

The Urbanisation of Emergencies – Adapting Humanitarian Action to a Changing World

Paper prepared for ALNAP/USAID **Global Forum for Improving Humanitarian Action**
By the WHS Urban Expert Group
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Background

The upcoming ALNAP/USAID Global Forum for improving humanitarian action will formulate propositions for adapting the international humanitarian system to a new generation of crises. There is growing consensus, emerging from WHS consultations and other discussions from around the world, that adapting to the *urbanisation of emergencies* will be key to ensuring the humanitarian system is fit to respond to future challenges.

Crises over the last 20 years have highlighted the consequences of urbanization for humanitarian assistance. Urbanization has reshaped the context of conflicts and disasters, by building in structural weaknesses within already fragile cities, and exacerbating the impact of crises – natural and man-made as well as influxes of displaced people. At the same time, the concentration of people, industries and resources; the existence (although sometimes tenuous) of infrastructure and market systems; and the presence (although sometimes weak) of institutions of various types presents an opportunity for effective humanitarian action to contribute to the longer-term development of inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable urban centres.

There is a pressing need to reshape humanitarian action so that it harnesses the resources and opportunities already present in urban areas and works to support, restore and improve existing urban systems after a crisis. While complex, the urban environment presents humanitarian and development actors with the opportunity to operate at scale, and in a cost-effective way, but only if they work with the ingenuity and perseverance of urban populations and grasp the way that urban systems were functioning prior to the crisis. Key to this is an appreciation of existing social and human capital in towns and cities, and the opportunities provided by local governance institutions, markets and the private sector to support relief and recovery. Also important is recognition that displaced populations can be self-reliant and contribute to the local economy. This paper proposes a series of recommendations that would adapt humanitarian response to better support city systems, and promote greater resilience to future crises. It also proposes taking steps to engage urban development actors to benefit from their expertise and make the most of existing programming. In doing so, it responds to a 2014 ALNAP paper that set out 'Four 'C's' models to humanitarian response, and concurs with the conclusion that urban emergencies are best met with a 'collaborative' approach.

The contributors to this document are members of an 'urban expert group' challenging the current organization and thinking about humanitarian action in urban areas, and seeking to stimulate discussion on how the issues outlined below could be addressed in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) and beyond. The emerging recommendations for the 'urban track' for the WHS, led by UN-Habitat, IRC and DFID are listed at the end of this paper and will be tested in a series of webinars with urban practitioners, and finalised at a Global Urban Consultation in Barcelona at the end of June.

The new urban world

The world urban population is estimated to increase from 3.5 billion today to 6.2 billion in 2050, with almost all population growth occurring in small to intermediate-sized African and Asian towns and cities. Of particular concern is the fact that over the past forty years, the urban population in lower income and fragile countries has increased by 326 percent. The displaced are increasingly part of this global urban population, with over half of the world's total 16.7 million refugees, now residents of towns and cities. This is fundamentally shifting the landscape of crises to cities—and to cities that already have systemic challenges to the delivery of basic services, security, and welfare.

Roughly one billion people live in low-income and informal urban settlements (often referred to as slums), representing one third of the population of the developing world. Slum dwellers often live on land exposed to hazards and without adequate protective infrastructure, decent housing and access to basic services. The informal nature of these areas, including their governance structures, limits opportunities to reduce these vulnerabilities. They accumulate acute and structural vulnerabilities and are frequently adversely affected by different shocks and stresses. They are also the areas where displaced people are most likely to settle. As a result, even small shocks can easily engender a humanitarian crisis. Residents in these areas may not have secure tenure, and when homes are destroyed, or people are displaced, those who cannot prove their rights to land or housing can be severely disadvantaged. Elsewhere in the city, poor urban planning, lax enforcement of planning legislation and inappropriate, unaffordable or poorly enforced building codes puts populations at risk – rich and poor alike. The interdependence and density of urban infrastructure and social systems and the multiplicity of hazards makes compound events a present danger.

Violence and conflict also occur frequently in cities, as they are the locus of, on the one hand, political and economic power and assets, and on the other, social tensions and inequalities.¹ Urban warfare has been a constant feature of recent conflicts, complicating humanitarian operations, in particular in terms of access and protection. Urban violence in contexts other than war is also leading to high levels of mortality in certain regions, and again compromises the ability of humanitarian actors to reach populations in need of assistance.

Challenges to responding effectively in urban areas

At present humanitarian response is fundamentally at odds with the way that towns and cities are organized and the way that urban life plays out, and this can limit the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance. In a paper on meeting the challenges of urban climate change, Da Silva, Kernaghan and Luque argue that urban areas must be understood by looking at the range of different systems of which they are composed, rather than just their individual parts. These systems include governance, infrastructure, markets and social systems, amongst others, and to take them all in to account requires a more holistic and spatial approach in which urban areas are understood as “complex ‘living’ systems”.² The interconnectedness of these systems is one defining characteristic of urban areas, as is the density and heterogeneity of urban neighbourhoods, and the presence and proximity of different governance actors.³

¹ See *Environment and Urbanization* (2014): Special issue on conflict and violence in 21st century cities. 26 (2).

