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Addressing urban crises: Bridging the humanitarian–development divide

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Abstract

The world is urbanizing rapidly. Demographic shifts are intersecting with the impacts of climate change, conflict and displacement. In many parts of the world, chronic stresses mean that large proportions of the urban population are already vulnerable. Rapid and poorly planned urbanization is not just an issue for governments and development specialists; humanitarian actors must also increase their understanding of and ability to operate within towns and cities at risk of crises. Their current approaches do not always adequately reflect and work with the reality of urban populations and the systems that support urban life. This means that humanitarian interventions may not contribute to sustainable urban development and the well-being of town and city dwellers in the longer term. This article argues that greater collaboration between humanitarian responders, municipal actors, development specialists and professional associations could lead to better outcomes for crisis-affected populations in both the short and long term.

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Background

The past decade has seen a gradual shift in policy thinking on the intersection between urbanization, sustainable development and humanitarian action. The implications of an increasingly urban world population, combined with climate change and the growth of poorly planned and built urban settlements, are beginning to dawn: humanitarians find themselves operating in urban areas more frequently, but their tools and approaches were largely designed with rural regions affected by floods or droughts, and refugee movements across remote borders, in mind. The characteristics of rapid urbanization – the poverty, vulnerability and everyday shocks and chronic stresses that accompany it in many parts of the world – intersect with a range of different emergency situations: conflict, violence, displacement, floods, earthquakes and other "natural" hazards, technological disasters and pandemics.[1] A move towards sustainable urban development and better enforcement of building and zoning codes in at-risk urban areas could greatly reduce death and destruction caused by natural hazards and the impacts of climate change. However, the pace of urbanization and the prohibitive cost of retrofitting existing buildings and infrastructure to an adequate standard in some of the world's poorest countries mean that humanitarian actors will inevitably be called upon to respond to more urban crises in future. But there is considerable scope for improvement in the way that humanitarians respond to such crises, and much that they can learn from other actors actively involved in promoting sustainable urban development.

The evolution of the policy framework for response in cities has been prompted by a number of crises affecting urban areas, during and after which humanitarian responders have questioned their own approaches: the effects of the 2010 Haitian earthquake on Port-au-Prince, the response to Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban in 2013, the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Freetown and Monrovia.[2] These debates have also been informed by the ongoing and very visible indirect impact of conflict on towns and cities, particularly in the countries surrounding Syria, where unprecedented numbers of refugees have sought sanctuary. The challenge of responding to massive influxes of refugees into urban areas of Jordan and Lebanon has been central to these discussions. The urban characteristics of this cross-border displacement are well documented.[3]

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1   See for example, Marion Harroff-Tavel, "Violence and Humanitarian Action in Urban Areas: New Challenges, New Approaches", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 92, No. 878, 2010, available at: www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/review/review-878-p329.htm (all internet references were accessed in September 2016).
2   See, for example, Victoria Maynard, *Experiences Following Typhoon Haiyan: Humanitarian Response to Urban Crises*, DFID, London, 2015; Donald Brown *et al., Urban Crises and Humanitarian Responses: A Literature Review*, University College London, 2015; International Housing Coalition, *Haiti Shelter Sector Assessment: One Year After the Earthquake*, Washington, DC, 2011.
3   For a general discussion and a range of articles on the topic of urban refugees and internally displaced persons, see "Adapting to Urban Displacement", thematic issue, *Forced Migration Review*, No. 34, February 2010.

A conference organized by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) in January 2012, entitled "Meeting the Urban Challenge: Adapting Humanitarian Response to a Changing World", drew the attention of the sector to its own shortcomings, as did the accompanying background paper for the event, creatively titled "'We're Not in the Field Anymore'".[4] It noted a failure of international agencies to "co-evolve" with urbanization, and a continued and serious lack of strategic and operational adaptation.[5] The need to move from a discussion of the complexities and challenges of operating in urban areas to changing policies and operations on the ground led the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) to initiate a collaboration on "urban crises" in 2014.[6] This partnership is based on the recognition that while appropriate responses will differ according to the type of crisis – conflict-related, displacement, "natural" or technological disasters – there is sufficient overlap in the changes needed in mindset and ways of working that render the focus on "urban crises" meaningful.

