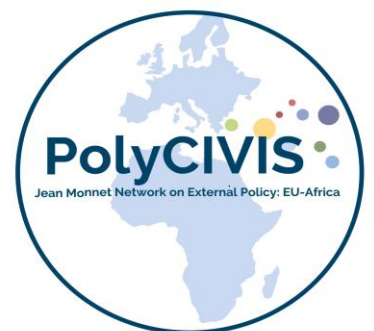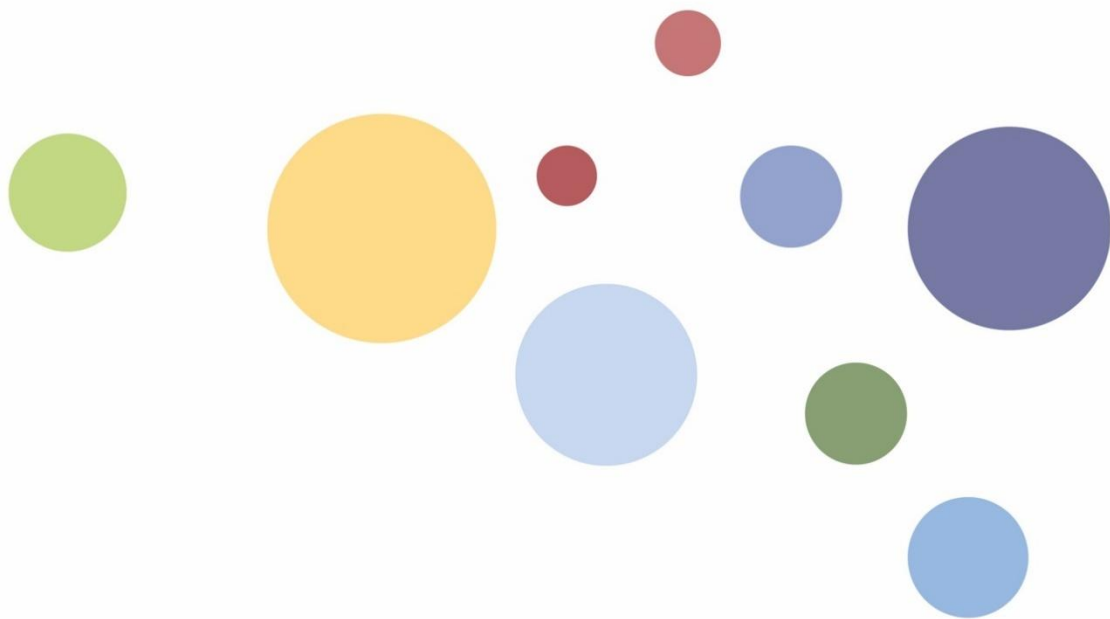# Internal Displacement in Africa

Navigating the Polycrisis in a Changing Climate

Policy brief no. 6
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Executive Summary

Africa has been reporting rising levels of internal displacement since 2009. In 2023, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that at least 35 million people were still internally displaced by the end of the year – a figure that has tripled over the past 15 years. IDMC anticipates a further increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2024, emphasizing the ongoing severity of the internal displacement crisis for the region.

This increasing trend is primarily driven by a combination of disasters and conflict and violence. Conflict and violence are the main triggers of internal displacement in Africa, accounting for 32.5 million IDPs at the end of 2023. However, the number of disaster displacements has also risen rapidly across the continent, up nearly sixfold in the last 15 years.

The interplay of multiple crises, or 'polycrises', exacerbates the vulnerability of African communities, making them more susceptible to displacement. Population size and density, high exposure and vulnerability to hazards are exacerbating factors. Climate change acts as an additional stressor, intensifying weather-related hazards and straining socioeconomic systems. To address these challenges, it is imperative to implement adaptation strategies that enhance resilience against displacement in a changing climate. This includes adopting effective disaster risk reduction (DRR) practices, improving early warning systems, and investing in sustainable development initiatives aimed at reducing vulnerability to climate impacts
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This policy brief delves into the current state of internal displacement in Africa in the context of polycrisis between 2009 and 2023. It highlights successful adaptation strategies and offers recommendations to strengthen resilience against future displacements.

