

Urban vulnerability and displacement: a review of current issues

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*Urban displacement is frequently portrayed as a new and unfamiliar dilemma for the humanitarian sector, yet broad awareness of its characteristics and challenges has been developing since the 1970s. In the past decade, however, there has been greater attention to, and recognition of, the implications of rapid urbanisation in the developing world. This has led to some policy development and a mounting body of NGO (non-governmental organisation) and think-tank literature on the topic. Assuming displacement to be a key lens on urban vulnerability more broadly, this paper presents an overview of the historical development of debates on urban displacement since the 1970s. Drawing examples from the contributions in this special issue of *Disasters*, as well as from other sources of information on recent humanitarian responses in various contexts, it assesses the ramifications of urban vulnerability for humanitarian practitioners. The paper contends that the humanitarian sector has failed to galvanise on the issue, and has struggled therefore to employ existing knowledge and to adapt practice.*

Keywords: cluster system, context analysis, displacement, humanitarian system, partnerships, protection, urban, vulnerability

Background and introduction

The fast pace of urbanisation, and the implications for the developing world in particular, have received increasing attention from academics and policymakers in the past decade, as demonstrated by the wealth of literature on this issue (see, for example, Pelling, 2003; Parnell, Simon and Vogel, 2007; Beall and Fox, 2009; UN-HABITAT, 2010a). As part of this general trend, humanitarian crises in urban areas also have received more attention, reflected in policy developments such as the 'Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas' issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2009 and the release of the 'Strategy on Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas' by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in 2010. The swell of interest within the humanitarian community is related to recognition of surging urbanisation in crisis-affected countries, the prevalence of natural disasters in urban areas, and the difficulties confronting humanitarian actors in responding to such situations. Interest has also been spurred, however, by greater understanding of several interrelated factors that are exacerbating acute and chronic vulnerabilities in such contexts, including climate change and long-term underdevelopment.

Many of these factors have developed or have been acknowledged only recently. Yet, in reality, many of the vulnerabilities of crisis-affected populations in urban areas

today and the challenges confronting humanitarian actors are not new—in fact, they were identified in academic literature as long ago as the 1970s. Past learning with regard to these issues is largely absent, though, from contemporary discourse and, as the papers in this special issue of *Disasters* indicate, humanitarian operational and policy responses in urban contexts in recent years appear to struggle with many of the same challenges that were identified several decades ago. Despite many years of experience and research, humanitarian action in urban areas in recent years has too often been ad hoc, ill-judged, and poorly coordinated.

This is perhaps most stark in relation to contemporary humanitarian discourse on displacement and vulnerability in urban contexts. While more recent NGO (non-governmental organisation), think-tank, and academic literature has explored issues pertaining to urban-based natural disaster preparedness and response, there has been far less discussion in academic, policy, and operational literature on how to respond to urban-based complex emergencies. In particular, the links between conflict- or violence-induced displacement and acute vulnerability have been poorly addressed, although UNHCR (2009) and others (see, for example, Metcalfe and Pavanello, 2011; Schmeidl, 2011; Thomas-Jensen, 2011) have emphasised the connection between rapid urbanisation and displacement (internal and external). A review of the literature indicates that translating past learning about urban displacement and vulnerability into more effective humanitarian responses today is perhaps related to two challenges:

- a failure to absorb and build on extant knowledge of how vulnerability and displacement interact in urban contexts, especially in acute and chronic complex emergencies; and
- the slow progress made by many humanitarian actors in innovating and adapting their responses to the particularities of the urban environment.

Much of the past and recent literature demonstrates that acute vulnerability is not always related to displacement per se, and that both displaced people and the populations among which they settle in urban contexts often face similar challenges in accessing basic services, in achieving adequate housing, and in accessing sustainable livelihood opportunities. Furthermore, often they are exposed to similar levels of abuse and violence. However, given the complex drivers of vulnerability in urban contexts, displacement, including its impact on host communities, continues to be one of the key indicators of vulnerability of urban poor populations. This special issue of *Disasters* aims to address, at least in part, some of the gaps in existing knowledge of urban displacement, vulnerability, and humanitarian action. Reflecting on experience in a range of cities and towns around the world, the featured papers present learning from a variety of country contexts and methodological approaches. This editorial distils the key points in these submissions and combines them with a review of historical literature on the links between urban displacement and vulnerability in order to offer some reflections on the implications for current humanitarian policy and practice.

Past perspectives on urban displacement and vulnerability

The plight of displaced populations in urban centres first attracted attention worldwide in the early 1970s. This resulted from the rapid process of urbanisation in the developing world and the surge in refugee numbers—in urban and rural areas—generated by the Cold War, post-colonial conflicts, and political instability in Asia, Latin America, and, in particular, Africa. However, much of the literature on displacement initially focused primarily on displaced populations in rural settings, specifically those residing in camps. The enduring tendency to concentrate on displacement in rural environments was indicative of the difficulties associated with conducting research in urban areas. Researchers faced a range of challenges in accessing and identifying displaced populations in these contexts, including insecurity, the desire of many displaced persons to remain anonymous, and the simple fact that many of the urban displaced were living in densely-populated areas of cities and towns and often were swallowed up by the large urban populations hosting them.

