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PA-X REPORT



How Peace Agreements Address Displaced Persons: Key Trends and Challenges

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Key Findings

1. **There is a concerning mismatch between the rise in displacement and the decline in peace agreements addressing it.** At the end of 2024, an estimated 123 million people were forcibly displaced, with 73.5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) displaced by conflict and violence. Yet, only 16% of international- and national-level agreements signed between 1990 and 2024 address displacement in a substantive way. While global displacement has been increasing over time, reaching record levels since 2019, the proportion of new peace agreements addressing displacement substantively has been declining.

2. **Displacement being addressed by peace processes and their agreements has been episodic rather than systematic.** Agreements addressing displacement have clustered around specific conflicts. A small number of agreements address the issue of displacement exclusively. Most frequently, displacement is addressed in partial and comprehensive peace agreements (45% of all mentions). This pattern is concerning given that peace agreements are increasingly difficult to reach, a trend which is particularly acute for comprehensive agreements.

3. **Peace agreements substantively addressing displacement have tended to be less effective as standalone mechanisms.** They are more effective when coordinated with and supplemented by sustained domestic and international efforts that are specifically focused on the displaced population.

4. **The majority of peace agreement provisions have struggled historically with implementation;** both in post-conflict settings due to complexities around return of ethnic communities, and in ongoing conflict settings as part of stalled transitions, as has been the case, for example, in Colombia. Displacement is linked to politics and the hierarchical interests of parties in peace processes. In some cases, displacement becomes enmeshed with the identities, interests, and political agendas of the conflict parties. Fast responses by governments and returns of those displaced are essential, however these are also often delayed or at risk of being overtaken by new government priorities.

5. **There is a lack of clear, strong, and detailed language addressing displaced persons in peace agreements.** Definitional ambiguities remain, limiting how peace processes and agreements can address displacement. Most national peace agreement texts since 1998 make no distinction or very limited distinction between refugees and IDPs, often grouping populations together. In that regard, mediators and negotiating parties should consider using clearer language and references to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998).

6. **Changing conflict and mediation landscapes are complicating efforts to address displacement, with increasing rates of intrastate conflict and fragmented governance posing questions over the capacities of domestic authorities to protect and provide for those displaced.** Many of the cases examined in this report come from the 1990s, when formalised state-centred peace processes were the norm. Contemporary conflicts are increasingly protracted and fragmented, characterised by geopolitical interventionism, multimediation, and more transactional peacemaking. These new dynamics raise fundamental questions about whether current mediation practices are conducive to finding robust ways of addressing displacement.

7. **In adequately formulating the aims and scope of a peace agreement as part of a response to displacement, peace process stakeholders should have a detailed understanding of the contextual dimensions of the displacement in question and its relationship to the conflict.** There is contextual and temporal variation in forms of displacement within and across conflicts. Historical developments, political context and connected conflict dynamics can create vastly differing displacement challenges, shaping their position in relation to peace and transition processes and how displacement can be addressed by peace agreements. Mediators should be aware of the ethnic, social, and political contexts around the displaced population, the role displacement has played in the conflict, and the implications of returns for different groups, including in relation to safety in areas of return and the political agendas of the relevant states or negotiating parties.

8. **Dealing with displacement in peace processes also requires adaptive approaches from peace process stakeholders, targeting a variation of peace agreement stages or mediation entry points.** This is particularly timely, given changing conflict and mediation landscapes and the need for enhanced focus on the issue of displacement within peace processes. Adaptive approaches need to be able to adjust to changes in political and conflict contexts, and find alternative entry points when formal processes stall. It is essential for mediators to understand and explore how displacement can be addressed at different stages of the process; such as when and how to support mechanisms for more short-term protection and assistance, and when to address the long-term issue of returns in a context-sensitive way. Mediators also need to understand the relevant organisations that can help support displaced people and processes such as return at different points in a peace process.

Introduction

As of late 2024, data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) showed an estimated 123 million forcibly displaced people worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.[1] As part of this figure, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimated the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) displaced by conflict and violence to be 73.5 million.[2] Since the IDMC began recording in 2009, the global number of IDPs has increased in a steep upward trend from roughly 25 million to 73.5 million – an overall rise of 48.5 million – with an accelerated jump of 26.4 million between 2020 and 2024 (see Figure 1).

The sharp increase has occurred despite efforts to establish international protections for displaced populations. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights (now the United Nations Human Rights Council) incepted a set of Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement[3] in April 1998, designed to safeguard and address internally displaced populations in the absence of any international normative commitments or legal frameworks directly addressing IDPs and their rights and protection. More recently, alternative international attempts to respond to the rising global number of IDPs displaced by violence and conflict, such as the UN Secretary-General's 2022 Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, have struggled to have an impact.[4]

In parallel, conflict and transition landscapes are increasingly fragmented, with mediation initiatives becoming more transactional, competitive, and focused on the short-term.[5] Bell has usefully termed these contexts as examples of 'multimediation' – the proliferation of situations where multiple overlapping conflict mediation initiatives compete or co-exist, emerging in response to increasingly fragmented conflict systems.[6] As part of this shift, peace processes have seen a decline in formalised peace agreements – particularly those that have tended to deal with the substantive parts of a conflict or address the entirety of a conflict.[7] Historically, peace agreements that attempt to set out detailed approaches to supporting displaced populations have most often come from either substantive-partial or comprehensive agreements, which are now in decline.

These shifts in mediation patterns create a concerning mismatch. As displacement sharply increases, the willingness and ability of parties and mediators to address displaced persons substantively in peace agreements, has reduced.

Challenges around which conflict party, mediator, or other third-party organisation (such as the UN, historically) should adopt an active role in addressing displacement, now also seem to overlay established barriers to humanitarian efforts in fragmented conflicts. The politicisation of humanitarian aid, the behaviours of armed actors targeting aid implementation efforts, and cuts in official development assistance could all be said to be overlapping congested mediation spaces, across various mediation initiatives. In addition, despite being among the groups most affected by armed conflict, displaced persons are still underrepresented in peace talks, further limiting the potential of mediation efforts to tackle displacement.

In Sudan for example, Qatar has both funded development and humanitarian efforts to support those displaced, while simultaneously excluding IDPs from talks Qatar has led (see Sudan section below). Contrasting this, in a separate initiative, the African Union (AU) High-Level Panel on Sudan, as part of attempts to support the AU Roadmap for Sudan, have attempted to promote and foster inclusive political dialogue, calling for the inclusion and engagement of displaced populations.[8] Moreover, in a 2024 peace agreement (*ALPS Group Humanitarian Access Agreement in Sudan*), centrally focused on humanitarian access and aid delivery, only the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) attended talks with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) absent, with both eventually violating the agreement. The United Arab Emirates, as one of the mediators, also supports the RSF,[9] with Egypt and Saudi Arabia as two of the other mediators, supporting the SAF.[10]

Alongside the issue of addressing displacement through mediation and peace agreements, other factors causing implementation gaps in drawn out transitional settings and protracted conflicts, also remain central in many contemporary conflicts. In intrastate settings particularly, such as Colombia and South Sudan, as a party in the process, the state's capacity or willingness to implement domestic legislation, particularly where displacement is concerned, also often complicates responses to displacement.

There is therefore an increasing need to better understand how negotiating sides resolve, or fail to resolve, the problems of displaced populations, and how peace agreement-making practices could evolve to be part of a renewed approach and response to globally escalating displacement.

This report draws on a sub-collection of peace agreements from the PA-X Peace Agreement Database,[11] bringing together and visualising examples of peace agreements that in varying ways attempt to address displaced persons by adopting differing technical mechanisms or modalities. Based on the publicly available data from PA-X, the report examines trends of existing peace agreement practices. While comprehensive analysis or insights on the implementation of specific peace agreement provisions dealing with displacement lies outside the scope of this report, we offer reflections on the challenges to effective or comprehensive safe return and reintegration of displaced persons, when set against the backdrop of fragmented conflict contexts and messy peace and transition processes.

First, we outline the dataset, scope and definitions used. We present global trends on how peace agreements have substantively addressed displaced persons from 1990 to 2024. We examine the periods when such agreements were signed, as well as considering the stage of the peace process they were signed at and the importance of this. As part of this focus on agreement stage, we offer reflections on some of the peace processes in which examples of substantive agreements have been most concentrated. Second, we highlight some short country cases and the contextual details that are important in relation to the peace agreement data, while also considering how the issue is addressed in local agreements. The report then concludes with discussion and reflections, particularly in relation to what the observed shifts in contemporary mediation and peacemaking practices could mean for including and addressing displacement in peace processes.

