DISASTER-INDUCED INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN INDIA IN 2020: A REVIEW

Considering movement in the context of COVID-19 is critical for understanding the actual scale of internal displacement in the context of disasters that occurred in India in 2020

Published on December 17, 2021
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An open-air shelter a displaced person living through Indian winter © Vashishtha Sharma
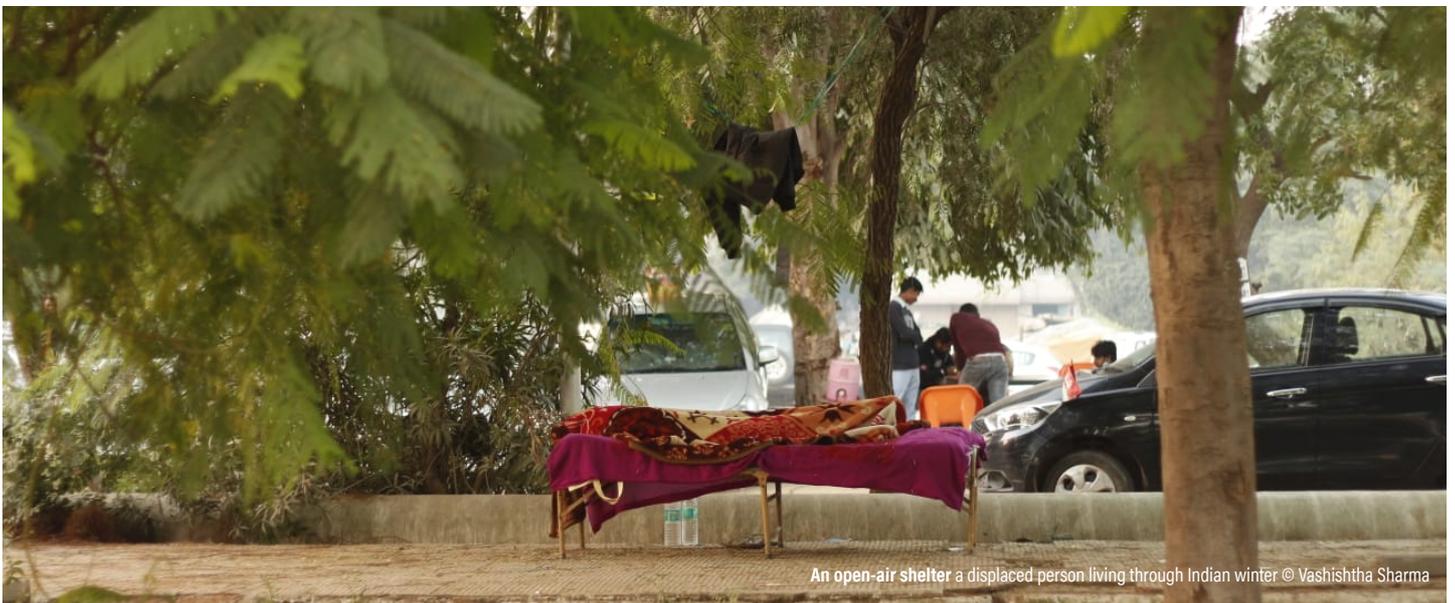
It is now becoming increasingly evident that environmental threats like disasters can 'push the movement of persons.' Such movement of persons can be both cross-border, i.e., from one country to another or internal, i.e., within the borders of a country. There is increasing scientific evidence and data that environmental factors like climate change and other disasters will be one of the biggest drivers of human migration in the 21st century.

One of the most well-known and widely cited sources of data on internal displacement in the context of disasters is the Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID) released annually by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). These reports are known to provide independent and high-quality data on internal displacement, which further guides decision and policy-making at national and international levels. The most recent edition, IDMC GRID 2021, records the 'scale and impacts' of internal displacement, with a particular focus on displacement in to the context of disasters and climate change. In addition to IDMC, there are other influential sources of data on displacement in this context, such as the World Bank's Groundswell Report, which predicts that millions are likely to be displaced due to disasters, climate change and other environmental factors. The Groundswell Report, however, concerns both internally and cross-border displaced persons. Furthermore, while the Groundswell Report offers a prediction, IDMC GRIDs draw on existing figures of people affected by disasters to derive estimates on internal displacement in the context of disasters. Both the GRID 2021 and the Groundswell Report call on the stakeholders to act now to better manage human mobility in the context of disasters and climate change.

