



The UN Office on Internal Displacement Closed. Now What?

 Steven Goldfinch

Internal displacement—that is the forced movement of people within the country they live in—is at crisis levels. There were 46.9 million internal displacements, or movements, recorded during 2023, across 151 countries. While some of these movements were a result of preemptive evacuation ahead of a disaster, the total number of people living in internal displacement increased by 51 percent over the past five years, reaching a record high of 75.9 million people across 116 countries at the end of 2023.¹ Unlike refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are, as citizens, the primary responsibility of their State and enjoy the same rights as other citizens. However, as displacement results from conflicts, disasters, and climate change, often linked to poverty and other vulnerabilities, IDPs are often invisible.

At the end of 2024, against this backdrop, the Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement reached the end of its 30-month mandate to strengthen and accelerate action on solutions to internal displacement from across the United Nations (UN) system.

With the office now closed, this note provides an overview of the UN Secretary-General's efforts to raise awareness and reframe internal displacement, and to improve the UN's performance in supporting Member States to reduce, prepare for, and provide solutions to the millions of internally displaced.

Raising global attention, reframing internal displacement

The Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement was established in response to the September 2021 report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement.² Precipitated by a letter from 57 Member States calling on the Secretary-General to “act on the need for increased global attention in support of IDPs,” the panel—co-led by Donald



Kaberuka and Federica Mogherini—was established in 2019 to identify concrete recommendations on how to better prevent, respond, and achieve solutions to the global internal displacement crisis.³

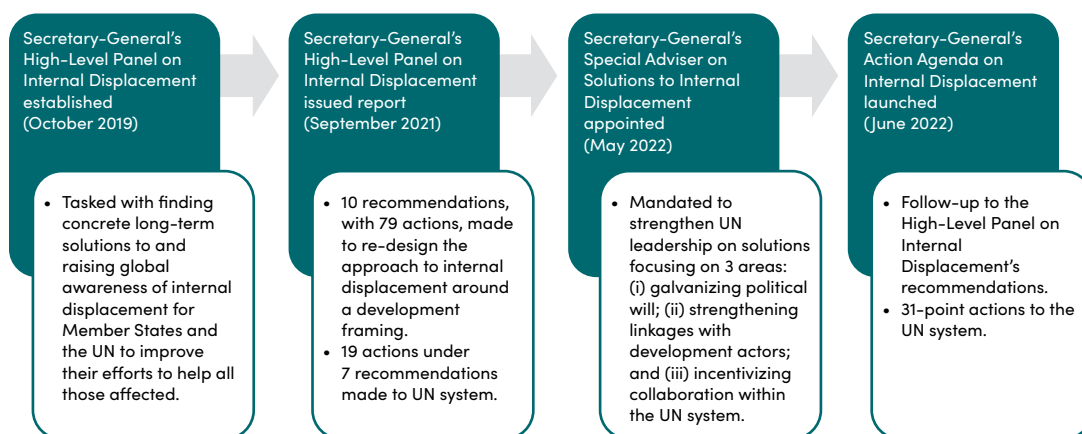
The report, commissioned by the Secretary-General rather than being a Member State-led process, called on States—as part of their sovereign duty—to do better, for the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the private sector to step-up, and for the UN to get organized and accountable for solutions.

The panel found a “collective failure to prevent, address and resolve internal displacement.” It made 10 recommendations comprising 79 actions to re-design the approach to internal displacement around a development framing. It called for a fundamental shift in the way States and the international community understand and address displacement, moving away from short-term humanitarian responses, currently costing \$6-7 billion annually, to address the root causes and finding durable solutions.

When accepting the report in 2021, the Secretary-General noted that the international community’s approach to internal displacement was “extremely fragmented,” that strategies, policies, and measures to empower the internally displaced were absent, and that the UN had insufficient institutional mechanisms in place for the effective coordination of durable solutions.⁴

Given the report was not part of an intergovernmental process, there was no built-in follow-up mechanism on the recommendations made to Member States, financiers, and civil society. As such, it was left to the Secretary-General to take forward the recommendations made to the UN system (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Reforming the UN system’s approach to internal displacement



Source: Author.

The UN's response

In May 2022, the Secretary-General appointed Robert Piper as his Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement to oversee the UN's efforts to implement a 31-point Action Agenda on Internal Displacement in response to the High-Level Panel's recommendations.⁵ The Office of the Special Adviser, established in June 2022, served as the UN's chief advocate on solutions and was tasked with helping drive a change in the approach to solutions within and outside the UN system.

