

## Beyond Simply 'Return': How IDP Mobility, Agency and Self-Identification Contradict the Underpinnings of Refugee Policy

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*<https://doi.org/10.12982/CMUJASR.2018.0003>*

### ABSTRACT

*By framing 'repatriation' and 'return' as the most common of the three 'durable solutions', the global framework for managing people in situations of protracted displacement accounts only for the limited mobility of individuals with refugee status back to the locality they fled. By its very nature, it places unrealistic efforts at achieving sustainable outcomes on broader processes of peace and resettlement, that are assumed to provide appropriate conditions for return, but rarely do so. The Internally Displaced People (IDPs) of Ee Tu Hta in Karen State, Myanmar, are a vivid representation of how this system fails to understand, let alone engage, with common experiences of mobility. After more than a decade of international assistance, the camp has faced a cessation in humanitarian food aid and as a result people are making strategic choices on how to sustain livelihoods for themselves and their families. While there are elements that are specific to this particular example, a glance at similar situations, both in Asia and beyond, suggests that people termed as 'displaced' are often in continuous movement - both within and across national boundaries - and, even while staying in a fixed location, their agency, political association and sense of place undermines the assumptions of the structures designed to manage the 'displaced'. This research explores the experiences of people in Ee Tu Hta vis-à-vis these assumptions. In doing so, the research questions the viability of a system that assumes that displaced people seek to return home in large numbers.*

**Keywords:** IDPs, Migration, Mobility, Karen, Myanmar, Refugee return, Repatriation, Displacement, Durable solutions

## INTRODUCTION

The durable solution framework is the UNHCR's 'core mandate' for providing long-term solutions to people with refugee status, providing three potential options; local integration, resettlement and voluntary repatriation. However, it has become increasingly clear, as Katy Long (2013) explains, that in the present environment, where humanitarian intakes are being threatened by the surge in nativist politics, mass refugee exile will not be handled in large numbers by third country resettlement or local integration - leaving repatriation as supposedly the only viable large-scale solution in the international displacement regime. This point is emphasised by the reality that 65.4 million people are displaced globally, a figure higher than at any point since the Second World War. Of those numbers, around 40 million people remain within their own country (UNHCR, 2017). The wellbeing of IDPs, meanwhile, still primarily remains the responsibility of the national government of the country where the people remain. Regarding 'return', the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (2004), while urging foreign assistance, places the primary onus on national authorities to establish safe conditions and provide the means for the return of people to their former residence, or another part of the country, 'in safety and with dignity'.

However, the complex strategies and agencies employed by people and communities to counter external pressures and forces are broadly disconnected from the overwhelming perception of the languishing, disconnected and de-territorialised refugee, perpetuated by forms of collective discourse (Malkki, 1992) which forms the premise of 'return' from which so much policy is based. While the task of fashioning a practical alternative to this failing system is an unenviable one, this research attempts to add to the growing evidence that an architecture needs to urgently be forged that more comprehensively acknowledges complex human choices, movements and strategies. The failure to do so will not only continue the pattern of unsustainable movements of people as part of a 'durable solution', but will add fuel to the fire of nationalist politicians who regularly cite the flaws in the refugee framework as reason to close off borders to displaced