



Humanitarian Crises in Urban Areas: Are Area-Based Approaches to Programming and Coordination the Way Forward?

The humanitarian landscape is changing. The world is urbanising rapidly and natural disasters and displacement crises will increasingly occur in urban settings.¹ The size and complexity of towns and cities requires different approaches to delivering assistance, compared to approaches deployed in remote, rural areas or in refugee camps. Humanitarian organisations must adapt to this new reality in order to meet the needs of impacted populations and to support the city and its systems. We must work with new actors and develop new models for programming and co-ordination. Area-based (or ‘settlement’ or ‘neighbourhood’) approaches have been proposed as a way to address the range of needs of crisis-affected urban populations.

Whilst using area-based approaches in urban settings is increasingly being discussed in policy and operational forums, a shared understanding of what an appropriate area-based approach entails and how to deliver such an approach in a crisis has yet to be reached². It is clear that there are both positive and negative impacts of using such approaches in urban settings. More must be done to develop a shared understanding of area-based approaches across the sector, and establish good practice in the design and coordination of such approaches.

Key Messages

- **Interventions in urban areas must take in to account the existing urban context** - this will require investment in improved context analysis from the outset of an urban crisis;
- **A common understanding of terminology is required** - the sector lacks an agreed definition of ‘area based approach’;
- **Programme design in urban areas should be approached geographically**, working with municipal and city wide systems;
- **The humanitarian sector should invest in developing expertise and generating evidence** on the best ways to meet the needs of affected populations in urban areas;

¹For more detail see IRC, 2015. Humanitarian Action in a New Urban World. Available at: [http://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/IRC Urban position paper WHS Budapest PRINT.pdf](http://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/IRC%20Urban%20position%20paper%20WHS%20Budapest%20PRINT.pdf).

² For example, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals endorsed an action plan on urban challenges in May 2015 which included a new focus on deploying area based approaches. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/principals/documents-public/final-summary-record-and-action-points>

- **Coordination mechanisms in urban areas should be flexible and can no longer be 'one-size fits all'.** Greater emphasis on inter-sector coordination and the role of municipal authorities is required.

Why do Urban Settings Require New Ways of Working?

Towns and cities are characterised by high numbers of very different people living and working in close proximity to one another. The social, political, economic and institutional environment is more complex, as is the built environment.³ In contrast to rural areas, urban inhabitants are more mobile and largely dependent on technical or economic systems in order to meet their basic needs.

Urban residents are reliant on a range of interconnected systems and infrastructure to support their daily lives and livelihoods. Systems include road, transport, water, sanitation, and market networks. There is increasing recognition of the need to work with these existing systems when responding to a humanitarian crisis. As an example, organisations providing shelter in crisis settings are increasingly focused on the 'settlement' approach, recognising that 'shelter' means more than providing individual housing units.⁴ However, humanitarian actors have not always made the best use of existing systems, and our interventions can have negative impacts on the urban fabric, on local businesses and governance structures. A clear example of this is when camps are established near to urban centres. These can morph into violent informal settlements, beyond the reach of local authorities. A further example can be found in the tendency of humanitarian actors to set up parallel services rather than support the capacity of existing services. Providing parallel water and healthcare services can bankrupt local small providers.

The complexity of towns and cities requires that the delivery of assistance is coordinated across multiple sectors at once, and that it is delivered at scale. Interventions targeted at the individual and household levels may falter if they are not complemented by support for neighbourhood and municipal-wide services and systems.

What are Area-Based Approaches?

There is no shared understanding of what area-based approaches entail, however, three defining characteristics have been identified. Area-based approaches must be:

- geographically targeted;
- participatory, and;
- multi-sectoral.⁵

³ This definition is adapted from E. Parker and V. Maynard, *Humanitarian Response to Urban Crises: Literature Review of Area-Based Approaches*. London, IIED. Much of this paper is drawn from this review. <http://pubs.iied.org/10742IIED.html?k=humanitarian&r=p>

⁴ For a discussion of the settlements approach, see the blog and webinar at: https://www.disasterready.org/blog/humanitarian-shelter-and-settlements-assistance#_VKTse1LouUk

⁵ E. Parker and V. Maynard, Op Cit.

An area-based approach:

- (i) 'defines an area, rather than a sector or target group, as the main entry point', and as such will have a strong focus on communities within a specific spatial context.⁶ Interventions seek to address the problems associated with that defined area;
- (ii) places a significant emphasis on community and wider stakeholder engagement, recognising that identifying and solving problems requires not only formal inclusion, but also the active participation of all relevant stakeholders in the area;
- (iii) responds to local problems with a multi-sector approach, typically embracing 'a range of social, economic and physical development objectives cutting across ... fields such as education, housing, transport and economic development'.⁷

Advantages and Limitations

Programmes that are participatory, grounded in local contexts and in tune with the way people live their lives in urban areas, combined with an approach that breaks down silos between different sectors, is a recipe for good programming. Yet caution is needed before making an outright call for the adoption of area-based approaches.

