WEBINAR
(re)constructing the city: integrating urban design into humanitarian response

TRANSCRIPTION

Leah Campbell: *Good afternoon everyone. My name is Leah Campbell and I work at ALNAP. I'm here to introduce our presenters for our urban webinar today. Kate Crawford and Alison Killing have been working on urban issues for the past ten years.*

Kate has worked in a variety of private and not for profit organisations, most recently as the Shelter Field Advisor for an international NGO supporting the emergency shelter program in Haiti. Kate's PhD research at UCL looked at sustainable urban infrastructure in Peru and her research interests are now centred on how we share risk through infrastructure. She's also a Chartered Building Services Engineer.

Alison Killing is an architect and urbanist based in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, where she runs her own design practice, Killing Architects. Before starting her own studio Alison worked for a number of international offices in the fields of architecture and urban design. Her Master's thesis, at the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes, focused on responses to humanitarian emergencies in cities and the ways in which urban design and urban planning tools could strengthen an emergency response . So we'll start off today with Alison and I'm going to hand you over to her right now. Welcome Alison.

(re)constructing the city: integrating urban design into humanitarian response

Alison Killing: *Thanks Leah. To pick up from there, I'm an architect and urban designer and Kate is an engineer and has a lot of experience in humanitarian response. We have very different perspectives and very different ways of looking at the world and those two different perspectives have been absolutely crucial to this project. That dialogue has been a critical part of what we've done.*

We just finished a study, which was funded by the Royal Institute of British Architects looking at how urban design and urban planning can be integrated into a humanitarian response. What was did was, we produced a written report, which looked at the different ways that humanitarians and urbanists conceive a city. We also produced a series of short films.

We don't have time to show you all of them, but we do have time to show you one and we'll do that a little bit later. For this project, I actually went to Haiti in September, October of last year and participated in a reconstruction project and talked to the people doing it. We did some online discussion talking to as many people as possible and ran a workshop, which brought together urbanists and humanitarians and we did a planning exercise to see how the two groups worked together.

Urban disasters
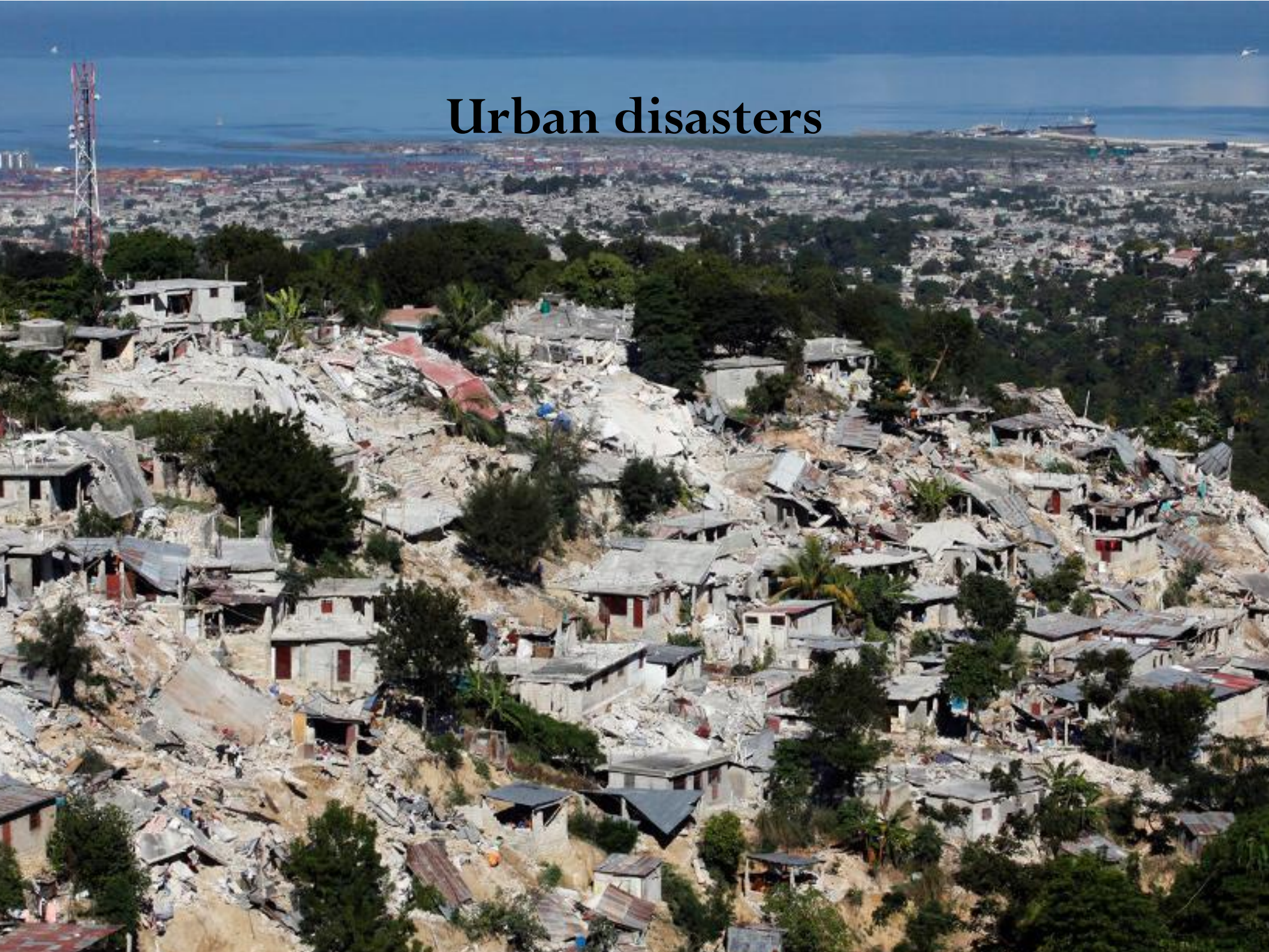
Alison Killing: *So the rational for starting off the project was, as I'm sure a lot of you know, there's been massive growth in urban areas, so now 50% of the world's population now live in urban areas. The biggest growth has been in cities in quite dangerous areas because they're in low lying coastal location.*

