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[Data-based humanitarianism in Nigeria and South Sudan](#)



Source: Data and Displacement Project Fieldwork

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This blog from members of the [Data and Displacement](#) team explores barriers that emerge in the context of data-driven approaches to humanitarian protection.ⁱ

How far can a data-driven approach to humanitarian protection foster increased participation and improved outcomes for IDPs? We address this question based on an analysis of interviews with displaced persons (IDPs) and stakeholders in Northeastern Nigeria and South Sudan. Our findings highlight the ways that the production and use of data in itself generates challenges for the participation of affected communities, with protection outcomes compromised by a range of contextual, specific and systemic barriers.

Northeastern Nigeria and South Sudan

Northeastern [Nigeria](#) has seen terrorism and armed conflict over a number of years, including insurgencies by the Boko Haram sect in the 1990s, later allied with the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This has led to deaths, the loss of livelihood and key support systems, and multiple displacements. Findings from [our research](#) suggest that there are lapses in the data ecosystems in Nigeria, with likely consequences of imprecise and inaccurate data on humanitarian assistance and planning.

South Sudan gained independence on 9 July 2011, enabling the return of millions of displaced persons. However, due to the outbreak of civil war in 2013, ongoing political battles and intense violence, largely along ethnic lines, has caused catastrophic repercussions for civilians. As of [2021](#), 2.34 million South Sudanese were refugees in neighboring countries while another 1.615 million were IDPs. Despite resolution in 2018, [our research](#) indicates that the generation and management of data on IDPs in the country have significant shortcomings.

Exploring the Challenges:

1. Technological and infrastructural barriers

In Northeastern Nigeria, there are both [personnel and equipment gaps](#), which limit capacities for data collection and storage. The lack of equipment and well-trained personnel limits the coherence of data storage and handling processes, which differ across organizations. Divergent data banks across institutions and actors, along with reliability and systematisation issues in some cases, mean that there is a multiplicity of data.

Most South Sudanese NGOs do not generate sufficient and reliable financial resources by which to acquire the necessary expertise and material resources. UN agencies and international organisations are better positioned to acquire and deploy the required capacity to generate and manage data. Representatives of international organisations that we interviewed confirmed use of tablets to undertake headcounts and profiling for returns.

2. Procedural and Administrative barriers in defining vulnerability

Both stakeholders and IDPs highlight irregularities in the classification and identification of the most vulnerable IDPs in camps in Northeastern Nigeria. Many ‘fall through the cracks’ of protection because classification issues both at the point of registration and within the data subsequently collected for planning purposes lead to many needing help being overlooked.

While some stakeholders in South Sudan are involved in projects targeting vulnerable groups as well as general protection needs, many IDPs who we interviewed in camps suggest that the needs of some vulnerable people are not addressed. Those likely to ‘fall through the cracks’ of protection are victims of sexual violence, which is a significant but culturally sensitive issue in South Sudan.

3. Ethical barriers

There is an inconsistent and inappropriate ethical system for data collection from IDPs in Northeastern Nigeria. Many IDPs describe consent as verbal, without proper recording or written documentation and with limited information. In some instances, data collectors do not directly obtain consent from IDPs, but instead, go ahead with data collection after stating the purpose and approval from higher authorities.

In South Sudan some IDPs interviewed for this study expressed distrust or fear about people coming to collect data from them. Some IDPs agreed to give consent because their community leaders agreed to the data collection, and some complain that those who collect data from them do not return and [fail to provide feedback](#).

4. Systemic barriers

Technological innovations intersect with donor pressure, donor agendas, and [our research](#) highlights the role of inter-agency competition over finite resources and funding. Data-driven humanitarian assistance is clearly a [contested terrain](#) with implications for IDP participation and humanitarian outcomes. [Our research](#) indicates that IDPs often have different understandings to humanitarian practitioners of the value of sharing data and expectations of what it should be used for. One told us:

‘I did not ask them. I would want to ask them, but I did not, they came to collect data like you are doing now, but they disappeared’

Conclusion

In reviewing data-driven humanitarian assistance in IDP camps in Northeastern Nigeria and South Sudan, our research points to a range of barriers to improving protection outcomes: technological and infrastructural, procedural and administrative, as well as ethical. Our findings suggest that this requires further

investment in personnel and technological infrastructure, more careful attention to classification processes in the identification of vulnerability and need, plus improved ethical practices that take informed consent seriously.

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Notes:

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