These challenges significantly affected the ability to collect data on the experiences of urban displaced communities and to assess general dynamics, impacts, and trends. At the most basic level, it was difficult even to determine accurate statistics or estimates of numbers. For example, estimates put forward for the urban refugee population in Africa in 1976 ranged from 14,000 (Chambers, 1979, p. 382) to 201,500 (Neldner, 1979, p. 393). Reflecting the complex dynamics of the urban environment and the local and national political sensitivities surrounding their presence, researchers also faced confusion and misinformation, as illustrated by the work of Sommers (2000) on Burundian refugee youth in Dar es Salaam. At the outset of the research endeavour, government officials informed Sommers that the Burundi refugee community in the city did not extend beyond 30 or so men and their families; after nearly two years of probing, he discovered that the population in fact ran to several thousand people, whose presence in the city defied a longstanding state policy against urbanisation (Sommers, 2000, p. 70).

Despite the initial focus on rural areas, as the example of Sommers' work indicates, a more nuanced picture of urban displacement and vulnerability did emerge in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Some of the literature challenged previously-held assumptions about displacement and underscored the extreme complexity of the diverse drivers and patterns of displacement and the hugely variable nature of the resulting experience. For instance, earlier assumptions that urban displacement was characterised largely by a move from rural areas to cities and towns were challenged by learning from Africa and Latin America in the 1980s. Research in Kenya revealed that 95 per cent of urban refugees interviewed had previously resided in cities and had been displaced *within* the urban environment (Billard, 1982, p. 35). Similarly, studies in Guatemala suggested that a large proportion of people in new urban refugee settlements came from other urban areas (Belcher and Bates, 1983). In addition, although there were only limited reflections on the ramifications of urban displacement for host communities, studies during this period show that the relationship between displaced and host communities in such contexts can be highly

variable and should be analysed on a case-by-case basis (Wright, 1980; Dick, 1985; Kok, 1989).

At the same time, scholarship challenged long-held assumptions about vulnerability and gender with respect to urban displacement. Anita Spring (1979) highlighted the complexity of the relationship between displacement and vulnerability of women in urban settings. She showed how female Angolan refugees in Zambian cities and towns near the border were able to assimilate better and achieve economic self-sufficiency by marrying Zambian men, often after divorcing their Angolan husbands who struggled to gain access to land or to restock their possessions. Gaim Kibreab (1995) described, some 15 years later, the mixture of challenges and opportunities that urban displacement posed to women, asserting that 'despite the structural and institutional constraints under which they operate, they display a high degree of adaptability, resilience, creativity and resourcefulness. This is reflected, *inter alia*, in their ability to cope with changes represented in new economic and social roles, new familial and non-familial relationships and problems. . . . In most cases, they achieve this while maintaining dignity and identity in an environment characterized by hostility to women's independence and self-assertion' (Kibreab, 1995, p. 1).

Another key research theme has been the importance of livelihood opportunities for urban displaced communities. A series of detailed studies of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in Sudan in the 1980s, for example, illustrated the difficulties urban displaced populations often faced in taking advantage of livelihood opportunities. Surveys conducted in 1980 found that even skilled workers, who were estimated to make up 27 per cent of the refugees in Khartoum, Sudan, were working in marginal and informal employment sectors as drivers, domestic servants, guards, and waiters (Wright, 1980, p. 161). Many IDPs and refugees in Khartoum relied on remittances sent by friends or family living elsewhere in Sudan or abroad, although a handful of modest programmes aimed at urban self-sufficiency had met with some success and official approval. Several years later, however, experts on displaced populations were still warning that, 'in urban areas, refugees are left to their own devices' (Karadawi, 1987, p. 124). A study of Eritrean refugees in the Kassala region of east Sudan found that, despite strong signs of economic integration throughout the region, refugees in urban areas were almost two-thirds less likely to be independently employed or self-employed than those in rural areas (Kok, 1989, p. 432).

The literature produced prior to 2000 also underlines some of the factors affecting access to livelihoods, particularly ill-judged or inappropriate programmes and policies. For example, Peter Winchester (1981) described how locally designed and run shelter support programmes that sought to assist the 10,000 or so people made homeless by the flooding of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad, India, in 1973 failed entirely because the site chosen for the relocation of this population was too far from the city centre and thus from preferred sources of income. The programme suffered because it did not recognise that, despite the lack of services and the frequently poor standard of public health, 'the slums that can offend official eyes are often thriving business communities' (Winchester, 1981, pp. 158–159).

National refugee policies, then, as now, also presented obstacles to accessing sustainable livelihoods and self-sufficiency; Richard Black (1994) illustrated how government policy on the right-to-work of refugees significantly limited the ability of urban refugees in Athens, Greece—most of whom came from Iran and Iraq, as well as from Somalia—to support themselves.

In contrast, there is relatively little reflection in the literature of this period on the impact of the influx of refugees and IDPs on host communities in urban contexts. Some studies of natural disasters during the period indicated that family and social networks offered (as they still do) crucial support to displaced populations: Davis (1977), for instance, established that roughly 90 per cent of the 250,000 or so people made homeless by the 1972 earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua, were taken in by family and friends. This research fed into his pioneering work on transitional shelter published the following year (Davis, 1978). In relation to complex emergencies, Wright (1980) hinted at increased tensions between the influx of refugees in Khartoum and the host community and Dick (1985) and Kok (1989) both presented some brief reflections on the relationship between host communities and displaced populations in general, although they did not go into sustained detail with respect to urban contexts. The same was true of work on this issue that was part of the turn towards previously neglected issues such as the experience of returnees (see, for example, Van Hear, 1994) or mental health evaluations (see, for example, Baker, 1991; Mandić and Ebling, 1994).