This article will set out the argument for why a change in approach in humanitarian response is needed, taking into account the challenges that these actors have experienced in recent urban crises, including the Haiti earthquake, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and the ongoing Syrian refugee crises. It ends by setting out some of the thematic areas where opportunities can be found for greater interaction and collaboration between humanitarian, development and urban actors responding to crisis-affected populations in urban areas.

Why the need for a new approach?

The world urban population is estimated to increase from 3.5 billion today to 6.2 billion in 2050, with most of the population growth concentrated in small to medium-sized settlements in Africa and Asia.[7] Of particular concern is the fact that the past forty years have witnessed a 326% increase in the urban populations of lower-income and fragile States.[8] The displaced are increasingly part of this global urban population, with over half of the world's internally displaced

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4   Ben Ramalingam, "'We're Not in the Field Anymore': Adapting Humanitarian Efforts to an Urban World", ALNAP, London, 2011.
5   *Ibid.*, p. 23.
6   For more information on DFID's urban crises programme, see the websites of its two main implementing partners, available at: www.rescue-uk.org/what-we-do/urban-crisis and www.iied.org/urban-crises-learning-fund.
7   United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision, Highlights*, New York, 2014, available at: http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Highlights/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf.
8   Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Global Estimates 2014: People Displaced by Disasters*, Geneva, 2014, available at: www.internal-displacement.org/publications/2014/globalestimates-2014-peopledisplaced-by-disasters.

persons (IDPs) and refugees (estimated as a total population of about 65.3 million[9]) residing in towns and cities.[10] Urban areas are now the backdrop for all sorts of crises. Many of these environments already have systemic obstacles to the equitable provision of basic services, security and welfare, even before an emergency.

Estimates from 2014 suggest that more than 880 million people live in informal urban settlements (sometimes referred to as slums), accounting for 29.7% of the urban population living in developing countries.[11] These residents often live with high levels of vulnerability, as the land they live on is exposed to hazards and they do not have the protective infrastructure, decent housing and access to basic services that could keep them safe. The very fact that these areas are informally occupied – and often informally governed – makes it difficult (or politically unpalatable) to reduce their exposure to natural and man-made hazards. They thus continue to accumulate acute and structural vulnerabilities and are frequently adversely affected by a range of shocks and stresses. Even small shocks can easily engender a humanitarian crisis.

These are also the areas where displaced people are most likely to settle. Residents in these areas may not have secure tenure, and when homes are destroyed, or people are forced to move, those who cannot prove their rights to land or housing can be severely disadvantaged. Even in wealthier areas of towns and cities in the developing world, poor urban planning and lax enforcement of planning legislation and building codes puts populations at risk.

Violence and conflict occur frequently in cities, as they are the locus of, on the one hand, political and economic power and assets, and on the other, social tensions and inequalities.[12] Urban warfare has been a constant feature of recent conflicts, complicating humanitarian operations, in particular in terms of access and protection. For example, in the Syrian conflict, the use of explosive weapons with wide area affects in urban areas has inflicted indiscriminate and devastating impacts in heavily populated areas. The besieging of towns and cities by parties to the conflict has further prevented the delivery of life-saving assistance to Syrian urban populations. Urban violence in contexts other than war is also leading to high levels of mortality in certain regions, and again compromises the ability of humanitarian actors to reach populations in need of assistance. For example, gang violence in the larger cities of Brazil has become so severe that international humanitarian actors, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, have developed programmes to promote safer access to schools and health-care facilities.[13] Many humanitarian actors responding to the 2010 earthquake in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, were ill-prepared or unwilling

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9   See: www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html.
10   IDMC, *Global Overview 2015: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence*, Geneva, 2015; Nicholas Crawford, John Cosgrave, Simone Haysom and Nadine Walicki, *Protracted Displacement: Uncertain Paths to Self-Reliance in Exile*, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2015.
11   United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *World Cities Report 2016*, Nairobi, 2016.
12   See "Conflict and Violence in 21st Century Cities", special issue, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2014.
13   For a discussion on this, see: www.icrc.org/en/document/brazil-partnerships-reduce-impact-violence-rio-de-janeiro.

to deliver assistance in certain neighbourhoods with very high levels of violence prior to the disaster.[14]

As noted above, recent crises have highlighted the consequences of urbanization for humanitarian assistance and the inadequacy of traditional response. However, the concentration of people, industries and resources, the existence of infrastructure and market systems, and the presence (albeit often weak) of institutions of various types presents an opportunity for humanitarian action to contribute to the longer-term development of inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable urban centres.

