MCC Episode 4

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SPEAKERS

Lucinda Platt, Perry DeMarche

Lucinda Platt 00:04

Welcome to Migration, Conflict and Crisis, a podcast investigating what leads people caught up in conflicts around the world to stay put or to move to a different country. I'm Professor Lucinda Platt from the London School of Economics and Political Science. And from my own recent research on those caught up in the war in Ukraine, and on who's moved or stayed, I'm interested in finding out more about how migrants fleeing conflict fare when they move, how people in different countries respond to them, and what policy responses have been. In this fourth episode, I'm delighted to be joined by Perry DeMarche from the International Organisation for Migration to discuss her work tracking the flows and experiences of internally displaced persons in Sudan. Since the clashes between the Sudanese armed forces and the rapid support forces in Sudan from April 2023, we've witnessed the largest worldwide displacement of people due to conflict. Perry, can you start by give me some context on what's underlying the conflict and how and where it's driving people to move?

Perry DeMarche 00:58

Sure. So in terms of context on the conflict, and its impact on displacement, as you said, clashes broke out nearly a year ago now first in the capital city of Khartoum, but they have since spread throughout the entire country leading to widespread displacement. Since the beginning of the current conflict, IOM has monitored a continuous increase in the number of people displaced. As of early March 2024, IOM estimates that over 6.4 million individuals have been displaced internally within Sudan, while an estimated 1.9 million have crossed borders into neighbouring countries, all within a span of 10 to 11 months. So to put this in perspective, that means Sudan currently hosts approximately 13% of all internally displaced people worldwide, or that one in every eight people internally displaced worldwide is Sudanese.

Lucinda Platt 01:50

Those are some extraordinary statistics really, and all in the just in the last 11 or 12 months.

Perry DeMarche 01:55

Yeah, and so looking beyond the numbers in terms of how and where the conflict is driving people to move, part of why this specific conflict is driving such high levels of displacement is that many of the clashes are taking place in densely populated urban centres. For example, prior to the conflict, millions of people lived in the capital city, Khartoum, and a very high proportion of those have since been

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displaced due to conflict given Khartoum has been such an epicentre of fighting, and we've witnessed the same pattern unfold across urban centres really throughout the country. In addition, clashes have reached areas that were previously relatively safer or slightly more removed from the conflict, which has led many people to be displaced a second or third time. For example, many people who fled Khartoum sought safety in Jazeera, a neighbouring state. And then in December of last year, December 2023, numerous clashes happened in Jazeera forcing many people to be displaced again. As a result, people have been displaced truly everywhere throughout the country. IOM has monitored displaced communities in 180, out of the 189 administrative localities in Sudan across all 18 states, just to emphasise the scale of conflict driven displacement, not only in terms of sheer numbers, but also the vast geographical spread of where people have ended up.

Lucinda Platt 03:16
That's extraordinary that is quite exceptional that we see such non localised displacement, if you like, compared to other conflicts, would you say that's fairly unique to this context?

Perry DeMarche 03:25
Absolutely. And just the scale of internal displacement. So of all the displacement IOM has tracked, around 77% has been people displaced within Sudan, as opposed to cross border or international displacement.

Lucinda Platt 03:39
So this is really a story about internal displacement primarily. And that's where you've been focusing on tracking those who are internally displaced. Can you say a bit about why it's so important to collect information on those who are displaced and how you go about it?