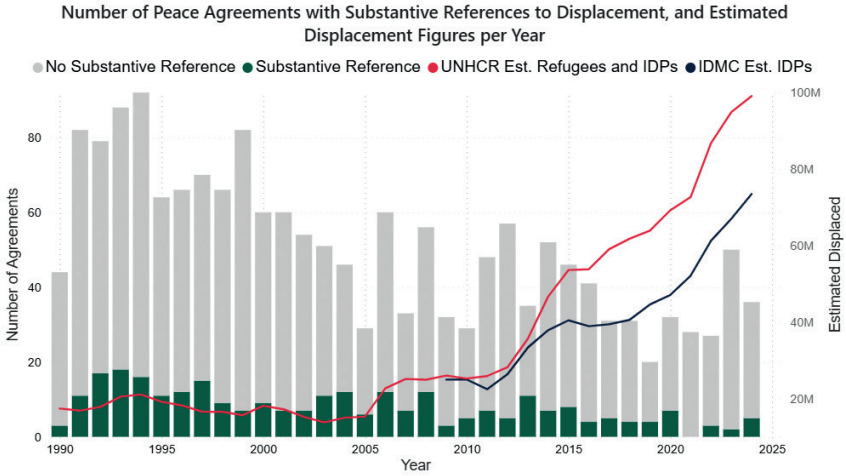

Figure 1: This chart shows the number of international and national-level peace agreements signed per year, denoting the number that do and do not include a substantive reference to displaced persons in the text. The lines on the chart represent the estimated number of refugees and IDPs 1990-2024 from UNHCR, and the estimated number of IDPs displaced due to conflict or violence from IDMC for 2009-2024. The combined chart shows the stark increase in the number of displaced persons, in particular internally displaced persons in the last decade, while there are few peace agreements addressing the topic.

Global Insights

Data Overview

This report draws on data from the PA-X Peace Agreements Database Version 9,[12] which records over 2,000 peace agreements signed between 1990 and 2024 across more than 170 peace processes. For the purposes of this report, we focus on agreements that include references to displacement. In PA-X, references to refugees or displaced persons are recorded under the 'Groups' category which includes any mention of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), or repatriation, including land claims or return arrangements. This is further refined to record a distinction between general mentions to displacement, and substantive provisions that include detailed commitments, mechanisms, or reference to rights.[13]

Throughout this report, we refer to displaced persons to encompass those displaced within their state border (internally displaced persons, or IDPs) and those who have crossed an international border (refugees). While both groups are products of forced displacement, they are governed by distinct frameworks – refugees by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol,[14] and IDPs by the non-binding 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.[15]

Definitions of Refugees and IDPs

We recognise the historical complexities around distinctions between refugees and IDPs in conflicts and transitions; notably in the differing international standards and laws offering protections to either group, variations of peace agreement provisions addressing either or both groups, and the challenges of delineating between and monitoring both populations in some conflict or post-conflict contexts.

We also recognise semantic variations in the way peace agreements have described or addressed those displaced, which may partly reflect the discrepancies in legal frameworks for addressing both groups. This is particularly acute in cases from the 1990s when states, the international community, and peace process practices were attempting to navigate a growing recognition of the distinction. This terminological confusion must be factored into how we understand peace agreement data since 1990 and how displacement has been addressed historically, both internally and across borders.

Cases from the former Yugoslavia are particularly illustrative of these contextual complexities. Agreements from this period frequently use 'expelled' as a catch-all term, applying it interchangeably to describe those displaced internally, those displaced across borders, and those explicitly defined as refugees. The broadness of the term 'expelled' was complicated further by the fact that border delineation shifted mid-conflict, as new states emerged – changing the status of displacement between internal and external. This ambiguity may also reflect the political sensitivities of the former Yugoslavia processes that were simultaneously attempting to determine independence and borders. Not stringently defining populations that were still in flux may have been an intentional part of not pre-empting those territorial outcomes.

While there are clearer international measures providing status and protection to refugees, there are no treaties specifically addressing internal displacement. The 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are not binding, but rather attempt to leverage the normative power of other International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by showing more broadly how standards relating to protection of the person are relevant to the treatment of displaced persons.[16]

Following the broader definition used by PA-X allows for a wide consideration of semantic variations, cases, and peace agreement texts in this report.

While PA-X includes local agreements, these are not collected systematically across all regions or years and therefore could skew global comparisons. Main analysis is limited to 1,777 national and international agreements (interstate, intrastate and interstate/mixed agreement/conflict agreement types) as a result. Following our consideration of national and international agreement data and related cases, we provide a separate section on local agreements later in the report.

Of the 1,777 international and national agreements on PA-X, 466 (26%) include a reference to displaced persons, but only 282 (16%) contain substantive, as opposed to simply rhetorical, provisions. The following analysis focuses on this subset of 282 agreements.[17]

Overview of Substantive References to Displaced Persons

The 282 international and national agreements that substantively reference displaced persons address the topic in varied ways. Many include commitments to the voluntary return of refugees and IDPs in safety and dignity to their places of origin or other suitable locations, while others emphasise protection, assistance and human rights of displaced populations during and after conflict. Ceasefire and security arrangements occasionally include specific humanitarian protections, such as prohibiting armed group recruitment in IDP camps, or establishing humanitarian corridors to facilitate the movement of displaced persons. In several processes, provisions also address the socio-economic conditions of displaced groups, including compensation and re-integration, combining immediate material assistance with longer-term recovery or development measures. For example, agreements in Sudan address both immediate needs (monetary funds and material aid) and longer-term support (such as exemption from university fees), in addition to addressing housing, land, and property issues.

Temporal Trends

Despite sharp global increases in conflict-related displacement since 2008 (as seen in Figure 1), peace agreements have not mirrored this trend. The data broadly suggest that the inclusion of displacement issues in peace agreements has been episodic rather than progressive or systematic, spiking around specific conflicts or regional processes that are able to reach the comprehensive agreement stages, but not evolving in step with the consistent increase in global displacement patterns, or global peace agreement trends.

The 1990s saw the highest concentration of agreements with substantive displacement provisions (as opposed to general or rhetorical references). In 1993 alone, 18 such agreements were signed (around 6% of all agreements with these provisions were signed that year). Many of these come from European and Eurasian processes: the Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia peace negotiations, and the Abkhazia peace process, where large-scale displacement was a defining feature of both conflicts. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than a half of the pre-war population – approximately 2.2 million persons – were displaced from their homes after 1992.[18]

Substantive displacement provisions peaked in 2013, when 31% of all agreements signed that year contained such references (11 of 35). Notably, this spike occurred in a year with very few total agreements (only 2% of all international or national agreements in the PA-X database were agreed that year – 35 agreements). By contrast, in 2021 – when an estimated 52 million people were internally displaced[19] – no agreements included substantive displacement provisions, underscoring the persistent gap between global displacement realities and how peace processes address them (as seen in Figure 1).

The number of peace agreements with substantive references to displaced persons has tended not to follow the volume of total agreements signed or the trend for agreements that contain only general mentions of displacement (see Figure 2 – denoted by middle shaded section). This suggests that while displacement is often acknowledged in passing, substantive commitments addressing the rights, return, or reintegration of displaced populations remain comparatively rare.

Importantly, these substantive mentions are clustered in specific processes rather than following broader displacement trends. During concentrated episodes, substantive commitments often increased even when the global rate of general mentions of displacement was declining.

In the first of these periods, between 1992 and 1994, roughly 60% of substantive references came from the Bosnia and Herzegovina process and Georgia-related processes (Abkhazia and South Ossetia). A similar pattern followed between 1996-1997, in which well-established processes accounted for over half of substantive references; across the connected processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Yugoslavia and Croatia, and separately in the Tajikistan and Guatemalan processes. The final surge within this pattern before overall decline in substantive provisions on displacement, was recorded between 2010 and 2011, where 75% of substantive references come from agreements in the Philippines and in the connected Sudan-South Sudan Darfur and Kordofan - Blue Nile - Abyei processes.

These clusters of substantive references have tended to emerge primarily in contexts where forced displacement and mobilisation of ethnic groups, involving multiple regions, borders and territories, were central to the conflict. We consider other variables throughout the report that may also shape whether displacement can be substantively addressed, such as the timeline of political developments throughout conflict leading into talks, or the intensity of conflict conditions creating more opportune moments for return, if non-violent post-conflict conditions are not possible.

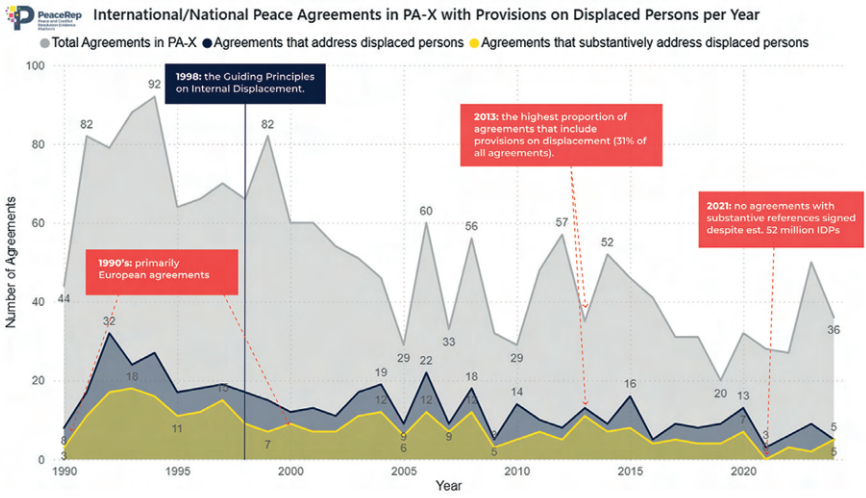

Figure 2: The number of international/national level peace agreements signed per year, 1990-2024. Also showing the trend for agreements that mention displacement, and additionally those that deal with displaced persons in a substantive manner.