The office had three focus areas: (i) galvanizing political will, (ii) strengthening linkages with development actors; and (iii) incentivizing collaboration within the UN system. While supporting the implementation of the 31 actions, the office was configured around four workstreams:

- 1. Prevention** – by promoting awareness of inter-linkages (climate change/mobility/adaptation strategies and climate change/conflict/displacement) including through global and regional alliances, by and working with IFIs and UN climate actors to support countries at risk of climate displacement to access climate-adaptation financing.
- 2. Response** – by working with specific UN teams in displacement affected countries to enable earlier pathways to solutions, and by contributing to the review of the humanitarian response in internal displacement contexts.
- 3. Solutions** – by working in 10-16 countries where conditions are met to get 10 million people on a path to resolve their internal displacement, together with UN country teams, affected Governments, donors, IFIs, IDPs and civil society and the private sector to put in place solutions and financing strategies, and roll-out enhanced data systems.
- 4. Governance** – by identifying how IDP solutions can be better managed in multilateral forums, investigating UN accountabilities when displacement goes from “acute” to “chronic” and propose related mechanisms, and by supporting the development and roll-out of UN agencies individual plans on solutions.

The UN's report card

Understanding the UN system's progress on addressing the recommendations of the High-Level Panel requires a review of the 19 specific actions made to the UN system by the panel and the UN system's own efforts to implement the Secretary-General's Action Agenda.

In the three years since the High-Level Panel presented its report, progress on the 19 actions in response to the seven recommendations made directly to the UN system are mixed (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement to the UN system

<p>Recommendation 2 Political will is key and should be catalyzed</p>	<p>Recommendation 5 Make the UN fit for purpose and accountable for solutions</p>	<p>Recommendation 6 Harness international financing for solutions</p>	<p>Recommendation 10 Sustain momentum and ensure robust follow-up</p>
<p>2.5 The Secretary-General should strengthen the UN's diplomacy and advocacy by appointing a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Solutions to Internal Displacement to provide continuous engagement with States on solutions. [Also 5.6]</p> <p>2.6 The Secretary-General is encouraged to produce an annual report on the State of Solutions to Internal Displacement that documents positive steps taken to resolve displacement as well as areas where improvements are still needed. [Also 10.11]</p> <p>2.7 The UN should work to enhance States' access to predictable technical support by providing expert capacity to Governments and streamlining technical assistance from the UN, including by using the SRSG's office as an entry point for requests.</p>	<p>5.1 The Secretary-General should formalize the role of Resident Coordinators to lead UN efforts on solutions at country level, including by incorporating the associated responsibilities into their Terms of Reference and performance assessments.</p> <p>5.2 Relevant UN agencies, NGOs and donors should provide Resident Coordinators with capacity to support their leadership role on solutions, including by stepping up to serve as a 'Coalition of Champions' on solutions at country level.</p> <p>5.3 The Resident Coordinator should ensure an appropriate mechanism is in place to coordinate efforts towards solutions, including for joint analysis and the development of a solutions strategy and costed plan, and should ensure that solutions are included in the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework and associated processes.</p> <p>5.4 The Secretary-General should formally and unequivocally communicate his expectation that UN development actors step up their engagement on IDP solutions and recognize this as essential to their work on the SDGs.</p> <p>5.5 The Secretary-General should set out clear expectations for all parts of the UN system on solutions and require relevant UN agencies and entities (humanitarian, development, peace, and disaster/climate change) to outline institutional plans for how they will build internal capacities and step up their engagement on solutions.</p> <p>5.7 UN agencies and NGOs should incorporate action on internal displacement in individual performance assessments and the Secretary-General should use independent evaluations to assess UN responses on internal displacement at country level.</p>	<p>6.4 UN, in particular the Peacebuilding Fund and Central Emergency Response Fund, bilateral donors and IFIs should scale up their engagement on solutions and actively pursue opportunities for complementary funding across the humanitarian-development nexus.</p>	<p>10.1 The Secretary-General is urged to provide strong leadership for follow-up of the Panel's report and for embedding internal displacement as a priority issue across the United Nations and globally.</p> <p>10.5 A High-Level Event on Internal Displacement should be convened at which States and other actors make commitments on internal displacement in light of the Panel's report and recommendations.</p> <p>10.6 The Secretary-General should establish a small 'Coalition of Champions' from across the humanitarian, development, peace, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation communities to support follow-up and other relevant action in light of the Panel's recommendations.</p> <p>10.9 The Secretary-General should establish a Private Sector Advisory Board to help engage the private sector as part of solutions.</p> <p>10.12 The Secretary-General should establish in his office a small secretariat or other appropriate mechanism to ensure continuing overall administrative coordination, monitoring, reporting on and dissemination of information on the implementation of our report and recommendations.</p>
<p>Recommendation 4 Make better use of the capacities of the private sector for solutions</p> <p>4.6 The UN and NGOs should invest in building their understanding of the private sector, including by recruiting individuals with private sector backgrounds.</p>		<p>Recommendation 8 Address the drivers of displacement and reduce displacement risks</p> <p>8.4 The UN should mobilize and use its full weight to confront threats to civilians, including by ensuring senior staff across all parts of the system are trained and held accountable for taking action when there are widespread rights violations or civilians are under threat.</p>	
		<p>Recommendation 9 Strengthen the quality of protection and assistance to IDPs and host communities</p> <p>9.5 The Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator should formally reaffirm that Resident / Humanitarian Coordinators are responsible for ensuring that the specific needs of IDPs are identified and responded to in a comprehensive and coordinated manner during the humanitarian response.</p> <p>9.6 The Secretary-General should commission an independent review of the humanitarian system in contexts of internal displacement and based on its findings, the IASC should update its policy and operational guidance on responding to internal displacement to ensure a more predictable response to the specific needs of IDPs.</p>	