Key messages

❖ Internal displacement in Africa is increasing, driven by a combination of conflicts, violence, and disasters, with the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) tripling since 2009. This trend is expected to continue, underscoring the severity of displacement challenges in the region

❖ Addressing the underlying causes of conflict and achieving peace are essential to durable solutions and preventing future displacement. Displacement-specific instruments in Africa are beginning to recognize disasters and climate change as significant drivers, outlining measures to prevent and manage disaster displacement, including early warning systems and disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies.

❖ Integrating internal displacement into DRR frameworks is critical for shifting from a reactive to a preventive approach. Scaling up early warning systems, ensuring adequate shelter and infrastructure protection, and training local communities are key components of this approach . Countries like Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and Nigeria have successfully incorporated displacement into their national DRR frameworks, highlighting the importance of embedding displacement-specific measures in national strategies.

❖ Regional cooperation is vital, given the transboundary nature of climate and conflict-induced displacement

(1) Introduction

Internal displacement in Africa has reached unprecedented levels, with millions forced to flee their homes due to a combination of conflicts and violence as well as disasters. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), at least 35 million people remained internally displaced in Africa by the end of 2023[1]. This figure marks a three-fold increase since 2009 and it is expected that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) will continue to increase even further by the end of 2024. This worrying trend underscores the severity of displacement challenges for the region.

Figure 1: Africa's share of global IDPs (2009 – 2023)
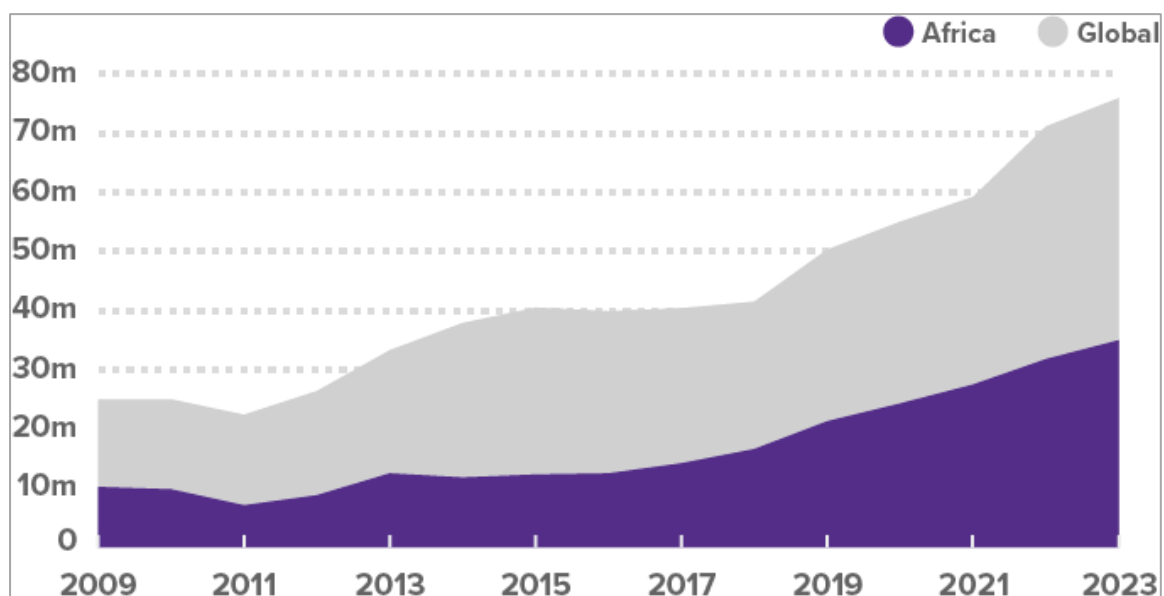
Source: IDMC, 2024a

The concept of polycrisis aptly describes the complex environment driving internal displacements in the region. Polycrisis refers to the simultaneous occurrence of multiple interconnected crises, leading to compounding effects. In Africa, conflict and violence remain the primary drivers of internal displacement, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and straining already fragile socioeconomic systems. Additionally, low levels of socioeconomic development, characterized by high poverty rates, limited infrastructure, and weak governance, further reduce communities' capacity to withstand and recover from shocks. At the same time, a growing population size and increasing population density interlaced with high exposure and vulnerability to hazards makes the region vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying weather-related hazards and straining socioeconomic systems, reducing people's ability to withstand shocks and triggering movements as a coping mechanism.