Regardless of the growing knowledge amassed by such research, many of the international policy debates and frameworks being developed in the decades prior to 2000 were limited by other national interests. The Pan-African Conference on the Situation of Refugees in Africa, held in Arusha, Tanzania, in May 1979, called on participant states to 'study in detail the problem of urban refugees and recommend appropriate action' to deal with these growing populations. Yet, as Yash Tandon (1984) made clear in the context of Uganda, awareness of the phenomenon was not necessarily synonymous with sympathy and urban refugees were also often accused of being 'a scourge, an economic threat to the host country' (Tandon, 1984, p. 269). Such fears were linked to the consensus among experts at the end of the twentieth century that 'the most dramatic feature of the refugee scene in the 1990s was the globalized restriction on asylum' (Surhke, 1998, p. 396; see also Kibreab, 1996; Roberts, 1998).

The appointment of a Special Representative of the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General for Internally Displaced Persons (in 1992) and the development of the 'UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement' (in 1998) were critical steps towards securing recognition and supporting appropriate responses to internal displacement more generally, but they did not, at that stage, signify much progress in dealing with the specific matter of urban displacement. To address the lack of policy guidance within the humanitarian community, UNHCR began, in the mid-1990s, a process of discussion on urban displacement. Workshops were held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in May 1994, and in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in May 1995, to tackle issues arising from increased urban caseloads in those regions. A discussion paper on urban refugees

was issued in 1995 that noted that ‘concern has been growing during the past few years over the dearth of policy guidelines regarding urban refugees’ (UNHCR, 1995). It pointed to the lack of organisational policy on urban refugees—as well as a failure to implement consistently the ad hoc guidelines that were available—despite the proliferation of in-house research and evaluations of UNHCR’s own programmes in urban centres.

The document, however, failed to take onboard the wealth of research that had been conducted in the previous decades on this issue and many of its messages were contradictory. On the one hand, it appeared to indicate that urban refugees had been neglected by national and international actors. On the other hand, it seemed to suggest that this population was an over-served minority that commanded resources beyond what could be justified by its size. It reported that ‘a number of UNHCR officers’ consulted had even challenged ‘whether or not refugees have the right to expect assistance in urban areas’ (UNHCR, 1995). In 1997, UNHCR adopted its first ‘Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas’, but this too was much criticised for its almost total focus on assistance and the absence of any major reflection on the protection needs of urban refugees—a dilemma that had been flagged in the 1995 discussion paper (see Jacobsen and Landau, 2005). Human Rights Watch (HRW), in particular, lambasted the policy as ‘misguided’, recommending that it be replaced with a new policy that would ‘avoid generalizations, derogatory depictions, or incorrect assumptions about urban refugees (such as that they are “irregular movers”) that undermine efforts to address their protection concerns’ (HRW, 2002).

Thus, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was a body of academic research that specifically or more broadly offered learning on urban displacement and vulnerability. Although most of it concentrated primarily on refugees, rather than IDPs, it highlighted several challenges, concerns, and lessons learnt that applied to a range of different urban displacement contexts. However, the richness of this academic discourse had not, during this period, led to improved humanitarian policy and practice. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, while many in the humanitarian community developed an understanding of the scale and the dynamics of urban displacement, this was not matched by the development of policy and practice to support the protection and assistance needs of affected populations.

Current academic and policy debates

The prevalence of large-scale humanitarian crises in urban settings over the past decade have seen the humanitarian community involved in such varied situations as the Bam (Iran) earthquake in 2003, the floods in Mumbai (India) in 2005, the hurricanes in New Orleans, Louisiana (United States), in 2005 and in Gonaïves (Haiti) in 2008, the large-scale displacement of Iraqis in 2005–06, ongoing and new conflict-related displacement of urban Sudanese, Somalis and Afghans, and the Haiti earthquake in 2010. However, there has also been a burgeoning intellectual debate on this

issue. In large part, this has related to recognition of several interrelated factors: the global, regional, and local impacts of climate change; heightened drivers of migration and increasingly restrictive national asylum and migration policies; chronic underdevelopment and the continuing proliferation of urban slums; and the increased local, national, and even international security threats originating in many slum areas. This heightened attention has led to greater production of NGO, UN, and other literature, and increasing consensus at the policy level on the challenges posed by urban displacement and vulnerability.