Source: Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (2021)

In response to **recommendation 2** on catalyzing political will, there were three action items: the Special Adviser with a time-bound mandate was appointed. However, with internal displacement on the rise and the reconfiguration of the UN system in train, the direction that the mandate end “once a solutions approach is more firmly embedded within the working methods of the different actors across the UN system” has not been fully met. As the panel said, “it is only with a new, dedicated, high-level position that the necessary predictability and consistency of engagement can be achieved.”

On reporting, while IOM-commissioned a Periodic Global Report on the State of Solutions to Internal Displacement in 2023, this is an agency publication, as opposed to a Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly or other intergovernmental body, so there is no formal follow-up or review by Member States.⁶

In response to the call for predictable technical support for affected countries, the establishment of a solutions fund, with \$21.4 million in commitments from Germany, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, provides an important vehicle to strengthen the capacity of resident coordinators to take forward the agenda at a country-level through the deployment of experts. The fund is currently supporting 10 joint programs.⁷

Progress on **recommendation 4** on building the UN's understanding of the private sector is unclear.

Recommendation 5, on making the UN fit for purpose and accountable for solutions, saw the largest number of proposed actions. The action to formalize the role of resident coordinators vis-à-vis internal displacement has not yet been reflected in their terms of reference and performance assessments.⁸ While it remains to be seen how resident coordinators facilitate the inclusion of displacement in UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks with countries, current guidance on developing a framework remains silent on displacement.⁹

In terms of raising the expectation that UN development actors step up their engagement on IDP solutions, the Action Agenda and a joint statement by the principals of DCO, IOM, OHCA, UNDP, and UNHCR speaks to this commitment.¹⁰ Further, 12 UN entities have put in place new institutional plans on internal displacement.¹¹ However, the status of independent evaluations to assess UN responses on internal displacement at the country level is unclear.

Recommendation 6 on financing for solutions sees progress in engaging the Peacebuilding Fund and the Central Emergency Response Fund.¹²

Progress on **recommendation 8** to address the drivers of displacement and reduce displacement risks through training and increased accountability of senior staff is unclear.

Recommendation 9, reaffirming the role of resident/humanitarian coordinators to ensure the specific needs of IDPs are identified and responded to appears partially unmet given that displacement is not reflected in their terms of reference. However, an independent review of the humanitarian response to internal displacement was completed in March 2024.¹³