Stage of Peace Process

Relevant to this broader peace process trend is the pattern that emerges when examining the stage of the peace process at which agreements containing substantive provisions on displacement are signed. Using PA-X stage definitions, Figure 3 shows the percentage of agreements that contain substantive provisions on displaced persons.

- Framework–partial (substantive) agreements account for 27% (77 agreements);
- pre-negotiation/process agreements account for 20% (55);
- framework–comprehensive (substantive) agreements account for 18% (52);
- implementation and ceasefire agreements each account for 17% (47 each); and
- renewal agreements account for 1% (4).

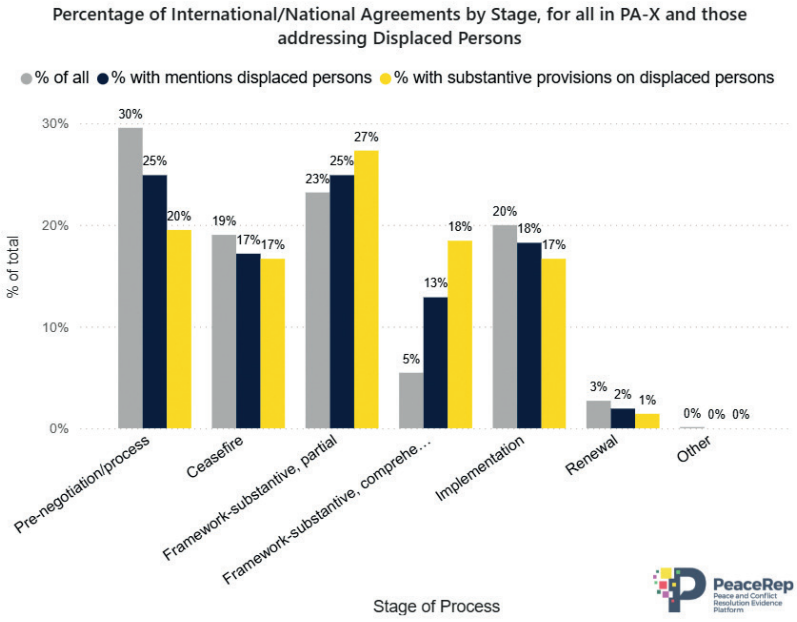

Figure 3: The proportion of agreements signed per stage – showing the breakdown for all international/national agreements in PA-X, for agreements that include a provision on displaced persons, and agreements with substantive provisions on displaced persons. Such agreements (third/yellow bar) are most commonly signed at the framework-substantive, partial stage. Notably, 18% of all these agreements are signed at the framework-substantive, comprehensive stage, showing proportionally they are included here more often than the general trend of agreements (5%).

This breakdown shows the references have been concentrated in comprehensive agreements, as partial and full framework comprehensive agreements count for almost half (45%) of all agreements with substantive references on displaced persons. This is striking given that only 5% of agreements in PA-X are signed at the framework comprehensive stage, while 18% of agreements with substantive provisions on displacement are signed at this stage (52 agreements) as seen in Figure 3. This means that, proportionally, comprehensive framework agreements have contained substantive provisions on displacement more often historically, than agreements at other stages of peace processes.

Comprehensive framework agreements are increasingly rare, owing to the changing nature of conflict, mediation, and peace process practices.[20] This trend poses substantial questions for contemporary conflicts involving ongoing displacement. Comprehensive framework agreements attempt to address in detail some of the most central or complex components of the conflict and what an envisaged transition beyond it might look like. Reaching this stage requires not only momentum and sustained commitment from all parties but also a willingness to continuously address – and if necessary, re-visit – complex issues central to the conflict, such as displacement. This level of sustained engagement is difficult to achieve where multiple fragmented processes have emerged in place of one consolidated effort, as has been the case in a number of contemporary conflicts with mass displacement, such as in Sudan.[21]

There is no one set of dynamics or conditions related to displacement, such as ethnic divisions, that ensures or increases the likelihood that displacement will be addressed in a peace process in a substantive way. In many cases, however, agreements that have reached the comprehensive stage and included substantive references have emerged in contexts where forced displacement and mobilisation of ethnic groups, involving multiple regions, borders and territories, were central to the conflict. These peace processes were also sustained enough to build the momentum needed to address such a complex issue.

Furthermore, as these ethno-nationalist dimensions intersected territorial and regional governance claims and became tied to addressing mass displacement, they posed substantial challenges to negotiation dynamics, and in some cases became obstacles to the peace process progressing further.

It is therefore notable that in some of these cases there was sufficient political will to develop displacement provisions, particularly given the complexities involved in addressing displacement, not only during conflict but also in post-conflict settings. The absence of overarching international legal frameworks to guide such provisions adds to these complexities. Additionally, political sensitivities around placing state or party responsibility for displaced populations during talks, and the party composition of negotiating groups representing those displaced, add further considerations to how to address displacement in processes. The latter was relevant in the Bosnia and Herzegovina process (see 'Annex 7' in Table 1 below).

Crucially, the conditions necessary for displacement to be dealt with fully or more comprehensively may only be in place once parties have agreed to a framework agreement. It is worth noting that short of a more comprehensive arrangement or measures resembling a full solution to displacement, some aspects of displacement can at least be focused on at earlier stages, for example by prohibiting forced displacement in the terms of a ceasefire.

Examples of Comprehensive Peace Agreements with Substantive References to Displacement

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the Dayton Peace Agreement (*the Dayton Agreement*), actors in the Bosnia peace process were able to navigate these complexities in what was a multiparty process. The comprehensive agreement was effectively 11 separate agreements, each signed by a differing constellation of actors, and came at a time during the 1990s when there was a shifting expectation for international norms to address issues previously understood to be within the remit of the state, domestically.[22] In this context, a multiparty arrangement involved three governments signing, along with the other semi-autonomous territories representing varying populations signing certain annexes (see Table 1 below). The comprehensive agreement framed the responsibility for those displaced more generally, as an obligation to all parties to ensure the rights of returnees and to create safe conditions with emphasis for example on property return, including detailed provisions for a commission to deal with property claims and disputes following returns.

Tajikistan

In the Tajikistan comprehensive peace agreement (*General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan*) concluding a civil war which had displaced just over a tenth of the country's population (600,000),[23] the government accepted a more formalised responsibility within the agreement text to ensure return and reintegration of those displaced. This commitment built on previous momentum in the process, linking to an earlier substantive agreement in the process which exclusively addressed displacement (see Table 1 below).

Georgia-Abkhazia

Conversely, the Georgia-Abkhazia peace agreement (*Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons*), shared some of the same complex multi-ethnic divisions and territorial claims as the Bosnia peace process but had fewer parties. The agreement outlined a mutual responsibility between the Georgian government and the de facto semi-autonomous Republic of Abkhazia for safely returning and hosting those displaced. The agreement set out a relatively detailed framework for return of those displaced, making some distinction between refugees and those displaced and describing safe conditions and immunity for those returning, specifying this does not apply to armed actors who have committed war crimes or who intend to continue fighting. The framework however lacked detailed provisions around steps of safe return and reintegration – details which might have come in the subsequent stage of the process, had there been one.

The issue of displacement itself, however, became a central block in further negotiations and what had materialised as a promising partial framework agreement exclusively addressing displacement, did not develop to the full comprehensive stage. On the Abkhaz side of negotiations in the process, it was felt that the process had not addressed security concerns around Georgians who had been involved in enacting violence in the conflict and who were returning to Abkhaz areas. As process momentum faltered, the issue of displaced populations became increasingly politicised by the Georgian government and Abkhaz political organisations, which in turn led to overall conditions involving the negotiating process being discredited.[24]

As well as sustaining the necessary momentum in a peace process to reach windows of opportunity for addressing displacement, in relation to earlier discussion around agency and mediation, it is also worth noting Russia's involvement as a mediator. Its presence as a mediator in this region during this period has been described as playing 'the role of a kin or parent state for the putative internal stabilization of post-Soviet *de facto* state entities and the perpetuation of their external limbo'.[25] This was part of Russia's broader policy of creating ambiguities in settling territorial conflicts, and therefore influencing new states forming in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Sudan

The most recent comprehensive agreement on PA-X Version 9 that includes substantive references to displacement is the failed ***Juba Agreement*** (3 October 2020). In the case of Sudan, the central transition and the Juba Agreement had become entangled with multiple competing mediation and facilitation initiatives, involving various regional and international actors and their interests.[26] This poses questions not only around sustaining progress towards a settlement through peace process stages, but also asks a more fundamental question, of how displacement is likely to be addressed or make it into the negotiating agenda in any of the processes or mediation spaces in this context.