This essay considers the reporting on displacement in the context of disasters and climate change in India within the IDMC's GRID 2021 and compares it with publicly available data from national archives, government reports, print media and social media reports on disasters in India in 2020. The information derived from social media reporting may not always be accurate and/or factually reliable. Therefore, wherever possible, social media reports

The limitations of IDMC's data on disaster displacement has been acknowledged, including by the IDMC itself. For example, IDMC acknowledges that one of its limitations arises out of existing data tools in its submission to the UN High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, where it states that data tools like national statistics do not include data on certain concepts like displacement risk and are often aggregated, limiting the use of such data (p.8). Being mindful of this, the aim here is not to offer an analysis of such limitations. Instead, this essay considers implications that incomplete data presents through a concrete example of disaster displacement data in India in the year of 2020. The chronological overview presented includes the disaster events that were not included by the IDMC GRID 2021, hereunder the displacement that followed the COVID-19 lockdown and travel restrictions within India, to provide a more comprehensive overview of disaster displacement in India. It highlights that reporting on disaster displacement is incomplete, if disasters such as COVID-19 are not taken into consideration, especially by influential organizations such as IDMC. Excluding such major events from analysis creates a data gap that is likely to carry policy-making implications for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in general.

IDMC estimates of internal displacement in India in 2020

The latest IDMC GRID 2021 has two parts: the first part discusses general internal displacement in 2020 and the second part discusses internal displacement due to disasters and the need to reduce the negative impacts of climate change on the IDPs. In 2020, 40.5 million people were newly displaced internally across the world, out of which 30 million were newly displaced due to disasters, including but not limited to floods, storms, earthquakes and wildfires.

In its country specific data, IDMC states that in India there were 3,856,000 new displacements due to disasters between 1st January to 31st December 2020. The total number of displaced persons that remain in displacement as of 31 December 2020 are 929,000. In its 'how to read our figures' section on India, the IDMC also notes that the data on new displacements due to disasters 'corresponds to the latest reported occurrences of disaster-related internal displacement.' Essentially, the IDMC reports 'new displacements, the number of IDPs at a given time and the number of returns.' The numbers under the new displacement category represents movements and not the exact number of people displaced because people can be displaced several times. This approach has been previously criticized by an independent evaluator commissioned by the NRC (p.14). The evaluation states that IDMC reporting lacks a 'systematic monitoring of new displacement' and an adequate strategy to systematize it.

In its country profile, IDMC recognizes that India is exposed to a range of natural hazards, including droughts, earthquakes, cyclones, tsunamis and tropical storms. These factors when combined with country's high population density, poverty levels, rapid urbanization and environmental degradation, puts India at a high risk of disaster displacement in South Asia. Apart from this, the IDMC also recognizes conflicts and developmental projects as triggers for internal displacement in India. However, it also states that information related to internal displacement due to developmental projects may be complex to collect and disseminate, due to its interaction with conflicts creating gaps arising out of lack of systemic monitoring. Secondly, it is also criticised that IDMC lacks field presence (p.20), which limits the scope of accessing data and information related to IDPs. Thirdly, it is also highlighted that there is 'IDMC's lack of clarity on the cause of displacement which may not always be directly or solely attributable to a disaster' (p.11) or conflict or violence.

In the country figures analysis report of 2020, IDMC details out its methodology and sources, caveats and challenges, and highlights of the data collected for internal displacement in India. The report underscores that for India there are three types of data sources that IDMC has utilized in the collection of the data: the triangulated media reports, reporting by government and reporting by the civil society. IDMC Reports use data triangulation to 'validate data sets from various sources that describe the same phenomenon' (p. 60 of the GRID 2019 report). This helps IDMC reports to avoid fake news and unverified information, while collecting data through social media and other media outlets (see p.115 of the GRID 2021 to read more about how IDMC uses social media as a data source) because IDMC considers reporting from such media outlets less reliable (p. 13).

An alternative estimate of disaster displacement in India in 2020

This essay offers an alternative estimate of disaster-induced internal displacement in India in 2020. The IDPs in the context are one of the most vulnerable groups in India, especially due to a lack of a concrete protection framework. Additionally, it may not always be easy to ascertain which movement is due to disasters or conflicts or both, due to overlapping complexities.

