

Beyond Humanitarian Assistance: Identities Shifting of Conflict-Induced Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Ethiopia: An Anthropological Ethnographic Analysis

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Abstract

Internal displacement is a worldwide problem, yet the way it is addressed mostly involves providing humanitarian aid, treating internal displaced persons as passive recipients of assistance rather than as active participants in social change. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in China Camp (which hosts 20,000 internal displaced persons) in Debre Berhan city, Ethiopia, this study examines the way in which conflict-induced internal displacement alters the ethnic, civic, place-based, gendered and generational identities of Amhara internal displaced persons (IDPs). In order to understand how the IDPs' identities evolve during periods of displacement, uncertainty and exclusion, the study combines anthropological theories (those of Barth, Turner, Bourdieu and Appadurai) with Social Identity Theory. The ethnographic data were obtained through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and field observations.

The results showed a dual process involving identity breakdown and reconstruction: before being displaced there had been a fluid integration, which then changed to a stronger form of reactive ethnicity as a result of targeted violence and the loss of civic identity; disenfranchisement broke up the social contract and led to marginalisation under the stigma-bearing term 'Tefenaqay' (displaced person) concerning place-based identity; the sense of belonging which was based on territory developed into hybrid identities that balanced memories of one's origins with the networks formed in the camp, as well as gendered and generational identity; men went through a crisis relating to economic masculinity, women dealt with greater agency while remaining vulnerable, the elderly grieved the past they had achieved, and the young found their futures disrupted. Since displacement is a long-lasting social process, adequate interventions should go beyond simple relief and work to restore dignity, rights, and achieve sustainable identity reconstruction.

Keywords

Internal Displacement, Identity Shift, Reactive Ethnicity, Liminality, Ethnography, Ethiopia.