The 'grey' and academic literature of the past decade spurred by these factors has sought to capture learning and experience from the many urban-based crises to which the humanitarian community has been responding. It has also tried to explore some of the factors compounding the vulnerabilities of the displaced and other affected populations in urban contexts. Published and unpublished work has included: analyses of urban refugee's economic self-reliance in Cairo (Egypt), Johannesburg (South Africa), and Delhi (India) (Women's Refugee Commission, 2010); an in-depth examination of Iraqi displacement across the Middle East (Chatelard, 2008, 2009, 2010); development and testing of profiling tools for urban IDPs in Khartoum (Sudan), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), and Santa Marta (Colombia) (IDMC, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c); extensive research on vulnerability and displacement in urban areas by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the Overseas Development Institute (Pantuliano et al., 2010; Haysom and Pavanello, 2011; Martin and Slugga, 2011; Metcalfe, Pavanello with Mishra, 2011; Pavanello with Haysom, 2012); research on the protracted displacement of Afghans, Iraqis, and Sudanese by the Middle East Institute (Chatelard, 2011; Schmeidl, 2011; Thomas-Jansen, 2011); and Groupe Urgence, réhabilitation, et développement (URD)'s research on urban warfare, urban reconstruction, and shelter (Grunewald and Levron, 2004; Boyer, 2008; Deprez and Labattut, 2010). UNHCR also has published several reviews of refugee livelihood strategies that emphasise the difficulties of the informal economy, competition with the host community, and the importance of transnational networks for refugees' self-sufficiency (such as through providing remittances) (De Vriese, 2006; Levron, 2006). Dedicated issues of *Humanitarian Exchange* (2006) and *Forced Migration Review* (2010) on urbanisation also have contributed numerous policy position pieces and reviews of field experience to the debate. In addition, the *World Development Report 2010* examined the topic of 'urban risk' and its humanitarian consequences from several perspectives (IFRC, 2010).

Perhaps the dimension of humanitarian crises in urban areas that is most extensively covered in current literature is the effect of natural disasters, including those linked to climate change. Recognising that the impact of more frequent and more intense climatic events (IPCC, 2007) would be multiplied in cities and mega-cities, there has been a new focus in academic research and policy debate on improving emergency relief responses to urban-based natural disasters. Research on climate change-related and other natural disasters has made a significant contribution to the understanding of emergency response in urban areas, including through comprehensive

syntheses of lessons learnt from flood and earthquake responses (Alam, 2008; Cosgrave, 2008). Brought together under the notion of 'resilience', there has also been a plethora of discussions and of frameworks on how to manage the risks of future shocks and the potential ramifications for affected populations (Berkes, 2007; Twigg, 2007; Rockefeller Foundation, 2009). This work tries as well to identify opportunities to reconstruct settlements in ways that mitigate the threat of such events in future, including the resulting displacement, and support long-term local socioeconomic development (UN-HABITAT, 2006; Pelling and Wisner, 2009; Lyons and Schilderman, 2010). The linking of disaster and reconstruction and the implications of increased natural disasters, such as flooding and earthquakes, on the built environment have been picked up particularly by the shelter sector, especially after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2005. In this regard, publications such as those of the World Bank (2008), the Norwegian Refugee Council and Shelter Centre (2010), and the United Nations Agency for Human Settlements (UN-HABITAT, 2010b) have advanced the debate on urban shelter and post-disaster urban reconstruction.

Although there has been less discussion of the dynamics of urban displacement in acute or chronic complex emergencies, there has been some important learning on this issue. The series of studies on urbanisation, urban displacement, and vulnerability in Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East by the HPG, for example, have challenged some of the assumptions about displacement and vulnerability in such contexts and have highlighted some of the failings of the humanitarian response in this respect. Confirming other research on urbanisation more broadly (see, for example, Satterthwaite, 2007), these studies found that most of those forced to leave rural areas—and often other cities—are accommodated in slums on the periphery of cities and towns, where housing frequently is poorly constructed and tenure is insecure, access to services is low, employment opportunities are few, and the physical environment often is unfit for human habitation (Pantuliano et al., 2010; Metcalfe, Pavanello with Mishra, 2011; Metcalfe, Haysom with Martin, 2012). In these settings, vulnerability is generated by a complex range of factors, including armed conflict, chronic under-development, high levels of criminal violence and poverty, and political instability. While spikes in acute vulnerability occur in relation to sudden increases in violence or when a natural disaster strikes, the line between acute and chronic vulnerability often is difficult to draw. Some commentators have argued, therefore, that the levels of chronic vulnerability in many slums of the developing world constitute humanitarian crises in and of themselves: 'Daily life in the worst slums ought to be considered a humanitarian emergency and be responded to urgently, as urban populations face both familiar and new city-specific threats from natural and man-made causes' (Satterthwaite, 2007, p. 10).

Just as it is difficult to distinguish between acute and chronic vulnerability, so too levels and types of vulnerability cannot be neatly divided between host communities and displaced populations, since they are all facing similar challenges in the struggle to survive. This is particularly so in the urban context because of the density of the population, with displaced and host communities living side-by-side in

the same shelters, streets, and neighbourhoods, and because of the complex nature of risks and opportunities in the urban environment. There is growing recognition in the humanitarian sector of the need to consider this relationship between displaced and host communities, including the potential impact of the influx of displaced populations on the resources of the local community and the authorities. In an article in *Forced Migration Review* on the topic of urban displacement, Anna Tibaijuka (2010) highlights the competition over resources and livelihood opportunities between displaced populations and the host community, and she points out how the influx of displaced populations has only added to the challenges facing many poorly resourced governments in seeking to manage the process of urbanisation in their countries. This view is echoed by other authors in the same edition (Gutierrez, 2010; Zetter and Deikun, 2010).

Some of the 'grey' literature documents the failings of the humanitarian community in responding to urban displacement and vulnerabilities (as discussed later). However, there has been less academic literature in recent years on the role of humanitarian assistance in urban areas. As Jacobsen and Landau (2003) asserted in *Disasters* several years ago, few academic studies have been able to disaggregate their research subjects, provide controls, or conduct longitudinal investigations. It seems that academic researchers have continued to confront the same challenges identified three or four decades ago, namely that the urban displaced often are reluctant to be identified and hence seek to maintain a low profile, that insecurity in many slum areas limits the access that research staff have to affected populations, and that local or national authorities have sought, in some instances, to restrict access to displaced populations. More recently, researchers have lamented also the lack of a cross-disciplinary dialogue that is needed to assess the complexity of urban displacement issues (ALNAP, 2009).