As we have described, displacement has been increasingly sidelined as an issue in more formalised peace processes, with those who are part of displaced groups having faced exclusion from dialogue processes. Qatar for example, has been perceived as a successful mediator in Sudan and supported the Juba Agreement with witnesses, but in some unilateral Qatar-led talks in the Darfur process and in the 2020 transitional process agreements, Qatar was accused of excluding marginalised groups including IDPs. This was viewed as causing the failure of previous rounds of negotiations.[27] In line with this, more recently in the post-2019 transition period in Sudan, mediation initiatives have become more ad hoc, sporadic and less coherent.[28]

In this sense, it is worth noting that even as a comprehensive agreement is looking unlikely in Sudan, as well as in many other settings, attempting to address issues related to refugees and IDPs does not need to wait for parties to become convinced of the need for a broad settlement. There is precedent for practices within peace processes for agreements to exclusively address displacement. Some annexes to comprehensive peace agreements and other substantive-partial and pre-negotiation/process agreements primarily deal with displaced persons (see Table 1 below).

These examples illustrate the diverse ways peace processes have addressed displacement – from comprehensive agreement annexes to standalone partial agreements. Most of these examples emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, during a period characterised by more formalised, state-centred peace processes, in contrast to current mediation and peacemaking practices that differ in form and format. Yet within these contemporary contexts of fragmented conflicts and competing mediation initiatives, finding ways to take parts of the approaches, practical solutions and takeaways developed throughout the 1990s and early 2000s as fundamental approaches to mediating complex issues, may nevertheless be relevant – particularly given the decline in processes able to reach comprehensive framework stages.

Peace agreements that primarily deal with displaced persons	Year	Title
Cambodia	1991	*Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement on the Cambodia Conflict*, Annex 4 on Repatriation of Refugees and Displaced Persons (page 19).
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1995	*Dayton Peace Agreement, Annex 7 on Agreement on Refugees and Displaced Persons* (page 94).
Substantive-partial agreements (sometimes signed in a peace process that pursues a comprehensive settlement, or directly building on a previous comprehensive agreement)		
Rwanda	1993	*Protocol of Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Rwanda and the Rwandese Patriotic Front on the Repatriation of Rwandese Refugees and the Resettlement of Displaced Persons*
Abkhazia	1994	*Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons*
Guatemala	1994	*Agreement on Resettlement of the Population Groups uprooted by the Armed Conflict*
Tajikistan	1997	*Protocol on Refugee Issues* (linked to the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan, 1997)
South Ossetia	2000	*Agreement between the Government of Georgia and the Government of the Russian Federation on Cooperation in Restoration of Economy in the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict Zone and Return of Refugees*
Pre-negotiation/process agreements (either as a part of, or separate from, a wider comprehensive peace process)		
South Africa	1991	*Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of South Africa and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on the Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration of South African Returnees*
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1992	*Sarajevo Declaration on the Humanitarian Treatment of Displaced Persons*
Sri Lanka	2003	*Accelerated Action on Resettlement and Humanitarian Action, Progress on Human Rights*

Table 1. Examples of peace agreements that primarily deal with displaced persons.

Agreement Locations and Peace Processes

Using PA-X regional categories, and considering the period since 1990, the most agreements with substantive provisions were signed in Africa (excluding MENA), accounting for 41% of the total (117 agreements). Europe and Eurasia follow with 26% (72 agreements), though this activity is heavily concentrated in the 1990s. To illustrate this, Figure 4 maps where these peace agreements have been signed, comparing the 1990-2007 and 2008-2024 periods.

The temporal comparison reveals a notable geographic shift. In the earlier period, Europe and Eurasia show substantial concentration of agreements, particularly driven by processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the former Yugoslavia in general, and the South Caucasus. In the period since 2008, agreement activity has shifted primarily to Africa and parts of Asia, reflecting areas with high conflict activity. This geographic distribution reflects the temporal trends outlined above: much of the agreement activity in Europe and Eurasia stems from the 1990s and early 2000s, and the resolution of conflicts stemming from the collapse of multi-ethnic communist authoritarian regimes, while more recent large-scale displacement crises in regions such as MENA and parts of Asia have not generated equivalent levels of peace agreement activity addressing displacement.

Comparing contemporary peace agreement locations with current internal displacement trends (Figure 5) highlights critical gaps in how displacement is incorporated into agreements. Several of the world's largest displacement crises since 2008 – Syria, Yemen, and Myanmar – have large numbers of people forcibly displaced, yet displacement is rarely mentioned in agreements that address these conflicts (Figure 5). In Syria, displacement is addressed in just 9% of agreements (2 of 23); in Yemen the proportion is similarly low at 10% (3 of 30); and in Myanmar, 15% of signed agreements (6 of 39) contain substantive references to displacement. Notably, even where there are ostensible 'end points' to conflicts, such as in Syria, frozen pockets of authority often remain and processes of return supported by a government are not contemplated or possible. These contexts reflect the contemporary challenge of increasingly fragmented conflicts with competing mediation initiatives, where the types of sustained formalised peace processes that have historically produced substantive references to displacement in peace agreements are increasingly less common.

By contrast, countries like Sudan (29/120 agreements; 24%), South Sudan (25/97; 26%), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (22/54; 41%) show both high displacement and comparatively higher rates of agreements addressing displacement. In line with our reflections in this report, these figures may be said to be a partial result of longer-running, more formalised and more substantive (past) peace processes in the DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan. Equally, specific displacement contexts and previous conflict history are also relevant in each case. In Sudan, even after the beginning of the 2019 transition, agreements including the Juba Agreement were still addressing aspects of historical displacement unaddressed from the Darfur conflict of the early 2000s. Of the 29 Sudan agreements referenced above that have substantive references to displacement, 5 of these (17%) come from the Darfur-Sudan process alone, which spanned almost a decade from 2004-2013; with the process accounting for almost a third of all agreements in Sudan with general references to refugees and displaced persons (16/50 agreements; 32%).

There are 79 peace processes that produced the 282 agreements with substantive displacement references in PA-X; however, a relatively small number of peace processes account for a large share of these agreements (Figure 6). Just five peace processes alone – in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Philippines-Mindanao, Georgia-Abkhazia, the Eastern DRC, and Sudan – account for approximately one-third of all agreements addressing displacement. The most prominent case, the Bosnia peace process, represents 9% of all mentions (25 agreements), followed by the Philippines-Mindanao (7%; 21) and Abkhazia (6%; 18) processes. Several other processes – such as the Eastern DRC and Sudanese (North–South) peace processes – each include 12 agreements (each being 4% of total) with substantive displacement provisions. Both processes are discussed further in the spotlights below.

These five processes account for approximately one-third of all agreements that address displacement. Beyond these, many peace processes contain smaller numbers of such agreements, typically between three and eight, including those in Guatemala, the Central African Republic, Kordofan–Blue Nile–Abyei (Sudan/South Sudan), Tajikistan, and Colombia. This distribution suggests that while displacement is recognised across a wide range of peace processes, in practice only a small number of processes engage with it in a sustained or comprehensive manner.

The following case studies examine a selection of these processes in greater depth, exploring how displacement has been addressed in specific agreement texts and what this reveals about the opportunities and limitations of peace processes as a mechanism for protecting displaced populations.

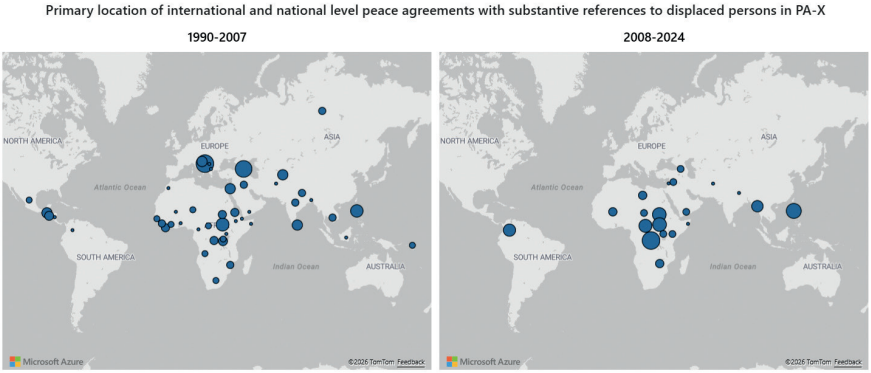

Figure 4: Primary location (Loc1ISO in PA-X) of international/national level agreements with substantive references to displaced persons in PA-X, 1990-2007 (left) vs 2008-2024 (right).