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[1] IDMC, n.d.

While it is impossible to halt a changing climate, there are ways to prepare oneself to adapt to its impacts. In Africa, the need to mitigate these impacts which are magnified due to other compounding drivers such as conflict and violence and economic instability, is imperative to managing the internal displacement crisis. Mitigating the impacts of displacement will first require a better understanding of the interconnectedness of different drivers. Such an understanding can help towards developing effective policies and interventions to mitigate the adverse impacts of internal displacement and build resilience.

This policy brief examines how polycrisis influences internal displacement in Africa and highlights some good practices that have emerged to manage and mitigate displacement risks. Through examples in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), it illustrates effective interventions that integrate governance, disaster preparedness, and resilience-building strategies.

(2) Background

Conflict and violence are the main drivers of internal displacement in Africa. In the last 15 years, the number of IDPs as a result of conflict and violence in Africa more than tripled from 10.2 million in 2009 to 32.5 million in 2023. Five countries – Sudan, DRC, Somalia, Nigeria and Ethiopia – accounted for 80 per cent of the IDPs displaced by conflict and violence in Africa as of the end of 2023[2].

People displaced by previous conflicts continue to struggle to resolve their displacement, while in some countries where people have been living in protracted displacement, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, conflict and violence have escalated.

New conflicts have also broken out in countries such as Mozambique and Burkina Faso, where the number of IDPs has risen sharply[3]. The increase in conflict and displacement not only creates immediate humanitarian challenges, it also has longstanding consequences for countries' development and stability.

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[2] IDMC, 2024a.
[3] ACSS, 2022; allAfrica, 2022.

Figure 2: Conflict IDPs and incidents (2009-2023)
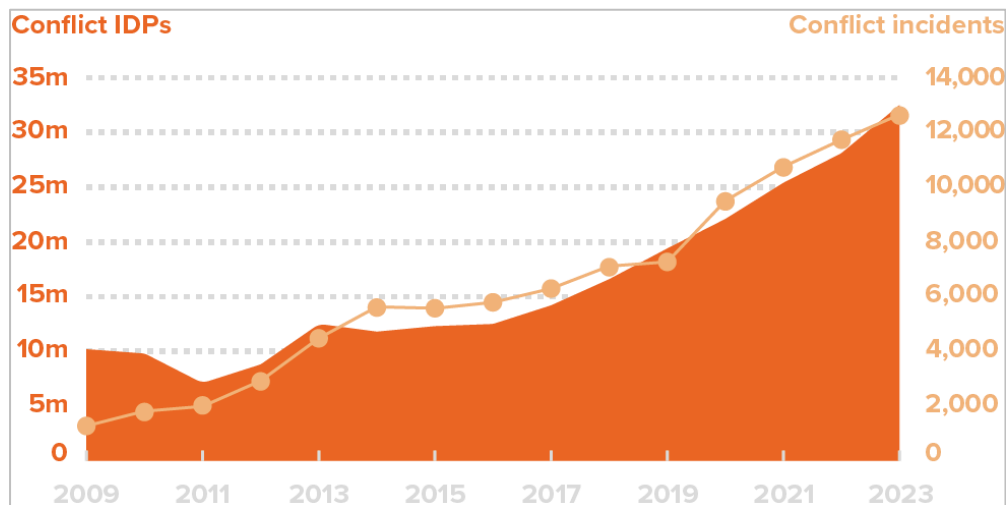
Source: IDMC and ACLED.

Disaster displacements have also seen a substantial increase, increasing sixfold between 2009 and 2023 from 1.1 million in 2009 to 6.3 million in 2023[4]. The greater availability of data partly explains the increase, but the growing number of people exposed and vulnerable to hazards is also a significant factor.

