

The enduring damage of displacement

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Political tensions in Burundi have been growing since April, when the president announced he was running for a controversial third term in office. Violent confrontations and a failed coup have stoked fears of large-scale conflict, with memories of Burundi's 1993-2005 civil war still raw. So far, tens of thousands of people — mostly women and children — have fled to neighbouring countries in Africa's Great Lakes region, and the UN warns this number may double over the coming months.

The sudden exodus is undermining Burundi's economy, with a reduced workforce and political insecurity hampering production. Research shows that after the outbreak of war in 1993, food production remained below what had been the pre-war norm for several years; and by 1996, the country had lost a fifth of its cattle. [1] The food insecurity that resulted is a pattern likely to be repeated this time around.

Less easy to predict, but potentially far more economically damaging over time, is the harm inflicted upon the country's future workforce: its children.

Children displaced by war and other crises experience numerous, intersecting vulnerabilities. Undernutrition is common. A 2014 study on Colombia found that displacement increased the likelihood of chronic malnutrition in early childhood by almost a fifth. [2] A study on the 1998-2000 conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia showed that exposure to war and displacement also stunts children's growth. [3]

These experiences can have permanent and irreversible impacts on cognitive capacity and overall health. [4] And, as affected children mature into adulthood, they often find there is a knock-on effect on their ability to work and earn money, particularly in low-income countries where physical strength and good health underpin many livelihoods.

Damage to education prospects, another devastating side effect of displacement, further harms future employment chances. One study on Burundi suggests that the probability of completing primary schooling declines by six percentage points for every forced displacement experience and by two percentage points for each year of residence in a displacement camp. [5]

So can anything be done? Health and food transfer programmes that target young children and pregnant and lactating women might help mitigate some of the impacts. Evidence from northern Uganda suggests that food-for-education programmes — which provide snacks and meals to children in school — can improve the growth rates of young displaced children. [6]

Families tend to direct food aid to their youngest children, and this could help reduce the long-term risks of problems such as stunting and cognitive impairments. But these programmes do not fully repair the damage, and younger generations will always be marked by their or their mothers' experience of displacement, long after wars end and they return home.

References

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