

ACT Alliance Letter to the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement

Dear Members of the Panel,

Thank you very much for your recent call for submissions to support the work of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement. ACT Alliance appreciates your very broad engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders, including civil society, and specifically, faith-based organisations.¹

We are writing to you with some key observations in lieu of a formal submission, in light of the difficulties encountered by many of our members in providing detailed inputs at this time. The current COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant additional strain on them, as many are directly involved in assisting and protecting those hardest hit by the pandemic, including many IDPs.

We therefore have chosen to offer our support to the Panel in two ways: (1) by sharing key observations briefly in this letter: and (2) by committing to support the upcoming regional consultation process that the HLP is set to embark on later this year. It is our hope that, despite the travel restrictions currently still in place, the Panel will continue to plan for regional consultations, to be held in whichever forms may be feasible. We stand ready to support your process by mobilising our membership and their partners to contribute substantively to your regional consultations. In this regard, we emphasise the critical importance of ensuring the meaningful and inclusive participation of IDPs and host community members across all regional consultations. And we urge the Panel to enable various forms of participation, including online/virtual consultations and more traditional (write in) methods – taking into account the often limited access to and familiarity with digital forms of communication, specific access challenges which may be encountered by women, youth, elders and others in particularly vulnerable situations, as well as the longer timeframe that may be required to facilitate alternative methods. ACT Alliance looks forward to supporting the Panel in these endeavours.

Our work with internally displaced people worldwide has highlighted to us the need to address the following key issues, amongst others, in order to make significant progress in addressing internal displacement, which we hope the HLP will take note of and include in its report next year:

Acknowledging internal displacement: In many country contexts, we witness long-standing disavowal of the phenomenon of internal displacement by the respective governments. In some cases, this is due to the government's own involvement in triggering such displacement – whether through armed conflict, or through promoting public policies that result in displacement, sometimes at the behest and for the benefit of private commercial interest. Such disavowals impede humanitarian response as well as dialogue on solutions. **To address this**, church leaders and other faith actors should be supported to engage affected communities, key influencers and decision-makers on human rights and health and safety messaging. *Churches and faith actors* have a rich resource of moral language that is particularly applicable to these issues. Concepts of welcoming the stranger, caring for the least of these, and loving our neighbor are deeply seated in the Christian tradition. In recent crises, including the Ebola outbreak, bishops and other

¹ Action by Churches Together (ACT Alliance) is a coalition of more than 135 churches and church-related organisations working together in over 125 countries to create positive and sustainable change in the lives of poor and marginalised people regardless of their religion, politics, gender, race or nationality in keeping with the highest international codes and standards. ACT Alliance is faith-motivated, rights based, impact focused, committed to working ecumenically and inter-religiously, with the communities we seek to serve and accompany at the centre of our work. Our members respond in areas where suffering, poverty and injustice occur, regardless of location.

church leaders in Africa were instrumental in promoting understanding and changing social behaviour amongst their constituencies. The same approach could be utilized to promote the need to care for IDPs.

Incentivising compliance with human rights norms: Even though there is a rich and well-known compendium of international human rights law detailing states' obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of their citizens, and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement over 20 years ago aptly summarized their applicability for situations of internal displacement, little progress has been made in achieving state compliance with these obligations. It is quite clear that certain states have been abusing the prerogative of national sovereignty to ward off any interventions from the international community insisting on the respect for human rights within their own borders. **To address this**, new coalitions of member states and other stakeholders concerned about internal displacement should be forged and reinforced, and various avenues should be pursued to leverage their influence. This could include supporting progressive resolutions in the Human Rights Council (including through the UPR process) and the UN's Special Procedures mandates (including the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons), the UN Security Council, as well as in regional and intergovernmental actors. In addition, the status of the SR on the human rights of IDPs should be elevated to its previous level, reporting directly to the UNSG, in order to increase and sustain international visibility for internal displacement. *Churches and faith actors* have a long history of working closely with UN human rights mechanisms, as well as with monitoring intergovernmental processes as they relate to human rights.

Emphasising the need for a whole of society approach, as outlined in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and Global Compact on Refugees (GCR): While international frameworks to enhance the protection and access to rights of international migrants and of refugees were adopted by the UN General Assembly at the end of 2018 – the GCM and GCR, respectively – internal displacement was deliberately side-stepped as an issue in both. Nonetheless, many of the principles proposed in these Compacts are equally applicable to IDPs, including and especially the concept of the Whole of Society Approach, which calls upon member states to make dedicated efforts to include affected communities, civil society, FBOs, the private sector, academia, municipal authorities and others in every aspect of relevant policy development, implementation and follow up. **To address this**, it is important to ensure that a Whole of Society Approach is adopted in relation to addressing internal displacement, which has historically suffered from poor (if any) consultation with those affected. As noted above, *churches and faith actors* have rich historical and theological resources for mobilizing communities to care for the most vulnerable in our midst. The combined engagement of mayors and local leaders, including clergy, by national leadership on issues related to IDPs can garner practical localized solutions to displacement.

Considering the interconnectedness of migration & asylum systems and internal displacement: For many years, we have observed the negative effects of increasingly restrictive asylum and migration systems on internal displacement. States tightening their borders to those seeking protection abroad forces large numbers of people to remain at home, exposing them to grave dangers and human rights abuses. In addition, prematurely returning/deporting people from destination countries back to their countries of origin, at a time when conflict and other adversities continue to persist, often makes it impossible for them to return to their place of origin, thus creating internal displacement or adding to already existing displacement situations. Furthermore, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing an alarming escalation in multiple contexts of *refoulement*, premature returns and denial of access to territory. We are concerned that this will inevitably exacerbate the scale and complexity of internal displacement, particularly at a time when the pandemic is causing stigmatisation against those infected in many countries, forcing them to abandon their habitual places of residence. **To address this**, states need to fulfil their human rights obligations relating to access to asylum and *non-refoulement*; they should also be encouraged to proactively and in good faith implement the commitments they made under the two Global Compacts relating to this issue. *Churches and faith actors* have been actively advocating for safeguarding these standards, and stand ready to increase the visibility of the linkages with internal displacement situations in this regard.

Please note that this list is not intended to be comprehensive or conclusive. We anticipate raising further considerations and proposals through your regional consultation mechanisms.

Further to the above, we also see the imperative for including ADG mainstreaming, and support the submission, **“Leaving No One Behind: Ensuring an Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) Inclusive Approach to Internal Displacement”** by a group of various stakeholders, and of climate change concerns in any document related to IDPs, and we support the related submission of the Platform on Disaster Displacement on **“Internal Displacement in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change,”** as well as the letter of the Climate, Migration, and Displacement Platform on **Addressing the Impact of Climate Change on Internally Displaced People** in this regard. We expect and support other submissions of this nature.