Figure 3: Internal displacements by specific significant disasters in Africa (2009-2023)
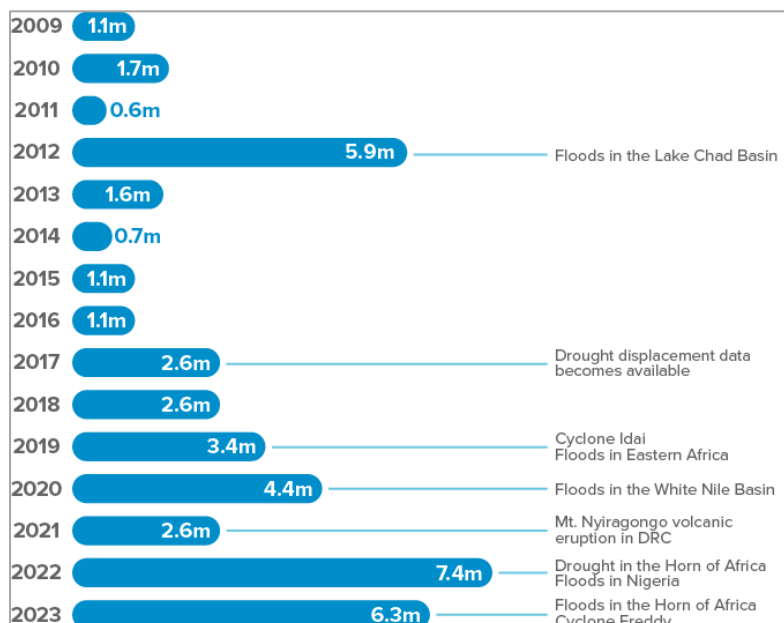
Source: IDMC, 2024a.

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[4] IDMC, 2024a.

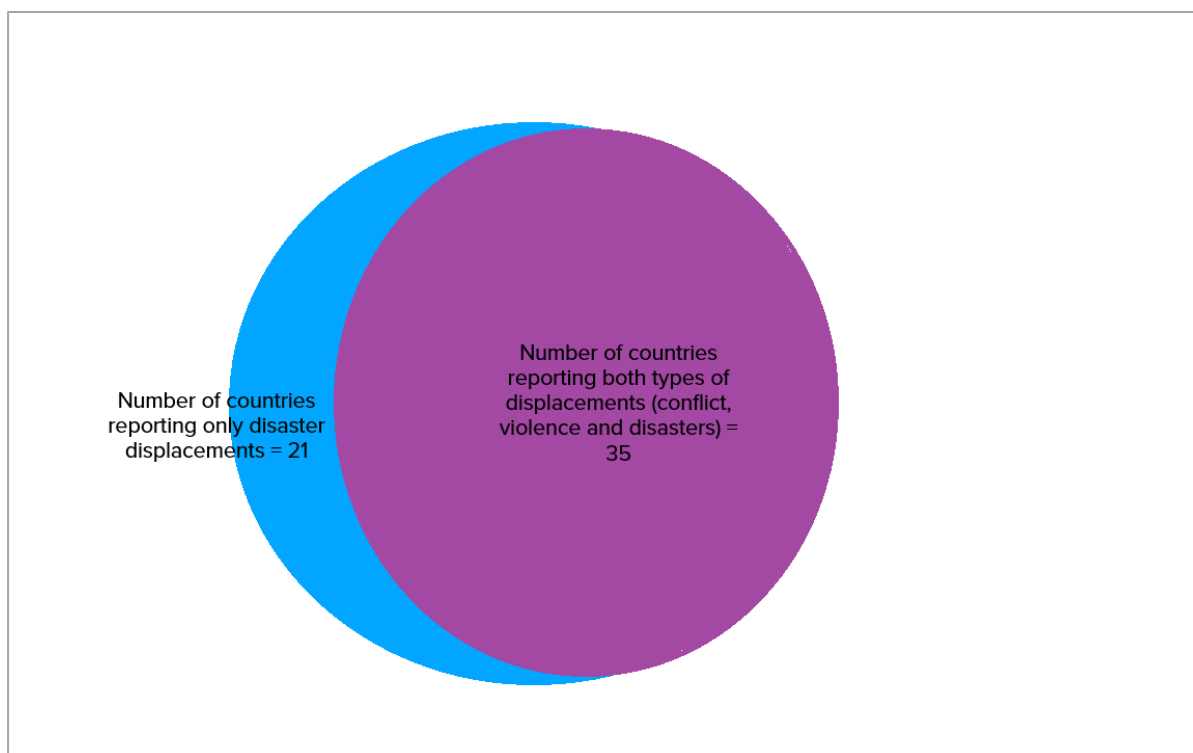Weather related hazards namely floods and droughts have contributed to much of this increase. Floods, specifically, account for more than three-quarters of disaster displacements recorded in the region while drought displacements account for 11 per cent of total disaster displacements in this period[5].

