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Brief: Urban Response Practitioner Workshop

Meeting Needs in a Context of Protracted
Urban Displacement in the Middle East and
North Africa



Istanbul, Turkey
September 2015

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Executive Summary

In our urbanizing world, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are increasingly leaving their homes in conflict areas and moving to cities and towns. Today, nearly 60% of refugees and more than half of IDPs live in urban areas, a phenomenon termed “urban displacement.” A large number of these refugees and IDPs living in urban areas are from Syria and Iraq.¹

Urban displacement is not only a humanitarian issue, but a municipal issue as well. Municipalities responsible for public service provision find themselves unable to meet the needs of an increasing population base, particularly when that increase is of mostly vulnerable individuals and families. The duration of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq mean that urban displacement in the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey – as well as within Syria and Iraq themselves – is protracted and unlikely to abate any time soon. The humanitarian sector, therefore, must not only address the needs of refugees and IDPs in urban areas, but should also work to support the needs of the municipalities and their representative communities that absorb displaced populations.

In order to better understand how to achieve these dual goals, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) hosted a practitioner workshop entitled “**Meeting Needs in a Context of Urban Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**” in Istanbul, Turkey. The aim of the workshop was to bring together humanitarian (both international and national), international development, and local municipal actors currently responding to the Syrian and Iraqi crises affecting MENA’s urban areas. Collectively, these actors are referred to as the **urban response network**.

Based on the workshop’s discussions, the IRC developed the following four key recommendations to meeting needs in a context of urban displacement:

- 1. The urban response network should balance individual and community outcomes and bridge the humanitarian / development divide**
- 2. Non-governmental organizations and municipalities should form partnerships specifically structured to meet their shared goals**
- 3. The urban response network should view urbanizing areas in the same light as urban areas**
- 4. The urban response network should view localized or mobile approaches as viable alternatives to area based approaches**

At the conclusion of the two-day workshop, attendees agreed that humanitarian organizations have a critical role to play in meeting the needs of protracted urban displacement in the MENA region. While the exact nature of this role depends on the context and nature of the crisis, it is clear that humanitarians should be generally a.) **rethinking traditional programming models** and b.) **acting as a part of a larger network of urban responders** to collaboratively address the needs of urban crises.

¹ The Overseas Development Institute (September 2015). “Protracted displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile.”

Overview

In September 2015, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) hosted a practitioner workshop entitled “**Meeting Needs in a Context of Urban Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**” in Istanbul, Turkey. The workshop is part of the Urban Crises Program, which is divided into two components: learning and advocacy. The goal of the Urban Crises Program is to generate practical evidence as to what constitutes effective urban humanitarian response for both beneficiaries and the places in which they live, and to use this evidence to improve humanitarian urban programming and advocate for innovative and sustainable approaches to urban response within the international community.

To this end, the aim of the workshop was to bring together humanitarian (both international and local), international development, and local municipal actors currently responding to the Syrian and Iraqi crises affecting MENA’s urban areas. As many publications written about the topic of urban humanitarian response highlight the need for non-governmental and public sector actors to collaborate, this workshop sought to gain insight from these various perspectives in order to determine the challenges, opportunities, and potential solutions to meeting needs in a context of urban displacement. With this in mind, the workshop’s organizers encouraged each invitee from an international non-governmental organization (INGO) to invite a local municipal or national actor with whom they may or may not coordinate with on the ground. This allowed a forum where actors working in the same country but representing different perspectives engaged with one another over the two-day period. Workshop participants are listed in the **Annex**.

This brief is meant to provide an overview of the key points generally agreed upon during the workshop. The following recommendations are meant as a general overview and are the sole opinion of the Urban Crises Program project team and the IRC.

Unsolved Challenges

The predominant challenges to meeting needs in an urban context are related to scale and duration

When asked as a group about the challenges and opportunities of meeting needs in a context of urban displacement, workshop attendees – all of whom have been working to address urban crises in some capacity – focused on the myriad of unsolved challenges.

