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**Conflict and Displacement: The Life Stories of Internally
Displaced Families (IDFs)**

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CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT: THE LIFE STORIES OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED FAMILIES (IDFs)

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Abstract

Internal displacement is a global phenomenon that generates massive effects on humanity. The Philippines is one country prone to internal displacement, ranging from natural causes to conflict-induced displacement. The armed conflict that transpired in an urban city in Mindanao, Philippines, produced unimaginable outcomes for the lives of internally displaced families (IDFs). Thus, exploring their experiences yields a broader grasp of internal displacement. Since the topic of internal displacement is intermittently concentrated, the study could provide supplementary literature in the field of social sciences, particularly in studying displacement. The study utilized phenomenological inquiry to delve into the lived experiences and coping mechanisms of the IDFs during their displacement. Through Colaizzi's thematic analysis, findings were depicted in six (6) emergent themes. As to the participants' experiences, the themes were: Terror Brings Deep Stress, Inhumanity of War, and Displacement in Laden with Adversities. The themes detailed the inhumane repercussions of conflict-induced displacement. Nevertheless, the IDFs remarkably subdued these adversities through their coping mechanisms, which were thematically described as Patience Beats Obstacles, Positivity Survives Difficulty, and Tightened Faith.

Keywords: *Internal Displacement; Conflict; Lived Experiences; Displaced Families; Coping Mechanisms.*



A. Introduction

Internal displacement is the involuntary or forced movement, evacuation, or relocation of persons or groups of persons within internationally recognized state borders (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2004). Significant causes of displacement are natural or environmental disasters, armed conflict and violence, land redevelopment, and infrastructure expansion projects (Bradley & Cohen, 2010; Albarazi & van Waas, 2016). Other causes include inter-communal and inter-ethnic clashes, land disputes, boundary conflicts between indigenous people and settlers, communal and ethno-religious clashes, and electoral violence (Adesote et al., 2015).

Displacement, as a phenomenon, is more than just leaving one's current country; it is also associated with eradicating established economic and social facilities and involves access to vital resources with no benefits gained in exchange (Cohen & Deng, 2012; Cernea, 2004). People, tribes, and communities that have been cut off from their current socioeconomic base have seen their standard of functioning substantially degrade. As averred by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2018), internal displacement may lead to a broad spectrum of consequences for individuals compelled to leave their homes due to war, conflict, climate change, or natural calamities. Housing, access to educational opportunities and infrastructure, health, social life, security, and the environment all change and often deteriorate (Cernea, 2007; Alifuddin et al., 2021).

Displaced people frequently lose their jobs as a result of being forced away from their location of employment or source of income. Some people go months or years instead of being able to make a proper living. Loss of livelihood can impact displaced people's ability to meet their necessities and impair accessibility to medical care and education. It can also harm their social life, psychological health, and well-being (Cernea, 2021).

Though displacement has many causes, those uprooted by conflict and human rights violations generally arouse the most concern. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] (n. d.)

stated that by 2020, 40.5 million more individuals will be internally displaced due to conflict and disasters around the world. 30.7 million of these individuals were displaced by violence and conflict, while natural catastrophes displaced 9.8 million. As of December 31, 2020, there were almost 55 million IDPs globally, the most significant number ever recorded. Mindanao, Philippines, accounted for 136,000 of the country's total 140,000 war displacements, marking a 27% increase over 2020 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2020).

By 2020, China, the Philippines, and Bangladesh had the highest number of IDPs as a consequence of disasters, combining conflict and climate change as causes of displacement. This trend has continued, with 95 percent of recent conflict displacements occurring in climate-vulnerable nations. In Mindanao alone, where most armed conflict transpired, it affected 1,080 lives of internally displaced families, or 4,619 individuals, as of April 2019 (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Notably, the Zamboanga crisis, which erupted in September 2013, had displaced 119,714 individuals at the onset of the crisis (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). The conflict affected 16 barangays in Zamboanga City, including the coastal areas of Rio Hondo and Mariki. Many houses were explicitly burned in Sta. Barbara and Sta. Catalina and 194 civilians were held captive, and some were used as human shields by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (Veloso, 2017). Individuals, homes, and communities suffer serious and often severe effects as a result of conflict-induced displacement. Despite the experience of violence, property devastation, and flight difficulty, displacement has long-term political, economic, and social ramifications (Worldwide, 2018).