Out of 56 countries monitored by IDMC in the region, all of them report disaster related displacements. Out of the 56, 35 (62.5 per cent) of them also report displacements associated with conflict and violence, highlighting the polycrisis nature of internal displacement in the region, while 21 (37.5 per cent) of the countries only report on disaster displacements[6].

Figure 4: Overlap of countries reporting internal displacement from disasters and conflict and violence in Africa (2009-2023)

Number of countries reporting only disaster displacements = 21

Number of countries reporting both types of displacements (conflict, violence and disasters) = 35

Source: IDMC, n.d.

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[5] IDMC, 2024a.
[6] IDMC, n.d.

(3) Analysis

Displacement in Africa is often prolonged and recurrent, as conflict, violence and disasters overlap with economic stability and other vulnerabilities. Many displaced individuals find themselves trapped in cycles of vulnerability due to food insecurity, inadequate shelter, and lack of economic opportunities. Prolonged droughts, for instance, can decline agricultural yields, leading to food shortages and loss of livelihoods.

Communities dependent on farming and pastoralism are particularly affected, often forced to move in search of sustenance and income. Similarly, intensified flooding can destroy homes and infrastructure, rendering areas uninhabitable and prompting mass evacuations.

Persistent conflict and violence and the growing impacts of disasters and climate change make more people susceptible to displacement and increase the needs and vulnerabilities of those already displaced[7]. For example, in regions already grappling with conflict, climate change can exacerbate tensions by further straining limited resources. Displaced populations may move into areas with scarce resources, leading to competition and potential conflict with host communities. All of these factors place additional obstacles in the continent's path towards sustainable development.

Responding to IDPs' unique needs helps them in the short term, and with proper planning, can set them on a path to resolving their displacement. But to reverse the trend of increasing displacement, it is essential to address its underlying drivers. Humanitarian interventions must address immediate needs arising from displacement while also considering long-term strategies to build

resilience against future shocks. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected drivers of displacement and the implementation of integrated solutions.

Addressing the underlying causes of conflict and achieving peace remains essential. Somalia and South Sudan emphasize that peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts and facilitating IDPs' return and reintegration are necessary to achieve durable solutions and prevent future displacement.

Displacement-specific instruments in Africa have traditionally focused on conflict and violence, but recent frameworks adopted in Chad, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and the Republic of Congo also recognize disasters and climate change as significant drivers[8]. They outline measures to prevent and manage disaster displacement, including early warning systems, evacuation plans, disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies and initiatives to build community resilience.

Many African countries have integrated displacement into broader DRR and climate adaptation strategies. Acknowledging that it is not always possible to prevent internal displacement and that it can even function as a resilience measure to reduce harm and loss of life, the role of such frameworks in avoiding the multiplication of vulnerabilities as a result of disasters and displacement is key. Burkina Faso, Mozambique and Nigeria are among the countries to have included displacement in their DRR strategies and frameworks[9].

Efforts to cooperate at the regional level to ensure stability through the prevention of conflict, disasters and displacement are also increasingly evident. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Regional Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2023-2030) acknowledges that the region is

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[7] Brookings Institution, 2017.
[8] Government of Chad, 2023; Government of Mozambique, 2021; Government of Niger, 2018; Government of Nigeria, 2021; Government of the Republic of the Congo, 2023.
[9] Government of Burkina Faso, 2014; Government of Nigeria, 2018; Government of Mozambique, 2021.

heavily affected by displacement triggered by entrenched conflicts that often stem from competition for scarce resources and are likely to be aggravated by climate change[10]. The strategy prioritizes prevention efforts intended to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of climate change and develop guidelines for emergency evacuation plans in response to disasters, and for resolving conflict. These measures are essential to prevent further instability and displacement in Eastern Africa.

Two country examples are presented below in detail, highlighting specific strategies that have been effective in reducing the risk of displacement in the context of polycrisis. The aim of these examples is to demonstrate how policies that consider internal displacement facilitate the reduction of adverse impacts of polycrisis while building communities' resilience.