Thus, the academic discourse on this issue has continued into the twenty-first century, although perhaps practice has not advanced greatly in terms of addressing the identified challenges and knowledge gaps. While operational practice has not necessarily improved, as discussed later, humanitarian policy debates at least have begun to consider this issue and initiated the process of formulating specific policy frameworks for urban contexts, including urban displacement. In particular, UNHCR's 2009 'Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas' signalled a renewed focus on seeking to meet the protection and assistance needs of urban displacement populations and, consequently, earlier questions about whether it is appropriate to provide protection and assistance to urban displaced populations have been effectively answered. Similarly, the IASC (2010, p. 2) has acknowledged that 'the increasing migration of IDPs, refugees and other undocumented migrants to cities is creating additional challenges to already marginalized communities in informal settlements and slums which host most of these migrants', and has noted that the subsequent pressure on urban administrations and governance is an important issue for humanitarian organisations.

Perhaps one of the most interesting developments in terms of academic and policy debates on urban vulnerability and urban displacement in recent years has been

mounting awareness of the causes and impacts of urban violence. Lawlessness has been a prominent feature of mega slums in many cities since the 1990s, but, in the past decade, slums have increasingly been seen in the light of global security concerns (Kaplan, 1994; Norton, 2003), including as a source of and a target for national, regional and international terrorism (Beall, 2007). The phenomenon of urban violence is now increasingly seen as linked to the discrimination and marginalisation of certain groups, including displaced communities, in under-resourced or poorly serviced urban areas. Within the humanitarian sector, there is growing awareness of the severity of urban violence in some cities and its impact on displaced and other affected populations. In many settings, the failure of the state to ensure public security has led to ‘symptoms of endemic community violence, which can result in fatality rates comparable to those in situations of open armed conflict’ (Humansecurity–cities.org, 2007, p. 17). These include high casualties among gang members, police and civilians, the recruitment of children as ‘soldiers’ for gangs, violence targeted at ‘undesirable’ social groups, and gender-based violence (Humansecurity–cities.org, 2007). Haroff-Tavel (2010) describes how the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has identified the major impact of urban violence on urban populations and Pavanello, Metcalfe with Martin (2012) reflect on the difficulties humanitarian actors face in understanding their role in assisting slum residents, including displaced populations, in dealing with the consequences of urban violence. Muggah and Savage (2012) caution that there appears to be a ‘blind spot’ when it comes to recognising and responding to humanitarian situations caused by long-term urban violence and question if the current aid architecture is appropriate to respond to such events.²

The humanitarian sector is developing a better understanding of the dynamics of urban displacement and the implications for its own strategies and programmes. Ideally, this cumulative knowledge and learning should already have led to improved humanitarian policy and operational practice, but innovation in the sector so far has not kept pace. In particular, there remain gaps in policy on specific aspects of urban responses, deficiencies in programmes and tools, a lack of innovation in approaches, and a failure to establish and sustain effective partnerships with the plethora of international and, more importantly, national and local actors present in urban contexts.

Contemporary humanitarian action in urban areas: adapting existing strategic and programme responses

Accepting the general consensus in the humanitarian sector regarding the prevalence of humanitarian protection and assistance needs in urban crises and the imperative for humanitarian actors to respond, the emphasis now must be on *how* these needs can be addressed best. As Elena Lucchi articulates in this volume, the humanitarian community must now move from the ‘why’ to the ‘how’. However, a fundamental question also is whether the humanitarian community is equipped to respond—can it adapt its architecture, strategies, and tools to ensure a more effective response in such contexts?

The papers in this special issue of *Disasters* contribute answers to this question, and offer evidence from particularly significant experiences of urban response. Jeff Crisp, Tim Morris and Hilde Refstie discuss the importance of better preparedness for urban displacement, highlighting the value of new partnerships; Elizabeth Ferris and Sara Ferro-Ribeiro reflect on experience of the inter-agency protection response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti; Lilianne Fan considers the degree to which the shelter sector has incorporated critical urban theories, drawing on case studies of Aceh, Indonesia, and Haiti; Elena Lucchi describes the experiences of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) of providing health services to marginalised urban poor populations affected by urban violence and neglect by the authorities; François Grünewald explores the impact of conflict dynamics in Mogadishu, Somalia, on humanitarian interventions over three decades; and Tahir Zaman examines the role of faith-based organisations in supporting the needs of Iraqi refugees in Damascus, Syria.

Several of these authors raise concerns about the failure to adapt the approaches that have worked in camps and other traditional displacement settings to more complex urban environments, or to capitalise on the opportunities that the urban environment might offer both to members of the affected population and to the aid actors seeking to assist them. Notwithstanding the complexities of the operating environment, the papers in this special issue of *Disasters* indicate that a lack of commitment remains within the humanitarian sector to move things forward, with many actors failing to invest sufficient time and resources in understanding the dynamics of the urban environment, the complex nature of urban vulnerability and displacement, and how they can respond best.

