

Rethinking the humanitarian response: Emerging approaches for engagement in urban crises

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Concerns about urbanization and the multiple risks faced by urban populations are not new. Urban planners, development and human rights experts, and economic growth institutions, for example, have long dealt with the challenges but also the opportunities offered by the urban environment. However, it is only recently that the international humanitarian community has started to pay attention to engagement in urban areasⁱ. In part this is linked to the number of humanitarian emergencies that have occurred in densely populated urban areas over the past decade and which have required humanitarians to step up their engagement. Some of these include the Bam (Iran) earthquake in 2003; the conflict-related displacement of Iraqis to several capitals (and other cities and towns) in the Middle East including in Amman, Beirut, and Damascus in 2005–06; Kenya’s election-related violence of 2007–08; and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. There is also a growing realization of the link between rapid urbanization and urban risk to future disasters, which means that international humanitarian actors expect to be increasingly involved in humanitarian response in cities and towns of the developing world. While urbanization and the implications for humanitarian action have received increasing attention and recognition in academic, policymaking and operational debates, there remain significant gaps in knowledge, evidence-based policy, and practice.

Drawing on think tank, academic, policy and operational sourcesⁱⁱ detailing recent humanitarian responses in various contexts, this thematic brief explores issues related to humanitarian engagement in urban crises. It highlights key urbanization trends and challenges for humanitarian action in affected cities and towns, and outlines emerging approaches, tools, and guiding principles for response in urban settings, with a focus on urban-based natural disaster response.

This brief does not seek to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of humanitarian response in urban crises or to analyze and discuss such response across key humanitarian sectors (i.e. shelter, protection, health, and so on). Rather, it attempts to provide a general overview of some of the key challenges that humanitarian actors face when engaging in urban areas, and point to a number of emergent humanitarian approaches, distilled from recent experience in the urban environment. Furthermore, much of the current literature is focused on urban-based natural disaster preparedness and response, with far less discussion on response in conflict-affected urban areas. As such, this thematic brief is largely focused on urban response to natural disasters (although reference is also made to some conflict settings), but acknowledges that especially in urban settings, natural disasters and conflicts are often closely related and that a holistic response is ultimately required.

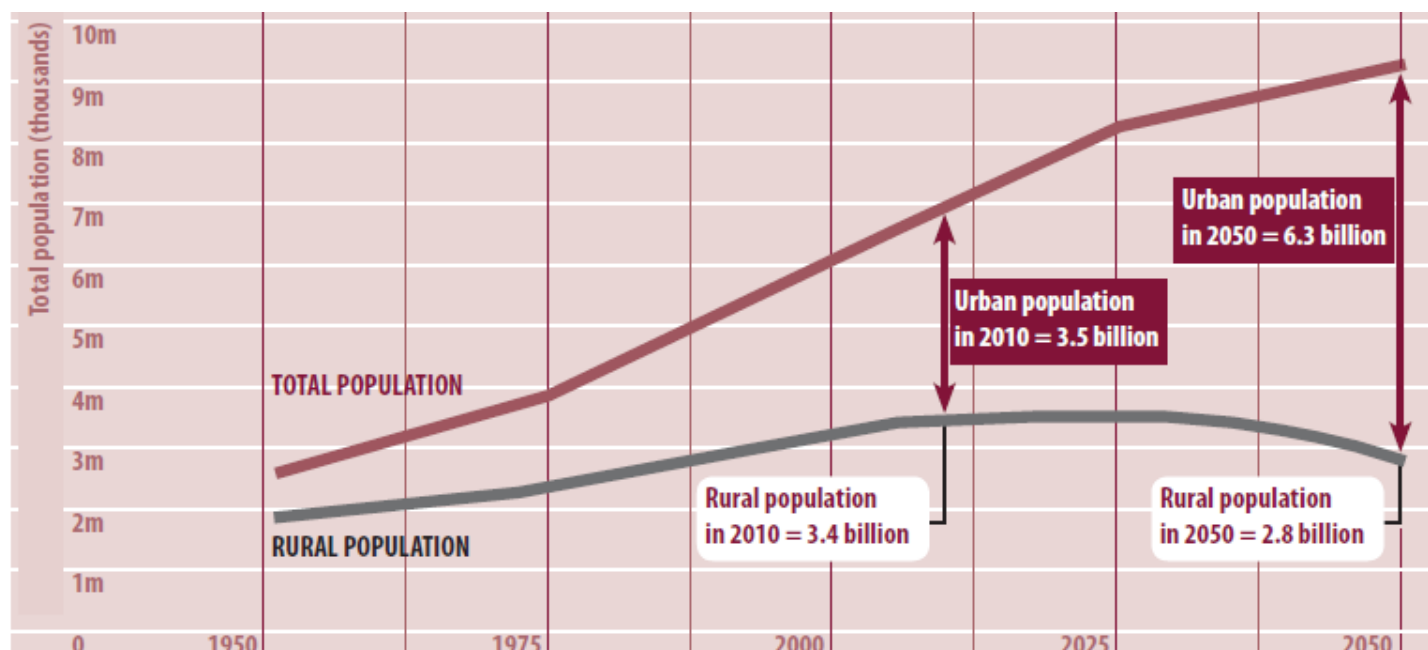
1. Framing the debate: urbanization and implications for humanitarian action