Example 1: Mozambique

Situated in the southeastern part of Africa, Mozambique is susceptible to various disasters including floods, droughts and tropical cyclones exacerbated by its coastal geography and various climate patterns. Mozambique is particularly vulnerable to cyclones, which trigger the largest share of internal displacements in the country, amounting to about 73 percent of total disaster displacements recorded for the country from 2008 to 2023. In particular, Cyclone Freddy in February 2023 and Cyclone Idai in March 2019 triggered 1.1 million displacements combined, accounting for 72 per cent of storm related displacements[11].

With a predominantly rural population entirely dependent on subsidence farming

and agriculture, the country's exposure to frequent cyclones, expected to increase in intensity and frequency with climate change, is exacerbated. This heightened exposure increases the risk of displacement as most, if not all, reported storm displacements were a result of people rendered homeless due to their homes being destroyed.

Loss of shelter and strained resources due to damaged agricultural produce leads to deteriorated health outcomes. Following Cyclone Freddy in February 2023, around 2.6 million people were reported to be in acute food insecurity, requiring urgent intervention to reduce food insecurity and protect livelihoods[12]. In 2019, following Idai, the country reported 1.6 million people facing challenges in accessing food to meet acceptable food needs[13]. These examples illustrate the polycrisis nature of the displacement in Mozambique where disaster displacements interact with low levels of development.

Since the experience of Cyclone Idai in 2019, the country has made a conscious effort to improve early warning systems to better prepare and stay safe during extreme weather events. Days before Cyclone Freddy hit Mozambique, many communities received warning through mobile brigades, radio and megaphone announcements, alerting them to the incoming disaster. This was made possible with Mozambique's new early warning system which enable authorities to track potential hazards well in advance, take early action, and minimize the impact on people and property[14]. The system combines new technology, infrastructure, and community action to alert communities located in disaster-prone areas.

The National Institute for Disaster Management and Risk Reduction (INGD) coordinates this exercise with support from

[10] IGAD, 2023.
[11] IDMC, n.d.; UNDRR, 2023.
[12] IPC, 2023.
[13] IPC, 2019.
[14] World Bank Group, 2023; UNDRR, 2023.

the World Bank's Disaster Risk Management and Resilience Program. The program promotes the creation and strengthening of local disaster risk management committees in all at-risk communities in the country.

Local communities were trained and equipped to improve disaster preparedness and response and coordinate with the various operational platforms for the dissemination of early warning messages. The Institute of Social Communication (ICS) does not only mobilise its training during cyclone season. In fact, communities are trained on what they can do before, during and after extreme weather events such as storms, cyclones or floods, throughout the year.

Since 2019, storm related displacements have reduced significantly from 504,000 in 2019 to 113,000 in 2022. In 2023, cyclone Freddy led to 640,000 internal displacements, a slight increase from Idai in 2019. Despite the early warning systems in place, internal displacements still continued and exceeded the levels reached in 2019 following Idai. This does not, however, mean that the early warning systems were ineffective in reducing internal displacement.

The intensity of the storm which was the longest-lived cyclone in recorded history and the fact that it hit Mozambique twice over the course of five weeks largely explain the reason for such high levels of internal displacement recorded in the country. Nevertheless, without the early warning systems in place, the impact could have been worse. Even though displacement itself did not significantly reduce in 2023, the country reported lower mortality from 600 following Idai to about 300 following Freddy.

Due to early warning systems, the impacts of the disasters were much reduced especially in terms of duration of displacement. By June 2023, 9,000 people were reported as displaced, indicating relatively short displacement periods for those displaced by Freddy. This is in contrast to Idai where 85,000 people were still displaced at the end of 2022, 4 years following the disaster. Such systems thus have the benefit of putting in place protective measures to minimize impacts of disasters on shelters and infrastructures.

Example 2: DRC

The DRC has been the country most affected by internal displacement associated with conflict and violence worldwide since the IDMC started monitoring such displacements[15]. Between 2009 and 2023, the DRC accounted for 15 per cent of global displacements by conflict and violence, totalling 24.4 million displacements. As of 2023, the DRC hosts the third largest number of IDPs globally, after Sudan (9 million) and Syria (7.2 million).

