

World Vision International - Accountability to Communities workshop – Sept. 2013

SESSION ON URBAN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

What is different in urban environments?

- **Higher population density:** Whereas rural areas have higher rates of acute malnutrition than urban areas, the total number of affected people can be similar due to high population concentrations in urban contexts. Another problem is that Sexual Exploitation and abuse is likely to be a bigger problem in areas with high population density. Furthermore, there is greater potential for potentially detrimental rumours to spread quickly.
- **Strong differences in social structures,** with neighbourhoods tending to be more segregated by social class than rural areas. This assumption is challenged by urban experts, arguing that when collective settlement of migrant groups takes place, it is based on culture rather than class.
- **Weaker social fabric,** with less social control (people tend to be more anonymous in a city than in a village). Social structures appear weaker than in many rural areas, with higher rates of single-parent households, crime, and weaker sharing networks. Slum dwellers are likely to have fewer connections with family members, more limited involvement in community activities, and share information less than in rural areas. Again, some experts also challenge this statement, arguing that this assumption is largely due to the fact that the social fabric is different than in rural areas and/or more complex to understand.
- This makes it more difficult to **target vulnerable individuals** and use community-based approaches NGOs are used to.
- **Vulnerable groups are more vulnerable.** Urban vulnerability is based on exposure to market, health and sanitation risks, and social and political risks. While urban poverty seems lower than rural poverty in most countries, slum poverty is relatively high, and child mortality and health indicators are particularly poor. Urban food insecurity is a very real issue, but is generally not as severe as in rural areas, and although malnutrition rates tend to be higher in rural areas, high urban population density means that there are many more malnourished individuals per unit of area.
- **Challenges of reconstruction:** In both rural and urban areas, shelters can be destroyed by a disaster or conflict. In urban areas, reconstruction can be complicated by factors such as population density, where people reside, dependency on local services, the materials used, the high cost of land and contested land ownership.
- **People's land and tenure rights,** or lack thereof, can make them more vulnerable. Cities have a higher percentage of people living as renters or squatters and in slums. This can make it more complicated to determine the appropriate humanitarian response to an urban disaster,

as agencies will inevitably find themselves in difficult discussions about land rights, the role of landlords and legal protection for landless people.

- The main **regulatory barriers to equitable and adequate emergency and transitional shelter** provision include:
 - gaps in documentation around ownership rights
 - opportunistic land claims
 - insecurity of renters and squatters
 - absence of rapid and effective dispute resolution mechanisms
 - inequitable assistance between documented owners and others
 - common biases such as discrimination against women in land ownership
 - absence of effective procedures for temporary requisition of land
 - problems with land planning rules, building standards and environmental protection regulations
 - corruption
 - problems specific to international shelter assistance
- **Some innovative approaches** have proven useful when faced with these entrenched problems. Examples include: setting up rapid, community-based approaches for verification of land tenure in partnership with local authorities; targeting shelter-related solutions at landless populations; and working with local experts to establish high quality building standards that are locally appropriate.
- **Sanitation** is likely to be significantly worse than in rural areas especially in informal settlements (slums). It is reasonable to suggest that poor sanitation relates to high rates of infant and child morbidity and mortality. E.g., children in urban informal settlements in Kenya are much less likely to have all their vaccinations, and much more likely to suffer from respiratory illnesses and diarrhoea, two of the largest causes (with malnutrition) of premature death. HIV rates are also higher. These morbidity rates are matched by much higher rates of infant and child mortality in urban areas.
- The influence of the built environment and population density on health has been well documented. **Cities concentrate certain risks** such as water, air and noise pollution, as well as heat waves from the 'heat island' effect (where an urban area is significantly warmer than its surrounding rural areas). The risks of epidemics, including influenza, typhoid, gastro-intestinal diseases and cholera, are higher in densely packed urban areas. However, public health experts are quick to point out that urbanisation in itself does not necessarily cause a crisis. It is only when populations expand beyond the capacity of their public health infrastructure that problems come to a head.
- The distribution of health risk also varies within different vulnerable groups. For example, access to basic services for children in urban areas is generally uneven.
- **Higher reliance on cash for livelihood** (much less barter or reliance on producing own food) – cash-based programmes often more appropriate than in rural areas. The significance of the market exposure is that responses working through cash are often the most appropriate. Urban areas, however, present particular challenges for cash transfer programmes, especially in terms of identifying and targeting the most vulnerable. People often have multiple livelihood strategies.
- **Less people own land or assets** they can sell in order to cope with economic shocks. In addition, there is a much more significant reliance on commercial exchange for both income

and survival consumption. Where most rural dwellers are able to produce at least part of what they eat, and often do not pay for water and shelter, those living in urban areas tend to have to pay for more items (including all food, shelter, water, fuel and even to use a toilet), and to pay higher prices for these goods and services. This exposes those living in urban areas to risks around prices and wages to a greater degree to those in rural areas.