Perry DeMarche 03:53
Collecting information on internally displaced groups is first and foremost critical to informing the humanitarian response and humanitarian programming on the ground. Our data allows IOM and other humanitarian partners to maximise resources and deliver aid more efficiently to populations on the move. Our data can inform partners where internally displaced people are just in terms of who is where quite simply the types of shelter they're in, their movement intentions, their top needs, whether that be food, water, protection, health care, other urgent necessities, but in terms of how IOM does this, of course, collecting this data can be extremely challenging given the ongoing conflict. IOM relies on the displacement tracking matrix, which is an IOM system that tracks internal displacement in around 100 different countries worldwide. But we've been able to adapt these methodologies to the Sudanese context so that we can capture such widespread displacement and the evolving needs of displaced people. Specifically, we rely on a network of hundreds of enumerators and data collectors on the ground who are talking to key informants in different locations. And they're able to report this data back to us on a weekly basis so that we can provide consistent updates on key figures. Another component is that we have implemented a system of early warning flashlights, where we can report on events that cause displacement. So primarily armed clashes are instances of conflict, but even environmental disasters, whether that's flooding or fires, and we are usually able to release these reports within 24 or 48 hours of an event, providing initial estimates of how many people have been displaced, and to where and this can be sent to a network of UN agencies, humanitarian partners, research institutes, or really any actor organisation that relies on our data to inform their response on the ground in Sudan.

Lucinda Platt 05:47

So this is a very large scale data collection and information process, if you like of a programme of work. And also you're emphasising how the importance of the ability to respond rapidly using enumerators and your information gathering in order to respond to needs. And this is all in a situation which as you've emphasised is one where there is no kind of safe zone where everybody is, in a sense, unsafe, and you've got lots of onward movement as well. So it sounds like quite a challenging exercise to be carrying out.

Perry DeMarche 06:16
Yes, there's so many different challenges in terms of collecting data at the scale in such a active conflict zone. First, in terms of the sheer scale of displacement, the number of people displaced, also the vast geographic spread, and then also how quickly dynamics on the ground are shifting due to the conflict. There are also several operational challenges to data collection, including the ongoing insecurity, the road closures, skyrocketing prices for fuel, which all of these factors limit transportation options and inhibit the ability of field teams to move around the country and visit key sites to collect data. Another challenge that's a bit unique to Sudan is that roughly 60 to 70% of people who are internally displaced are seeking shelter with host families and host communities as opposed to camps or other forms of shelter. So this can be challenging for data collection in terms of visibility and access and knowing where people are and what they need. Despite these challenges, IOM has been able to adapt week to week and we released our first report on displacement within 24 hours of the onset of the crisis in April 2023 and have been able to provide continuous weekly updates since that outline at least the estimated displacement figures across the entire Sudan. But of course, the situation is changing truly, day by day, minute by minute.

Lucinda Platt 07:37
And what are those reports that you've managed to produce? What do you know about the situation of these internally displaced persons and their needs?

Perry DeMarche 07:45
Of course, it changes week to week but at a glance, IOM estimates that the majority of displaced people so around 60% are in urban locations, while 40% are in rural areas. In terms of shelter, as I said, most are in host communities, but 13% are sheltering in schools or other public buildings, while others are in camps, private rented accommodation, informal settlements, so again, these are changing week to week. In terms of needs, food security has remained the highest reported need week to week throughout the crisis. Access to food has really reached catastrophic levels due to the rising prices, disruptions in supply chains, insecurity on national roads, ongoing clashes in agricultural areas, specifically, for example, a few months ago, there were major clashes in Al Jazeera state, which has traditionally served as a sort of breadbasket for Sudan. So this year's harvest will certainly be below normal production levels. IDPs also face a lot of challenges with access to health care and education. Around 70 to 80% of all healthcare facilities in Sudan are not functioning, particularly for displaced communities, access to water and sanitation has been a challenge. So we're seeing an increase in waterborne diseases, cholera. And then in terms of education, many displaced individuals around 170,000 are currently sheltering in public buildings or schools due to the lack of affordable housing, the lack of options, but this also means that many schools in different areas have remained closed for months at a time and millions of children may lose out on learning as a result.

Lucinda Platt 09:26

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So we're seeing what is both a very extreme situation, and one that seems to be deteriorating in many respects, including in basic food needs and the problem for harvest but also one that's having knock on effects and impacting a whole range of people very large numbers and highlighting the the impacts of using schools as accommodation for for the education of children there. So it's setting up and long term consequences as well as being sort of a crisis situation at present.

