).

### **Early Recognition: WWII and Post-war Era**

During WWII, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), established in 1943, provided some differentiation between refugees seeking to return home and those displaced within national borders. Yet, despite this early acknowledgment, post-war legal frameworks, most notably the 1951 Refugee Convention, deliberately omitted provisions for “internal refugees.” Eleanor Roosevelt, during negotiations, argued that internal displacement represented “problems of a different character,” reinforcing their exclusion from international protection (UNHCR, 1996). Consequently, IDPs remained legally unprotected, even though they faced risks similar to those of refugees (Orchard, 2018).

### **Conceptual Development: 1970s-1990s**

During the 1970s, UN agencies increasingly engaged with internally displaced populations, albeit under terms such as “internal refugees,” “internal migrants,” or “internal exiles” (Orchard, 2019; Cohen, 2006). These terms often blurred the distinction between voluntary and forced movements, reflecting the nascent understanding of displacement as a distinct category. Despite growing recognition, internal displacement remained largely invisible in international policy until the 1990s, when crises in Sudan, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Iraq brought

widespread attention to human rights violations affecting populations who remained within their national borders. The displacement of Iraqi Kurds particularly highlighted the inadequacy of refugee-focused frameworks and underscored the need for a rights-based approach to internal displacement.

### **The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998)**

A decisive moment occurred in 1992 with the appointment of Francis Deng as the first UN Representative on Internally Displaced Persons. Deng's mandate explicitly linked displacement with human rights, advising the UN on normative and practical measures to protect IDPs (Orchard, 2018; UNHCR, 1996). The resulting Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), drafted under Deng and Walter Kälin, provided the first comprehensive international framework for IDPs. They clarified that IDPs are persons forced to flee due to armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, or disasters, without crossing international borders (UN, 1998). The Principles affirm that IDPs retain the same legal rights as other citizens, including the rights to security, shelter, health, and education, while emphasizing that national governments bear primary responsibility for their protection, with the international community providing support when necessary (Kälin, 2008).

### **Human Rights Integration and Institutional Evolution**

Since the 1990s, international frameworks have increasingly framed internal displacement as a human rights challenge, rather than solely a humanitarian concern. The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals recognized displaced populations as vulnerable groups, whose protection and empowerment are critical for broader development outcomes. Similarly, the 2016 Agenda for Humanity from the World Humanitarian Summit identified reducing forced internal displacement as a core global responsibility, calling for interventions that respect dignity, safety, and rights (Orchard, 2018). Institutionally, the UN has maintained evolving mandates on IDPs through a series of Special Representatives and Special Rapporteurs (Deng, Kälin, Beyani, and Jimenez-Damary), emphasizing the centrality of human rights in international engagement. Nevertheless, coordination challenges remain, and scholars note that IDPs have often been “mainstreamed into oblivion,” with limited research, advocacy, or institutional focus (Orchard, 2018).

### **Distinguishing Migration, Internal Displacement, and Refugee: Conceptual Linkages and Differences**

Human mobility takes multiple forms, of which migration, internal displacement, and refugeehood are among the most significant. Although these categories all involve the movement of people away from their place of habitual residence, they differ in terms of causation, voluntariness, territorial scope, legal status, and protection frameworks. At the same time, they are often interconnected and may overlap in practice. A careful distinction among them is therefore necessary for analyzing internal displacement within broader mobility processes.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), migration broadly refers to the movement of persons from their usual place of residence to a new one, whether across an

international border or within a state. The concept includes both internal and international migration and encompasses movements of varying duration, causes, and legal status. Since there is no universally agreed-upon definition of “migration” or “migrant, ” the term is commonly used as an umbrella category covering diverse forms of mobility, including labor migration, family migration, student mobility, and forced movement (IOM). For demographic purposes, migration is generally divided into international migration, in which individuals cross state borders, and internal migration, in which movement occurs within the same country. Rural-urban migration is a common form of internal migration, often associated with employment and urbanization.

Most migration, particularly labor and family migration, is commonly associated with some degree of agency or choice. However, it should be noted that Migration is often presented as voluntary, yet the distinction between voluntary and forced migration is frequently blurred by structural inequalities, insecurity, and limited livelihood options (Castles, 2003). Thus, migration exists on a continuum ranging from relatively voluntary movement to movement undertaken under severe structural pressures.

Internal displacement constitutes a more specific category within this wider field of human mobility. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals or groups who have been forced or obliged to flee their homes or habitual places of residence but have not crossed an internationally recognized state border (United Nations, 1998). Unlike many migrants, IDPs move under conditions of coercion, where remaining in place becomes impossible, unsafe, or unsustainable due to armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, disasters, development projects, or environmental crises. The defining feature of internal displacement is therefore not movement itself, but forced movement within national borders.

Although some institutions have occasionally described IDPs as “internal migrants, ” such terminology can be misleading because it obscures the distinctive vulnerabilities associated with displacement. As Cantor and Apollo (2020) argue, IDPs are not merely a sub-category of internal labor migrants. Their movement is often accompanied by sudden asset loss, destruction of housing, insecurity, trauma, and prolonged marginalization. IDPs frequently experience poorer labor market outcomes, deeper poverty, and reduced access to land and social networks compared to other internal migrants. Internal displacement should therefore be understood as a distinct societal process with humanitarian and developmental implications, rather than simply another form of internal migration.