The other big growth area has been in cities, which are in earthquake zones. The biggest growth within those cities is within slum areas. What we've seen with that is a massive rise in urban disasters. One of the things we'd like to point out in the beginning, is that we're quite focused on the built environment. I find it quite strange and quite striking when humanitarians talk about the word 'urban' they're not talking about the built environment.

They might talk about a lack of land or a lack of shelters. They talk about cities in a very different way than urbanists. They talk about how hard it is to find individual people. They talk about the different livelihoods that people have in cities. They talk about how you have less cohesive communities in cities. Humanitarians focus heavily on social and demographic issues whereas urbanists look more at the built environment. Patterns of space, networks and roads. Those two things are very different ways of looking at a city.

Short film

(re)constructing the city: what is urban design?

http://vimeo.com/52373306

Calls for urban planning tools from aid agencies

Transitional settlement: displaced populations (Corsellis and Vitale, Oxfam 2005) http://www.sheltercentre.org/library/transitional+settlement+displaced+populations

Safer Homes, Stronger Communities (World Bank, 2010) www.housingreconstruction.org/housing/

Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (Sphere Project, forthcoming 2011), www.sphereproject.org/

Assistance in urban areas to populations affected by humanitarian crises (NRC and Shelter Centre, forthcoming 2010), http://www.sheltercentre.org/

'Shelter After Disaster', published by UNDRO, 1982: guidelines that presented the consensus on good practice in humanitarian shelter response at the time (available for free download at www.sheltercentre.org).

'Exploring key changes and developments in post-disaster settlement, shelter and housing, 1982 - 2006', facilitated by Shelter Centre and published by UN/OCHA, May 2006: scoping study to inform the revision of 'Shelter After Disaster' (available for free download at http://ochaonline.un.org and www.sheltercentre.org or in hardcopy from lsu@un.org).

'Transitional settlement and reconstruction after natural disasters, Field Edition', facilitated by Shelter Centre and published by UN/OCHA, 2008: substantially revised guidelines produced through extensive consultation with a dedicated peer review group (available for free download at www.sheltercentre.org).