This volume highlights some of the main failings of, and the key challenges confronting, the humanitarian community, drawn from recent operational experience in urban crises. In addition, it flags a number of innovative and practical ways in which some operational agencies have begun to adapt their methods of working to ensure a more appropriate response to humanitarian needs in urban areas, including those relating to urban displacement.

Context analysis and needs assessment

Understanding the vulnerabilities and needs of affected populations, and indeed the human and other capacities available at the local level, requires a comprehensive context analysis. In reference to programming for urban displacement in Nairobi, Kenya, Metcalfe and Pavanello (2011, p. 34) state that a needs analysis must be accompanied by ‘a comprehensive analysis of the political economy of the slums and informal settlements’ because they are ‘essential to identifying and addressing the drivers of vulnerability’, even though ‘[s]uch analysis will be resource-intensive and costly, and will face logistical and political challenges’. Yet, evaluations from many contexts indicate that they are rarely undertaken. Levine et al. (2012) assert that the lack of a comprehensive context analysis is directly linked to the poor performance of the humanitarian response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and caution that the humanitarian community must improve its ability to programme according to the context and not according to predetermined solutions (Levine et al., 2012)

However, there are a number of serious challenges to conducting a context analysis or needs assessment in urban areas, which, if not exactly new, are being compounded by more current developments. In many urban contexts, high levels of insecurity are affecting access by many humanitarian actors, as seen in the conflicts in Libya and Syria, as well as in ongoing complex emergencies characterised by high levels of criminal violence. As the sector has developed and expanded in recent years, many humanitarian organisations have focused security management on restrictive protective or deterrent measures, which, in turn, restrict access to affected populations in many settings (see, for example, Egeland et al., 2011). Many humanitarian actors also continue to face constraints to their access to affected populations because of practical circumstances—that is, displaced populations living in densely populated areas, among host communities—and because of the enduring desire of many displaced people to remain as anonymous as possible in an attempt to avoid abuse or harassment. These two factors in particular continue to challenge traditional approaches to conducting an assessment and targeting assistance, and many humanitarian actors have not yet devised new methods or adapted traditional ways of evaluating needs in such contexts.

As Lucchi explains with respect to experience in designing urban health interventions: ‘The classic rapid assessment formats utilised by humanitarian agencies in conflict emergencies are inadequate for the subtleties of urban settings because they are designed to be carried out quickly, with potential security constraints, frequently in camp settings, and are performed by one or two generalists’. Approaches previously designed for camp settings cannot capture the complexities of humanitarian needs in urban areas, and use inappropriate indicators.³ As Ferris and Ribeiro and Grunewald also point out in this volume, disaggregated data—using host government or humanitarian instruments—is crucial to designing approaches that take into account the huge variations in needs found within urban areas, but such data are rarely available. Consequently, in the words of Lucchi, ‘[i]t is important therefore to be aware of the limitations of available data and to work towards acquiring more focused, detailed information on particular populations or neighbourhoods, in order to avoid simplistic assumptions about the population’s needs’.

A needs assessment is also complicated by the fact that many of the populations in the cities referenced in this special issue exhibit complex patterns of displacement and vulnerability. Researchers looking at urban crises are now frequently cautioning that vulnerabilities cannot be assumed and that the traditional categorisation of vulnerable individuals (such as the elderly, the sick, and women and children) does not capture adequately the interlinked vulnerabilities and capacities of affected populations in urban contexts. This lacuna is important, not just because it can leave needs unaddressed, but because it can create a further risk of reinforcing real or perceived marginalisation among the displaced. This is particularly the case for young people. In many cities HPG researchers found a ‘palpable frustration and a sense of despair amongst displaced youth stemming from their lack of economic political and social opportunities and their inability to become self-reliant, get married and provide for

their families' (Pavanello and Metcalfe, 2012, p. 4). Given these challenges, humanitarian organisations are being urged increasingly to use self-assessment and community-based assessment tools, including participatory approaches, during all stages of programme assessment, design, and implementation (Pavanello, Metcalfe with Martin, 2012).

The humanitarian architecture

Developing the 'how' of urban humanitarian response also entails an evaluation of the usefulness of existing structures of the humanitarian system. Several authors in the special issue argue that the current international aid architecture has actually obstructed more effective coordination, innovation, or appropriate programming in the urban context. Fan describes the obstacles that existing structures posed to effective shelter response after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti:

the IASC cluster system struggled to maintain a consistent shelter-as-process approach and the responsibility for coordinating 'shelter' interventions was divided into at least four different clusters and numerous sub- and inter-cluster working groups . . . This approach fragmented the shelter and housing agenda within the cluster system and arguably made it more difficult for various actors to develop a common perspective and strategy.

Similarly, Ferris and Ribeiro complain that 'there still is a tendency to see natural disasters and conflicts as two different challenges when in fact they are closely related, particularly in urban settings'. This is reflected in the fact that, depending on whether a crisis is caused by conflict or a natural disaster, there are different leads for the Protection Cluster, Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, and Shelter Cluster, regardless of the fact that the two events can occur simultaneously. Echoing Ferris and Ribeiro's concern about the need for a more holistic and sophisticated understanding of the urban environment, in relation to the response to the 2010 Haitian earthquake, Levine et al. (2012) assert that, through the cluster system, the humanitarian system dissected problems into pieces that appeared manageable but at the cost of addressing the big picture.