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council/Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (2018), conflict-related displacement in the Philippines frequently affects the same impoverished communities, gradually eroding resistance and dragging such people deeper into adversity. The crisis in Zamboanga does not only disturb the socioeconomic status of the city, but it primarily affects the lives of the people who are displaced by the



insurgency. Local health authorities also documented 687 cases of acute watery diarrhea. Its worst scenario is that, in 2017, 209 displaced individuals died due to pneumonia and acute gastroenteritis, and half of them were children under five years old (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Such tremendous outcomes prompted this research paper to further delve into the lives of internally displaced individuals and specifically look into their experiences or challenges as well as their coping mechanisms during the siege to ascertain how internal displacement irrefutably affects human lives.

B. Method

This study utilized phenomenological inquiry to explore and describe the experiences of internally displaced families (IDFs) during their displacement. Phenomenology is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced by people living those experiences (Creswell, 1998). Thus, this method of inquiry is fitting in this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed through descriptive thematic analysis. Purposive sampling was employed to choose 10 participants from selected villages in Zamboanga. Four individuals were interviewed individually, and the remaining six participants participated in the focus group discussion (FGD). The participants were composed of 2 males and 8 females and were usually heads of family, all of whom had experienced internal displacement caused by the siege.

A validated interview guide consisted of open-ended questions with three parts that included the informant's circumstances. The first part is about the participants' experiences during the siege. The second part focuses on how IDFs cope with their difficulties after the conflict. The last part is the impact of government programs provided to the IDFs after the siege. The interview was conducted and supplemented by field notes and a voice recorder to document the participants' responses accurately.

The data gathered in this study were analyzed through Colaizzi's seven data analysis steps. The responses of the participants during the interview were transcribed and translated individually. From the interview transcriptions, significant statements were extracted, and core meanings were formulated. The formulated meanings with commonalities or key ideas were then grouped into clusters, forming the six (6) emergent themes that explicitly depict the participants' experiences.

Prior to the interview, consent forms and the interview guide were explained comprehensively by the researcher to make sure that the participants completely understood the research undertaking and its objective. The participants completed the informed consent forms before the interview commenced. Affixing their signatures to the consent forms also asserts their volition to participate. A copy of the interview guide was also given to the participants as a reference and guide throughout the interview process. The interview guide was explained in detail, precisely those questions that needed emphasis and elaboration. Reluctance towards answering some statements or questions was also considered. The responses and the personal circumstances provided by the participants during the in-depth interview and the focus group discussion were treated with confidentiality to uphold the sole purpose of this study.

C. Result and Discussion

1. Result

a. Experiences of Internally Displaced Families

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions, or FGDs, were utilized as data collection techniques. Applying these techniques and Colaizzi's thematic analysis, the study yielded six emergent themes that depict the lived experiences of internally displaced families (IDFs), as illustrated in Figure 1.



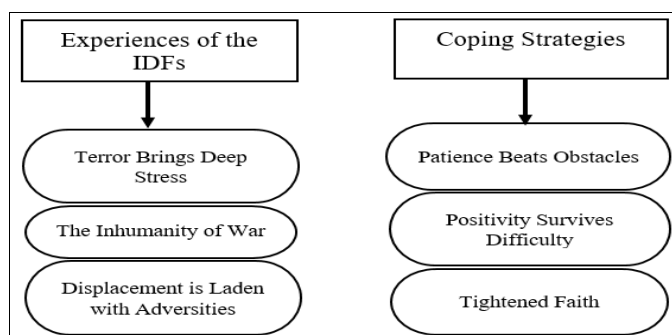


Figure 1. The six (6) themes

- 1) **Terror Brings Deep Stress.** The first theme reveals the terrifying experiences of the participants. The war generated tremendous fear, which impelled them to flee to save their lives. It destroyed their homes, leaving them internally displaced. Informant 2 recalled that.