1.1 The fast pace of urbanization: some key facts

In recent decades many cities, towns, and suburban areas around the world have seen dramatic population growth often as a result of both a natural increase of population and significant inflows from rural areas. At the start of the 20th century, the urban population worldwide stood at only 10% of the global population; by 2008 it had reached an unprecedented 50% (UNDESA, 2010). Cities and towns in Africa and Asia in particular have witnessed rapid expansion. The population of Nairobi, for instance, has grown more than ten-fold since 1960 (Pavanello et al., 2012), and that of Kabul two-fold during the past decade (UN-HABITAT, 2003; Beall and Esser, 2005; Cordero, 2010 in Metcalfe et al., 2012).

Urbanization is an on-going trend. According to the latest estimates of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the world urban population is expected to increase by 72% by 2050; as Figure 1 below shows from 3.6 billion in 2011 to a staggering 6.3 billion in 2050 (UNDESA, 2012).

Figure 1: Urban and rural populations, 1950-2050



Source: UNDESA, 2010 in Ramalingam and Knox Clarke, 2012.

<http://www.cashlearning.org/downloads/resources/documents/mifira-kenya-full-report-09-01.pdf>

Rapid and often uncontrolled urbanisation in a context of poor investment by governments and municipal authorities are in many cases key driving factors of the formation and growth of informal settlements and

ⁱⁱ There is no universally agreed definition of urban area. For the purpose of this thematic brief, urban areas are defined as “a built-up or densely populated area containing the city proper and continuously settled peri-urban areas” (IASC, 2010: 2).

ⁱⁱ Only published sources were reviewed for this brief, no grey literature was reviewed.

slums. Of the total 3.3 billion urban dwellers worldwide, nearly 1 billion are thought to live in these precarious, under-served and insecure urban and peri-urban areas (IASC, 2010; Tibujaika, 2010). A prominent feature of urbanisation is also **forced displacement** triggered by armed conflict, violence, political instability or slow or sudden-onset disasters – or a combination of these factors. Increasingly, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) move to urban areas in search of greater security, including a degree of anonymity, better access to basic services and greater economic opportunities. According to recent estimates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately half of the world’s 10.5 million refugees and around 13 million IDPs are thought to live in urban areas (Crisp et al., 2012). Displaced populations are also very likely to take up residence in slums and other marginal neighbourhoods where they are further exposed to the risk of disasters, but also violence and abuse, and social and economic marginalisation (Pavanello et al., 2012).