² Da Silva, J., Kernaghan, S. & Luque, A. (2012). 'A systems approach to meeting the challenges of urban climate change'. *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development*, 4(2), pp.125–145.

³ For a definition of 'urbanism' see

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/publicity/CitiesBrochure.pdf>

Informal and formal systems coexist in cities, and the intersection of the formal and informal, and the different scales at which urban residents interact – household, neighbourhood, city – also contribute to the specificity of urban life and livelihoods.

Despite a discernible shift in the policies, programming and operational tools of many humanitarian agencies to respond to the urban context, more needs to be done to improve and better implement existing policies so they fully harness the potential of cities and its inhabitants. The current approach to assistance often takes humanitarian response down to its component parts, working in sectors, at the household or individual level, and on a short timeline post-crisis that disregards the urban past and much of its future. Traditional household or individual level of analysis in humanitarian response does not capture the complex interconnectedness of the formal and informal and the way that households engage with the fabric of the city. Despite many advances, the current cluster system still struggles to institutionalise working with local market mechanisms, supporting local authorities or restoring/bolstering existing service delivery mechanisms. Opportunities are lost for wider and longer-lasting positive impact on urban life in the best of cases, while in the worst, responses may distort and damage informal or formal systems, particularly if humanitarians establish parallel service provision.

For example, a traditional humanitarian response (i.e. with material and logistical assistance based primarily on direct service provision to affected people, and the construction of camps within or near to urban areas) can have knock-on negative impacts on urban planning and the functioning of local markets for food, water and energy. By contrast, cash-transfer programming and the demand for goods and services from affected populations may serve to stimulate urban markets.⁴ Traditional approaches may generate dependency and fail to tap into the potential of urban refugees and IDPs who bring many assets, skills and resources to their host cities which can expand and diversify existing markets.⁵ This is a particular lost opportunity for women, who are more likely to gain income and financial independence in urban areas.⁶ Failure to incorporate displaced people in to the fabric of the city can lead to the creation of slums and create social cohesion issues that can lead to urban violence.

In short, humanitarian actors struggle to deal with the complexity of towns and cities and to take full advantage of the capabilities and resources present in urban areas. Knowledge and expertise of urban development actors, and of the formal and informal institutions they operate within, are not routinely informing humanitarian action. The exclusion of development perspectives in immediate humanitarian response can impede long-term recovery. While humanitarian actors cannot solve urban problems, they can operate in ways that better support city systems, establish new frameworks within which future urban development can flourish, while limiting disruption to urban development trajectories. It should be stressed here that the imperative to save lives can be aligned with the fast-tracking of recovery and strengthening resilience.

⁴ Lehman, C. and Masterson, D. (2014) *Emergency Economies The Impact of Cash Assistance in Lebanon*. London, International Rescue Committee.

⁵ Jacobsen, K. (2006) 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19:3, pps. 273-286, and Betts A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J., and Naohiko, O. (2014) *Refugee Economies, Rethinking Popular Assumptions*, Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre.

⁶ Metcalfe, V. and Haysom, S. with Martin, E. (2012) *Sanctuary in the City: Urban Displacement in Kabul*, Humanitarian Policy Group, London: Overseas Development Institute.

The collaborative approach

Recent thinking in an ALNAP paper entitled 'Responding to changing needs?' initiated discussion on how to adapt humanitarian response according to context. It set out a framework of four different models of humanitarianism, dubbed the 'four 'C's'. 1) Comprehensive; 2) Constrained; 3) Collaborative; and 4) Consultative.⁷ The authors, Ramalingam and Mitchell, note that the comprehensive model is what tends to follow an appeal for international assistance by a state experiencing a crisis. In cases where needs are great and local capacity extremely limited, international agencies tend to take the lead. The authors argue that 'the culture and practices of the international humanitarian system are arguably developed with the comprehensive model of external assistance in mind'. They note that, 'there are many issues with this model in terms of its insensitivity to context, the lack of engagement with local and national actors, and a tendency to be supply-driven rather than needs-oriented'.⁸

The paper suggests that in many cases, the comprehensive approach has been taken in urban areas. The authors use the response to the Haiti 2010 earthquake as a case to illustrate this point. The constrained model reflects crises where humanitarian space is limited, while the consultative is found in situations where there is domestic capacity to respond. Urban areas experiencing crises could fall in to either of these categories (for example current crisis response in Syrian cities is severely constrained, while in many Southeast Asian cities, floods and other crises are handled with minimal outside assistance), but the authors note that in urban areas, it is frequently the *collaborative* model that is likely to be most appropriate. They elaborate further:

In the collaborative model the international response works hand in hand with national and local actors.