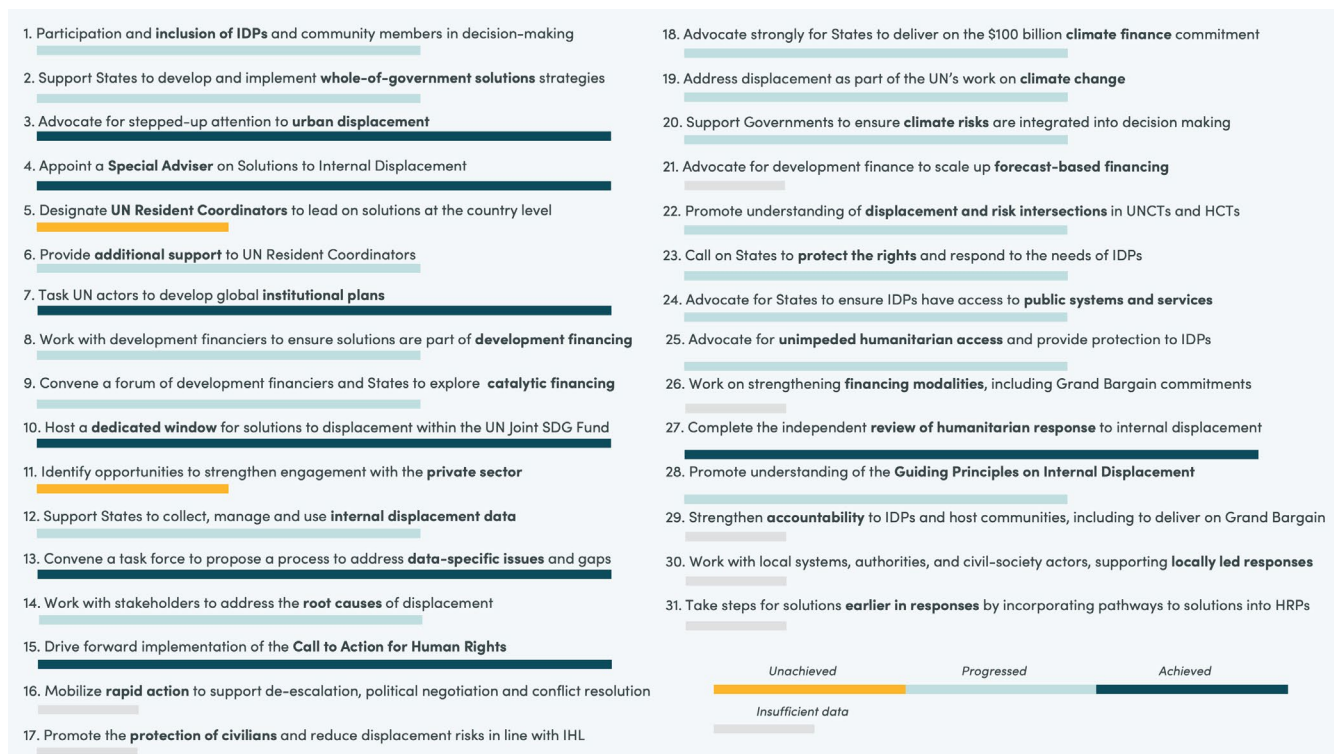
On sustaining momentum and ensuring robust follow-up, **recommendation 10** proposed five actions to the UN. The Secretary-General's leadership of the issue was demonstrated through the Action Agenda and the establishment of a (temporary) office to take forward the agenda. However, this did not result in a high-level event on internal displacement, or "coalition of champions" from across the humanitarian, development, peace, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation communities, or a private sector advisory board to support follow-up.

The Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement

Assessing progress against the 31-point Action Agenda on Internal Displacement is challenging given the advocacy-nature of many points and the absence of means of verification to measure progress (Figure 3). It should also be noted that this is a work-in-progress, as the Action Agenda will continue to guide the UN system beyond the Special Adviser's mandate.

That said, the Action Agenda has provided much needed direction to the UN system in addressing the extreme fragmentation identified by the panel. The agenda has undoubtedly increased the visibility of internal displacement among UN entities, as demonstrated in the 12 new institutional plans and commitments by various principals. Its inclusion in the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system (QCPR) resolution for the first time, along with sessions at the Peacebuilding Commission and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has also raised awareness among Member States.¹⁴

FIGURE 3. Progress on implementing the Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement



Source: United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement (2022) abridged with author's analysis.

Perhaps the greatest contribution was the support provided to the 15 pilot countries by the Office of the Special Adviser. These pilots, although limited considering the need, demonstrated the UN's contribution at the country-level, with leadership and funding. These pilots see over 11.5 million IDPs on a pathway towards durable solutions. In Central African Republic, Iraq, Ethiopia, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Somalia, it resulted in government-owned, time-bound, and costed solutions plans.¹⁵

Leveraging IFIs as providers of development finance for solutions was identified as a key enabler to supporting affected countries implement their solutions plans. Through a dedicated financing adviser for solutions, the Office of the Special Adviser worked closely with IFIs, resulting in a working group bringing together IFIs with UN agencies and bilateral donors. Both the World Bank and African Development Bank introduced new IDP indicators in their corporate scorecards, with others putting in place new and revised analytical products. A policy brief on bridging humanitarian aid and long-term development programming for the internally displaced was published.