Perry DeMarche 09:52
Yes, exactly. And I think even more broadly, in terms of the economy, the conflict has disrupted key economic sectors and resulted in the non payment of salaries so many people, especially those who have been displaced have lost their source of income. There are widespread cash shortages and the prices for basic goods, not just food, but other necessities have really skyrocketed. So especially for people on the move, these are ongoing challenges or may even be factors that inhibit people from being able to move and seek safety in the first place.

Lucinda Platt 10:24
So a very dire, very serious situation. And you highlighted how a lot of people have had to move multiple times. But the situation in Sudan is also complex, isn't it in that there's been internal displacement of sections of the population for the two decades before 2023. And how would you say this earlier displacement compares with the current situation?

Perry DeMarche 10:45
Talking first about the earlier period of displacement, Sudan has been a context of protracted displacement for the past 20 years going back to the crises in Darfur, and in 2003, IOM estimates that there were already approximately 3.8 million people internally displaced within Sudan prior to the start of the current conflict. By comparison, the period of recent displacement is truly unprecedented in terms of scale. The number of individuals displaced in 2023 was five times the number of those displaced in 2022, alone, and double the total number of people displaced between 2003 and 2022. And in addition to the differences in terms of kind of total numbers or magnitude, there are also key differences in the locations or kind of nature of displacement. Before the current conflict displacement was largely occurring in more rural areas across the western and southern regions of Sudan. So the Darfur and Kordofan states were now in this current conflict post 15th of April 2023 around 65% of displaced individuals originated in Khartoum and states that are more in the centre of the country. The displacement dynamics between these two periods are quite different. It's difficult to compare them because so many individuals who were first displaced 20 years ago have since been displaced a second time during this most recent crisis. So on one hand, while it's feasible to think that someone displaced 20 years ago might have very fundamentally different needs and circumstances compared to someone displaced two months ago, so many of these individuals displaced 20 years ago have been displaced a second or third time. So it may be difficult to conceptualise them as entirely separate populations with different needs, given the scale of the current conflict.

Lucinda Platt 12:28
So a completely different order of magnitude really, then in terms of the displacement.

Perry DeMarche 12:32
Yeah, absolutely. So in addition to the internal displacement, around 23%, of all trapped, displacement has been across borders, so 1.9 million individuals. Critically, Sudan borders, seven different countries, spanning three different regions. So it's a really important migration country in that it's at the

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intersection between countries in the eastern Horn of Africa, as well as Libya and Egypt along the central Mediterranean route, as well as access points to the Gulf via the northern route. So it's really at this intersection of so many different countries, so many different key migration routes. And specifically during this current conflict, the highest levels of recorded cross border movement have been to Chad in the West, Egypt to the North and South Sudan in the South. Quite a few of these movements are Sudanese nationals leaving, but many are also people going back to countries of origin or non Sudanese, who were in Sudan. And this breakdown changes a lot by country. For instance, at the South Sudan border. 80% of individuals arriving were South Sudanese nationals, where it's almost the opposite case on the border with Egypt, where the vast majority crossing into Egypt have been Sudanese nationals.

Lucinda Platt 13:45
I know we've been talking most about the internal displaced people who make up the majority of those affected, and I just wanted to touch on the the cross border movement as well, people moving across the borders, and where are they going to?

Perry DeMarche 14:01
It's very complicated. And while IOM doesn't necessarily collect specific data on the factors that determine where someone will flee or move, it's a constant combination of proximity and feasibility in terms of transport, the economic situation, ability to obtain visas or other documentation, networks of social or family support, so a whole wide range of factors.

Lucinda Platt 14:24
So it's a complicated sort of migration nexus, but also there's these flows that have taken place in the past have now been disrupted in many ways. So some people returning but then as well as the out migration across the borders.