- **Different demographics and dynamics of population.** Urban populations are highly mobile. Annual population turnover in some areas of Nairobi is 25%. Targeting needs to be responsive to this.
- **Usually higher literacy level** and access/exposure to means of communication such as internet, radio and mobile phones. In some contexts, urban beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries are more savvy and vocal in advocating for their rights and in seeking redress. Mobile phones and social media can often compound this phenomenon, as seen in Haiti. Managing such dialogues effectively will require robust communications systems and more transparent accountability procedures. It also requires well-trained staff to manage demands and complaints professionally and positively.
- **Women more empowered** than in rural contexts, but **single women/mothers possibly also more vulnerable** to abuse because of population density and weaker social structure. Urban women are better educated and play a more important role in decision making than rural women do.
- **Approach to time and organizing a day is different** (value of time, hours when activities take place, etc.). Recognising that people in cities use their time differently is also important. As most people are tied formally or informally to the market economy, the daily rhythm of jobs, commuting and juggling priorities takes precedence. British Red Cross staff found that community meetings and training often had to take place in the evenings or on weekends.
- While local authorities may be vital to the success or failure of a programme, especially in the initial phases, the potential of local authorities to helpfully engage must always be critically assessed. When authorities are unable or unwilling to ensure the protection and basic needs of their population, as in fragile and conflict-affected states, engagement is problematic. Moreover, in situations of intense urban violence, it may be that authorities are responsible for human rights violations or colluding with other groups – such as private militias – to do so on their behalf. What is clear is that **while engaging with urban systems and partnering with local groups and institutions is imperative, it is not easy and requires significant patience** and the investment of resources to bear fruit.
- Many households living in informal areas are **geographically marginalised**. Although most urban dwellers are closer to services and employment than many in rural areas, the high cost of transport and need to travel for work mean that any remoteness is likely to be correlated with poverty.
- While the world's media continues to focus on large-scale disasters in mega-cities, this risk covers only around 10 per cent of urban populations. It is people living in medium and small-sized cities in the developing world who may be even more vulnerable to disasters due to inadequate infrastructure, finance and government responses.
- Consider **accountability when sub-contracting**: make sure that the humanitarian response does not undermine local businesses

- Urban operating environments provide a greater opportunity to link up with development programming; this could have some implications for linking up with the accountability and participatory practices used by development personnel.
- Greater levels of socio-economic inequality that can contribute to social unrest and make issues of justice more important, even for the humanitarian worker. Communicating effectively with disaster affected people in the context of a crisis will require a nuanced understanding of the different learned practices and knowledge of people in different socio-economic classes
- Urban crime and violence are significant factors impacting the health and safety of humanitarian workers. How might accountability mechanisms help humanitarian workers mitigate these risks to their own safety?

Challenges to operationalize accountability mechanisms

- Not everyone is known in the community, therefore **targeting and control to avoid abuse is more difficult**. Urban heterogeneity and scale need to be taken into account. While in rural areas entire communities can feasibly be selected, in urban areas large populations mean that additional prioritisation is required. Households with very different levels of vulnerability may live very close to each other, so geographical targeting may be challenging.
- More difficult to **coordinate between agencies** and set boundaries: where does each agency work?
- More **difficult to identify reliable, accepted community representatives**. Communities are not as easily defined or as strong, which makes it a major challenge to identify community representatives.
- **Information sharing is more difficult** because information relays are more difficult to find. Social structures appear weaker than in many rural areas, with weaker sharing networks. Slum dwellers are likely to have fewer connections with family members, more limited involvement in community activities, and share information less than in rural areas.
- **Higher expectations resulting in more complaints**, because it's more difficult to cover all those in need? In some contexts, urban beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries are more savvy and vocal in advocating for their rights and in seeking redress.
- Many people in urban areas lack documentation. For some, this is because they are illegal immigrants, but for many, this is merely because they have not been registered. This can complicate the provision of aid. These groups are often the most vulnerable, particularly following disaster, and so should in theory be prioritised by agencies. They are also often the hardest to find, and may in some cases actively be avoiding identification by the government, which further underscores the importance of the role of humanitarian agencies in supporting them.

Opportunities to operationalize accountability mechanisms

- **Higher literacy level**, makes it easier to communicate with community
- **Higher density means office is probably closer to targeted community**, which allows more interaction, ability to raise complaints, etc.
- **Easier access to mobile phones, radio, internet and other means of communication widens possibilities to communicate with target group**. Different forms of media provide multiple opportunities to share information with stakeholders and for affected people to access information regarding the on-going response.
- **Facilities at city level make it easier to track beneficiaries**, or use tablets to follow up activities.

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