The war started at dawn. Then, all of a sudden, we heard a boom! I thought it was a bomb. We fled from our houses, and we did not bring anything with us. We heard our neighbors telling us to flee. Until we heard the bombings, and we were running for our lives. We just realized that our houses were caught in a fire and we have no more house to live in. (I2)

On their way to evade the horrendous plight, some residents were being attacked with machine guns. Informant 1 told this in his local dialect.

When we were aboard our boats to escape the impending danger, we were fired with machine guns. We do not know where it came from because the encounter was close enough, and even the Navy was just a hundred meters away. If we did not wave our white flags, we were gunned down. One of the fleeing boats even sank, and I think it was from the machine gun coming from the sea, not from rebels or land or in Buggoc. (I1)

- 2) **The Inhumanity of War.** The second theme indicates how the conflicts adversely affected the participants' lives. The war resulted in the death of an innocent life, as reported by Informant 3.

Some stray bullets would even reach evacuation centers. In ICAS [school], a child has been hit and killed. (I3)

Due to unhealthy conditions in evacuation centers, some evacuees died, and the majority of them got sick, as disclosed by Informant 6.

At our evacuation center, many people died because of dehydration and diarrhea due to the polluted environment and smelly condition of the comfort rooms. (I6)

Lives were at stake, and children were not spared. The conflict yielded psychological disorders that would haunt them for life. A displaced mother was worried while saying this.

The conflict had a huge effect, for it traumatized us, especially my children. Even the slightest blast would scare them and make them think that they are about to be kidnapped by the rebels. The conflict had affected us a lot; we had experienced extreme fear. I was scared for our lives [my family], particularly my children, for they had to stop schooling. My husband could not work because all the establishments are being closed. It indeed affected my children because the incident gave them a phobia. Even small blasting sounds would frighten them already. (I3)

3) **Displacement is Laden with Adversities.** The third theme displays the unforgiving predicament of Internally Displaced Families (IDFs) while living in temporary shelters. Being internally displaced, the participants had to juggle all sorts of difficulties while living temporarily in evacuation centers. Informant 3 narrated that.

Our situation at our evacuation center is that more or less ten families are accommodated in one classroom. We had to suffer the congestion, starvation, and fear. It also lacks a food and water supply since the initial aid from the government is limited. The comfort rooms are also inadequate. And for you to get food, you still have to register and once you already have a card, you can now line up for food packs. You cannot get the food rations if you do not have a card to present them; worse, you have to wait for any food packs left. (I3)

Acquiring daily necessities, especially food, was also tormenting on the part of the evacuees because they had to bear lengthy lines of people waiting to be distributed. Informant 6 conveyed that.

I stayed long at the evacuation center until I gave birth. At the evacuation center, we have to bear the heat, the rain, and the crowd of evacuees lining up for us to get our food packs. (I6)



Aside from striving hard to get food and basic supplies, the inadequacy of water and comfort rooms also adds to their burden. Informant 4 recounts that.

Our situation at the grandstand [evacuation center] is difficult. Due to water scarcity, it is hard for us to take a bath or get water. People were fighting over drops of water. Comfort rooms are also inadequate; you also need to fall in line to defecate or urinate). (I4)

b. Coping Strategies

1) **Patience Beats Obstacles.** The fourth theme describes the perseverance of Internally Displaced Families (IDFs) by employing ways and means to counter and alleviate their detrimental living conditions. In most cases, although help and support can be attained, relying on and trusting oneself motivates people to patiently endure their agonies during their stay at the evacuation centers, as Informant 3 uttered.

I was able to endure for the sake of my children; you just have to find a way to survive despite the hardships. When there is a distribution of food and other basic necessities, you must be attentive and always carry your access card. You need to be alert in falling in line patiently so you will not be left behind. (I3)

When shelters get flooded during rainy seasons, evacuees are greatly affected. To safeguard his family from cold and wet, Informant 10, a protective father, stated that:

When our evacuation center got flooded due to heavy rains, it was difficult for my family to sleep. What I did was I put planks of wood and cover them with cartons [empty boxes] so that our blanket would not get wet. (I10)

2) **Positivity Survives Difficulty.** The fifth theme reveals how the positive dispositions and initiative of the participants outlived the difficulties of being displaced. Being caught in a catastrophic dilemma, their primary source of livelihood was cut off. Even so, although the government gave them aid and donations from NGOs or concerned citizens, the inadequacy of supplies is still

inevitable. One way of providing themselves food and money is by extending services, which Informant 4 stated.