However, conflict is only one dimension of DRC's displacement crisis. The country is also highly vulnerable to disaster displacement such as floods, landslides and volcanic eruptions, further exacerbating the risk of displacement. Between 2009 and 2023, the country reported a total of 3.2 million disaster displacements, with the highest displacement recorded for the country originating from a single event – the 2021 eruption of Mount Nyiragongo triggering close to 600,000 displacements[16]. The intersection of conflict, weak governance, and exposure to disasters creates a polycrisis – a self-reinforcing cycle in which institutional weakness hinder both peacebuilding and DRR, increasing the likelihood of repeated displacements in the country.

In order to provide better responses to the forcibly displaced population which includes both IDPs and refugees, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have been working together since 2018 to support local

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[15] IDMC, 2024b.
[16] IDMC, 2024b.

governance and development in areas hosting refugees and IDPs in the DRC[17]. Supporting local governance and development takes three forms under this joint programming initiative.

1. Local authorities are trained to be better equipped to provide basic social services for both hosting communities and hosted communities. Training modules include decentralization of roles and responsibilities, planning and community accountability.

2. The capacity of national police forces is also strengthened in a bid to improve security. Training modules include the doctrine of proximity policing, respect and protection of human rights, responding to sexual and gender-based violence, maintaining public order, and ensuring the security of the sites hosting IDPs and refugees.

3. Collaboration is fostered with other actors on preparedness programming. This aims to support communities faced with repeated displacement and facilitate localized responses, rather than requiring international intervention.

The initiative has shown promising results since its implementation. Over 100 local authorities have been trained in decentralisation, service delivery, and community engagement, equipping them with the tools needed to better respond to displacement-related challenges. The establishment of six thematic working groups has further contributed to addressing key governance challenges, including land access, security coordination, and conflict mitigation.

Economic inclusion and livelihoods support have also been a key component of the initiative. IDPs have been integrated into entrepreneurship and vocational training programs, providing them with marketable skills and economic opportunities. To further promote self-reliance, small business startup kits, agricultural tools, and livestock have been distributed to displaced populations, enabling them to rebuild their livelihoods.

Furthermore, improvements in infrastructure and public service provision have had a direct impact on the well-being of displaced populations. The initiative has facilitated the rehabilitation of healthcare, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in IDP-hosting areas. As a result, both displaced and host communities have gained increased access to essential public services.

While such initiatives are steps in the right direction to empower national ownership and local leadership in addressing displacement, its long-term sustainability will depend on continued political will and investment and will depend on the capacity of the involved organizations to continue the programme despite the worsening security situation in the DRC's East. Ensuring that governance reforms contribute towards better outcomes for displaced populations will require consistent funding, integration into national development plans and strong coordination among stakeholders such as development, humanitarian and security actors. Such initiatives require interventions that not only focus on unilateral impacts of displacement, but ensure that interventions are much broader in nature to tackle persisting polycrisis in the country.

(4) Policy Recommendations

To mitigate and address internal displacement in Africa amid polycrisis conditions, a multi-pronged approach is required. This involves strengthening resilience against disaster displacement, integrating displacement considerations into

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[17] UNDP and UNHCR, 2018.

DRR and climate adaptation strategies, enhancing governance and security in displacement-affected areas, and ensuring that development policies align with durable solutions. The following recommendations outline critical interventions at various levels.

Policy recommendations

1. Incorporating internal displacement into DRR frameworks
Incorporating internal displacement into DRR frameworks is a critical first step toward shifting from a reactive to preventive approach – essential for managing the complex, overlapping challenges posed by polycrises. By recognizing internal displacement as both a consequence and driver of displacement risk, governments can design more effective strategies to prevent and mitigate its impacts.

Scaling up early warning systems is key to timely and widespread dissemination of disaster alerts. Mozambique's proactive warning system, which utilizes mobile brigades, radio, and megaphone announcements, has proven effective in reducing the loss of life.

Ensuring adequate shelter and infrastructure protection is critical in reducing displacement. Climate-resilient building designs can be adopted to improve resilience of housing structures and infrastructures. Investments in flood defences can help to reinforce homes while improvements in drainage systems, particularly in high-risk areas, can further help to minimize the risk of flood related displacements during rainy seasons.