There are clear advantages to area-based approaches. They can:

- mitigate against the creation or reinforcement of tensions and inequalities within an area;
- act as a valuable catalyst for local change;
- present mechanisms for effectively focusing resources;
- prevent consultation fatigue for disaster-affected populations;
- mobilise a 'bottom-up' approach;
- attract much needed investment; and
- prevent over-stretching mainstream programmes and services.⁸

Critically, there is a particular equity argument for area-based approaches in neighbourhoods affected by influxes of displaced populations, where they can reduce perceived inequalities between the displaced and host populations, particularly when the latter are very poor.⁹

⁶ IRC, 2015. Humanitarian Action in a New Urban World. Available at: http://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/IRC_Urban_position_paper_WHS_Budapest_PRINT.pdf.

⁷ Turok, I., 2004. The rationale for area-based policies: lessons from international experience. In P. Robinson, J. McCarthy, & C. Forster, eds. Heinemann, pp. 405–412.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Crisp, J., 2001. Mind the Gap! UNHCR, Humanitarian Assistance and the Development Process. *International Migration Review*, 35(1), pp.168–191. P. 164.

However, like all interventions, they can have very negative impacts if they are not well-designed or implemented. A number of problems arise when agencies concentrate their interventions in one area, without regard for adjacent neighbourhoods, or for how the area fits into wider city systems. In such cases area-based approaches can:

- Enhance inequalities between the target and surrounding areas
- Create an unnecessary distraction from underlying problems;
- Shift responsibility onto the wrong stakeholders and prevent action;
- Lead to a disconnect between local plans and wider city or regional plans which has long-term implications.¹⁰

Area Based Approaches to Delivering Assistance

‘Neighbourhood approaches’ (often used as a synonym for area-based approaches) were widely trialled in the response to the Haiti 2010 earthquake, in areas of Port au Prince. Reviews of the neighbourhood focus have not been overwhelmingly positive. A World Bank review notes the importance of considering future development needs of a particular neighbourhood, and its connection to the rest of the city: ‘Concentration of assistance in discrete areas reduces equity, coverage, and sustainability. In contrast, area-based interventions led by local authorities or communities can have wide-ranging benefits, and should be encouraged’.¹¹

Many of the areas selected in Haiti were very small and the connection with neighbouring areas and the wider city were lost. Non Government Organisations and other actors had a tendency to adopt ‘project approaches’ in locations they selected themselves. This led to limited engagement with local authorities, and missed opportunities to coordinate interventions or harmonise standards.

Area-Based Approaches to Coordination

In contrast, area-based coordination processes in the municipalities of Carrefour and Delmas in Port au Prince were seen to be relatively effective. Here local and municipal authorities took the initiative to engage with the many actors who were present in their neighbourhoods.

CARE supported the Mayor of Carrefour to coordinate humanitarian interventions within the municipality. This meant hosting regular meetings of all relevant actors, supported by appropriate municipal staff. A diverse group attended, including actors who were not involved in cluster meetings: small international religious groups but also established actors and large international non-government organisations. CARE provided logistical support so the municipality could convene, organise and undertake follow up from the meetings. As a result, the Mayor and his staff were able to take more of a leadership role, improving coordination between agencies and programmes, promoting complementarity and avoiding duplication between interventions, and, perhaps most critically, advocating for assistance based on assessment of need, rather than on resource or supply-driven activities. While providing an op-

¹⁰ Parker and Maynard (forthcoming).

¹¹ World Bank/GFDRR, IFRC, UN-Habitat, Habitat for Humanity (forthcoming) ‘The Effect of Land and Urban Development on the Haiti Recovery’.

portunity to coordinate on specific issues, this coordination mechanism also provided a channel whereby stakeholders could call on government actors, such as DINEPA, the water authority, to intervene with support and assistance.¹²

In a similar vein, during the response to Typhoon Haiyan, in the Philippines, a group of agencies formed a platform to support the Tacloban municipal government to coordinate intervention. According to the lead agency, UN-Habitat, this mechanism was 'meant to ensure a coordinated approach on disaster response within the context of the medium to long term development of the city'.¹³

Despite these examples of good practice, they are not the norm. When area-based approaches are implemented, they do not automatically lead to area-based coordination, or provide a substantive role for local authorities within this.

Can Area-Based Approaches Work at Different Scales Simultaneously?

Neighbourhoods, or areas within a city are not islands or villages. Their very urban-ness is bound up in the way they are connected to adjacent areas and the rest of the city – by governance structures, roads and other infrastructure, systems of markets and commerce, and links related to residents' social, cultural and employment activities. A risk of certain area-based or neighbourhood approaches is their narrow focus on individual geographical locations, that fails to take into account impacts on other parts of the city, or how that area should be linked up to broader networks and systems.