The main challenges particular to the MENA region are the scale and duration of the crises in Syria and Iraq and their impact on their surrounding countries. In many instances, host communities in cities such as Beirut or Baghdad were welcoming towards refugees or internally displaced persons four years ago but have since grown weary of their impact on public services, labor markets, and social dynamics as the crises endure. Furthermore, while municipalities may have been able to provide services to a relatively small number of displaced persons at the start of the crises, in many cases they have depleted their resources as the number grew over time.

Another increase over time is the amount of organizations – both locally and internationally – who seek to respond to the crises. While this represents an increase in resources, it is not yet clear whether it has resulted in a decrease in need, particularly given examples of lack of communication, unwillingness to partner with the public sector, and a focus on individuals rather than communities when delivering humanitarian aid.

While these challenges persist to some degree in every country represented at the workshop, attendees also agreed that opportunities for substantial collaboration between all urban responders and a meaningful integration of displaced persons into urban fabrics is possible, albeit difficult. These opportunities take time to develop and should be cultivated as the crises continue.

First Recommendation

The urban response network should balance individual and community outcomes and bridge the humanitarian / development divide

The duration of the crises highlights the importance of balancing individual and community outcomes and bridging the humanitarian and development divide. Throughout the workshop, attendees stressed the need to balance individual and community outcomes, a strategy that calls for an integration of both humanitarian and urban development solutions, such as infrastructure rehabilitation, municipal capacity building, etc. This is particularly true given the length of the crises in the Middle East and the dwindling of municipal resources and capacity over that timeframe. While humanitarians tend to focus on the most vulnerable groups and local municipal actors on the community as a whole, there is a need for all urban responders to prioritize those programs or projects that find a balance between the two and seek to implement long-term solutions to a protracted crisis.

Using Lebanon as an example, as one Lebanese city planner said, the word that best defines the country is “emergency.” Be it in clearly defined cities or fast-urbanizing rural areas, the Lebanese emergency is urban in nature. In order to meet these needs, a UN Habitat representative suggested NGOs take an approach based on the following points:

- Builds the response capacities of local authorities
- Meets needs of refugee and host populations
- Provides integrated (i.e multi-sectoral) response strategies

Particularly given decreases in aid over time, more refugees may begin moving to Lebanon’s major cities of Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre, where key economic sectors are closely interlinked, or back to Syria, where the conflict shows no signs of stopping. These Lebanese cities remain key areas where refugees look for income opportunities in both the formal and informal urban economies. Once they get there, however, they will rely on an overstretched system of municipalities that adhere to the policy of a central government that discourages any activities that may incentivize refugees to stay in Lebanon. Given that municipalities don’t have the capacity or resources to address these challenges, there is an increased need for humanitarian organizations to bridge the divide between their efforts and those of development organizations and actors. This is not to say that humanitarians should become development focused, but rather that they should leverage developmental goals (i.e sustainable improvements

to urban systems and communal quality of life) wherever possible – a tactic that would address both refugee and host populations.

In Egypt, for example, UNHCR reported that their *Community Support Programs* look at promoting inclusion, social cohesion, resilience, and community-based protection mechanisms in refugee-hosting communities in and around Cairo. Cairo's case study is particularly challenging as refugees are from multiple different origins and the regional municipal governance system is complex. In order to effectively implement community programs in Cairo's urban areas, UNHCR is systematically developing its relationship with public entities and contributing to national and local development agendas through their "community empowerment projects." These projects foster community-based protection networks, collective livelihood strategies, and other good practices in urban community programming. Through their *Community Support Programs*, UNHCR is balancing individual and community outcomes while also bridging the humanitarian and development divide.

