

POLICY BRIEF: THE CASE FOR UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT



Key messages

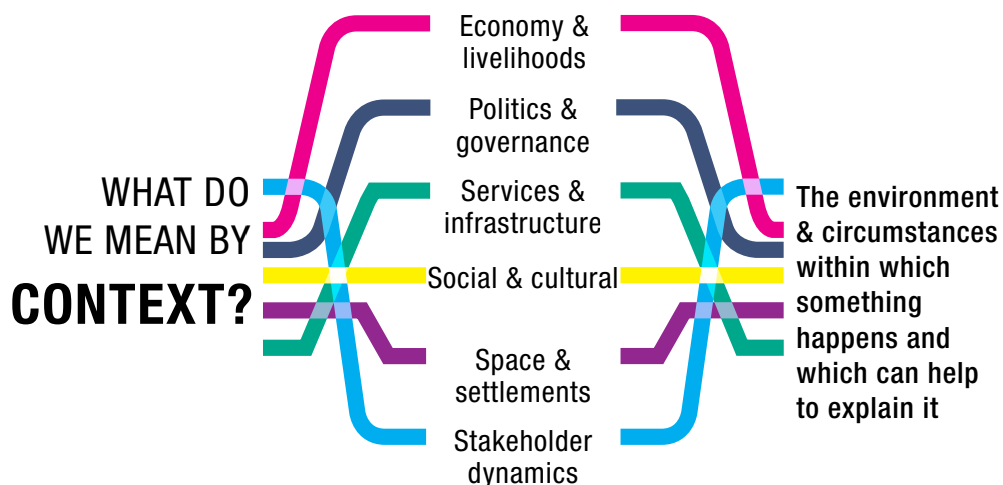
- Humanitarian response is often critiqued for not being context-appropriate. The first step in addressing this is to be clear what context means.
- Context is broader than any specific situation, or the experience of a single person or group.
- Better understanding of context can improve humanitarian response and build on existing capacities in a holistic way.
- Tools exist which can help, but to be effective they require institutional support and leadership buy-in.
- Donors can play a key role in incentivising better understanding of context. They can fund analysis and improve its uptake by supporting adaptiveness.

Within a broader research initiative exploring how humanitarian response can be more effective in complex urban contexts, ALNAP's **'What's missing? Adding context to the urban response toolbox'** study is the basis for this policy brief.

The research reviewed 25 tools and included an extensive literature review and interviews. The research was conducted by Leah Campbell, Senior Research Officer at ALNAP.

Introduction

In recent years, recognition of the need for humanitarian response to be 'context-relevant' has increased. It has featured in discussions around the World Humanitarian Forum (see Knox Clarke & Obrecht, 2015b) and in initiatives to improve humanitarian response in urban areas, such as the Global Alliance for Urban Crises (GAUC, 2015). The need to understand context is not strictly an urban concern. It comes up in discussions around coordination, accountability, localisation, and effectiveness and is now broadly accepted as something humanitarian response should be striving towards. However, the complexity of the environment and the number of stakeholders and relationships which exist, make this an especially critical issue in urban humanitarian response.



What is context?

'Context' is the environment and circumstances within which something happens and which can help to explain it. Context is broader than the needs and vulnerabilities of specific individuals and groups, and the situation at the present time, for example, the disaster or the conflict.

Why do we need to understand context when responding to urban crises?

Understanding context is important because:

1. It contributes to informed and effective humanitarian response in urban areas by providing a reference point to design evidence-based, context-relevant programming, enabling action to be taken before contextual issues become an obstacle to response, and by ensuring responses are sensitive to conflict and Do No Harm.
2. It allows humanitarians to identify and support what already exists within the city, maximising the opportunities which exist in cities by building on existing structures and networks and working effectively with a wide range of urban stakeholders. In doing so, humanitarians can support ongoing planning and development efforts in the city, achieving long-term impact even if their own actions are short-term.
3. It helps humanitarians to understand how different things are connected within the urban environment, which can be used to ensure programming takes advantage of the best opportunities for leverage to addressing complex issues.

While understanding context is important in any humanitarian response, it is particularly important in urban settings where the scale and complexity amplify the challenges humanitarians face.

How can tools improve our understanding of context?

At the moment, humanitarians do not have sufficient understanding of context, and this shows in our responses to urban crises large and small. While a number of tools have been identified that can improve this, many of them are newly developed and most of them are currently used on an ad hoc basis, rather than systematically.

ALNAP's research on context tools found that, above and beyond the existence of these tools, a number of supporting factors also need to be in place to ensure that the tools can be used effectively, and that findings and analysis produced by using the tools are used. A number of these factors relate to institutional and donor support.

Institutional Commitment and Leadership Support

Organisations who are regularly using tools to understand context, or have recently developed tools to do so, have made institutional commitments to support better understanding of context, and have support from senior leadership. The research shows that this support is important in helping to ensure analysis of context is prioritised in situations of limited time and resource, and that analysis findings are taken forward. This reflects broader research into the use of evidence and analysis in humanitarian response, where it has been found that “unless a signal comes from the top that evidence matters, progress will not be achieved” (Darcy, 2009:18).

Organisations who foster an environment that allows for flexibility, encourages self-reflection and learning, are open to failure, invest in analytical capacity, and promote listening to diverse perspectives are also important.

A critical role for donors, not just as funders but as incentivisers

At present, there are few funding options available to organisations wanting to use context tools. The majority of the analysis reviewed for this research was funded through pilots or core funding of organisations. Given the potential added value that better understanding of context can bring to urban humanitarian response, there is a clear need for more funding and support from donors to ensure this sort of analysis is a standard part of responses going forward.

However, providing funding is not the only way donors can support a better understanding of context. This research found that one of the barriers to broader use of contextual analysis, is that organisations are disincentivised from recognising that they need to take steps to improve their understanding of context. Interviewees explained that, at the moment, organisations overstate their understanding of context in order to get funding, and don't feel they can admit that they need to carry out analysis to improve this understanding, for fear that they will lose out on funding.

Donors have the power to shift the incentives, by acting as advocates for understanding context and asking all organisations to demonstrate their understanding of context, such as through an analysis exercise, as a standard part of urban humanitarian response programming. Finally, donors can also consider their own processes to ensure organisations who do take the time to understand context, throughout a response, are able to adapt their programming as required, when the context changes or new information emerges.

Final thoughts

This policy brief summarises key messages for humanitarian response organisations and donors based on research conducted by ALNAP. The full study is available at <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/whats-missing-adding-context-to-the-urban-response-toolbox>.

The research asks whether humanitarians can improve their ability to respond to crises in urban areas by better understanding the urban context using tools. The research finds that, indeed, there is both a need to better understand context in urban crises, and a number of tools which can be used to do so. 16 specific tools, and 9 complementary and related tools, were identified. These tools can and have been used to improve understanding of urban contexts, and in doing so, improve the effectiveness and context-relevance of humanitarian response, recognise and support existing systems and structures in the city, and create a holistic understanding of what's happening in urban crises and how things are interconnected.

For more information about this research and the tools, visit our website:

<https://www.alnap.org/our-topics/urban-response>