Both the estimates in IDMC GRID 2021 and the estimate presented here draw on three types of sources: media reports, government reports and social media reports. This allows the author to align and compare the figures presented in the IDMC GRID and the data sets available. Further, both IDMC and this analysis consider pre-emptive evacuations also as a form of internal displacement. There is fundamental difference, however. The IDMC GRID 2021 does not take into consideration COVID-19 as a disaster and a trigger for internal displacement globally. The reporting by IDMC makes it evident that the number of internally displaced persons in India due to disasters is amongst one of the highest around the world. The report, however, does not include figures for industrial disasters and pandemic-related measures that occurred between 1st January to 31st December 2020 and triggered internal displacement in India.

Hence, the exclusion of these two factors by IDMC and inclusion of these types of disasters into this analysis leads to different estimates. The IDMC only reports displacements due to industrial accidents or pandemics 'if they are triggered by a natural hazard'. Due to this reason, the migrant crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic was not taken on record by the IDMC in its 2021 estimates on India. The data on India would have added 40 million more internal migrants to IDMC GRID 2021, if COVID-19 related movements were taken into account. While the differences in the understanding and use of the terms 'migrants' and 'IDPs' could have led to exclusion of these 40 million people from the IDMC report, the fundamental reason that IDMC excludes these internal migrants from reporting is the fact that the movement of these people is caused by a pandemic: a driver which IDMC does not account for in its reporting. There has been academic discussion that rationalizes inclusion of these pandemic-related 'migrants' as disaster IDPs. Additionally, there is mounting evidence to establish that 'all disasters are fundamentally human made', and thus to include epidemics and pandemics as drivers of disasters.

The following chronology is an attempt to account for all types of disasters in India and the consequent displacement, including any pre-emptive evacuations. In doing so it includes disasters that are methodologically and categorically excluded by the IDMC. The IDMC works to 'provide verified, consolidated and multi-sourced estimates of the number of people internally displaced or at risk of becoming displaced by conflict, violence, disasters and development projects across the world'. This goal cannot be fully achieved by excluding industrial disasters and pandemics.

January 2020 to February 2020

During this time, there were no reporting on major displacement in the context of disasters in India.

March 2020 to April 2020

After the Government of India instituted lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic, an internal migrant crisis triggered 40,00,000 people to move within India.

May 2020

The Northeast India was affected by a catastrophic cyclone Amphan, which affected millions in both India and Bangladesh. It was reported that approximately 10,50,000 houses were damaged in India. In one district alone, approximately 80,000 people lost their homes due to this super cyclone. The National Disaster Response Force [NDRF] reports that it evacuated 8,13,000 people to safer places. The Odisha state disaster management authority reports that 2,00, 346 people were evacuated to safe shelters before Amphan. The IDMC reports that 24,00,000 displacements were due to Amphan in the state of West Bengal and Odisha. The Assam Government started reporting flood situation and people affected by the floods in their states. On 28 May 2020, it reported that there were 15,977 people in relief camps as temporarily displaced persons.

The month also witnessed a deadly gas leak in Southern India, known as the Vizag Gas Leak, that lead to evacuation of people within a 3 kilometers radius of the LG polymers chemical plant. The media reports suggests

June 2020

In Assam the flood situation was so bad that government offices like the office of All India Radio was inundated. In Assam, alongside ongoing floods, there were industrial disasters, impacts of which remained unmeasured. One of such industrial disasters was the Baghjan oil field Fire. It was reported that after two months with this oil field being on fire, approximately 500 people were living in shelters. These people were evacuated and moved to shelter temporarily due to this uncontrollable gas well fire. Another industrial disaster took place in Gujarat's Dahej in June, where a blast took place in a chemical factory. It was reported that as a matter of precaution approximately 4,800 people were relocated temporarily to a nearby village. Another report states that, a blast in chemical factory in Gujarat, led to evacuation of 3,000 villagers, causing them to forcibly move.

Gujarat was also affected by Cyclone Nisarga, due to which the government moved more than 50,000 people from low lying coastal areas to shelters in safer places. The NDRF however, does not report the number of people saved or moved due to this cyclone. The IDMC 2021, reports that Cyclone Nisarga led to 170,000 evacuations in Maharashtra and Gujarat.