- Domestic response capacities for coordination, management and delivery are of central importance in the collaborative model
- This model currently leads to numerous tensions with the international system, because of the strong tendencies and preferences to work in the comprehensive model.⁹

This resonates with the arguments set out above on the need *to work with the city* and to avoid undermining existing urban governance, infrastructure, social and market systems. This requires collaboration with a broad range of different actors, including local government, alongside affected urban populations, professional associations and the private sector. Critically, it also requires humanitarians to combine and align their efforts with those of development actors already present in cities, to ensure that life-saving and recovery activities can segue in to longer-term sustainable development, and that they contribute to government-led post-disaster assessment and planning.

There are a number of ways in which the current humanitarian-development divide could be bridged, and this type of collaboration fostered. At a conceptual level, lessons from emerging theory and practice relating to 'urban resilience' could support the development of an overarching framework to guide humanitarian and development interventions in urban areas. Urban resilience is understood as the ability of any urban system to withstand and recover quickly from any plausible hazard. It is a multi-hazard, multi-stakeholder approach focused not only on protecting lives and assets, but also on ensuring continuity of services and quick recovery. It can also help to prioritize

⁷ Ramalingam, B and Mitchell, J. (2014) 'Responding to changing needs? Challenges and opportunities for humanitarian needs'. London, ALNAP.

⁸ Op Cit. p 27.

⁹ Op Cit. p 30.

prevention efforts in cities most at risk. At a programming level, ‘area-based approaches’ can be a way to prioritise where in a city to intervene, and to do so in an integrated way – meeting residents’ multiple needs at the neighbourhood level, while also taking in to account the connections between different neighbourhoods and with the city as a whole.

Recommendations

The Urban Expert Group has developed a series of recommendations that seek to ensure the humanitarian system is fit for purpose.

Emerging Recommendations—Development and humanitarian actors should:

1. Draw on the concept of urban resilience as an overarching framework to align and combine humanitarian and development efforts in understanding urban risk, preventing and responding to urban crises. This requires prioritizing prevention and enabling recovery from day one, while saving lives and protecting the most vulnerable. Response must take into account the pre-crisis urban dynamics and chronic vulnerabilities, and be centred on affected men and women’s inherent capacities and priorities.
 - a. Adopt a coordination protocol that can flex to different contexts and types of crises, and that complements existing urban governance structures, and accommodates the multi- scalar, sector and stakeholder approach that cities and towns require.
 - b. Adopt an area-based approach to programming and coordination that incorporates the different scales – household, neighbourhood, city – that categorize the urban context, recognises the interrelatedness of multiple sectors and builds on people’s and communities’ different coping mechanisms.
 - c. Work with the World Bank and key stakeholders to develop an urban-specific Disaster Recovery Framework that integrates the processes and arrangements established during the emergency response phase. This should include setting up coordinated global efforts to strengthen resilience in the most at-risk cities.

2. Prioritize activities that restore or strengthen urban systems (social, governance, markets, and infrastructure), leveraging opportunities and existing human capital, while avoiding duplication of service provision, market distortions or weakening local authorities. This requires forging new partnerships with affected communities, the private sector, local authorities and power brokers to understand and respond to urban crisis, with shared humanitarian principles.
 - a. Develop participatory urban crisis profiling and monitoring tools, maximizing the use of new communications technology, and of big and open data so as to ensure responses are informed by and adapted to the different capacities and needs of women and men affected by crisis.
 - b. Develop partnerships and rosters of deployable urban managers and technical experts, managed at national, regional and international level, with the ability to surge through local authorities and communities to advise, mentor and strengthen local responders’ ability to lead and coordinate crisis response.
 - c. Prioritise cash-based responses and economic stimuli in urban response, ensuring that they build on existing livelihood strategies without exacerbating vulnerabilities. Develop standards and approaches to re-establish and support local markets and SMEs on the supply side.

3. Avoid the creation of camps and support national and local authorities in receiving the displaced in urban areas, recognizing the vulnerabilities and contributions of refugees and IDPs, while considering the absorption capacity of host neighbourhoods and towns/cities. Interventions to support the displaced should also benefit the host community, leverage private investments, and contribute to more sustainable urban growth, taking into account mobility of populations but the potential lasting nature of physical assets.
- a. Increase the absorption capacity of host towns and cities through the expansion of housing solutions (including rental support), upgrading infrastructure and services. This also includes economic stimuli programs to increase job opportunities for displaced and host communities, while providing a safety net for the most vulnerable. Diversity of household composition, density and existing markets (including land markets) and services in the city must be considered. This also includes mainstreaming displacement into urban planning and preparedness with local authorities.
 - b. Prioritize the protection needs of displaced people and the vulnerabilities of particular groups including women and girls and the elderly and take measures to ensure they are safely integrated into urban areas in a dignified and equitable manner.
 - c. Advocate for refugees to have the right to work so as to contribute to local and national economies.

Authorship

This paper was prepared by members of the 'Urban Coordination Cell' led by IRC, DFID and UN-Habitat for the Urban Track of the World Humanitarian Summit. It is based on papers developed in consultation with the Urban Expert Group for the WHS.

https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_urban