1.2 Gaps and challenges in responding to urban crises

The scale of rapid urbanization, recent humanitarian crises in urban areas and growing evidence of urban risk to future disasters have received increasing attention in academic and policymaker circles in the past decade, particularly on how to **step up engagement in cities and towns, and better adapt emergency response to the special requirements of the urban environment.** Since the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the large number of evaluations and related learning activities that have taken place since then, the topic of humanitarian engagement in urban-based natural disasters has gained momentum (Ramalingam and Knox Clarke, 2012). While all this has led to some policy development and a growing body of literature on humanitarian response in urban areas, there remain significant gaps in knowledge, policy and practice.

For example, there remains limited understanding of how existing organizational tools, procedures and capacities can be best adapted to the particularities of the urban environment, and which new tools are required to work in urban areas (IASC, 2010). Humanitarian action has also historically focused on rural settings and as a result the majority of tools, approaches, policies and practices have been designed with these settings in mind (*Ibid.*). Furthermore, urban-based natural disaster preparedness and response have also received considerable more attention in academic, policy, and operational debates than response to urban-based complex emergencies, and the links between conflict- or violence-induced displacement and acute vulnerability have been poorly addressed (Pantuliano et al., 2012).

There are **significant differences between rural and urban settings, and humanitarian engagement in urban areas is faced with new as well as old challenges,** some of which are discussed below.

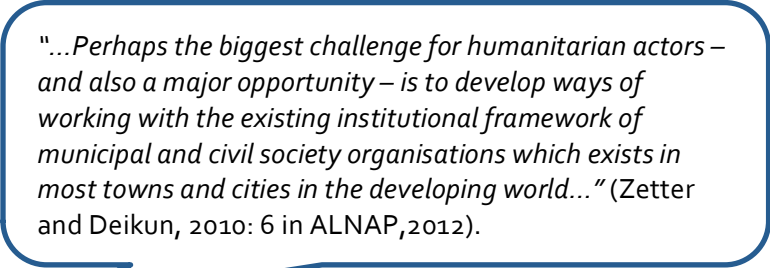
Urban vulnerability. As in other settings, humanitarian emergencies in urban areas are the result of a trigger event - such an earthquake or an outbreak of violence, combined with the underlying vulnerability of the population to that event. In cities and towns however, it is often **difficult to draw the line between acute and chronic vulnerability,** and understand when the ‘emergency’ ends and ‘normal’ conditions begin (Pantuliano et al., 2012; IASC, 2010). Indeed, in many urban centers worldwide a complex interplay of chronic underdevelopment, marginalization, and violence holds millions of poor urban dwellers, and slums residents in particular, hostage to a life of poverty and destitution, while also increasing their exposure to natural disasters and other risks. The levels of chronic vulnerability in many slums of the developing world can be considered humanitarian crises in and of themselves (Pantuliano et al., 2012). In turn, the specific nature of urban

vulnerability has significant implications for decision-making around what urban crises warrant a humanitarian response, at what stage such response should be launched, and for planning and identifying exit strategies.

Identifying and targeting beneficiaries. Just as it is difficult to distinguish between acute and chronic vulnerability, identifying the most vulnerable individuals or groups is also challenging. There are many reasons for this:

- The vast size and complexity of urban systems, high population densities, sheer number of affected people, and difficult access are all serious obstacles to the identification of vulnerable populations through traditional approaches to conducting an assessment and targeting assistance (Ramalingam and Knox Clarke, 2012; IASC, 2010)
- The mobility and diversity of urban populations also mean that vulnerabilities are often scattered across the city and, unlike in rural contexts, the ‘urban emergency’ is not necessarily restricted or linked to any specific geographical area (Ramalingam and Knox Clarke, 2012)
- The complex and interlinked vulnerabilities of urban dwellers cannot be adequately captured through ‘traditional’ humanitarian categories of vulnerability, such as the displaced, the elderly, the sick, women, and so on (Pantuliano et al., 2012). For example, in densely populated urban areas where displaced and host communities live side-by-side in the same shelters, streets, and neighborhoods, it is difficult to neatly divide the levels and types of vulnerability between host and displaced communities, since they are all facing similar challenges in the struggle to survive (Pantuliano et al., 2012). A recent study found that acute vulnerability among slum dwellers in Nairobi was not always related to displacement *per se*, and that both IDPs and the populations among which they settled faced similar challenges in accessing basic services, sustainable livelihood opportunities, and in achieving adequate housing. Both were also exposed to similar levels of abuse and violence (Metcalf and Pavanello with Mishra, 2011).

