

Involving IDPs in the Darfur peace process

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The UN estimates that there are 2.4 million IDPs in Darfur – over one third of the total population. There can be no meaningful peace process without their involvement. Giving IDPs a formal seat in official peace negotiations is problematic but there are other ways to ensure their participation.

IDPs were only marginally involved in the protracted negotiations in the Nigerian capital, Abuja, which after seven rounds of talks concluded with the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in May 2006. The DPA has not been implemented and it may have made things worse. The Abuja process was deeply flawed, a textbook example of how not to arrange peace negotiations. The final text¹ was written entirely by the African Union mediation team and its Arabic version made available to the parties only a few days before the expiration of an unrealistic deadline imposed by the UN Security Council. In order to close the deal, high-level representatives from the US and UK flew into Abuja to twist arms. No space was given for the parties to shape the agreement or to get input from their constituencies. In the end, the Sudanese government and Minni Minawi (the leader of a faction of the Sudan Liberation army/Movement – SLA/M – one of the main rebel groups locked in conflict with the government) signed while Abdel Wahid, Minawi's rival and the original leader of SLA/M, and Khalil Ibrahim, leader of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), refused.

The Abuja talks were not inclusive. While some civil society groups were present, their degree of independence and representativeness was highly questionable. IDPs in Darfur were neither informed nor consulted. Within a few days of signing, large and at times violent demonstrations against the DPA erupted in camps across Darfur. IDPs complained that the agreement did not sufficiently address their security concerns, nor provide adequate compensation for those who have lost their houses and land in the course of the conflict. The protests were probably encouraged by Abdel Wahid and his supporters among the Fur – Darfur's largest non-Arab group. However, it was clear that all IDPs, regardless of their tribal origin, felt that the DPA did not address their concerns and were angry at their exclusion.

Their frustration highlights the main recommendation arising from a recent report from the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement. 'Addressing Internal Displacement in Peace Processes'² makes a general case for involving IDPs in peace processes. There are three specific

reasons why this is crucially important in Darfur: the massive scale of the displacement; the centrality of land dispossession in conflict and any long-term resolution; and the politicisation of IDP camps as a result of efforts by the government of Sudan and the rebel movements to win support and secure military advantage.

Involving IDPs in the Darfur peace process is not idealism or part of an activist agenda. It is based on the pragmatic realisation – and lessons learnt from the DPA – that sustainable peace will only be possible if concrete solutions are found for IDPs. Their needs must be satisfied and they must feel they are integrally involved. The UN Special Envoy to Darfur, Jan Eliasson, and his AU counterpart, the Tanzanian diplomat Salim Ahmed Salim, seem to have understood this. In the beginning of their post-Abuja re-launch of the peace process, they made a deliberate effort to reach out to IDPs. They visited camps and held talks with IDP representatives so as to better grasp their interests and expectations. There now seems to be consensus on the principle that IDPs do need to be a part of the peace process. The real difficulty, however, is figuring out how to involve them.

Multi-track diplomacy

Peace processes consist of multiple actors and 'tracks'. Track One diplomacy refers to official negotiations between conflict parties; Track Two involves unofficial interactions between influential actors from civil society; and Track Three covers grassroots conflict resolution initiatives. The challenge in Darfur and elsewhere is to combine different tracks and to ensure complementarity.

Following the failure in late October 2007 of peace talks in the Libyan city of Sirte, Eliasson and Salim now face the challenge of developing a multi-track approach that satisfies the needs of IDPs without jeopardising the process. Logically, it seems desirable to give IDPs a seat at the negotiating table. However, as Donald Steinberg, Vice President of the International Crisis Group, points out: "there may be occasions where it is wise to include only the principal armed parties in the initial stages of a peace negotiation, as long as it is clear that the voices of other key actors – including IDP representatives – will be heard and heeded shortly thereafter."³

In Darfur, the formal inclusion of IDPs in official peace talks raises two significant problems. Given their lack of experience, IDP representatives would be susceptible to manipulation. They could become proxies in a power struggle between the government and the rebel movements, unable to independently defend the interests of their constituents. Furthermore, it would be

very difficult to identify legitimate IDP representatives. A microcosm of Darfuri society, IDPs are extremely heterogeneous – divided regionally, politically and between tribes. Selecting a small number to represent IDPs at peace talks could exacerbate tensions.

An alternative to direct Track One participation is to establish a parallel civil society forum for IDPs and other civil society groups. This forum – and its component thematic working groups – could work alongside official negotiators. Its decision-making power and coordination with Track One negotiations would have to be clarified. A parallel civil society forum would enhance the legitimacy of the peace talks, provide valuable thematic input and keep parties in check, preventing them from negotiating an incomplete and unsustainable pact between warring elites. The selection of IDP and civil society representatives remains tricky but, given that the parallel forum could accommodate a relatively large number of delegates, the AU-UN joint mediation team should be able to manage it.

Parallel Track Two initiatives are crucial. These should involve IDPs alongside other local government officials, tribal leaders, academics, partners of Sudanese and international humanitarian organisations, and representatives of women and youth groups. They would meet on a regular basis to exchange views and build trust. They could help the high-level mediators build grassroots support for the peace talks. The Civil Affairs Section of UNMIS has suggested that Track Two meetings be held separately for IDPs, tribal leaders and other civil society groups in each of Darfur's three regional capitals – El Fasher, El Geneina and Nyala. Their precise structure as well as the lead organiser is yet to be decided. What matters is that Track Two initiatives complement official negotiations and that those who participate are as representative and independent as possible. It will also be important to ensure their safety.

Eliasson and Salim should engage IDPs as frequently and regularly as possible in the build-up to any actual peace talks. AU-UN mediators need to travel to IDP camps, interact with camp leaders, brief them of higher-level developments and ensure their input. Transparency and regular dissemination of information

are particularly important if the peace talks take place outside of Darfur. Otherwise it will be easy for opportunistic rebel leaders to spread misinformation and mobilise IDP opinion against them. It will also be important not to arouse unrealistic expectations of what peace negotiations can achieve. Otherwise, the UN and AU will lose credibility among IDPs in the long run.

If a peace deal is reached, it is likely that details about implementation will be determined by a range of oversight committees focusing on property claims, compensation, disarmament and reconstruction projects. These matters are of direct concern for IDPs and Darfuri civil society and they must be given real decision-making powers.

Conclusion

Whether a peace deal will be reached remains highly uncertain. The rebel movements are fragmented, the Sudanese government is reluctant to re-negotiate the DPA and the international community is struggling to adopt a common position. However, there is no alternative to negotiating. A Kosovo-like military intervention, as demanded by some Darfur advocates, is unlikely to materialise and even if it did would probably make matters worse in the long run. Sustainable peace in Darfur has to be the result of a legitimate political process, built on a compromise that takes into account the needs of all stakeholders, particularly IDPs. The AU-UN mediators appear to have learned from the failure of the DPA, and their effort to reach out to IDPs is encouraging. However, the involvement of IDPs needs to be broadened and their participation acknowledged as an intrinsic part of the peace process. Otherwise, a chance for peace may be squandered.

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1. www.unmis.org/english/dpa.htm
2. www.brookings.edu/reports/2007/09/peaceprocesses.aspx
3. Donald Steinberg, 'A Seat at the Table: The Role of Displaced Persons in Peace Talks and Peacebuilding', www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5263&l=1

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