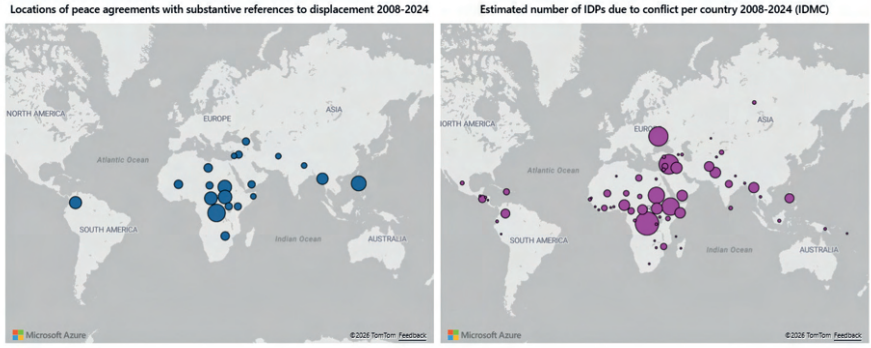

Figure 5: Locations of peace agreements with substantive references to displacement (left) compared with estimated number of IDPs due to conflict per country (right), 2008-2024. Data sources: PA-X and IDMC. This comparison highlights the mismatch between contemporary displacement crises and peace agreement activity.

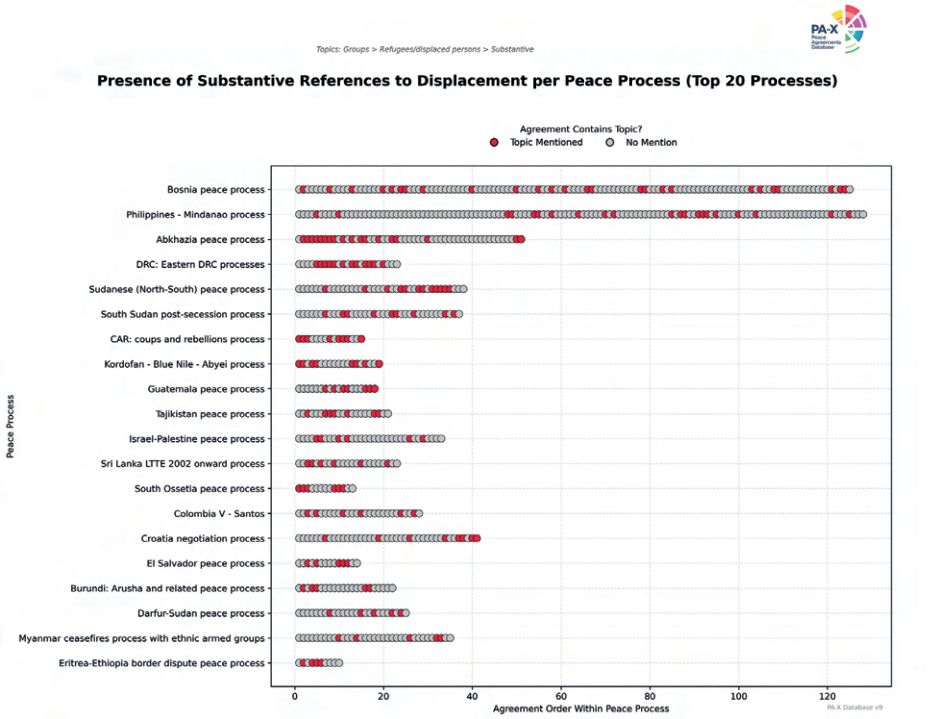

Figure 6: Top 20 processes by number of international/national agreements with substantive references to displacement, showing agreements in the process that did and did not include the issue substantively.

Country Cases

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In the available peace agreement data post-1990, agreements in Bosnia and Herzegovina are among the first in PA-X that contain displacement provisions. These agreements were formative in how they provided an early level of understanding as to how refugee and IDP-related issues could be comprehended in the context of agreements more widely. They helped establish the importance of addressing these issues in peace process contexts, and contributed to the ways that later agreements would frame texts addressing displacement, particularly due to the consistency in highlighting and normalising central themes including the right to return and recovery of property.[29] The agreements emphasise the creation of secure conditions for the safe and orderly return of refugees and displaced persons to places of their choice, with earlier agreements such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) *Humanitarian Principles* (6 June 1992) focused on providing food parcels for displaced persons. Later in the process, focus was placed on secure release and returns, working with organisations such as the UN or ICRC to facilitate this. The *Dayton Agreement* (21 November 1995) reaffirms these commitments, guaranteeing 'the right to have restored property of which they were deprived'[30] and providing for compensation when return is not possible.

As McConnachie notes, this case 'is a rare example of a peace agreement in which responding to displacement was at the heart of the entire agreement. This reflects the central role of ethnic cleansing as a tool of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which made the return of refugees essential to ensure that ethnic cleansing did not succeed'.[31] However, and crucially, while this was a positive step in the early evolution of getting displacement provisions into processes and agreements, provisions were also limited in detail in terms of providing for the distinctions among returning displaced populations. While there were articles that prescribed for safe repatriation and reintegration into communities and called for parties to ensure conditions free of discrimination based on ethnicity, there was also a lack of detail distinguishing clearly between ethnic majority and minority groups, based on possible areas for their return and resettlement.

In the second planned round of implementation around minority returns as opposed to the first round of majority returns, in some areas returnees were denied access to employment and other basic rights by those opposing their return, as well as suffering destruction of property. In some cases, these returns were met with violent resistance, even from local authorities.[32] To some extent an early process of return and compensatory justice for displaced people was implemented for parts of the displaced population, showing the possibility of reversing, to some degree, enforced ethnic segregation.[33]

Sudan

Displacement provisions feature prominently across multiple Sudanese agreements (see available peace agreement timeline for Sudan on PA-X). *The Darfur Peace Agreement* (5 May 2006) prohibits armed militia activity in IDP camps and commits to the 'resettlement, rehabilitation and reintegration of internally and externally displaced persons'.[34] The *Doha Document for Peace in Darfur* (31 May 2011) expands on these themes, outlining rights protections, voluntary return, humanitarian access, and compensation — including both immediate payments and longer-term education and reconstruction measures. The aforementioned Juba Agreement (3 October 2020) continues this focus, defining IDPs and refugees, establishing the IDP and Refugee Commission (IDPRC), and mandating coordination with international organisations to facilitate return, collect data, and assess rehabilitation needs. Taken together, the Sudanese agreements illustrate how displacement provisions can evolve from basic protection clauses to integrated frameworks for return and reconstruction. Nonetheless, with the failure of previous peace agreements, the outbreak of civil war in April 2023, and nearly 12 million people displaced internally and across borders, Sudan faces the world's biggest displacement crisis at the time of writing.[35]

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The DRC faces a protracted displacement crisis that has its origins in the 1996 Congolese war.[36] The IDMC estimates that there were 6.2 million IDPs in the DRC at the end of 2024.[37] Between 2008 and 2020, *several Eastern DRC agreements* addressed displaced persons. The *Outcome Documents from the Conclusion of the Kampala Dialogue between the Government of the DRC and the M23* (12 December 2013) include provisions assigning roles to armed groups in facilitating the return and resettlement of IDPs.

In 2020, a series of unilateral ceasefires signed by several armed groups between July and September introduced clauses with similar wording to ensure the conflict parties 'leave open a humanitarian corridor in order to assist displaced persons and populations in need of humanitarian aid'.[38]

Other Cases: The Early 2000s

In the build up to and in the wake of the introduction of the Guiding Principles, most conflicts recorded globally between 1989-2000 were intrastate.[39] As part of this gradual global shift towards intrastate conflicts, and as part of a wider acceptance at the time as to the changing nature of conflicts generally, one emerging defining feature was the increase in violence targeted at civilians.[40] We briefly describe the cases of Burundi and Guatemala here, as examples of conflicts that involved the systematic targeting of civilians, and that are also among the early post-1990 attempts to address displacement in their peace agreements.

Both peace processes happened towards the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s. While Guatemala's process formally ended two years prior to the inception of the Guiding Principles, implementation continued into the early 2000s. Both examples are also worth noting for their contrasting approaches to defining displaced groups in their peace agreement texts.[41] The *Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi* (28 August 2000) reflected the standard practice still being applied after the Guiding Principles, across several national agreements at the time. It focused its definition on the rights of refugees and returnees more broadly, capturing all displaced groups, and referring to international refugee protocols.[42]

Following the Arusha Agreement, the Burundian government issued a protocol in 2001 referencing the Guiding Principles and creating a framework for consultations on the protection of displaced persons,[43] as well as a new power-sharing constitution in 2005 (*Constitution of 18 March 2005*). But, by the mid-2000s there was a general recognition that there were insufficient focused protections and assistances being provided to IDPs in this context. The foundational protocol texts and policies had been largely ignored by government, and mechanisms conceived by the peace process such as the Committee for the Protection of Displaced Persons were delayed in being established. While there had been some progress encouraging returns through a national reintegration strategy, by 2015 displacement had become protracted, with 77,600 people still displaced and with a renewed outbreak of violence the same year causing further new displacement.[44]

In Guatemala, by 2001, the specific focus in the peace agreement on the rights of internally displaced persons had benefited parts of the IDP population, but many IDPs had not received adequate support from the state, which had shifted focus to address poor populations more widely.[45] Similar to the case of Burundi, Fagen has argued that the technical committee incepted during the peace process, as well as other state bodies, did not effectively administer or have jurisdiction over assistance to IDPs, whose specific needs were not addressed institutionally in the same way that those of refugees were.[46]

Local Agreements

Although local-level peace agreements have been excluded from the main data analysis in the previous sections, a number of these agreements also contain substantive provisions on displacement. Since the early 1990s, 42 local agreements in the PA-X Local database[47] have included such provisions, mostly negotiated directly between community leaders, elders, or local authorities. These agreements often focus on practical arrangements for return, safety, and coexistence, rather than large scale national strategies around returns, resettlement, and reintegration.