Institutional and spatial complexity. Urban areas present complex institutional landscapes, and multi-layered social and spatial structures which humanitarians need to understand and deal with. In most urban contexts, agencies need to consult, seek permission from and coordinate with many more actors - such as national and local governments, dedicated urban governance institutions, unofficial gatekeepers, militias and criminal gangs, and so on - than is typically the case in rural areas. Navigating among these actors and power-holders can be tricky, not only because of the many layers of authority, but also because of “less clarity about who is actually in charge due to overlapping levels of administrative responsibility” (Cross and Johnston, 2011:23).



"...Perhaps the biggest challenge for humanitarian actors – and also a major opportunity – is to develop ways of working with the existing institutional framework of municipal and civil society organisations which exists in most towns and cities in the developing world..." (Zetter and Deikun, 2010: 6 in ALNAP, 2012).

Beyond compliance requirements, working and establishing strategic partnerships with national and municipal authorities should be an essential component of program design, with forward-looking urban management plans and exit strategies in mind (*Ibid.*). An additional layer of complexity for humanitarians in this regard is how to balance engagement with the state with humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality, particularly in contexts where the government is engaged in campaigns against urban populations, urban gangs or paramilitary groups.

Precisely because of the complex nature of urban vulnerability there is growing recognition that response in urban areas calls for work in domains or areas that are not the typical remit of humanitarians. For instance the 2010 IASC Strategy for Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas highlights that *‘[h]umanitarian actors need knowledge of urban and spatial planning,...land use and tenure patterns...for operations in complex, dense and under-serviced urban environments’* (IASC, 2010: 3). This reinforces the idea that gaining a robust understanding of urban institutions, governance and administration systems, and establishing **strategic partnerships** with an umbrella network of national, municipal and broader variety of urban stakeholders is unavoidable, precisely because humanitarian action alone cannot effectively tackle the multiple challenges of urban vulnerability and needs, as many of these ultimately require a long-term development response.

2 Rethinking the humanitarian response in urban areas: emerging approaches to urban crises

The growing recognition of the many challenges of responding to urban crises, some of which have been highlighted above, has prompted the need to rethink fundamental tools, approaches and assumptions of humanitarian assistance (IASC, 2010). It is still too early to say how best to respond to the urban challenge, and there remain substantial gaps in research, policy and practice, while learning is patchy and often undocumented. That said, a number of key lessons on how to enhance humanitarian response in urban areas can be distilled from the growing body of literature and research, especially on response to urban disasters. Reflecting on recent humanitarian responses in various contexts, this section presents a number of emerging approaches, tools, and guiding principles for humanitarian engagement in disaster-affected urban areas.

1. Assessments in urban areas

Assessing the crisis context. Understanding the crisis context is a well-known essential step in any emergency response. As discussed above however, the sheer size of many cities, magnitude of urban populations and high population densities are among the reasons why assessing context and needs can be especially tricky. Setting out to assess entire metropolitan areas, especially in big cities and capitals, may also simply be unrealistic and a waste of resources, as it is highly unlikely that a single agency will be able to serve all disaster-affected people (Cross and Johnston, 2011).

Breaking down affected cities into sub-units, such as neighborhoods or street groups, and putting together a city map, where key infrastructure, economic dynamics and other important resources and processes are clearly marked, can be a practical way to facilitate assessment and analysis, and to identify the most affected neighborhoods (Cross and Johnston, 2011). As the example in Box 1 below shows, this **mapping exercise** can be usefully integrated with a range of secondary data – which, unlike in rural areas, is often readily available in urban areas – and through the deployment of staff with relevant technical expertise to ultimately gain as rich and in-depth picture as possible of the situation.