Alison Killing: *I've seen a lot of things from agencies over the past six to ten years. People have been reflecting on previous responses. People were talking about how urban planning tools would be helpful to re-plan a village that had been swept away during a tsunami. It would be helpful to have that knowledge about how you can better plan spaces to channel water. That's just one example. It's something that's come up quite regularly.*

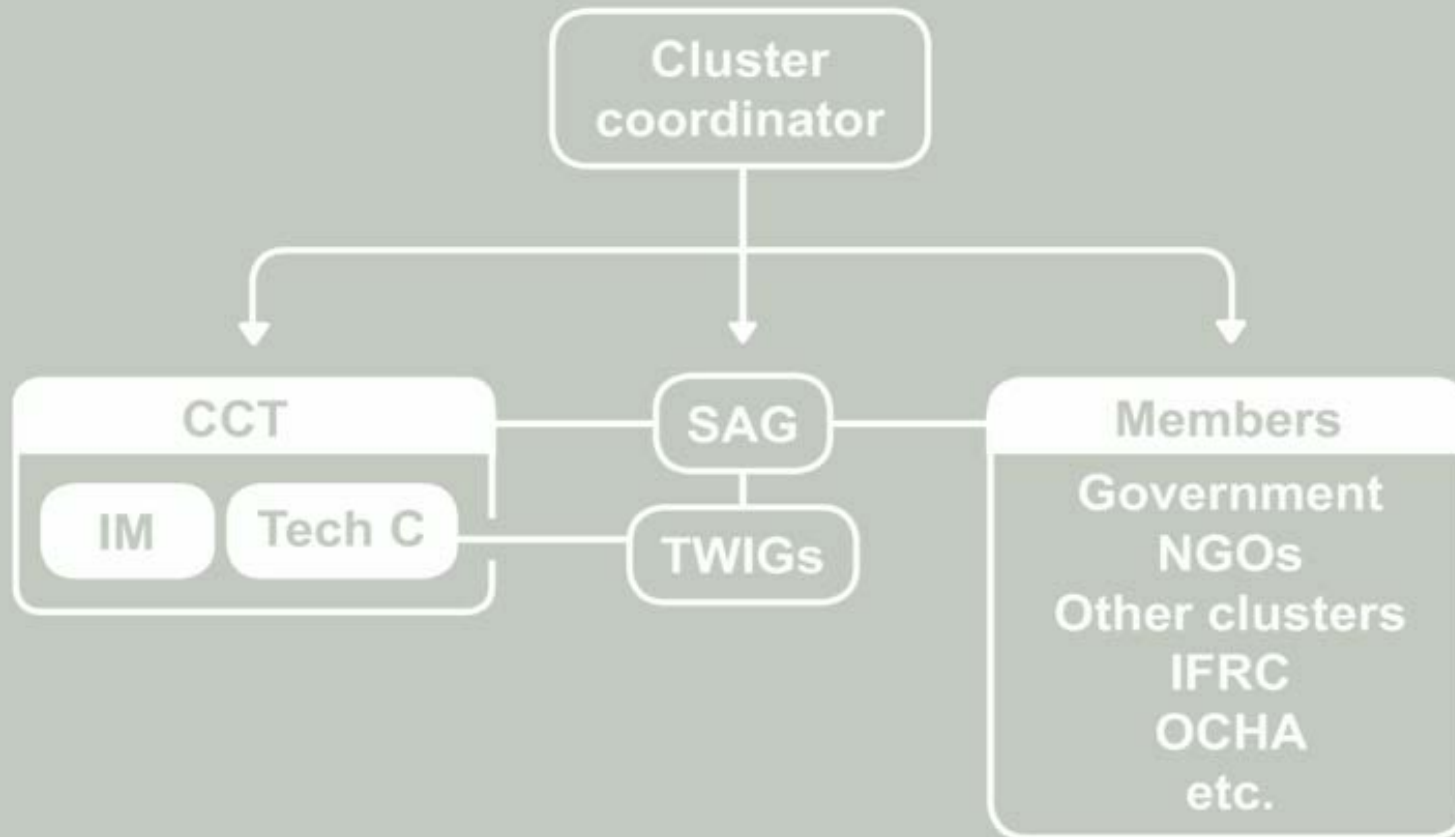# Why this hasn't been done yet – holistic/sectoral
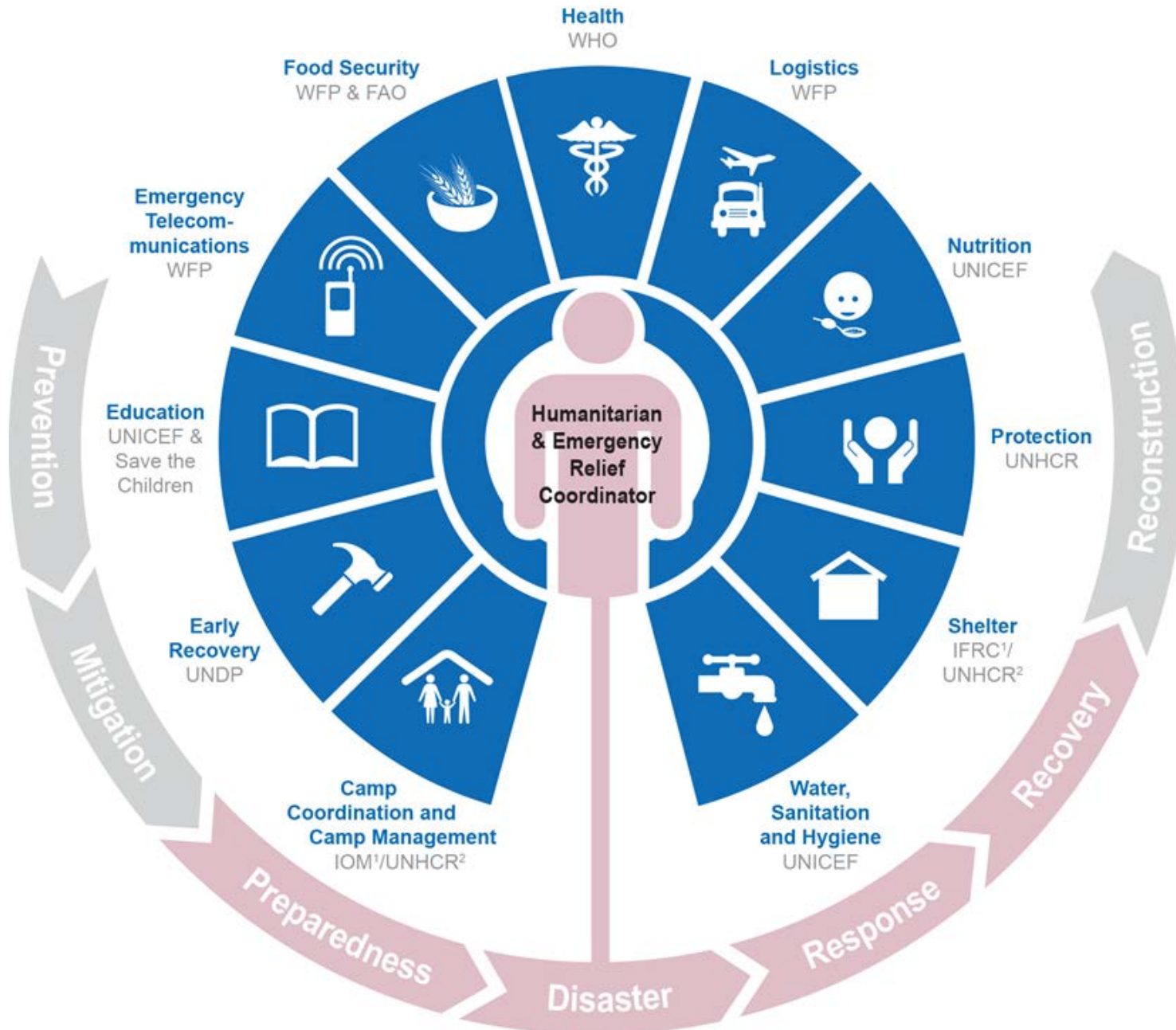
Alison Killing: *We think that urban planning can be useful for quite a lot of things. One thing is coordination. This is something that comes up constantly in evaluation. People are talking about how they can better coordinate things that are happening in the built environment.*