The poor functioning of the international architecture in urban contexts is also related to a lack of context analysis (as discussed above), especially understanding of the complexity of urban administrative and governance structures. The cluster system has been criticised for failing to integrate local and national state actors, particularly 'due to insufficient analysis of local structures and capacities before cluster implementation' (Steets et al., 2010, p. 9). Reflecting on the failings of the humanitarian response in Mogadishu over the years, Grünewald suggests that success of humanitarian assistance may require '[a] rapid move to area-based coordination in line with urban administrative units and authorities, in order to counter the unhelpful division of labour created by the current cluster system and to have 'city and neighbourhood coherence' rather than 'sector coherence'.

Ensuring coherence between the various investments that are made during, or in the immediate aftermath of, urban crises and the long-term public service delivery

plans of local administrations is relevant to donors as well as to implementing agencies. In many situations, donors fund according to their priorities without coordinating or streamlining these investments with the long-term plans of local governments or according to the advice of urban systems experts. The cluster system makes this donor preference more convenient by defining sectors that can be funded discretely, typically without consideration of the impact on the highly interdependent urban system. This results in investment with no continuity. An example is a donor with a priority to support women's health issues that funds an agency to build a women's clinic. While this is certainly a laudable and very specific need, these facilities ultimately are often abandoned as they are not integrated into public health care systems, or they lack a viable business model. Programming with sensitivity to the whole urban system is not simple; however, in the time between emergency events, donors and implementing organisations do have an opportunity to develop policy frameworks that appropriately guide operations in complex urban scenarios, that draw on urban systems expertise, or create internal capacity, and that strategically leverage short-term humanitarian programming for longer-term gain.⁴

The contributions to this special issue of *Disasters* illustrate why traditional approaches to gender, livelihoods, protection, shelter, and so on are problematic in the urban context. They demonstrate also that where will exists, humanitarian actors can respond more effectively to the vulnerabilities of displaced and other affected populations in urban contexts, by developing a comprehensive understanding of the setting and of needs and vulnerabilities, and by designing specific programming approaches to respond fittingly.

Humanitarian action in urban contexts today: expanding partnerships

Much of the recent literature on humanitarian response in urban areas highlights the multiplicity of actors in such settings and the importance of ensuring appropriate partnerships with local and national actors, the development community, and other stakeholders (Metcalfé, Pavanello with Mishra, 2011; ALNAP, 2012; Metcalfé, Haysom with Martin, 2012). As many of the authors in the volume also point out, establishing and sustaining effective partnerships are crucial in urban response both because there are so many actors involved and because the scale and inter-related nature of challenges and needs necessitate a multi-actor response. With regard to Haiti, Ferris and Ribeiro—referencing the need for partnerships with other stakeholders—call on the humanitarian community to recognise its limitations. They stress that, in a complex urban environment, 'humanitarian actors simply cannot keep people safe', and advocate appropriate partnerships with 'those who do have the responsibility for protecting Haitians: the Government of Haiti, those working on security-sector reform, and those involved in UN peace-support operations'. This necessity to partner non-humanitarian actors is found in other sectors too, most

notably livelihoods, where the private sector is a crucial stakeholder but one that often is neglected or dismissed by humanitarian actors. In many contexts where the line between acute and chronic vulnerabilities relating to displacement and the wider urban poor population is difficult to draw, the role of the development community is vital in ensuring an appropriate and holistic response. Noting the limitations of humanitarian action in such contexts, Metcalfe, Pavanello with Mishra (2011, p. 33) state with respect to the situation in the slums of Nairobi, that, '[s]ince a chronic lack of development is the principal driver of urban vulnerability, resolving this development crisis is key to addressing vulnerabilities more broadly, and those relating to displacement specifically'.

In her paper, Lucchi underlines the limitations of humanitarian action in urban areas vis-à-vis health interventions—'[v]iolence in urban contexts can be a chronic problem, with peak as well as quieter moments . . . but in most instances the possibility of it stopping completely is unrealistic'. This illustrates not only how it is frequently the marginalisation and neglect of populations by central or state agencies that has prompted humanitarian involvement, but also the importance of establishing partnerships with these national actors and with the development community since many of these needs ultimately require a long-term development response. Growing recognition that urban violence challenges notions of conflict and peacetime also emphasises the importance of resolving, with some urgency, the perennial problems of transition from humanitarian to development assistance. Similarly, Crisp, Morris and Refstie point out that, in the case of urban displacement, protection, solutions, and assistance cannot be attained by UNHCR alone. 'UNHCR is not a development agency and cannot, in any case, afford to provide education, health care, shelter, and water services. It has no mandate for prolonged involvement in peace-building, reconciliation, reintegration, and return'. At the global level, and in some instances at the national level, the IASC more broadly has recognised the importance of enhanced linking of humanitarian and development action to address urban vulnerabilities, as illustrated by the work of the Reference Group on Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas and a similar inter-agency forum in Nairobi (Metcalfe, Pavanello with Mishra, 2011).