Box 1: Collating secondary data for earthquake preparedness in Nepal

As part of earthquake preparedness, the British Red Cross (BRC) in Nepal collated a wide range of secondary data sources. An expert in geographic information systems (GIS) mapping was hired specifically to integrate data from satellite images with local government population statistics, building materials, availability of services such as health, education and police. Targeted training was also provided to staff in search and rescue and first aid. All this, combined with topographical maps, equipped the BRC with a robust basis for discussions with a range of stakeholders from local government, communities and other agencies about local vulnerability and preparedness.

Source: Brown, 2012 in Kyazze et al., 2012

Developing a robust understanding of needs, vulnerabilities and capacities. Another essential component of emergency response in any setting is the analysis of the specific vulnerabilities and needs of affected populations, and of existing capacities and resources. While some progress has been made in recent years, the humanitarian community does not have a particularly strong record, in both urban and rural areas, in establishing an accurate understanding of the vulnerabilities and threats that disaster-affected people actually face, and for ensuring that decisions about response are properly informed by that understanding (see for example Darcy and Hofmann, 2003). However, the complex nature of vulnerability, risks and opportunities in the urban environment as discussed above, brings a renewed spotlight to the need to invest in **holistic and in-depth assessments** that can effectively guide the design and targeting of relief programs.

A key guiding principle in this regard is that **responses should be designed according to realistic assessments of local needs, vulnerabilities and capacities**, rather than driven by pre-determined assumptions or pre-identified solutions. The **active involvement of urban communities is paramount** in all phases of assessments (but also implementation, monitoring and evaluation), for example, to determine context-specific vulnerability indicators, understand the magnitude and nature of needs and of existing coping mechanisms, resources and so on. Failure to include communities can lead to responses that are not relevant or acceptable to the people for whom they are intended (Sanderson et al., 2012). A recent evaluation of Christian Aid's response to Typhoon Ketsana in Manila, for instance, found several examples where "preconceived ideas of vulnerability were not those which communities felt caused vulnerability" (Levers and Pacaigue, 2010: 9). In particular, local urban communities disagreed with criteria of vulnerability such as age, disability and gender noting that, for instance, the elderly and especially elderly women, often enjoyed better financial conditions because of the support that they received from their grown up children (*Ibid*).

Analyzing markets. As urban households typically rely on markets for access to food, goods and basic services, developing a robust understanding of markets and supply chains within which the humanitarian response operates, as well as monitoring changes that occur in structure, dynamics, behavior, actors etc. in the aftermath of a disaster, is key. A robust market analysis is also needed to guide and inform market-based responses, such as cash and voucher programs, which are increasingly deployed in urban settings (see below). As such, any assessment of needs and capacities in urban areas should include a market analysis component.

Several toolkits and approaches² have been developed to analyze the role of markets in different sectors such as livelihoods, food security, shelter and protection. The great majority of these tools have been developed for rural settings, but in recent years some have also been adapted or trialed in urban areas³. A recently developed toolkit to guide the design of cash transfer programming in urban emergencies (Cross and Johnston, 2011: 14) highlights the following key points when designing market analysis in urban crises:

- Focus on staple food commodities, shelter items, NFIs that are necessities for survival, and/ or livelihoods markets, where people buy/sell services;
- Find out how many urban markets exist and what commodities are available and where;
- Find out how many wholesalers, transporters, market stall vendors, and other market actors are in the urban markets;
- Initially focus on the main urban market and the neighbourhood markets in your area of assessment; and
- Collect and analyse price information on staple foods and non-food items weekly in the aftermath of a disaster for trends in price fluctuation.

2. Targeting in urban areas

There is no single approach to targeting in urban areas and decisions around the approach to adopt ultimately depend on a range of factors, including the proportion of the population that needs assistance, the type of program being considered, trade-offs between targeting cost and accuracy, and the feasibility of targeting options (USAID, 2008 in Grünewald et al., 2011).

As highlighted above, rather than trying to cover the entire city, it makes sense for relief agencies to identify and prioritize a number of affected neighborhoods. At the same time it is important to also keep in mind that needs and vulnerabilities are most often spread throughout the urban area. As such, typical models of aid targeting and delivery which involve a single large agency office working as a ‘hub’ (and village committees conducting activities for ‘their’ community) (Ramalingam et al., 2012), may not be the most appropriate and timely way to operate in urban settings, and alternative targeting and delivery modalities are often needed.