I could endure somehow because some well-off women at the evacuation center gave us money I used to buy things I needed since the MSWD could not provide for us all. Sometimes, at the evacuation, I used to babysit someone's child, so in return, they would pay me and give me food for me and my grandson. (14)

Sometimes, some evacuees were not able to receive goods; however, some of them were able to ensure their well-being through volunteering. According to them, it is the only method that could guarantee they have food to eat as stated by Informant 3.

We managed to survive during those times because my husband volunteered to help distribute food packs, which could somehow prioritize us get our food rations easily. (13)

3) **Tightened Faith.** The sixth theme signifies the willpower and unyielding faith of the participants to surpass the trials they have encountered. Actions guided by prayers have been the source of strength for the evacuees. Informant 4 is a senior citizen and has rheumatism, but she can survive by asking for divine intervention as she said this.

I really prayed hard to endure anything, especially my health, so that every time there was a food ration, I could still fall in line for us to have food. Because if you are weak, then sorry, you will be hungry). (14)

2. Discussion

As retold by the participants during the interview, they were forced to flee to escape harm and peril. It aligns with Lee's Migration Theory or the Push-Pull Theory, which posits that push factors cause forced migration or compel an individual to escape danger from his original location. Factors that make a person move out in a state of panic face a crisis to escape intolerable threats (Lee, 1966; Richmond, 1988; Piguet, 2018). Ethnic, religious, and cultural antagonisms, poor governance, weak social structures, overpopulation, massive unemployment, conflicts for the control



and distribution of resources, economic mismanagement, and poverty have been identified as some causes of root causes of forced migration (Anderson, 1992; Gilbert, 1993; Richmond; 1993).

According to Ghimere and Upreti (2010), local people caught in such a situation not only lost their fundamental human rights and their identity as civilians but were exposed to great danger to their lives. Hence, leaving their community and villages was the only way of survival. The theme is also grounded in the stress and coping theory, which explains that specific primary and secondary appraisal patterns lead to different kinds of stress, such as harm, threat, and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Launier (1978) further assert that emotional processes (including stress) depend on actual expectancies that persons manifest concerning the significance and outcome of a specific encounter. It corroborates the study of Akhunzada et al., (2015) that Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), besides being displaced from their residence, exposure to trauma comes out to be an important causative factor in creating psychological disturbance. Trauma from conflict had clinically recognizable depression and anxiety symptoms along with emotional distress.

The immense social and economic repercussions of the Zamboanga siege resulted in death, health issues, loss of job or livelihood, and hampered the average growth and education of their children. The Impoverishment Risk and Reconstruction Model maintains that there are significant impoverishment risks of displacement. In this context, joblessness, increased mortality and morbidity, and loss of education are emphasized. Birkeland (2009) and Deng (1997) stressed that displacement dramatically disrupts livelihoods, breaks up families, cuts social and cultural ties, terminates dependable employment relationships, and disturbs educational opportunities, which also corroborates with the findings of Mahapatra (1999) that displacement resulted to temporary of loss of access to schooling of school-age children.

Guiam stressed that livelihoods and livelihood opportunities are among the first casualties when communities are forced to escape from

violent conflict. For families displaced due to war and other forms of clan violence, the loss of access to their farms is a significant deprivation that goes beyond incomes and livelihoods. It had pushed already impoverished communities to even more sordid levels of poverty (Guiam, 2013).

The loss of their farms was, more significantly, a loss in their identity as farmers and owners of agricultural lands. Such loss triggered psychosomatic ills that eventually led to depression. Because most resettlement areas have poor health facilities, the incidence of morbidity and mortality is high (Docena, 2015). The health and psychosocial well-being of IDP is affected in several ways. It produces extremely high levels of psychiatric morbidity amongst the IDP population who suffer somatic symptoms and physical illnesses, particularly hypertension, asthma, and chronic pain syndromes (Akhunzada et al., 2015).