Training of local communities is needed to ensure better disaster preparedness and response. The establishment of local disaster risk management committees, as seen in Mozambique, ensures greater community resilience.

Finally, countries like Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and Nigeria have successfully incorporated displacement into their national DRR frameworks. Their examples highlight the importance of embedding displacement-specific measures in national strategies to build resilience and protect at-risk communities. Other countries are encouraged to follow suit by embedding displacement-specific measures into their DRR policies.

2. Enhancing protection and assistance for IDPs

Many IDPs face prolonged displacement, with their vulnerabilities deepened by food insecurity, inadequate housing, and limited access to essential services. Addressing these intersecting needs is critical for supporting recovery and building long-term resilience.

Improving access to basic services such as food, healthcare, education and livelihoods, is essential to break the cycle of vulnerability. For example, the food insecurity that followed Cyclone Freddy in

Mozambique underscores the importance of both emergency food aid and sustainable food security strategies in affected areas.

Providing safe and dignified housing options is equally important. This may involve rebuilding homes or offering alternative solutions where returns are not feasible. In some cases, planned relocations can also be pursued with the full participation and informed consent of displaced communities to ensure their rights and preferences are respected.

3. Strengthening governance, security, and local capacity

Addressing the root causes and consequences of displacement requires a strong focus on governance, security and local capacity, particularly in areas hosting displaced populations. Building the capacity of local authorities is key to improving governance and service delivery in displacement-affected areas. In the DRC, capacity-building initiatives have enabled local governments to better manage essential services and enhance security in IDP-hosting communities. scaling up such programs across other affected regions can improve conditions for both IDP and host communities.

Investing in security sector reform is also critical. In the DRC, training national police forces in human rights and gender-based violence prevention has improved protection in displacement sites. Similar initiatives can be expanded in other conflict-affected contexts to ensure safer environments for displaced populations.

Peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts are essential for sustainable solutions. Countries like Somalia and South Sudan have prioritized these processes to support the return and reintegration of IDPs. More targeted investments in conflict resolution, dialogue and peace negotiations are needed to address polycrises and enable durable solutions.

4. Scaling up regional cooperation

Given the transboundary nature of climate and conflict-induced displacement, regional cooperation is vital. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has taken a leading role by recognizing climate change as a driver of displacement and prioritizing regional prevention strategies. This example highlights the potential for other regional economic communities to adopt similar action plans tailored to their specific contexts.

Establishing regional disaster response mechanisms, including protocols for coordinated evacuations and cross-border relief efforts, would enhance preparedness and ensure more effective responses in regions prone to regional displacement patterns. Regional collaboration also facilitates knowledge sharing, joint early warning systems, and harmonized protection standards for displaced populations.

5. Mobilizing development financing for long-term solutions

Addressing the root causes of polycrises and achieving durable solutions requires a shift toward developed-focused, long-term strategies. Integrating displacement into national development plans

ensures that recovery and resilience efforts are sustainable and embedded within broader economic and social goals. This includes the establishment of sustainable financing mechanisms to support post-disaster recovery, infrastructure rehabilitation, and community resilience.

Governments can promote economic resilience by investing in climate-smart agriculture, skills development and vocational training, and diversified livelihood opportunities. Additionally, continuous assessment of displacement trends and policy outcomes is critical. Data-driven, evidence-based approaches will allow for adaptive policymaking that responds to the evolving nature of displacement and ensures that interventions remain relevant and impactful.

(5) *Conclusion*

Internal displacement in Africa is a growing challenge exacerbated by conflict, climate change, and economic instability. While humanitarian responses provide critical short-term relief, reversing the trend of increasing displacement requires long-term, integrated solutions. Strengthening DRR measures, improving governance and security, fostering regional cooperation, and mobilizing development financing are key to addressing displacement drivers and enhancing resilience. Collaboration amongst key stakeholders like governments, donors, and international organizations is key to implementing these strategies, ensuring that displaced populations have access to sustainable solutions and that future displacement is minimized. Encouragingly, successful models of resilience-building and displacement management across Africa demonstrate that progress is possible. With continued commitment and innovation, there is a strong opportunity to transform displacement-affected communities into hubs of stability, development, and growth, offering a more hopeful future for millions.

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