One approach is to open several small offices in different neighborhoods, as Catholic Relief Services did in in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake (Rogers, 2012 in Ramalingam et al., 2012). Another approach that agencies could explore is **self-targeting**, as the example in Box 2 below shows.

² See for example Oxfam GB’s EMMA (Emergency Market Mapping Analysis) <http://emma-toolkit.org/> or the Market Information and Food Insecurity Response Analysis (MIFIRA) http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADS361.pdf

³ <http://www.cashlearning.org/downloads/resources/documents/mifira-kenya-full-report-09-01.pdf>

Box 2: Reaching Iraqi refugees in Amman, Beirut, and Damascus through self-targeting

Starting from approximately 2006, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has scaled up operations to respond to the assistance and protection needs of thousands of Iraqi refugees living in exile within Jordanian, Lebanese, and Syrian cities. One innovative response to the challenge of dealing with large refugee populations scattered across vast urban areas, mixed among local urban populations and often reluctant to come forward, has been the adoption of a self-targeting approach to establish contact with Iraqi refugees. To this effect, UNHCR, together with I/NGOs and local organizations, has set up several community centers in different areas of high Iraqi refugee concentration in the capitals of Amman, Beirut, and Damascus. These centers are open to Iraqis, other refugees and members of the local population and offer a wide range of services and skills training in addition to refugee registration, including languages and IT courses, vocational training and libraries, information, psychosocial counseling and support.

Source: Crisp et al., 2009

3. Humanitarian responses that ‘look like the life of city’

Given the specific characteristics of the urban environment and urban vulnerability, humanitarian agencies should strive to plan and implement programs that ‘look like the life of the city itself’ (Ramalingam et al., 2012).

“Urban problems require urban solutions. The aid system is just starting to discover how specific aid in cities at war should be, both from an organisational and a technical standpoint” (F. Grünewald, Groupe URD in Kyazze et al., 2012).

The two examples here below show how responses can be planned and delivered with the idea of ‘following the urban logic’ in mind.

Cash transfers. There is growing recognition of the advantages of cash-based response in urban emergencies over distribution or in-kind based response (Grünewald et al., 2011; Clermont et al., 2011; Cross and Johnston, 2011; UN-HABITAT, 2011 in Kyazze et al., 2012). Some of these advantages are outlined here:

- Urban areas have more diversified and robust financial institutions than rural areas, enabling implementers with a variety of options for partners to transfer funds;
- Urban populations depend on cash for their household expenses—such as rent, utilities, transportation and food—making cash transfer programs appropriate;
- Urban markets are likely to provide most, or all, of what beneficiaries need to recover from disaster. Appropriately designed cash programs can support local markets and help them recover faster; and
- Cash can be usefully linked with other programs, such as debris removal, helping to meet immediate needs while supporting recovery and building resilience at the same time.

While cash is increasingly part of the response to urban disasters (see Box 3 below), decisions around the appropriateness of cash should always rest on a robust assessment of the situation and needs (see above), and on the key premise that markets are working.

Box 3: Cash-based responses in Port au Prince, Haiti

A recent study of Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) member agencies' responses to the earthquake in Port au Prince, Haiti found that most member agencies had used some form of cash delivery, including cash transfers, cash for work, and small cash grants. Age UK for example piloted cash transfers of USD20 per month for six months to around 4,000 older people using banks, and had plans to advocate to the Government of Haiti for the establishment of a universal pension scheme. Christian Aid distributed cash (USD26 per family member for an average family of five) for three months to around 2,200 families living in camps in Petit Goâve. The value was calculated as the equivalent market cost of a Sphere Standard dry food ration. An existing local money transfer system was used for remittance collection and provided a rapid set up at a low cost, only 3% transaction fee. Christian Aid found that 47% of the cash was used by beneficiaries to purchase food and cooking fuel, 16% on water, 10% on education and 9% on small enterprise. Also, 68% of recipients used some of the funds to either start or re-start a small business.