In terms of temporal patterns, local agreements with substantive displacement provisions are a more recent development compared with national or international agreements. While national-level agreements containing such provisions appear throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, local agreements begin to feature more prominently after 2010, with peaks between 2015 and 2019 (see Figure 7) as intrastate conflict rates began accelerating.

Notably, while national- and international-level agreements addressing displacement have become less frequent since 2010 (Figure 1), local agreement texts have continued to make provisions addressing these groups. As displacement has proliferated, it has remained a central issue in local and grassroots peacebuilding when national negotiations have not addressed displacement or when negotiations have stalled. Other variables could also partially explain the post-2010 peaks in local agreements addressing displacement. These include an increase in more formalised and public local peace agreement signing practices, and the limitations of national process structures being able to establish the prerequisite conditions for addressing displacement against a backdrop of increasingly fragmented conflicts, complex transitional governance arrangements, and transactional mediation spaces.

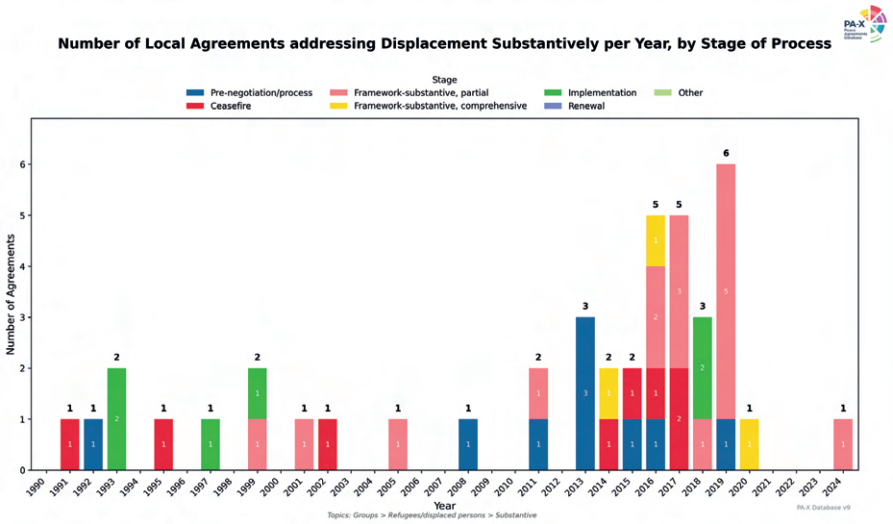

Figure 7: Number of local agreements per year with substantive references to displaced persons, by stage of agreement.

Geographically, Africa accounts for the majority of local agreements with substantive displacement provisions, particularly in South Sudan, Libya, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic (see Figure 8 below). This reflects the overall regional distribution observed at national level but with a stronger concentration in subnational and intercommunal processes. This geographic distribution, however, may in part be explained by the fact that the PA-X collection of local peace agreements is not an exhaustive set of all local peace agreements signed across the globe over the last 34 years; some geographic clustering would thus be expected based on the local agreements that have been included in PA-X.

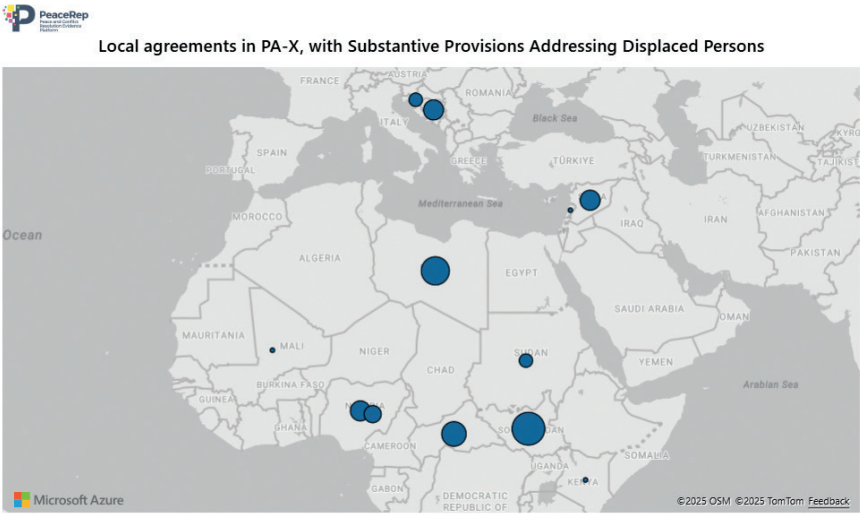

Figure 8: Number of local agreements per year with substantive references to displaced persons, per Country (1990-2024).

Across these local agreements, the most frequent provisions concern the return and resettlement of displaced persons to their areas of origin. Many specify that return should take place under safe and voluntary conditions, sometimes with the support of local monitoring or security arrangements. In some cases – such as the *Minutes of Misrata-Tawagha Agreement on the Return of Displaced Persons and Compensation for those Affected* (Libya, 31 August 2016) and the *Wunlit Dinka Nuer Covenant and Resolutions* (South Sudan, 8 March 1999) – provisions combine commitments on safe return with measures for reconciliation and rebuilding relationships between affected communities.

Other local agreements link displacement to land, compensation, or humanitarian assistance. Examples include the *Mabanga Peace Accord* (Kenya, 21 October 2011), which provided for community involvement in land restitution; and several Central African Republic and Nigerian local declarations, which refer to compensation for losses and the rebuilding of homes. Overall, these local-level agreements address displacement in immediate and community-focused terms, emphasising the facilitation of return, security, and coexistence within affected areas.

As discussed so far, there are complexities with implementing substantive displacement provisions even where they do exist in processes, depending on the context. As shown in the country cases, in a wider national sense it is not clear that substantive provisions can fully achieve their aims where ethno-political dimensions play into implementation, even in what conventionally would be called post-conflict or non-violent settings and where there is a clear end point to the conflict and peace process. In settings such as South Sudan, reoccurring episodes of local violence cannot be disentangled from national politics. Given that national politicians have used the peace process and the ***Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan*** (12 September 2018) to delay transition,[48] and with no clear end to conflict and the peace process in sight, implementing returns is fraught with challenges.

Historically in South Sudan, ongoing movement, return, and land and property claims have continued to cause tensions and violence between ethnic groups. In many cases, even if people can return, they find their homes gone, inhabited by others, or no longer in areas with services or livelihood opportunities.[49] As part of the Wunlit peace conference of 1999 between two of South Sudan's main ethnic groups, the Dinka and Nuer, the ***Dinka Nuer West Bank Peace Council Communication*** (30 September 1999) was an example of a local implementation agreement relating to the main conference, following up with the formation of working groups comprised of local, grassroots representatives from the Dinka and Nuer communities. The agreement detailed the tasks the Resettlement of People & Border Administration working groups were to be responsible for, specifying numbers of those displaced and ethnic groups to be resettled within specific areas. As an example of locally-led implementation, 'the return of captives and abducted persons began at Wunlit itself',[50] with local agreements achieving inter-ethnic returns between both Nuer and Dinka, stabilising borders, and enabling the swapping of captives.

Discussion

Viewing Displacement in Peace Agreements: A Recall to the 1990s

The focus on peace agreement stage serves as a reminder of the importance of the contextual political and conflict conditions that also shape how peace processes can build towards substantively addressing displacement. The 1990s cases that account for many of the substantive-partial or comprehensive agreements addressing displacement were intrastate in nature and a response to ethnic conflicts. In this sense we are no longer in 'the decade of the peace process',[51] when peace processes were administering to conflicts in which ethnic tensions and displacement were central causes. Nonetheless, while global displacement has proliferated to unprecedented levels in comparison to the 1990s, largely through the growth of intrastate conflict, many comparable conflict and political conditions, including ethnic divisions, remain centrally tied to varying cases of prolonged mass displacement.

In examining the peacemaking moment of the 1990s, we have also considered whether this was a moment that began a practice of substantive-partial and comprehensive agreement-making addressing displaced populations. Equally, we have considered that there were instances in that decade where processes that made it to the comprehensive stages could not sustain momentum to go any further. In these instances, momentum faltered in part precisely because of how the issue of displacement became intractable in those particular political settings; as in the case of the Georgia-Abkhazia process. Therefore, the focus on the stages of a peace process also reaffirms the need for adaptive approaches in bringing displacement into talks. At any stage, from pre-negotiation through to substantive and implementation agreements, this should be done in a responsive way that can adjust to political or conflict contexts. This is particularly important now, in the face of contemporary peacemaking and mediation shifts, where conventionally excluded groups or issues are even more at risk and less protected by the normative standards and framings of international and national law and standards related to peace processes.