The Disaster Summary Sheet (2012) affirmed that armed conflict displacement results in the death and injury of both combatants and civilians. It also contributes to additional mortality and morbidity among civilians. The impact is categorized into direct and indirect impact. The direct impact includes mortality, war-related injury, sexual and gender-based violence, disability resulting from war injuries, health-related problems, and psychological and social suffering. The indirect impacts on the health of conflict-affected populations, especially for the displaced, are influenced by overcrowding, inadequate shelter, insufficient nutrient intake and vaccination coverage, poor water, sanitation and hygiene conditions, high exposure to and/or proliferation of disease vectors, and disrupted health assistance systems (Disaster Summary Sheet, 2012).

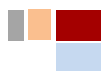
The tormenting condition of the IDFs inside evacuation areas, such as inadequacy of food and other necessities, sleep deprivation, and unbearable heat in their evacuation centers were experienced by IDFs, this was described in the IRR model of displacement, highlighting two from nine established impoverishment risks of the theoretical model: homelessness and food insecurity (Cernea & McDowell, 2000).



Displacement often leads to a severe reduction in access to the necessities of life, including food, clean water, shelter, adequate clothing, health services, and sanitation (Birkeland, 2009). Being displaced from one's habitual residence also means being uprooted from one's familiar ecosystem and natural resources. It is particularly detrimental to indigenous communities whose lives and livelihoods are closely linked to their environment. Displacement can also lead to natural resource depletion and increased pollution in transit and host areas (IDMC, 2018). According to Rajput (2013), displaced families who are forcibly uprooted from their ancestral homes, flee to unknown destinations, run from the fear of persecution, and unplanned departure result in a phenomenon of homelessness. The forceful eviction has meant more than a loss of their physical abode. It also represents the loss of the way of life.

Aside from being homeless, IDPs who are temporarily settled in evacuation areas suffer inadequate food and water supply, lack of bathing facilities, including gender-sensitive latrines and insufficient supply of basic hygiene (UN Commissioner for Refugees, 2017; Carver et al., 1989)). Poor housing conditions and lack of access to electricity and water were also suffered by the IDPs living in resettlement areas (Band & Few; Docena, 2015).

Despite the horrid experiences during their displacement, the participants patiently withstood and employed possible coping strategies to beat the extreme heat, inadequacy of necessities, and sleep deprivation during the period of displacement. Stress and Coping Theory where ascertains that stress, as a result of the interactions between individual characteristics and the environment, largely depends on a person's control of the stressor and his or her coping resources to deal with the primary appraisal and secondary appraisal (Borjalilu, 2023; Glanz & Schwartz, 2008; Krohne, 2001). The appraisal is made by a person with a particular psychosocial and biological heritage at a particular developmental stage in a particular setting, with particular personal, social, and material resources



for coping and with other demands competing for those resources (Folkman, 2010) to Krohne (2001) secondary appraisal has three components: (a) blame or credit, (b) coping potential, and (c) outcome.

Key examples include the perception of the ability to change the situation, manage emotional reactions, and expectations about the effectiveness of coping resources (Glanz & Schwartz, 2008). However, our coping responses, like what we think and do in response to stress and, to a certain extent, the emotions we feel, are at least potentially under our control. Coping is thus a critical point of entry for protecting mental and physical health from the harmful effects of stress (Folkman, 2010). According to Taylor et al., (1998), adaptive coping strategies are the individual's behavioral and psychological efforts to overcome, bear, or increase the stressful event they have experienced. Ghorpade (2012) stated that displaced families who experienced stressful events such as natural disasters and conflicts use different coping strategies based on the available resources and information, how they see their future, and the different available opportunities.

Subsequently, *the participants used* optimistic ideals and means and coping tactics to survive the harsh living conditions in evacuation centers. In order to support their daily needs, since inadequacy of supplies usually happens in displacement, the participants utilized coping strategies such as extending their services by working as helpers and sweepers inside evacuation centers earning money by selling and peddling some goods. They volunteered themselves to be prioritized during relief goods distribution. The theme supported the Stress and Coping Theory, which states that the coping process is initiated in response to a cognitive appraisal of a situation as stressful, which means it is personally significant. It taxes or exceeds the person's resources for coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested two essential coping functions: emotion-focused and problem-focused. However, they added coping strategies such as confrontative coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking



social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem-solving, and positive reappraisal, which are loosely related to the two coping strategies mentioned earlier (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991).