Second Recommendation

Non-governmental organizations and municipalities should form partnerships specifically structured to meet their shared goals

Non-governmental and municipal partnerships are not simple equations. To date, research on improved urban humanitarian response tends to emphasize the need for increased partnership between humanitarian and local municipal actors. While this is certainly true and easily stated, attendees voiced several challenges to enacting partnerships in practice. The main challenge is that NGOs and municipalities are not simply structured organizations. Each has set goals (i.e mission statements), priorities, funding structures, chains of command, and outside influences.

For example, if one NGO seeks to partner with a municipality on a specific project based on successful on-the-ground communication, the project must also have sufficient donor funding to be feasible to implement. Similarly, municipalities can be influenced by central government policies that do not always align with the priorities of a specific locality. In this instance, a municipality can be a willing partner, but might not have the jurisdiction to act on that willingness. Examples of this are prevalent in Lebanon, where NGOs find municipal partners who support NGO-managed classrooms to accommodate Syrian children when seats in public schools are full or schools are too far from refugee settlements. The Lebanese Ministry of Education, however, discourages the involvement of NGOs in the education sector despite the tremendous need on the ground.

This is not to say that these sectors should not pursue partnerships, but that their partnerships must be specifically structured and targeted to achieve outcomes that align with certain priorities shared by all involved parties. Partnerships should not undermine the general responsibilities of the non-governmental and public sectors, but rather seek to leverage capacity and resources around shared goals where they exist. To do this, each sector must work to find partners that are trustworthy, accountable, and – perhaps most importantly - fully understanding of potential misalignments in priorities. They must be willing to focus more on their shared goals.

Third Recommendation

The urban response network should view urbanizing areas in the same light as urban areas

The IDP and refugee crisis is spurring unguided urbanization in MENA countries. While the influx of refugees into major urban centers is well documented, attendees also reflected on the impacts of rapidly increasing populations on more rural, peri-urban, and smaller urban areas. While Baghdad now hosts half a million IDPs² – some of whom settle informally in mosques or unfinished buildings – other areas of the region show signs of urbanization outside of cities.

For example, the region of Akkar in Northern Lebanon – often considered a rural area in comparison to Central Lebanon and Beirut – has seen dramatic increases in population and is losing some of its rural characteristics. Of the region's nearly 390,000 residents, approximately 107,000 are recently registered Syrian refugees. This represents a 27 percent increase in population that has caused a strain on municipalities' delivery of public services as well as the housing market, with large communities of informal tent settlements cropping up wherever refugees cannot find more formal housing. This unchecked and rapid urbanization is resulting in the densification of certain areas within Akkar, issues around social cohesion, greater risk of fire and vulnerability to flooding, and an increase in negative coping mechanisms. Using Mafraq, Jordan as another example, the refugee influx has caused a significant challenge in terms of the physical expansion of the city's boundaries. Given that these areas of expansion are unregulated, they tend to lack access to public services such as healthcare, transportation, or electricity.

The nature of urbanization in MENA countries creates challenges that cut across the humanitarian-municipal divide, and therefore the entire network of urban responders must work towards a targeted consolidation of NGO and municipal capacity, resources, and strategy. Organizations involved in responding to the growing needs of Akkar and Mafraq often found that through collaboration they were able to achieve some successes in delivery, as evidenced by the work of the Akkar Network for Development (a local Lebanese NGO that works with both international NGOs and local municipalities within the Akkar Governorate) or the collaboration between the IRC and the Al Mafraq Health Directorate discussed below. Still, the sheer scale of the crisis's impact on unchecked urbanization results in more questions than answers.

Fourth Recommendation

The urban response network should view localized or mobile approaches as viable alternatives to area based approaches

Localized or mobile approaches can address the challenge of service delivery in urban areas. Past research on the topic of urban humanitarian response has highlighted area based approaches as one potential strategy to operating in the urban context. Area based approaches prioritize multi-sectoral response within a defined geographical area or community and various publications around urban humanitarian response have called attention to their effectiveness.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (June, 2015). "Iraq IDPs caught between a rock and a hard place as displacement crisis deepens."