In this sense, the historical examples here are also reminders of the precedent for finding alternative entry points for bringing displacement into processes in complex multi-party settings, such as at pre-negotiation stages. Addressing displacement at pre-negotiation stages can open opportunities for negotiation later in talks, and can act as a mechanism for separating displacement as a distinct issue from the rest of the negotiating agenda.

In the case of Guatemala referenced throughout this report, there was enough political will among parties to bring displacement-specific issues and also displaced groups themselves into talks, separating displacement from the main negotiations;[52] with a pre-negotiation agreement in March 1994 calling for a timetable for discussion on outstanding negotiations on resettlement,[53] followed by a substantive-partial agreement in June 1994 which addressed displacement exclusively (see Table 1 above).

We have also considered the absence of international legal frameworks, and the responsibility to address displacement that this absence places on the unitary state or domestic authority within peace processes. Importantly, where timing and sequencing are concerned, there have been cases where peace agreements have led to the introduction of laws and policies on internal displacement, as was the case in Sierra Leone when its national resettlement strategy was introduced in 2001, following a series of peace agreements three months before fighting in the civil war ended. Since 1998[54] however, there have been relatively few domestic laws or policies passed by states specifically addressing IDPs.[55] As key actors in peace processes, states have been left to interpret, define, and adjudicate the position of displacement within their wider set of interests or agendas within peace negotiations.

Early decisions by the governing authority ultimately matter as part of conditioning responses to internal displacement, shaping how they are likely to develop throughout peace negotiations and beyond both during conflict and in post-conflict settings. In many cases, well-drafted laws and policies on displacement have stalled prior to implementation due to governance issues – including in cases where lack of leadership or ownership of the process within government, or administrative blocks, inhibited responses, as was the case in the DRC, Nigeria, and the Philippines.[56] Where peace agreements are increasingly addressing the rise in local and intrastate conflicts,[57] fragmented governance arrangements are likely to shape responses to displacement, either in conflict transitions or in post-conflict settings.

Defining the Displacement in Question

As we have discussed, clear and deliberate language in peace agreement texts, specifically around responsibility and defining the specific displacement dynamics within the conflict in question, is critical. The Guatemalan agreement of June 1994,[58] as referenced above, described 'internally displaced person' by explicitly drawing the distinction between those displaced within and those displaced outside of existing borders. Relative to the evolution of the term and the distinction to refugee at the time, this decision placed a much-needed emphasis on the right of IDPs to choose whether they returned to their place of origin. This dynamic became central in the implementation of the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, even since the introduction of the Guiding Principles in 1998, there have been issues with states adopting the Principles' definition, and limited or non-existent IDP definitions remain.[59] It is notable that across the PA-X corpus, following the introduction of the Guiding Principles post-1998, in most national agreement texts there is often no distinction or very limited detailed distinction between refugees and IDPs, with provisions in national peace agreement texts often grouping the two populations together as we discussed in the 'Global Insights: Definitions of Refugees and IDPs' section above.

Comparatively speaking, when viewing all agreements available on PA-X, it seems there is still a broader need for clearer and more context-specific displacement provisions when addressing these diverse groups.

Backdrop to Displacement: Socio-political and Conflict Conditions

In some of the cases examined here where displacement was central to the conflict, it was also enmeshed with the identities, interests, and political agendas of the national conflict parties. In a hierarchical national peace process, displacement is frequently bound up in the ethno-nationalist territorial interests of states as the main conflict parties, as was the case in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia-Abkhazia. This matters in terms of displacement being taken to the negotiating table as a central issue, and for commitments being implemented post-agreement. These pre-existing socio-political and national political conditions also created complexity in implementing these peace agreement commitments, even in non-violent post-conflict settings such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as displaced ethnic groups attempted to settle and reintegrate in newly defined territories.

By contrast, in intrastate conflict settings in several contexts, formalised processes and supporting third parties may seek to uphold the previously legitimate or elected authority. Equally, in many of these settings, conventional assumptions about the functions of the unitary state are less easily applied, particularly when it comes to implementing complex policies around fast return of the displaced population and peace agreement commitments. This challenge poses more fundamental questions around how peace processes and conflict transitions are likely to be able to substantively address displacement. In Sudan, large sections of the displaced population and civic base have found themselves perpetually relegated to the margins of civic life, blocked from political inclusion and involvement in the peace process as the transition has stalled and the Juba Agreement has become a site of 'political manoeuvring'.[60] Longer-term displacement has worsened and become embedded within other complex longstanding conflict issues including community representation and reconciliation or land reform.

In the 2020 Juba Agreement in Sudan, IDP groups had provided consultation on protocols on land reform and participated in processes leading up to the signing of the main agreement but in reality, lacked a genuine voice during negotiations at the final stages of drafting and effectively were not part of the agreement. The consultations had been politicised by armed groups from Darfur, where the structuring of the process and agreement served as a space of transactional politics and competition for government positions among the signatories.[61] In the aftermath of the Juba Agreement, violence and conflict across the country increased and violence in Darfur was not prevented, with more than 77,000 newly displaced between 2019 and 2020, rising continuously throughout the formation of the transitional government to 330,000 towards the end of 2021 – seven times more people displaced than the previous year.[62]

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, given that ethnic cleansing was at the centre of the conflict and a central reason for displacement, the peace process timeline was very different. Where the conflict and displacement effectively began towards the end of 1991, by April 1992, very early in the process, there was the first substantive agreement addressing displacement.[63] The conflict and the Bosnia peace process ended officially with the Dayton Agreement three years later in 1995. While displacement had been addressed in the peace process within a relatively short timeframe, in a process where displacement provisions were meant for further review, implementation became complex and played out over the following two decades and beyond.

This shows how, even in a context where the process had ended and reached post-conflict and non-violent conditions, intricacies around sustained commitment to the peace agreement provisions arose, given the complex nuances of return and reintegration in ethnic minority-majority settings. Territorial lines that were redrawn by the conflict and peace process settlement meant that groups were expected to return to their areas and homes of origin post-agreement and re-integrate. In the case of the Dayton Agreement, where much of the return-focused provisions addressed property return, IDPs only temporarily returned to home communities to reclaim and sell their property, then going back to settle in areas they had been displaced to during the war where they were the majority.[64] In the decade after the war, one million IDPs were able to return. But even with a UNHCR-supported law passed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1999 on Refugees and Displaced persons, implementation and reintegration ultimately did not fully materialise in the way local communities had envisaged, with local authorities also adopting legal positions to impede implementation.[65]

Dilemmas of Implementing Returns

It has been shown that the efforts of governments to facilitate fast returns of those displaced are central to longer-term implementation, without which peace agreement commitments on displacement tend to stall as governments shift their focus, as was the case in both Burundi and Guatemala.[66] Facilitating returns is an important part of peace agreements, but the success of facilitating returns depends on the varying forms and the position of displacement within the national political context of the conflict. From examining the PA-X data in this report and peace process timelines in both the Burundi and Guatemala cases, it is relevant that whilst not a central cause of either conflict, displacement had been developing over time prior to the processes beginning, due to other episodes of violence, civil war, and politicisation of ethnic divides. Notably in both cases, displacement was not addressed substantively until late on in the process.

Liberia has also been cited as an example of fast return and implementation of domestic policy, as it adopted its National Community Resettlement and Reintegration strategy a year after its comprehensive peace agreement[67] was signed in 2003. In part the resettlement programme was also successful because of the war ending, which triggered natural large-scale returns.[68] Similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic divisions remained, with minority returns to some communities not effectively leading to what a peace agreement might prescribe as return and reintegration, in a comprehensive sense. Many of the foundations of settlement post-agreement, like reconciliation between communities and reconstruction, connect to return and reintegration, and can also become sites of new division and instability if targeted by national politics or where divisions become part of economic reconstruction (such as in the cases of Darfur, Liberia, and the DRC).

PA-X data and the examples discussed above also suggest that peace agreements substantively addressing displacement have tended to be less effective as standalone mechanisms. During implementation, they are more effective when coordinated with and supplemented by sustained domestic and international efforts that are specifically focused on the displaced population.

Displacement in Contemporary Peace and Conflict Transitions

Given the increasingly protracted and deeply fragmented nature of contemporary conflicts, the nature and scale of displacement at the start of a peace process pose challenges to domestic policy formulation and implementation and sequencing or timing of peace process mechanisms. If a process stalls, and displacement becomes protracted or secondary displacement occurs, where those displaced inevitably make up large sections of the civic body of any future state, this places a question over the fundamental aims or outcomes of the peace process and the envisaged political settlement. Even in cases where the recognised state can exercise a level of legislative authority, informal governance arrangements through armed groups present challenges to the return and protection of displaced persons, creating immediate safeguarding questions in instances where transitions or peace processes stall and conflict parties proliferate as displacement continues.