When you consider water pipes and transport. Drawing maps and urban planning is very effective in coordinating things better. It's good to bring a group of people around the table and just be able to resolve all of the complicated demands of the city. The last thing is that urban planning and urban design are good at communicating about specific environmental things, looking at what's being done now and what's being proposed for the future. So you can coordinate different ways people are working. You can coordinate different sectors and hopefully get everything to work together at the individual scale, neighbourhood scale and city scale.

There are a number of reasons why these things haven't been done yet. There are a lot of conflicts between the ways that urban designers and planners and the ways that humanitarians think about things and organise themselves. This diagram is divided into qualities that are given priority. It's efficient in some ways but it makes it very difficult when you need to work more holistically as you often need to do in a city. You may be working on a neighbourhood scale, but if you were working holistically you would work on it all together. It's a synthetic discipline, and one of its strengths is being able to take all of these separate things and resolve them.

Why this hasn't been done yet – holistic/sectoral

Organisation of cluster and cluster team

Cluster coordinator

CCT
- IM
- Tech C

SAG

TWIGs

Members
- Government
- NGOs
- Other clusters
- IFRC
- OCHA
- etc.

CCT — Cluster Coordination Team
IM — Information Manager
SAG — Strategic Advisory Group
TWIG — Technical Working Group
Tech C — Technical Coordinator

Alison Killing: *The thing that we found is that even when people do recognise the need for urban planning, they don't necessarily put it in the appropriate place in the organisation. This is a diagram of the organisation.*

You have the Strategic Advisory Group and then you have a series of Technical Working Groups. These Technical Working Groups include things like TIX. Urban planning has been seen as one of these Technical Working Groups as well, and we would argue that is upside down. Urban planning and design are the larger strategic disciplines and they should be coordinating things like logistics. There's been a lot of talk about how these tools will fit in the existing system.

Why this hasn't been done yet – individual/community

Alison Killing: *Another issue is that humanitarians tend to focus on the individual and the individual household, treating everyone the same. That doesn't work when it comes to building a sewer. A whole community will be involved and a whole community will benefit from it. Regardless of how vulnerable they are, everyone will benefit from this. This idea and approach doesn't sit well with humanitarians.*

Why this hasn't been done yet – impartiality/politics

Alison Killing: *Another thing is the philosophy on which humanitarian action is based. Humanitarians don't support independent institutes getting involved in political situations but urban planning is very political. It's about how you use your land and the discussion is about who gets priority in developing transport, where the centre of your economy will be in the city. These are political decisions, yet humanitarians don't support getting involved in those.*

Why this hasn't been done yet – suspicions around masterplanning

Alison Killing: *There are a lot of misunderstandings about masterplanning, particularly amongst people who work in urban development, which is about empowering communities and working better. This feeling on masterplanning has come from the '70s when there were a lot of large development projects such as mega dams, which involved the displacement of large groups of people. They were very negative.*

The films

The films can be seen at

www.reconstructingthecity.org

The project report can be downloaded

from the RIBA website.

Kate Crawford: *Thanks Alison. What we're arguing for really is this idea that urban planning and urban design can change how the response and coordination is happening: the tools of urbanists can potentially change the way people convene, coordinate and communicate about the city.*

If we can use these tools to develop a strategic, spatial account of intervention that uses visual – as well as text based – approaches to the built environment, this has the potential to change the way people learn to know their own city and represent and explain their needs in the city.

It's this communication point. There are a number of films covering different themes and ideas we were working on in this project, which can be seen on the website.

Solutions

Kate Crawford: *What are the solutions? What are the things that need to be done in the city? Perhaps we need a bigger paradigm shift about how we think about our interventions. What are other people doing? I don't just mean other INGOs, I mean the urban humanitarians and urban professionals that are already in the city.*

Let's think about context as more than just reporting on the scale of the disaster and impacts by sector but in terms of the what the city was before the disaster. We're arguing for a spatial strategic conversation about intervention in the city and the shape of the city.

We need a conversation about more nimble organisations that engage with platforms for communication and engagement. We've had a lot of different reactions to the idea of urbanists and humanitarians working together. Now we'll put it over to questions.

Questions and Talking Points

Leah Campbell: *Thanks for starting us off Alison and Kate, presenting the thoughts you've had so far in your research. Before the presentation we sent out a couple of questions to get people thinking, so I'll read those out and see if anyone has any thoughts.*

Perhaps Kate and Alison can start off by giving us theirs. We were interested to see what people thought about where urban planning exists in terms of the cycle of a disaster. Could urban planning be integrated into a response right from the onset, or does it have to wait for the recovery period to kick in? Another thought is are there any tools, guidance or examples of where urban planners and humanitarians have successfully worked together before? If so, how can we capitalise on those?

We would definitely love to hear thoughts from any of you here today. Also any evidence of cross-sectoral and holistic working, which Alison was talking about, is really important when trying to engage with urban planners and designers as humanitarians and vice versa. I'll pass over to Alison and see if she has any thoughts.