The Office of the Special Adviser, and the UN system more broadly, was less successful in putting in place the foundations needed to sustain these efforts. While the system is making efforts to reconfigure itself (below), there is no vehicle to ensure continued, or periodic, visibility or accountability of and by Member States. The proposed high-level event on internal displacement, to have taken place in 2024, to provide “an opportunity for States and other key stakeholders to make new, concrete pledges to action on internal displacement, reaffirm their support for existing normative frameworks, such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and, if agreed, articulate a new declaration or common statement of commitments on preventing, addressing and resolving internal displacement crises” was not held. Presumably, this was due to a lack of Member State support to provide the political space required to elevate this issue. The failure to hold this event and therefore not provide a reporting and review mechanism to address internal displacement within the UN architecture, leaves it “orphaned” within the system.

Revitalizing a “system-wide” approach to internal displacement

In the absence of structural changes to UN architecture, the Office of the Special Adviser has reconfigured the UN system in an attempt to address the fragmentation. Without a dedicated agency or home for internal displacement, the UN system has agreed on steps to better coordinate and integrate the work of displacement across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts.¹⁶

At the core of this reconfiguration is a new inter-agency Hub for Coordination of Solutions to Internal Displacement. While not an entity per se, this grouping will bring together the solutions fund and the advisers it provides to resident coordinators, short-term deployments from UN agencies, and coordinate UN country teams working on solutions. These functions will be supervised by

an inter-agency Solutions Steering Group, reporting to the Joint Steering Committee to Advance Humanitarian and Development Cooperation. A UN inter-agency IDP Solutions Consultative Group, tasked with taking stock of progress and discussing high-level strategy, will also be established.

From an operational perspective, the UN will establish a global solutions data platform, to bring together actionable data and to improve the quality and availability of data, create UN country solutions dashboards for countries with significant displacement situations, and publish a biennial state of displacement solutions report on trends, data and global progress in advancing solutions. To address the lack of visibility, a small group of UN principals will form a “solutions champion group.”

Given this falls within existing mandates and budgets from participating agencies, it leaves open the question of ambition and, critically, sustainability. At the operational level, it’s somewhat perplexing to see the UN attempt to recreate what the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and other non-UN entities are already providing in terms of global solutions data and monitoring and reporting on internal displacement.

Where to from here?

The issue of internal displacement remains effectively “homeless” within the UN. It’s now without dedicated leadership or a standalone coordination mechanism. It remains without an intergovernmentally agreed framework, there is no convention, no global platform, no regular forum, nor is there a foreseeable pathway towards one.

Without a special representative (or special adviser), or an annual report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly, or a standing item at ECOSOC, it is hard to see how the momentum and political attention achieved is maintained in New York.

The limited number of embedded solutions advisers in the offices of the UN resident coordinator will provide ongoing support at the country-level for as long as there is funding. However, in the absence of an office to advocate and mobilize resources, and recognizing the many demands on resident coordinators, it seems likely that the approach will fall back towards fragmentation, as individual UN agencies seek to find solutions within the scope of their mandates and, increasingly, the bounds of donor earmarked resourcing.¹⁷

The efforts to reconfigure the UN system, albeit without core resources or changes to existing mandates or formal reporting structures to Member States, is commendable. However, the fact remains that UN agencies are being asked to do more in the context of reducing budgets and donor fatigue. Relying on the goodwill of agencies, and their principals for sustained leadership, presents obvious risks.

Ultimately, the UN system relies on its Member States to drive issues and support those members in need. The question of “where to from here” largely lies with the membership. The High-Level Panel was clear on what needs to change. The Secretary-General effectively provided Member States with a trial of what could be achieved, with a dedicated office working with targeted countries to find solutions, coordinating a UN system-wide approach, and engaging with IFIs. These yielded promising early results.

Addressing the invisibility of internal displacement within the UN rests with its Member States, or at least a group of likeminded Member States willing to expend the political capital, and provide the financial resources, to elevate the issue. It also requires a Secretary-General willing to continue advocating for Member States to do better.

In short, it remains to be seen how the UN will ensure that internal displacement doesn't return to the status quo of fragmentation and UN system failure that both the Secretary-General and the High-Level Panel highlighted. As the Panel warned, “we fear that without dedicated, high-level attention to this issue, embedding a development-oriented approach and joined-up action for solutions will not succeed.”

Endnotes

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STEVEN GOLDFINCH is a policy fellow at the Center for Global Development on secondment from the Asian Development Bank.

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