Seguin et al., (2017) disclosed that distraction techniques such as seeking employment and working are the coping strategies displaced women in Georgia use to cope with their circumstances. Besides the obvious economic benefit of working, some women described how working helped them divert their attention from problems and combat feelings of depression. Skinner et al., (2003) developed a coping taxonomy of “conceptually clear, mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories”. From their analysis of 68 approximately 100 coping category systems proposed from the 1980s to 2000, five core domains emerged: problem-solving, support seeking, avoidance, distraction, and positive cognitive restructuring.

In their study on displacement, Seguin et al., (2017) revealed that problem-solving and support-seeking behaviors emerged as the most commonly used strategies employed by displaced women in Georgia. Consequently, interventions fostering sustainable livelihoods and robust social networks are needed to utilize these coping strategies. The self-efficacy theory is also appended to this theme. Bandura (1993) outlined the fundamental processes by which self-efficacy is a determinant of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and noted that cognitions related to high self-efficacy include high goal setting and increased likelihood of imagining successful scenarios. Individuals with high self-efficacy look at difficulties as challenges rather than threats and tend to be more intrinsically interested in the tasks they pursue. (Bandura, 1993). Difficult and failure do not mean defeat; instead, these individuals redouble their efforts and look for new ways to overcome (Cherry, 2019).

The participants’ unyielding spiritual beliefs and self-trust were considered coping mechanisms during the conflict. The participants mentioned prayers and reliance on themselves during the interview, and it



was their source of strength according to them. The self-efficacy theory explains self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. The person’s attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills play a major role in perceiving and responding to different situations” (Bandura, 1986).

The extent or strength of one’s belief in God and ability to complete tasks help one achieve his or her goals (Ajuwon et al., 2012). The degree of self-efficacy is positively associated with effort in information processing and intrinsic motivation. Self-efficacy operates on an affective level to the extent that it correlates with one’s self-esteem, depressive thinking, and anxiety (Bandura, 1989, 1993). As a point of integration, self-efficacy promotes positive change in cognitive processing (information processing) and emotional state (desire to succeed), which, in turn, impact behavior (Bandura, 1993).

Self-efficacy is influenced by a person’s specific capabilities and other individual factors, as well as by environmental factors (barriers and facilitators), and is about a person’s confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform or reach goals (La Morte, 2019). Other goals, such as self-compassion, might be a more valuable target for coping tactics (Karanika & Hogg, 2016). The theme is also linked to stress and coping theory, where religious and spiritual beliefs are mentioned as coping resources in this model.

However, spirituality can confer benefits, especially in the case of serious illness, but religious coping can have both beneficial and harmful effects on mental well-being and physical health (Ironson & Kremmer; Folkman, 2010). Coping through engagement with faith and religion was commonly reported by the displaced women in Georgia. The perceived positive impacts of faith-based coping were two-fold: enabling women to assign meaning to hardships, interact with others, and potentially receive support from others during religious services. Viewing the war and displacement as ‘God’s plan’ assigned an inevitability to the events and



aftermath, which conferred comfort. The meaning-making function of faith-based coping has been reported elsewhere amongst other war-affected groups (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Hardgrove, 2009).

D. Conclusion

Conflict-induced displacement undoubtedly produces innumerable aftermaths, and its casualties are immense. The experiences shared by the IDFs are a testament that internal displacement could lead to homelessness or involuntary expulsion from their habitual way of living; it causes morbidity and mortality due to unfavorable conditions in evacuation areas; and psychological trauma and excessive fear are inevitable, where children suffer the most. However, despite the magnitude of the conflict's repercussions, the participants displayed resiliency and perseverance through their forbearance, positive outlook, and unyielding belief.

The upshots of internal displacement disclosed by the participants via firsthand experience on such issues could be a bearing or an avenue to fortify national initiatives and countermeasure platforms to address internal displacement. On the other hand, the participants' coping mechanisms may provide a broader perspective on comprehending human behavior, focusing on how individuals utilize solution-finding and problem-solving strategies to respond to or adapt to a particular societal dilemma.

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