Answer

Alison Killing: *Yes, I actually wanted to respond and say a couple things about development efficiency and allocation of resources and how these choices are always political. You should be targeting the most vulnerable.*

It's a very clear set of priorities, and they're not necessarily the ones you would choose if you're looking at the community as a whole or even a society as a whole. There are conflicts between communities and what communities want and what is better for the wider society.

Building in certain areas increases the risk of flooding. Also sewer systems built and not completed where there are people living downstream who will be adversely affected by that. There are real conflicts between these things. I don't think humanitarians are equipped to deal with that question. More thought needs to be given to how you work with that.

Alison Killing: *The other thing is that it's true that development is on the more political side and humanitarianism is not political, but in fact humanitarians are starting to set the groundwork for what will happen and what can happen later. In that sense they are making decisions about resource priorities, reconstruction and about how people's lives and livelihoods are going to be established. They are aware that they are doing it.*

There are a lot of questions that haven't been fully answered by saying, 'Humanitarianism and development are different things and everything we do is political.' I don't know if Kate has anything to add to that.

Answer

Kate Crawford: *Another strand of the lesson-learning associated with humanitarian literature at the moment is the priority of working with local authorities. The relationships between national governments and urban authorities are nuanced.*

For example, if you're a politician in an urban area, you're not necessarily interested in the geographic ideas of community, but you're more interested in the administrative entity or ward because those are the voting blocks. That also means that there may be tensions between local and national authorities because the local political grouping may not hold power at a national level.

I guess what we're arguing for is not necessarily for humanitarian agencies to take on roles beyond their immediate mandate or principles but to consider in their analysis how the city's history, politics and peoples have shaped its built environment and vice versa.

Leah Campbell: *Great. So we've had a few questions come in. We had a couple of thoughts come in dealing with the government and local authorities. Is the difference between urban and rural environments down to the interests and priorities of local authorities?*

Another question was wondering what your thoughts were on how to improve coordination with government around informal settlements and land issues.

A third questions is, what do urban planners need to do differently if humanitarians need to work more holistically to work with urban planners? Are there things that urban planners can do?

Answer

Alison Killing: *I'll take the question on urban regeneration and I apologise if I've misunderstood the question. One thing that we have looked at is slum upgrading and the fact that it possibly could be an acceptable discipline to borrow from. You look at communities that are missing things like sanitation and water. You may have to move people's houses and rebuild them in a different configuration. Projects that take a slum upgrading approach are happening in Haiti now, two to three years after the disaster. I hope that starts to answer that question.*

In terms of what urban planners can do differently to fit in better with humanitarians, it depends on what your experience of urban planners has been in the past. There are some planners that follow the masterplanning stereotype and everything is very rigid and there is no room for change or chance, or for anyone else to add anything. That's not typically the way modern urban designers and urban planners work. They typically work much more strategically and with priorities. So one of the things they could do is listen to some of the participatory input more and do more to allow the bottom up perspective to come in, alongside the top down one. That would add a lot of value. It shouldn't be such a threatening thing for them, it should just be one more set of inputs. They ought to be able to sympathise with that. We need to listen to the community more than we used to. Kate, would you like to take some questions?

Answer

Kate Crawford: *I want to add that we're deliberately stereotyping both these communities into humanitarians and urbanists. What we're trying to do is show how their different philosophies play out when there is an industrial scale humanitarian response, by which I mean one where international humanitarian organisations are responding en masse.*

And here I want to respond to Xavier's question about concrete practical recommendations from this research. We are not trying to develop generalised rules for urban response: each city is different, each economy is different, each rural area is different. What we are arguing for is a discussion about solutions that is more radical than just asking how each individual agency can learn from best practice in their operations. So two practical recommendations might be to consider how coordination is organised and funded: if you resource the coordination of camp management in an urban setting are you automatically divorcing the international response from the neighbourhoods and fabric of the city?

And let's consider how the international community gives a shared, spatial account of their action that builds on the existing information about the city held by different ministries – this spatial account needs to be an objective from the start of the response and it needs to be more than a map showing where agencies are working but a shared platform for mapping what people are doing for themselves and whether money is being pumped into the city in inequitable, asymmetric ways.