Perry DeMarche 14:37
Yeah. So both IOM and a wide range of other humanitarian partners, whether that's UN agencies, NGOs, civil society groups, community organisations, all are working to respond to both the immediate needs particularly of those displaced, as well as working to scale up more mid and longer term solutions and forms of assistance both as you said in border regions and neighbouring countries but also within Sudan. But I would say that these humanitarian actors are all facing a lot of the same challenges that we're facing with data collection. So there's a lot of road closures along the major national roads that crossed the country, particularly the past few months have seen pretty severe internet blackouts and telecommunication outages, there's often a lack of safe passage, the significant increases in cost of food fuel, the basic essentials needed to operate a humanitarian response. Again, clashes are reaching areas that were previously more stable. And that functioned as a sort of operational basis for humanitarian partners. So that has often completely disrupted ongoing programming. I guess most broadly, we're seeing areas where displaced people are most in need or most vulnerable are usually the areas that are highly restricted and insecure, which makes it incredibly difficult for humanitarian actors to provide that much needed assistance. So even if we're able to capture data about these populations, it's often really challenging to then implement sustainable humanitarian programming in areas of highest need.

Lucinda Platt 16:07

Can we move on to talk a little bit about responses? So what have been the responses to this massive displacement of people beyond Sudan as we were just talking about, but also particularly within Sudan. Who's been involved? And what have they been doing? And how effective have they been?

Perry DeMarche 16:21
Right now, in addition to the challenges I've mentioned, because it's such a context of protracted displacement, people are running out of savings and resources so even communities that are more recently displaced, facing all these challenges, it's only going to get worse and worse, as people have their savings just depleted and as they run out of different options in terms of where to flee to. So thinking about how this will only exacerbate levels of humanitarian need in the coming months, especially as the conflict continues to unfold and reach new locations. Also, just thinking about how the current situation is unprecedented. But it is unfolding in a context that already has such a history of protracted displacement in the past 20 years. So thinking about how people can endure and what more durable solutions would look like.

Lucinda Platt 17:08
And so you're having some success in assessing that need, but actually meeting it is a whole other challenge. So again, you emphasise the severity of the situation there. And just the major challenges in such a context of achieving humanitarian aid access. If you could think more broadly, and also thinking a little bit about the future. I mean, what would you say, are the things we really need to understand and grapple with about the current situation of displaced people in Sudan, how to respond to them, and thinking a bit more long term about about the future?

Perry DeMarche 17:42
Despite the challenges on the ground, any increase in international cooperation would be very needed to address the scale of the needs and the issues on the ground in terms of access, and how quickly things are evolving.

Lucinda Platt 17:56
So yes, an existing fragile context and how that can be addressed. And in the longer term. Is there is a role for a bigger role for the international community?

Perry DeMarche 18:06
Yes, but there's definitely facing the same challenges in terms of of conflict and how rapidly the situation is changing. And the general kind of deterioration of, of the economy and its impact on operations and the ability for humanitarian partners to safely and have the necessary goods and resources to help people.

Lucinda Platt 18:28
That's a real insight into kind of the dynamic and swiftly unfolding situation which you, in turn are trying to track as it were, in real time, in what's an incredibly complex setting. Is there any anything final you'd like to add before we conclude?

Perry DeMarche 18:43
I would say again, just emphasising how fluid the situation is. So all the data and all the figures are constantly being updated by IOM. So to best understand these dynamics, actors really need to check

the datasets, check the latest on the website to see how this will unfold in the weeks and months to come.

Lucinda Platt 19:02
Yes, so we can't be confident at any point in time that that's the situation two weeks ahead or a month ahead. Well, thank you. Thank you so much. That's been a very insightful account of the situation, which is a very recent, a more recent conflict than the others we've been talking about in this podcast, and one where as you've emphasised, it's an incredibly fluid and dynamic situation. So thank you to Perry DeMarche for your insights on this topic. And thank you to all of you for listening. In the next episode of Migration, Conflict and Crisis, we'll be looking at policy responses to the situation of those fleeing conflict, to those who do not or cannot move, and to those who wish to return. Thanks to my producer, Chris Garrington of Research Podcasts, and to the LSE for their support. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you discover your podcasts to get all our forthcoming episodes.