During the workshop, however, urban responders based in Lebanon and Jordan – representing both humanitarian and governmental organizations – called attention to the opportunities of either localized or mobile approaches to service delivery in urban areas. In Jordan, for example, representatives from both IRC’s health unit and the Al Mafraq Health Directorate spoke about using both types of approaches to deliver health services to refugees and host populations dispersed throughout Jordan’s northern cities. In the city of Mafraq, the IRC set up a localized community center off of a main road, open to anyone who walks in. Through the community center, the IRC offers services related to health, women’s empowerment, and cash assistance. Perhaps most importantly, the community center serves as a central focal point for IRC assistance in the city, eschewing costly and inefficient identification processes for a “have them come to us” strategy. The IRC’s Lebanon office utilizes a similar approach through their “Livelihoods Center” near Beirut, where the organization offers different livelihoods support strategies to anyone who visits.

Additionally, the IRC – in coordination with the Al Mafraq Health Directorate and the Ministry of Health – operates mobile health clinics meant to both reach those residents scattered in different urban and peri-urban areas of the region and to provide relief to both an otherwise overburdened health system, and to those who can’t access that system for financial or administrative reasons. Through this approach, the IRC has a partnership with the Ministry of Health where the Ministry focuses primarily on Jordanians and secondarily on refugees, while the IRC focuses primarily on refugees, secondarily on Jordanians. With this understanding, the IRC ensures that it offers supporting rather than duplicative health services.

These localized and mobile approaches provide worthwhile alternatives to area based approaches, depending on the context in which they are implemented. While each has their associative challenges, their successes thus far highlight the fact that urban programming will never be a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Rather, its approach must remain flexible and tailored to the specific context.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Urban crises are not humanitarian issues alone. They affect municipalities, central governments, civil society, urban systems, and city residents of every kind. Their impacts are complex, far reaching, context-specific, and difficult to assess. And, as the above examples evince, their solutions require humanitarian actions delivered creatively and in tandem with those municipal and development actors - the urban response network - working to solve beyond them. When delivered effectively, humanitarian response to urban crises can leverage a tremendous support network of responders and urban systems in a way that offers sustainable and community-based solutions.

The humanitarian community is engaged in an ongoing learning process to better understand specific steps needed to improved urban response. The findings of this workshop serve as one stop along the way to improving our collective knowledge of how to better take care of cities and the most vulnerable within them.

Annex

The following organizations and their associative countries were represented at the workshop:

- Akkar Network for Development (Lebanon)
- Baghdad Provincial Council (Iraq)
- DFID (Turkey and Syria)
- Green Developers (Lebanon)
- International Rescue Committee (Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan)
- Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs (Lebanon)
- Leon Televizian, Urban Planning Professional (Lebanon)
- Al Mafraq Health Directorate, Ministry of Health (Jordan)
- UNHCR (Egypt)
- UNICEF (Jordan)
- UN HABITAT (Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq)
- Support To Life / Hayata Destek Derneği (Turkey)

Topics of discussion included opportunities and challenges to urban response, municipal and humanitarian collaboration, potential solutions to urban response, case studies of urban response around the MENA region, and opportunities for innovation, amongst others.

The Urban Crises team wishes to thank all workshop participants for their insight and continued dedication to urban response.

Acknowledgements

This **Urban Practitioner Workshop Brief** is generously funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the DFID–IRC Advocacy and Learning Partnership on Urban Crises. The partnership is part of the DFID Urban Crises Program on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Outputs from the program will feed into a broader consultative process on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, focused on the World Humanitarian Summit and Habitat III. The process is led by the World Humanitarian Summit Secretariat, UN-Habitat, IRC and DFID.

To learn more about the Program, or to get involved in future Urban Practitioner Workshops, please contact Samer Saliba, Urban Response Learning Manager of the IRC, at Samer.Saliba@rescue.org. Additional information and similar publications may be found online at www.rescue-uk.org/what-we-do/urban-crisis.