However, while some literature highlights the wealth of national and international partners that are prevalent in urban settings, all of the papers in this volume demonstrate that, unfortunately, international humanitarian assistance is needed precisely because national responders either are overwhelmed or are unwilling to manage the domestic response. Furthermore, forming relationships at all levels frequently is politically charged. Various contexts reveal that the relationships between authorities and urban residents can vary widely depending on a number of factors, including the influence of corruption, kinship, and patronage relationships, and the political significance of displacement status (Metcalfe, Pavanello with Mishra, 2011; Haysom and Pavanello, 2011; Metcalfe, Haysom with Martin, 2012;)

Owing to weaknesses in national capacities, the authors in this special issue of *Disasters* emphasise also the importance of strengthening partnerships and coordination

with municipal and state actors in particular, and with local civil-society actors, as well as with the international development community. Grünewald, while recognising the inherent difficulties of working with authorities at all levels, criticises the failure of international aid agencies to engage the municipal government in Mogadishu: ‘While some of the NGOs working in Mogadishu have tried to establish Memorandums of Understanding with the Ministry of Health, they have bypassed the municipal level and gone down to the district commissioner level, which is responsible only for law-and-order control functions rather than urban planning. The reasons why there has not been engagement with municipal authorities include fear of politicisation, the risk of corruption, and, more broadly, ignorance about their roles, if not reluctance to work with these urban actors’. As he goes on to underline, this approach effectively eliminates the potential of international assistance to strengthen public systems and institutions, which, in turn, means less impact for affected populations.

The literature also evidences a reluctance to engage or partner with non-traditional assistance actors. Zaman’s analysis of how ‘[t]he state, international humanitarian organisations, and local FBOs [faith-based organisations] all compete in the structuring of the humanitarian field’ sheds light on the often surprising role that FBOs play even in contexts where their activities are suppressed. He highlights the case of Iraqi refugees in Syria, where international responses have overlooked religious traditions, networks, and institutions. Studies such as this one illustrate how the traditional view of assistance does not necessarily respond to needs as affected populations see them. For some of Zaman’s respondents, for example, religion has helped them to adjust to forced displacement and ‘provides a means for reconciling the disjuncture and loss incurred through the process of displacement with a reliance on a just and merciful God’. Such effects are less tangible than traditional forms of assistance but become increasingly important in settings where protracted displacement, as well as the causes and process of displacement, have taken a psychological toll (see Haysom and Pavanello, 2011; Pavanello with Haysom, 2012).

In other contexts, the problem of partnership has related more to the logistical burden of managing multiple relationships at various levels. Crisp, Morris and Refstie point out that ‘[f]requently there are problems of coordination of (often large numbers of) development agencies and government ministries/agencies in urban areas, especially in capital cities’. To address this challenge, MSF has experimented by ascribing dedicated staff to the task of networking, recognising, in the words of Lucchi, that ‘networking is a complex operational task’. As Lucchi describes, the prioritisation of networking and the allocation of adequate financial and human resources to it as a discreet task have been seen by the organisation as critical in maximising the efficacy and impact of its projects, as in the case of Lagos, Nigeria. The experiences described in this volume serve to emphasise the need to develop more structured ways of coordinating with multiple actors, while underscoring the inadequacies of current structures such as the cluster system.

Conclusion

Academic, policy, and operational debates on urban displacement have been continuing for several decades. However, while the earlier academic discourse offers some important observations and learning that remains relevant today, less progress has been made in terms of improved humanitarian policy and operational practice in this respect. Despite ongoing challenges to conducting research in urban contexts, the early academic discourse of the 1970s and the 1980s has evolved from a focus on urban refugees to consideration of other aspects of urban crisis response, such as urban violence, urban-based natural disasters (including those relating to climate change), and urban internal displacement. This has contributed to greater awareness of the challenges and the opportunities of urbanisation more broadly, and as they relate to urban displacement. Nonetheless, this learning has not been effectively translated into substantially better policy and practice in the humanitarian sector, as shown by the critical reflections on urban responses in this volume.

The perspectives put forward here demonstrate that, while there is greater reflection in literature from the humanitarian sector on the complexities and the challenges, and, although perhaps to a lesser degree, on the opportunities for and the capacities of displaced populations in the urban environment, deficiencies remain in the policy and operational response. There has been inertia in the humanitarian community: the arguments for change are clear and have been so for decades, yet the system has not galvanised itself in response. Operational innovation exists but it is at an individual, rather than an institutional, level.

Clearly, greater effort is required to ensure that learning to date is captured and that there are mechanisms for the sharing of this information. But the fundamental problem facing the sector is that more knowledge will only lead to better policy and practice if there is commitment and leadership within the humanitarian sector to translate lessons into action. At the moment, for example, the system lacks an agency with a responsibility for urban IDPs, or donors that champion a system-sensitive approach to funding urban interventions. Without these, vulnerable populations will continue to fall through the gaps, and international humanitarian responses will fail to leverage their resources to achieve the sustainable development gains needed to address chronic vulnerability. What we do know about the need for more innovative approaches, greater investment in partnerships, and more tailored tools and programmes, ultimately needs to inform more effective responses on the ground.

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- ² Notably, however, the increasingly urban nature of armed conflicts and the implications for protection and assistance needs have received limited attention and reflection in recent years despite the prevalence of such situations in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere.
- ³ Elena Lucchi questions the value of emergency benchmarks in protracted situations, suggesting that such indicators ‘often show only moderate elevation of mortality, but it is protracted and spread out over a large population. In these situations, the excess death tolls might better reflect the magnitude of the crisis while evolution of mortality rates might indicate the trend’.
- ⁴ HPG interview with a member of the United Nations Agency for Human Settlements (UN-HABITAT), May 2012.

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