July 2020

There were reports in July, 2020 that more than 24 Lakh people were affected by floods in Assam since May 2020. The government report from 31st July 2020, states that 10,82,504 people were affected due to these floods and more than 26,000 people were in camps.

August 2020

Karnataka was hit by landslide that led to disruption of many day-to-day activities. Kerala was also hit by landslide which affected approximately 100 people. Apart from landslides, floods were also affecting Indian states. In Bihar alone, 53,67,000 people were affected due to floods. The Ganga River faced river washing away fur to erosion in the River in Bengal's Malda District. It was reported that at least 55 houses were swept away, affecting more than 150 people. Floods during this monsoon time period also affected the State of Maharashtra in India in a series of floods known as 2020 Vidarbha Floods. It is reported that approximately 100, 000 people were affected by these floods, over the course of two months and over 25,000 houses were reported to be damaged.

September 2020

Nine taluks (district areas) were declared flood affected zones in the State of Karnataka in September, 2020. The sufferings and displacement from the Vidarbha floods continued as well, which continued to affect over 100,000 people.

October 2020

The rains in Hyderabad affected several hundreds of houses which collapsed due to this heavy rainfall. This was the second wave of floods, that caused damage in the area. The NDRF reports that it evacuated 6052 persons because of floods in Telangana. Additionally, NDRF evacuated 237 people from Andhra Pradesh, 939 persons from Karnataka and 688 persons from Maharashtra. There were heavy floods in Karnataka, due to which the 12 flood-affected districts were provided with emergency assistance. There were forest fires in Uttarakhand which continued to rage until April, 2021. Even Maharashtra was affected by heavy rains, where over 8,000 were evacuated from one district. In Pune, Sangli and Solapur in Maharashtra, nearly 20,000 people were evacuated due to floods.

November to December 2020

The Southern India was affected by cyclone Nivar and Burevi. Although no major damage was reported, low-lying houses were inundated. One of the reasons that no major damage was reported may also be lack of any assessment tools with the states who were affected by this disaster. A central team was created to visit the affected areas and assess damage due to these cyclones, thereby highlighting the need for a more robust system

Gaps in adequate reporting on internal displacement in India

One of the lessons learnt during COVID-19 is that there is a need to re-evaluate current understanding of IDPs, which needs to start with accurate data and statistics. One major gap that limits access to data in India is the shortage of information and systems to collect, report and disseminate relevant information, including information related to early warnings and post-disaster response. For example, a November disaster report by the Ministry of Home Affairs in India, recognizes that situation reports were received from less than 20% of total states and union territories in India. The reporting and information system for disaster preparedness in India was highly criticized when the first reports of Chamoli Flood Disaster in India were reported by citizens on social media. While the government and triangulated media reporting on disasters is low, the reporting on disaster- related displacement is almost non-existing. The IDMC also recognizes this as a gap that poses difficulty to derive estimates for numbers of people displaced by disasters in India (p. 21).

India needs a technically capable workforce that can master ensemble weather and flood forecast models. In addition to these large, visibly reported disasters, there are small scale disasters that may occur due to phenomena like rains. For example, in 2020, people were evacuated after buildings bent due to heavy rainfalls.

Although IDMC, reports that 900,000 people were living as internally displaced in India as of 31st December, 2020, it recognizes that this figure is likely to be 'highly conservative'. IDMC states that 'as most disaster reports stop a couple of weeks following disasters, it is difficult to know for how long people remain displaced.' Therefore, most IDMC estimates are:

'Based on time series data and housing destruction data for specific disaster events, as well as aggregated figures on the number of people displaced by disasters, recorded by governments and other stakeholders [...] this figure includes cases from previous years where there was information on the number of people still displaced.'

The IDMC reporting is modelled to decrease chances of overestimation, however, it recognizes the conservative character of its reporting on internal displacement in India.

Way forward

Nonetheless, IDMC today is one of the most reliable platforms to understand the scale of internal displacement, especially in the context of disasters. The work contributes to strengthening national and international protection frameworks and capacities for the benefit of millions of IDPs.

IDMC can take a step forward by including datasets on industrial disasters and pandemics by adopting a broader definition of disasters. Today IDMC is an authoritative source of data on internal displacement and has a country specific database, which is comparable with other countries and regions. If industrial disasters and pandemics related internal migration dataset is also reported by IDMC, it will allow policy makers to look at human mobility in the context of disasters in a more holistic and coherent way, rather than in fragments.

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