Leah Campbell: *Another question someone brought up was, to what degree can we learn from things, even from far in the past?' For example the earthquake in Lisbon in 1755, which devastated most of the city led to a revision of city design. Someone else commented that using urban planners in mitigation preparation might improve the ability for them to work in response. What do you think of those comments?*

Answer

Alison Killing: *One of the things I found when I was in Haiti when I was speaking with people was that if urban plans had existed before the earthquake it would have been possible to build back in accordance with them. Ideally cities would have those things prior to disasters.*

The rebuilding can also mean more attention for more neglected parts of the city, in planning terms and to think about how they might be done better. One example in Haiti was the fact that there were a lot of people living in the ravines. Those people could have been moved out of the ravines. The area was part of a waste disposal, sewage drainage system. So there's definitely a role for getting people involved. One question is what recommendations have come out of this project? You can see some of them in the video section on the website. You can always say things like, 'It would be good to have more designers and planners,' but also we need to change the other people working in humanitarian agencies. Some agencies were starting to do integrated response, and they would work very well. There were quite a few other things that came up within the interviews. They would say they need software and hardware equipment. Also there was a massive backlog within different municipalities and government ministries in approving agencies' plans.

Answer – cont'd

Alison Killing: *One of the ways that could have been sped up and helped massively was by getting specialists like transport engineers and water engineers involved to approve those plans. Within the films that we've made, there's quite a lot of small, individual recommendations. Things like buying AutoCAD licences, installing Google Earth and OpenOffice shouldn't be too difficult. For now we actually want to shy away from solutions because we want to get to the actual heart of the problem and try and solve it. We've already outlined a number of philosophical problems and larger scale organisational problems. We'd very much like to have a look at building mechanisms and financing. In the next phase of this research we're hoping track some of that. We need to go to agencies, donors and international governments to find out exactly what positions they are making and what that will lead to on the ground in, for example, Haiti. The other thing is that a lot of the solutions that agencies come up with ask for guidelines. We want to step away from guidelines because we think that's the heart of the problem. We think we actually need people who have the skills and can think critically about what they're doing and what the consequences will be.*

Leah Campbell: *We have time to fit in just one more question. Someone else had asked about large events which have highlighted the need to be better equipped to deal with urban emergencies, such as the earthquake in Haiti. After these events does the urgency and need create an opportunity for urban planners, humanitarians and even local authorities to work better together?*

I'd like to invite everyone to join our Urban Response Community of Practice, where we can continue to discuss these issues. This is just a starting point to get everyone thinking about these issues. Now that we are aware of the research that Alison and Kate have been doing, we'd certainly like to hear more examples of areas where urban planners and humanitarians have worked together, or other issues that were discussed today. I'll pass back to Alison now to make some final comments.

Next steps

Grand Challenges grant – an anthropological study of urbanists and humanitarians trying to work together.

A book, which we'll start working on later this year, to be funded partly via kickstarter.

Alison Killing: *I'd like to tell you briefly about what we're planning.*

We've just won a small grant from University College London. When we ran the workshop with urbanists and humanitarians we were analysing exactly what was happening within those groups and why people acted the way they did. We want to track those answers to whether some of it is based on personality. We believe it is part of the organisational and philosophical backgrounds that people bring to it. We'll hopefully get the context of that.

The second thing is that we're working on a book, which will be partly funded by Kickstarter. In that we want to look at the funding and the way that influences what is built on the ground. We want to look closely at the relationship between monetary agencies and local governments, both national and municipal. We want to look at the different ways humanitarians and urbanists conceive the city. Humanitarians tend to be looking for textual reports while urbanists tend to go for more visual presentations. We also want to look at neighbourhood planning, which some humanitarian and developmental agencies are starting to be very successful in. We'll be starting work on the book later in the year. Now we have a few acknowledgements to make.

Acknowledgements

Alison Killing: *The RIBA Research Trust funded us and the project was supervised by Camillo Boano of the Development Planning Unit, University College London. The last thing I'd like to say is stay in touch with us. We'd very much like to continue this conversation.*

Stay in touch with us!

Sign up to our mailing list

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Alison Killing: *Thank you very much for coming today!*

Leah Campbell: *Thank you so much Alison, and thank you once again to everyone for joining us today. Make sure you join the Urban CoP and keep on discussing these issues. You can only fit so much into an hour and this has barely scratched the surface. Thanks to Kate and Alison for joining us and presenting your research and starting to get us thinking about how urban planners and humanitarians can work better together. Join us next time.*

To continue the discussion, please visit:
https://partnerplatform.org/urban-response/