

Joint Data Centre / World Bank / University of Los Andes 2nd Research Conference on  
Forced Displacement

Online, 20 January 2022

Remarks by George Okoth-Obbo<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\* Statement begins \*\*\*

Thank you very much indeed to you JDC and the University of Los Andes for inviting me to join you and make remarks at the start of this Conference today. My gratitude extends as well to the patron organizations of the JDC - the World Bank and UNHCR - both because, as you just heard, I have until 20 days ago been a long-term cadre of UNHCR across its Protection, Operational and Management domains in both the Field and at Headquarters and also because both UNHCR and the World Bank were very close players in the initiative of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Internal Displacement one of whose most venerated members I was doubly pleased to see is also here today, our dear friend Paula Gaviria whose dedication, energy and passion helped make the Panel's report as truly grounded as I hope you have all found it to be.

I will be drawing heavily in my remarks on those experiences and even somewhat from my forthcoming role from next month as the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect. But I will be speaking fundamentally in my personal capacity, particularly as concerns the Panel's report which, as I am sure you all will know, the Panel launched at the end of the September last year. The Panel's Secretariat which I headed continued to operate to the end of December to help mount the follow-up of the report which is continuing apace even as we speak today under the auspices of the Secretary-General's Office. Also in December, his Executive Committee (a strategic leadership group composed of the Heads of a number of UN agencies and entities) adopted an **Action Agenda on Internal Displacement** which lays out the SG's vision for follow up of the report, focusing on UN action to step up its work on internal displacement, in particular on solutions and to make a difference for IDPs.

So, referencing the Panel and its report as the latest global initiative to fire up a game-changing impetus across the internal displacement landscape, what are some of the key points that I am minded to share with this Conference today with reference to the question of research?

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<sup>1</sup> Until 2019, a long-term cadre of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) across its Protection, Operational and Management domains in both the Field and Headquarters. Then Secretary of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Internal Displacement 2020 & 2021. As of 01 February 2022, will take up appointment as the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect. The views herein are entirely in a personal capacity.

The very first one is to echo **the crucial importance of knowledge creation, propagation and application in the internal displacement context, in particular for illuminating and understanding the issue and the elaboration of policies, strategies and outcomes that will move it along the crucial shifts that the Panel has called for.** Especially in the period since Francis Deng led a global impetus on internal displacement that led to the adoption of the “Guiding Principles”, research, scholarship and the investigation of the issue has grown exponentially along the different trajectories. But in key respects, internal displacement still remains very much in what I would call a **discovery stage**. A lot of the knowledge work and production that have developed in this time -and even their policy, normative and institutional articulation - has been set very much conjunctively and adjunctively within the refugee and forced migration schematic. While this transpositive approach has been very helpful and productive in several respects, it is not sufficient fully to problematize, prod and unveil the full concatenations on which the internal displacement problematic sits both at large and with specific reference to the shifts which the Panel has called for.

This gives rise to a number of articulations which I believe remain relevant to the research question in internal displacement today:

The first relates to **the need to, without this being seen as an argument to separately pigeon-hole, isolate or fire-wall internal displacement, engender a critical degree of focused, distinctive and even bespoke research and knowledge production.**

Secondly, in that respect, **to horn in on some crucial questions that are fundamental and even unique to how the internal issue is properly problematized and framed and the pivotal solutions to it devised.** To these ends, the Panel partnered with a number of research institutions, academics, UN agencies and NGOs to research specific questions for which it did not find enough information through existing literature, consultations, input and feedback. And, recognizing the importance of research, knowledge production and application downstream in achieving outcomes, the Panel made a clear recommendation for research and the role of academia to be cemented within the process of follow-up and implementation of its recommendations and for that effort to be specifically supported.