Source: Clermont et al., 2011

Technology. Compared to rural areas, cities and towns typically offer a wider array of ready-available technology, such as ATMs, mobile phone and Internet coverage. As Boxes 4 and 5 show, incorporating available technology into programs can be particularly useful to enhance the delivery of assistance and improve agencies' accountability to affected communities.

Box 4: e-vouchers in the West Bank

The WFP Urban Voucher Program in the West Bank was rolled out in April 2009 to address poor food consumption and low dietary diversity. WFP delivered paper vouchers worth USD 12 per month per beneficiary, which could be exchanged for food commodities such as bread, milk, cheese, oil etc. Since December 2010, WFP transitioned beneficiaries away from paper vouchers and provided them with a magnetic swipe-card, or an e-voucher, while shopkeepers were given an electronic terminal, similar to a credit card machine. This new system has been found to increase cost-efficiency, and has improved monitoring as it has also allowed the analysis of purchasing patterns.

Source: WFP Fact Sheet on the E-Voucher Program, 2011 in Cross and Johnson, 2012

A recent review of programs of the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in Haiti, Indonesia and Pakistan focusing on beneficiary communication and accountability, indicated urbanization and new technologies as the two main reasons why better consideration of communication channels and procedures is needed (IFRC, 2011).

Box 5: Beneficiary phone hotline complaints and response mechanism in Haiti

The BRC set up a free, in-house beneficiary phone hotline complaints and response mechanism (CRM) as part of their cash program in post-earthquake urban Haiti. The call center staff manning the phone hotline are jointly managed by the beneficiary communication delegate and the beneficiary accountability supervisor. The establishment of the hotline was preceded by a training session for all field staff in accountability and the importance of complaints and response mechanisms. This included role-play scenarios of receiving and handling complaints in the field, when to refer beneficiaries to the call center, as well as communications skills related to complaints handling.

The establishment of a phone hotline was found to be the most cost-effective and confidential way to manage feedback and response in an urban context such as Haiti, where literacy levels are low and mobile phone ownership is widespread. The BRC has found that the CRM has improved the quality and efficiency of the program. For example it allowed the rapid identification of potential cases of fraud or technical problems, since cash grants were distributed via SMS and as such were prone to technical hitches. The hotline has also taken the pressure off field staff who can refer certain queries to the call center directly, and beneficiaries widely valued being involved in the setting up and running of the CRM, and having the opportunity to raise concerns and ask questions.

Source: Kyazze et al., 2012

4. Establish and sustain multi-stakeholder partnerships and coordination

The scale of urban disasters and the many actors involved in the response, such as central and municipal governance authorities, national NGO, civil society, the private sector, the development community, and others, mean that the **establishment of partnerships** and **intra-agency coordinating mechanisms** is not only necessary, but **unavoidable** (Crisp et al., 2012; Kyazze et.al, 2012; IASC, 2010, and others). Given the complexity of administrative and institutional systems in urban areas (as highlighted above), the establishment of partnerships with local actors should be premised on a robust understanding of the functioning and organization of such systems, and of local politics and interests, decision-making processes, and so on. The policies of several agencies (including Oxfam, WFP, and ACF), for instance, increasingly recommend mapping political structures, power relations and interests at the beginning of an intervention in urban areas (Creti, 2010 in Sanderson et al., 2012).

How to best ensure that short-term relief efforts are linked with long-term development objectives and systems, while also operating through established partnerships with development actors, is certainly not a new concern of humanitarian actors (see for example Harmer and Macrae, 2004). Today, the inter-related nature of challenges and needs in urban settings is placing renewed attention on these long-standing debates. But while there are some examples of coordination between humanitarian organizations (see Box 6), ‘joined-up’ work between humanitarian and development actors is still rare, especially in urban areas.