Refugees share with internal displacement the element of forced movement, but differ primarily in terms of territory and law. Refugees are persons who flee persecution, conflict, or violence and cross an international border to seek safety in another state. Crossing a border is not merely a geographic act; it confers access to international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). By contrast, IDPs remain within their own country and therefore continue to fall under the jurisdiction of their national government, even where that state may be unable or unwilling to provide protection (Cohen and Deng, 1998).

The relationship between IDPs and refugees is more complex than a simple distinction based on border crossing. Some policy discussions have assumed that IDPs are merely “refugees who have not yet crossed a border.” However, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Cantor and Apollo (2020) demonstrate that internal displacement and refugee flows often follow different patterns, are shaped by different structural factors, and may involve different social groups. IDPs are often drawn from zones of concentrated violence and tend to move shorter distances within the same region, whereas refugees who travel to distant countries may have greater economic resources, education, or access to migration networks. Thus, IDPs and refugees should not be seen as two identical categories separated only by borders, but as related yet distinct outcomes of conflict and crisis.

At the same time, migration, internal displacement, and refugee are interconnected. In conflict-affected or disaster-prone societies, internal displacement may merge with labor migration, accelerate urbanization, or later evolve into cross-border movement. A household displaced internally by violence may subsequently migrate to a city for work or eventually flee abroad as refugees if insecurity persists. Similarly, environmental degradation may begin as seasonal labor migration but later become forced displacement when livelihoods collapse. These examples illustrate that mobility categories are analytically distinct but socially fluid (Cantor and Apollo, 2020).

In sum, migration serves as the broadest category of human mobility, encompassing both voluntary and compelled movement. Internal displacement refers specifically to forced movement within state borders, while refugee denotes forced cross-border movement under international protection regimes. Distinguishing among these categories is essential, but so too is recognizing their intersections. Such a framework is particularly relevant for countries like India, where conflict, disasters, development projects, and livelihood insecurity often blur the boundaries between migration and displacement.

Having clarified the conceptual distinctions between migration, internal displacement, and refugee, it becomes necessary to move beyond definitional boundaries and examine the conditions under which displacement occurs. While definitions establish what constitutes internal displacement, they do not fully explain its causation or variability across contexts. Internal displacement is not triggered by a single uniform factor; rather, it emerges from a complex interaction of structural vulnerabilities and immediate shocks. In this context, the distinction between underlying drivers and immediate triggers provides a more analytically useful framework for understanding the production and persistence of displacement.

### **Drivers and Triggers of Displacement**

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) distinguishes between drivers and triggers of displacement as a conceptual framework. Drivers refer to long-term structural conditions such as poverty, inequality, weak governance, environmental degradation, and social tensions. These factors gradually erode resilience and increase vulnerability. Triggers are sudden events such as conflict, disasters, or forced evictions that directly force movement. However, triggers alone do not explain displacement outcomes; they operate in interaction

with underlying drivers. Repeated or overlapping triggers often produce protracted and complex displacement patterns.

Thus, displacement is not the result of isolated shocks but emerges from the interaction between structural vulnerability and immediate crises.

### **Emerging Challenges: Disasters, Development, and Conservation**

The understanding of internal displacement has expanded beyond conflict to include disasters, development projects including conservation policies.

Disasters and climate change increasingly contribute to displacement, particularly in agrarian and resource-dependent societies. Floods, cyclones, and droughts generate both sudden and slow-onset displacement, often exacerbated by weak institutional responses (IDMC, 2023).

Development-induced displacement arises from large infrastructure projects such as dams, mining, and industrial expansion, often involving inadequate consultation or compensation.

Conservation-induced displacement occurs when protected areas restrict access to traditional livelihoods and resources, affecting forest-dependent communities (Agrawal, 2009; Kabra, 2009).

According to IDMC (2025), by the end of 2024, 83.4 million people were internally displaced globally, including 73.5 million due to conflict and violence and 9.8 million due to disasters. These figures reflect the increasing complexity and scale of displacement, shaped by the interaction of human and environmental drivers.

### **Conclusion**

Internal displacement is not an isolated or temporary humanitarian issue but a structurally embedded and historically continuous process shaped by long-term political, economic, and environmental transformations. Its evolution from an overlooked condition within state borders to a recognized category in international human rights discourse reflects important normative changes in global governance, particularly through the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998).

Despite these advances, the scale and complexity of displacement continue to increase, as evidenced by IDMC (2025), with growing interactions between conflict, disasters, and development processes. This underscores that internal displacement cannot be understood through a single-cause framework but must be seen as a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

The article highlights three key insights: the need for a historical perspective that situates displacement within broader structural transformations; a conceptual clarity that distinguishes internal displacement from migration and refugeehood while acknowledging their overlaps; and a causal understanding that focuses on structural drivers alongside immediate triggers.

Overall, internal displacement should be approached not as an episodic crisis but as a recurring condition of uneven development and governance. Addressing it therefore requires long-term, rights-based, and preventive strategies rather than purely reactive responses.

## AI Acknowledgement

The author used AI tools as a language-support tool during the preparation of this manuscript. The tool was used solely for language refinement for the improvement of readability.

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