In a series of interviews with representatives from agencies that had responded in Port au Prince, Crawford and Killing sought to understand why agencies addressing a range of needs in one area seemed 'to be isolated and disconnected from any relationship to the larger city'. They report,

'Interviewees talked about 'systems', 'networks', 'infrastructure', 'services', 'axes' and 'inter-neighbourhood issues', but their projects and programmes tended to concentrate on 'neighbourhoods' 'target zones' or 'unbuildable zones'. Even where the emphasis was on connecting neighbourhoods to systems, it entailed a shift in scale from human-scale to collective or state scale; responsibility for the systems beyond the neighbourhood belonged to the state or local authorities, the scale of investment required was beyond NGO budgets.'¹⁴

Seemingly working in isolation, and unable to connect up to the institutions with responsibility for the rest of the city, the sustainability of such interventions is brought in to question. This would suggest a much greater role for municipal authorities to match the needs of residents and their neighbourhoods with the skill sets of different

¹² Described to the author by a former CARE employee involved in the Haiti response, June 2015.

¹³ <http://www.unhabitat.org/ph/index.php/2-uncategorised/308-second-planning-charette-held-for-tacloban-s-recovery-and-rehabilitation-plan>

¹⁴ K. Crawford and A. Killing '(Re) constructing the city: Contrasts in the conceptual approaches of humanitarians and urbanists.' p22. Available at <http://www.reconstructingthecity.org>

organisations. This would require humanitarian actors to work in very different ways and should be a topic of future discussion across the sector.

There is evidence that area-based approaches should not necessarily be prioritised over other ways of targeting assistance. The recent IIED literature review highlights the need for ‘systems-based approaches’ in urban areas. This means repairing or strengthening critical infrastructure networks – such as water, sanitation, electricity, roads, transport, communications, using local markets and delivering through existing service providers for healthcare and education, while increasing access to services for vulnerable groups.

An ambitious response to the above conclusion would be to declare an intention to do both – using a geographically-focused, multi-sector approach to programming, but ensuring that this programming is supported by, and linked to, interventions that restore or strengthen city-wide systems. A nuanced context analysis is critical for the success of such an intervention.

What are the Coordination Implications?

Adopting area-based approaches and linking them up to wider city systems, would have significant consequences for humanitarian coordination. Rather than approaching delivery of assistance through sector-based coordination structures, coordination in urban areas should mirror how local governments manage their administrative areas: maintaining an overview of all interventions within a geographically bounded area, prioritising investments, ensuring complementarity and avoiding wasteful duplication. But as Groupe URD notes,

‘Where cities have faced both chaotic urbanisation and a disastrous humanitarian situation, such as in Mogadishu or Misrata, for example, the aid community has had great difficulty in approaching coordination in a way which is appropriate for these specific contexts, rather than adopting classic humanitarian coordination.’

This approach would start to challenge the aid architecture, with ‘strategic inter-sector coordination linked to the city’s administrative units rather than the sector-based coordination of the cluster approach’. Most important, it means engaging with local urban authorities, who have ‘by and large been left aside in most cases by international agencies’.¹⁵

Recommendations

The world is changing. As it becomes increasingly urban, and displaced people choose to settle in towns and cities, so humanitarian responders must find new way of working that fit with this reality. Operating at different scales, understanding urban systems and collaborating with municipal authorities can no longer be optional. It is a

¹⁵ Groupe URD, 2011b. *Humanitarian aid in urban settings: Current practice, future challenges*. Available at: <http://www.alnap.org/resource/7853.aspx> P.28

must. Area-based approaches, if well-designed, may be a way of achieving these critical changes.

Given the increasing attention to this issue among humanitarian actors responding to urban crises and the IASC endorsement of area-based approaches in urban contexts, further debate and building of consensus across the sector is required around the following areas:

- **Interventions in urban areas should take in to account existing urban context:** the socio-cultural environment, power dynamics, formal and informal institutions, markets and livelihoods, urban systems and services and existing local plans, policies and legal frameworks. Investments should be made around improved context analysis.
- **A common understanding of terminology is required:** ‘Neighbourhood/area-based approaches’ and ‘integrated programming’ are terms that are used interchangeably, but a common understanding of what this entails must be developed and widely shared. This should be encouraged and facilitated by the IASC, supported by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
- **A geographical approach to programme design is important in urban areas:** helping to ensure complex urban communities receive the multi-sector assistance they require, by assessing existing services and infrastructure, and affected people’s access to these. But different scales must be taken in to account: to be sustainable, interventions at the neighbourhood level must be conscious of their impact on surrounding areas and be designed to interact with wider municipal or city-wide systems.
- **Invest resources to develop expertise and generate evidence:** on the best ways to meet the needs of affected populations in urban areas.
- **Flexible coordination mechanisms are needed** - coordination structures can no longer be ‘one-size fits all’. Adoption of a geographical approach to programming will require a corresponding shift in coordination. There must be a much greater emphasis on inter-sector coordination, and an increased role for municipal authorities and technicians. OCHA should take the lead in this regard.

Contacts:

Lucy Earle - Urban Advisor, DFID/IRC: lucy.earle@rescue.org

Jo Henderson - Urban Policy Advisor, IRC UK: joanna.henderson@rescue.org

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