Box 6: Coordinated efforts for response to urban emergencies in Nairobi

In 2010, UN-HABITAT and UN-OCHA established a mechanism for strengthening coordination and advocacy for response to urban emergencies in Nairobi. Under this initiative a group bringing together a wide range of stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs and CBOs, the UN and donor agencies has been established. The work of the group has focused on three key activities: developing a multi-sectoral framework to guide humanitarian responses in informal settlements and a monitoring tool on urban vulnerability; strengthening the coordination of interventions addressing urban vulnerability, with local authorities playing a central role; and developing an advocacy strategy to raise awareness of the situation in the slums and encourage action.

Source: Metcalfe and Pavanello with Mishra, 2011

The need to adapt existing mechanisms and tools to the unique requirements of the urban setting is also evident with regards to existing coordination mechanisms. The UN cluster or system – created in 2006 as part of the UN Humanitarian Reform process – is an important step towards more effective humanitarian coordination, but recent experience in Haiti and Mogadishu has thrown into question the suitability of this approach in urban emergencies. For example, a recent study in relation to the response of the 2010 Haiti earthquake found that that by working through clusters, the ‘humanitarian system dissected problems into pieces that appeared manageable but at the cost of addressing the big picture’ (Levine et al., 2012 in Pantuliano et al., 2012). As the discussion so far has highlighted, addressing the complex and interlinked nature of vulnerability in urban settings calls for the development of a common perspective and strategy and concerted inter-sectoral coordination, rather than the single sector coordination that underpins the cluster system (Grünewald, 2012; Pantuliano et al., 2012). The cluster approach has also been criticized for typically failing to integrate key potential partners such as local and national state actors, and the private sector (Kyazze et al., 2012; Steets et al., 2010 in Pantuliano et al., 2012).

There are calls to adopt a completely new, area-based method of co-ordination in urban settings (Kyazze et al., 2012). For example, Grünewald (2012: 122) suggests the adoption of an “area-based coordination mechanism in line with urban administrative units and authorities...to have ‘city and neighborhood coherence’ rather than ‘sector coherence.’” Others have focused on how the cluster system itself can be improved to allow more coherence between developmental and humanitarian activities and foster broader collaboration around urban issues. For instance, partnerships with government could be strengthened through government/agency co-chairing of clusters, and by structuring the clusters to reflect existing administrative and governmental structures. Local NGOs and other key actors, such as private sector and civil society representatives, should also be included in clusters (Sanderson et al., 2012). To this effect, cluster coordinators could consider inclusive actions such as the use of local language, presence of translators and ensuring that cluster-meeting venues are accessible by local organizations (Grünewald et al., 2010; IASC, 2010a).

3. Conclusion

Humanitarian response in urban crises is receiving increasing attention and a rapidly growing body of literature is exploring how to best improve policy and operational practice in these settings. That said, the humanitarian sector is only starting to get to grips with the specific challenges that arise from the urban environment, and learning remains limited and not often translated into practice.

Humanitarian action in affected cities and towns of the developing world is putting relief actors in front of old challenges and well-known shortcomings. These include how to best ensure that humanitarian and relief efforts and systems are better linked, that partnerships are strengthened, that coordination and coherence are improved, and that an accurate and realistic understanding of the context and existing vulnerabilities is established. That said, some characteristics of urban settings, such as the multiplicity of actors and power-holders, the complex and interlinked vulnerabilities of urban dwellers, the sheer size of cities and affected populations, and the difficulty of distinguishing between chronic and acute vulnerability are all placing new demands on humanitarian agencies to develop or rethink fundamental tools, approaches and assumptions.

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¹ There is no universally agreed definition of urban area. For the purpose of this thematic brief, urban areas are defined as “a built-up or densely populated area containing the city proper and continuously settled peri-urban areas” (IASC, 2010: 2).

¹ Only published sources were reviewed for this brief, no grey literature was reviewed.

¹ See for example Oxfam GB’s EMMA (Emergency Market Mapping Analysis) <http://emma-toolkit.org/> or the Market Information and Food Insecurity Response Analysis (MIFIRA) http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADS361.pdf

¹ <http://www.cashlearning.org/downloads/resources/documents/mifira-kenya-full-report-09-01.pdf>