What does home mean in displacement?

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‘It all starts at home’ was the tagline of this year’s World Urban Forum (WUF) in Cairo, Egypt. But what does ‘home’ mean for people who are displaced into towns and cities?

The WUF framed home in terms of the global housing crisis, with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goal 11.1 of adequate, safe and affordable housing as well as basic services. Housing is critical in displacement. Access to shelter is a major struggle for those residing in tents and camps, or struggling to rebuild their lives in cities.

But more nuance and depth are needed in order to understand what ‘home’ really means to people who are displaced.

In our panel at the WUF, we sought to nuance and deepen the framing of home beyond a narrow focus on housing. Drawing on experiences from Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria and Ukraine, here is what we had to say.

Home is a safe space that gives life meaning

Paula Gaviria Betancur, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons

A home is far more than just housing or shelter. It is a safe space that nurtures our wellbeing and mental health. A home provides a social network and community support structure where we are accepted and gain a sense of belonging. It may also be tied to our ancestors and their connection to the land and nature. A home gives life meaning and is essential for all to reach their full potential.

As Luis Eduardo Pérez, a Colombian academic expert on displacement and the concept of home, has aptly stated:

Home is not always a fixed place that those who are uprooted unequivocally want to return to. The displaced conceptualise home as a contested, multidimensional and dynamic space in which ideas of identity, belonging, and well-being interact over time and space.

Home is emotional and social stability

Bibiche Modjenpa, Assistant Executive Director at Reach Out Cameroon

The notion of ‘home’ for displaced Cameroonians goes beyond physical shelter – it involves emotional and social stability. To help build a sense of home, Reach Out Cameroon establishes safe spaces for survivors of gender-based violence to build emotional healing and peer support. Reach Out also provides group therapy as a means to strengthen emotional resilience and a sense of community spirit – helping make new environments feel more like ‘home’.

Culturally sensitive and gender-inclusive approaches were crucial for fostering trust and active participation. Overall, these efforts helped internally displaced persons (IDPs) redefine ‘home’ through emotional recovery, social ties and economic independence, contributing to a more stable and supportive life in displacement.

Home is a feeling of belonging and community

Valeriia Vershynina, Executive Director of the Charitable Foundation 'Stabilization Support Services', Ukraine

Displacement is not just about losing a physical home – it is about the loss of security, stability and identity. As someone displaced twice due to Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, I know this all too well. Through my personal journey, I realised that home is not just a place, it is a feeling of belonging and community.

This is what drives my work at Stabilization Support Services, where we empower IDPs to rebuild their lives and reclaim their agency. One of our key initiatives is the creation of IDP Councils – advisory bodies that connect displaced persons with local governance, restoring their voice and enabling integration. Over 1,000 councils now operate in Ukraine, promoting social cohesion and fostering trust between IDPs and host communities. Displacement, while a deeply personal experience, requires collective solutions.

Home depends on the local community

Alesia O'Connor, Researcher at the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)

IDMC research in Colombia, Iraq and Nigeria has shone a light on less tangible aspects of home and integration that we don't often measure when assessing progress towards solutions. For example, physical and psychological safety was key for IDPs in Adamawa state, Nigeria, who felt accepted by the local community but recognised that this was conditional on their 'good' behaviour and willingness to work hard.

For displaced Yazidi people in Duhok governorate of Iraq, social and community structures, such as clan and ethnicity, influence how displaced people are welcomed into the community. Many IDPs recognised how pre-displacement social and cultural ties with the local community contributed to their feeling of acceptance.

Social and emotional interpretations of home also play an important role for many Colombian IDPs who could still describe in detail the rural homes they had left behind decades ago, how it felt to own their house and land, and to eat fruit directly from their own garden. Formal recognition and reparation for this loss remain important issues for many.

Not just bricks and mortar

In sum, the concept of home goes beyond the bricks and mortar of housing. It is also about more abstract and social aspects of making a home in displacement. For those who are displaced, 'home' represents a sense of belonging and acceptance, social networks and cohesion, identity and trust, wellbeing and dignity, and community and collective alliances.

Aid actors must take note of displaced people's personal reflections of home, paying particular attention to these less tangible, easy-to-miss aspects of home-making. Doing so will imbue wider policy and practice with the full richness of the meaning of 'home'.

Available at: https://odi.org/en/insights/what-does-home-mean-displacement/