Sudan

In the case of Sudan, it is notable that before stalling (even in 2019 when the transition was beginning) there were still two million people displaced from the 2003 Darfur conflict.[70] As of October 2025 ,the IOM estimated the total number of IDPs to be over 9.3 million, with over 4.3 million refugees from a total population of around 52 million.[71] Not only is there no clear sense of how any legislation would be passed in this context, there is even less sense of which of the competing armed groups would administer any kind of informal measure given the negotiating behaviours of both the SAF and the RSF, with both groups found to be committing atrocities towards civilians.[72]

Whilst never formally adopting the Guiding Principles, the Sudanese government had acknowledged the Principles, to an extent aligning their displacement policies in 2006 and 2009.[73] As mentioned earlier in this report, a range of agreements on PA-X across the Sudan and Darfur processes[74] also make detailed provision for the securitisation and protection of IDP settlements and camps from attack and recruitment by armed groups, and yet armed parties have been found to be both attacking camps and recruiting from them.[75] In this sense, the longer the violence and stalled transition continue, the harder it is for displaced groups to avoid becoming pulled into cycles of violence, and any peace agreement provisions addressing IDPs and camps lose weight. Increasingly transactional mediation practices and behaviours by national and international actors are clearly visible to armed actors such as the SAF and the RSF as they compete for governance power and resources. It is unclear how an issue such as displacement can be addressed in these kinds of settings without extensive and consistent international support coupled with alternative approaches to finding humanitarian entry points for providing aid.

Colombia

In the case of Colombia, following the 2016 comprehensive peace agreement[76] as part of the justice sections of the peace agreement, the national government reaffirmed its commitment to implementing return programmes. During the implementation phases, the process stalled with the proliferation of armed groups and fragmenting of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), with new groups forming and the number of members of armed groups quadrupling during this period.[77] This was coupled with an increase in the number of displaced people due to the actions of armed groups, with the number of displaced people rising from 139,000 in 2017 to over 388,000 in 2024. Other estimates suggest that since the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement, as many as 1.5 million people have been displaced, based on government and other international organisations' estimates.[78] While the 2016 process did lead to the return of 459,000 IDPs,[79] even with substantive provisions at the comprehensive agreement stage and a framework for constitutional court rulings creating commitments from the government during the conflict to pass laws on the rights of IDPs,[80] continued cycles of violence post-peace agreement has caused blocks on comprehensive return.

Concluding Reflections

Alongside a decline of formalised and substantive peace processes which historically produced the substantive-partial and comprehensive agreements that addressed displacement, contemporary peacemaking is increasingly characterised by rising geopolitical competition, transactionalism, and multimediation. Given that displacement figures are rising with these peacemaking shifts, there are critical questions around what this means for displaced groups being addressed in either peace agreements or alternative dialogue and mediation spaces.

It may be that competitive multimediation landscapes with their more short-term and limited peace agreements create more entry points for the immediate responses to aspects of displacement, including in relation to humanitarian assistance. However, it may be increasingly challenging to enable returns and find durable solutions for displaced persons without an ability to broker more substantive and long-term agreements between conflict parties.

Many of the cases examined in this report date from the 1990s, from a moment when the international normative view of displaced populations was shifting towards increased domestic state responsibility for those displaced and, crucially, when there was a stronger practice of formalised state-centred international and national peace processes. There is a need to re-evaluate how the contemporary mediation space can be conducive to fostering the requisite level of political will among states, international organisations, regional organisations, and other third-party mediators to address issues such as displacement. Part of this challenge involves contemporary peacemaking practices finding robust ways of navigating multiple transactional mediation initiatives and competing governance claims within increasingly protracted and fragmented conflicts. At a critical moment for global displacement, the focus on examining peace agreement stage and design in the PA-X data, as well as comparative cases, has served the purpose of highlighting what we know about processes that historically built momentum around addressing displacement.

There is a need for clearer, stronger, and more detailed substantive peace agreement provisions addressing displaced people, and particularly IDPs. Mediators and negotiating sides need to consider how clearer provisions and mechanisms can be included in any signed agreements.

The ability of parties to navigate political pressures remains critical, finding a balance between including suitable displacement provisions for the context, rather than overly generalised provisions, and pursuing provisions that either slow the progress of the agreement or cause disagreement amongst parties. In the case of Dayton, as early as this was as an example of an agreement with displacement as a central issue, a lack of nuance in addressing the specificities of the ethnic dimensions of returns ultimately impacted implementation.

As we have suggested throughout the report, the centrality of displacement to a conflict can shape how substantive displacement provisions become concentrated within the same process. By working through the available data and cases, we have also shown that this centrality often in part emanates from pre-existing highly complex ethno-political and socio-political conditions that are embedded in the realities of implementing displacement provisions such as returns and reintegration, whether during or post-peace process.

It matters whether displacement is tied to the causes of the conflict and develops early in the conflict timeline as in Bosnia and Herzegovina; or becomes so politically divisive that it stalls peace process momentum altogether, as in Georgia-Abkhazia; or even conversely, has developed prior to and throughout evolutions of conflict in the same country, as in Darfur and now latterly more widely across Sudan. These differences are important in how different peace agreement commitments can be understood and advanced.

To conclude, dealing with displacement in peace processes requires adaptive approaches, particularly given changing conflict and mediation landscapes. Adaptive approaches need to be able to adjust to changes in political and conflict contexts, and find alternative entry points when formal processes stall. It is essential for mediators to understand and explore how displacement can be addressed at different stages of the process, such as when and how to support mechanisms for more short-term protection and assistance, and when to address the long-term issue of returns in a context-sensitive way. Mediators also need to understand the relevant local, national, and international organisations that can help support displaced people and processes, such as return at different points in a peace process.

Data Tables

All agreements on PA-X that contain substantive references to displaced persons are available at: https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/search

Table 2: The number of total peace agreements signed (excluding local agreements), number with general displacement references (GRef) and the number with substantive displacement references (GRefSub), in addition to the estimated number of Refugees and IDPs (from UNHCR data finder), and the number of estimated IDPs (from IDMC), per year from 1990 to 2024.

Year	Total Peace Agreements	Agreements with General Displacement References	Agreements with Substantive Displacement References	Percentage of Total Agreements with Substantive Displacement References	Estimated Refugees and IDPs (UNHCR)	Estimated IDPs (conflict stock - raw) (IDMC)
1990	44	8	3	6.82%	17395914	
1991	82	17	11	13.41%	16854762	
1992	79	32	17	21.52%	17838020	
1993	88	24	18	20.45%	20523699	
1994	92	27	16	17.39%	21076484	
1995	64	17	11	17.19%	19182606	
1996	66	18	12	18.18%	18210573	
1997	70	19	15	21.43%	16588079	
1998	66	17	9	13.64%	16544318	
1999	82	15	7	8.54%	15655408	
2000	60	12	9	15.00%	18127580	
2001	60	13	7	11.67%	17212803	
2002	54	11	7	12.96%	15240167	
2003	51	17	11	21.57%	13773948	
2004	46	19	12	26.09%	14999258	

Year	Total Peace Agreements	Agreements with General Displacement References	Agreements with Substantive Displacement References	Percentage of Total Agreements with Substantive Displacement References	Estimated Refugees and IDPs (UNHCR)	Estimated IDPs (conflict stock - raw) (IDMC)
2005	29	9	6	20.69%	15278084	
2006	60	22	12	20.00%	22671147	
2007	33	9	7	21.21%	25130399	
2008	56	18	12	21.43%	24931142	
2009	32	5	3	9.38%	26023770	24951626
2010	29	14	5	17.24%	25246639	24982500
2011	48	10	7	14.58%	25877315	22441651
2012	57	8	5	8.77%	28167385	26386478
2013	35	13	11	31.43%	35623788	33341220
2014	52	9	7	13.46%	46658908	37877384
2015	46	16	8	17.39%	53604448	40455779
2016	41	5	4	9.76%	53811413	38917813
2017	31	9	5	16.13%	59059082	39426065
2018	31	8	4	12.90%	61784721	40558446
2019	20	9	4	20.00%	63918031	44603144
2020	32	13	7	21.88%	69219285	47078055
2021	28	3	0	0.00%	72649908	52086980
2022	27	6	3	11.11%	86750275	61243034
2023	50	9	2	4.00%	94888775	67000982
2024	36	5	5	13.89%	99089911	73505422

Table 3: The number of total peace agreements signed (excluding local agreements), number with general displacement references (GRef), and the number with substantive displacement references (GRefSub), by stage of process as defined in PA-X.

Stage of Process	Stage of Process	Agreements with General Displacement References	Agreements with Substantive Displacement References
Pre-negotiation/process	525	116	55
Ceasefire	338	80	47
Framework-substantive, partial	412	116	77
Framework-substantive, comprehensive	97	60	52
Implementation	355	85	47
Renewal	48	9	4
Other	2	0	0

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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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