Population displacement

Displacement in the aftermath of nuclear weapon detonation events
Background

• Beyond the **instantaneous death and injury** caused by a nuclear detonation in a highly populated area, one of the most significant and immediate costs and sources of lasting disruption is likely to be displacement.

• **Displacement** is being forced or obliged to feel to leave one’s home or habitual residence, in particular as a result of avoiding the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence, violence of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.

• Should be understood as also covering what happens to people during and after flight.

• Understanding the humanitarian impact of a nuclear weapon detonation also involves understanding what displacement would mean for those affected.
What is Displacement?

Generally speaking, displacement is being forced or obliged to flee or leave one’s home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters. It may occur within or across national borders. Displacement should not be understood solely in terms of the movement of people from once place to another but in terms of what happens to those people during and after flight. Understanding the humanitarian impact of a nuclear weapon detonation event entails understanding what displacement would mean for those affected.
Displacement patterns

- Similarities to patterns seen in the context of armed conflicts or natural or human-made disasters

- The detonation of a nuclear weapon in one or more populated areas could cause displacement from areas far away from ‘ground zero’, due to radioactive contamination

- The more widespread the displacement, the more challenging to provide humanitarian assistance and protection

- If detonation takes place near an international border, it is likely that people would seek safety and assistance in neighboring states

- The spread of radioactive fallout would require placement of displacement sites outside contaminated areas and regular monitoring of radiation levels
The reality of displacement

- The humanitarian community can learn from experiences spanning a broad range of causes and contexts that becoming displaced is about much more than losing housing.
- Educational opportunities are lost, along with sources of income.
- For many people, displacement means a significantly increased risk of disease, discrimination, abuse and violence.
- For these reasons, displaced people are among the most vulnerable in the world.
Women

• Often face particular risks of **discrimination and violence** in situations of displacement

• Exacerbated vulnerability can be a result of unequal citizenship rights, gender-biased application of asylum laws and obstacles to registering and accessing identity documents

• Medical service delivery, including reproductive health services, often become unavailable and could lead to unwanted pregnancy in perilous conditions

• Risk of gender-based and sexual violence is **higher for women**

• Nuclear weapons might impact women differently in the psychological impact related to stress, and impact on cultural and indigenous rights
Shelter

• Access to adequate shelter will be a **critical determinant** for the survival of the displaced

• Provides security, personal safety and protection from the climate, and promotes resistance to ill health and disease

• Contributes to human dignity, sustaining family and community life and enables recovery

• To get to a shelter, those fleeing might have to travel through hazardous areas, e.g. due to radioactive fallout - could cause tension with local communities

• Conditions can lead to violence and force the displaced to seek shelter again, undermining access to basic assistance
Food, water and nutrition

- Displaced people will **need immediate access** to food and potable water, as well as a nutritious diet.

- In many disaster situations, people affected, especially in Africa and parts of Asia, are often already chronically undernourished when the situation erupts.

- Experience demonstrates that various factors can negatively impact the nutritious status of the displaced, including inadequate food intake, poor water, hygiene and sanitation, and lack of proper healthcare.

- A further complication is to ensure that **food and water is not contaminated** by radioactive fallout.
Healthcare

• Public health impacts may be **direct**, such as death and injury from the blast, heat, flash and prompt radiation generated by a nuclear explosion

• Can also be **indirect**, such as increased rates of infectious diseases or malnutrition related to factors such as inadequate quantity and quality of food and water, breakdown in sanitation and disruption of health services

• A significant proportion of the displaced would likely have suffered burns or been exposed to radiation, requiring **specialist medical attention**

• Acute radiation syndrome (ARS): people would need blood transfusions, antibiotics and the use of blood stimulating agents or even bone marrow transplants
Protecting the displaced

• Displacement situations typically give rise to problems of discrimination, exploitation, abuse and violence from which displaced people must be protected.

• Older persons, persons with disabilities and households with only one guardian may face discrimination or otherwise have difficulties in accessing assistance.

• Displacement situations often give rise to high rates of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in overcrowded camps and shelter.

• Trading sex for food and other non-monetary assistance might also occur.
Meeting long-term needs

• Experience with other forms of disasters show that displaced people *continue to require* various forms of assistance and support for the duration of their displacement.

• In the aftermath of nuclear weapon detonation events, rebuilding of communities will be a lengthy process.

• Many displaced people may be *unwilling to return* due to factors such as trauma, fear of residual radiation and absence of income-generating opportunities.

• Eighteen years after the Chernobyl incident (1986), affected areas continue to face numerous socio-economic challenges.

• Young people and skilled workers tend to move away and joblessness is high.
Safety of humanitarian staff

• Meeting these various needs presupposes some degree of national or international **humanitarian response**, raising the issue of ensuring the safety of humanitarian workers

• There is limited, if any, understanding among agencies of the level of training and equipment necessary to work in environments where a nuclear detonation has taken place

• **No protocol in place** for making decisions about these questions
Ensuring continuity

• At the end of 2013, more than **51 million people** were displaced as a result of conflict and persecution

• A single nuclear weapon detonation in a populated area would probably add significantly to the existing caseload of displaced people receiving assistance and protection from humanitarian organizations

• Multiple detonations would **overwhelm entirely** and immediately

• Consequences for those requiring assistance is likely to be catastrophic
Conclusion

• Providing the necessary assistance and protection to people displaced by a nuclear weapon detonation in a populated area would be a monumental task.

• The task is likely to be overwhelming even if capabilities and well-rehearsed plans exist.

• In the international context, the current level of awareness to an emergency response is low.

• This underlines the importance of preventing such a situation from arising, preferably through effective measures to ensure that nuclear weapons can never be detonated in populated areas.