Let me say a bit more about **this question of the instrumentalization and application of this research for outcomes in policy, normative and institutional developments, framing and delivering outcomes.** While, in its work, ten principal recommendations and some 70 detailed ones, the Panel covered the landscape fairly broadly from prevention through to protection and assistance, its focus was very much on **solutions to internal displacement, for which it called for an approach anchored on national ownership and the leadership of Governments to drive solutions forward as a national development imperative.**

The Panel did not dictate any particular research agenda. But there is no question that, at least as far as the main axis of the report goes, this question - solutions – has to be a crucial one around which the research agenda has to give attention and even priority. There are several

consequential questions that flow from this, but here again, I would like to highlight the following:

- The framing and illumination of **internal displacement as not only a humanitarian problem but as one fundamentally of citizenship, membership and agency linked to development – peace – disaster – and climate change imperatives.**
- Its **different causalities and the implications** that they have for the drive for solutions.
- **Political economy** including the primacy of governance accountability and civic participation and to understand the pathway to support Governments to see solutions as a priority, an analysis which development actors are well placed to carry out and need in order to tailor their programming to a specific context.
- A number of **dimensions of internal displacement which may not stand out as sharply in a refugee-conjunctive analysis but which are central to understanding the internal displacement question in its current articulation.** The Panel dealt with one key one in this respect – **internal displacement in the urban context** – but another equally stark one is **the need to illuminate internal displacement as not only a Global South, but an overall Global phenomenon and challenge including in the Global North.**
- **How Governments actually work and should work to bring about the key shifts called for** including National Ownership, Political will and Whole of Government accountability (including municipal and local authorities) entail and how Governments can be incentivized to act and address internal displacement.
- **The question of data:** It became clear to the Panel that the evidence needed to anchor the shift in solutions requires a different and complementary type of information to what is produced by humanitarian actors which is primarily linked to understanding the patterns of displacement, the specific location of IDPs and who they are to identify their vulnerabilities, as well as their specific humanitarian and protection needs in a specific context. The Panel has thus highlighted in its recommendations both **the importance of and need for analysis and information on the socio-economic dynamics of internal displacement including how these dynamics differ from those of the non-displaced population.** Development actors are well placed to carry out this type of analysis, in partnership with local and national governments.
- **Good practices and mutual learning across a range of issues** including Government ownership and accountability; centralizing internal displacement as a national priority of development, peace and transitional justice; legal and constitutional aspects; data development and utilization.

I want to conclude with two other questions. For the first of these, I go back to the internal displacement research and knowledge production for purposes of achieving results and outcomes and to raise two groups of questions:

- The first is one I would call a **configuration question**, i.e. whereby researchers are configured on one hand as the sources of know-how and knowledge and the

accountability owners – particularly States/Governments – on the other hand as only the receivers and utilizers of this information and knowledge. The interface needs to be organized differently, particularly to ensure that research is properly defined to begin with and ultimately is relevant to the issues at stake. In this context, it is important to have clear answers to questions such as:

- > Who determines the research agenda?
- > Who defines the issues?
- > Who carries out the research, where and how?
- > What are the key questions when it comes to creating and manipulating research and knowledge products as instruments, resources or multipliers for policy and development outcomes?

- Then there is the question of **research networking, coordination and coherence at global, regional and, particularly, national levels including questions of leadership, agency and participation**. It is pleasing to see that a number of initiatives either already are at play or are emerging. To mention but just a few: Researching Internal Displacement Research Programme (IDRP); the Climate Mobility Africa Research Network in Africa; PDD; IDMC, etc. How will all these work in an aligned and coherent manner for critical effectiveness? In terms of defining issues and agendas? Avoiding overlaps and waste? In engaging systematically with the accountability holders? In maximizing all strengths and potential in a maximalist, not vertical manner especially as between the Global North and Global South?

I apologize that I have taken too long in my remarks but let me finish with a word of advocacy. There is clearly a lot still to be done on all the themes and questions I have overviewed above and indeed others I did not cover. I encourage researchers to dig further into these issues to look at country specific aspects and offer more nuanced and deeper analysis than what it was possible to achieve in the limited time of the Panel process.

Thank you very much indeed to listening to me!

George Okoth-Obbo

January 2022.

\*\*\* Statement ends \*\*\*