There is a pressing need to reshape humanitarian action so that it harnesses the resources and opportunities already present in urban areas and works to support, restore and improve existing urban systems after a crisis. While complex, the urban environment presents humanitarian and development actors with the opportunity to operate at scale, and in a cost-effective way, but only if they work with the ingenuity and perseverance of urban populations and grasp the way that urban systems were functioning prior to the crisis. Key to this is an appreciation of existing social and human capital in towns and cities, and the opportunities provided by local governance institutions, markets and the private sector to support relief and recovery. Also important is recognition of the fact that displaced populations can be self-reliant and contribute to the local economy, and that humanitarian response can benefit from the expertise of urban development actors and existing development programming.

Challenges to responding effectively in urban areas

At present humanitarian response is not well aligned with the way that towns and cities are managed locally, and how urban life plays out. This puts a limit on how effective humanitarian response to a crisis in a densely populated area can be. Da Silva, Kernaghan and Luque, in a paper exploring the challenges of urban climate change, point out that urban areas must be understood through a consideration of the range of different systems of which they are composed, not just their individual parts.[15] These systems include governance, infrastructure, markets and social systems, among others, and to take them all in to account requires a more holistic and spatial approach in which urban areas are understood as "complex 'living' systems".[16] The interconnectedness of these systems is one defining characteristic of urban areas, as is the density and heterogeneity of urban neighbourhoods, and the presence and proximity of different governance actors.[17]

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14 Matthew Bolton, *Human Security after State Collapse: Global Governance in Post-Earthquake Haiti*, LSE Global Governance Research Paper RP 01/20112011, London, 2011.

15 Jo Da Silva, Sam Kernaghan and Andrés Luque, "A Systems Approach to Meeting the Challenges of Urban Climate Change", *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2012.

16 *Ibid.*

17 For a definition of "urbanism", see: www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/publicity/CitiesBrochure.pdf.

Informal and formal systems coexist in cities, and the intersection of the formal and informal, and the different scales at which urban residents interact – household, neighbourhood, city – also contribute to the specificity of urban life and livelihoods.

There has been a discernible shift in the policies, programming and operational tools of many humanitarian agencies that are responding in urban contexts. For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released an urban refugees policy in 2009, and other institutions within the United Nations (UN) will be releasing strategies and policies for their programming in urban areas in 2017, spurred on by the UN's Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, Habitat III, in October 2016. More critical is that these policies and statements of intent are put into practice, to ensure humanitarian interventions in urban areas fully harness the potential of cities and their inhabitants. The current approach to assistance is often siloed within sectors, and bound by short timeframes, post-crisis, that lead to a disregard for the urban past and not a great deal of preoccupation with its future. Traditionally humanitarians tend to analyze needs and capacities at the household or individual level. This means their response may not take into account the ways that households engage with the fabric of the city and access services through either formal or informal networks and systems. While there have been advances in how coordination is managed, the current cluster system still struggles to institutionalize working with local market mechanisms, supporting local authorities or restoring/bolstering existing service delivery mechanisms. Opportunities are lost for wider and longer-lasting positive impact on urban life. In the worst cases, humanitarian interventions may distort and damage informal or formal economies and service provision, particularly if these involve the establishment of parallel systems for distributing goods and providing services.

For example, a traditional humanitarian response (i.e., with material and logistical assistance based primarily on direct service provision to affected people, and the construction of camps within or near to urban areas) can have knock-on negative impacts on urban planning and the functioning of local markets for food, water and energy. By contrast, cash-transfer programming and the demand for goods and services from affected populations may serve to stimulate urban markets.[18] (Cash programming will inevitably be more difficult in towns and cities directly impacted by conflict and where supply chains and markets are no longer functioning adequately.) Traditional approaches may generate dependency and fail to tap into the potential of urban refugees and IDPs who bring many assets, skills and resources to their host cities which can expand and diversify existing markets.[19] This is a particular lost opportunity for women, who can earn

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18 Christian Lehman and Daniel Masterson, *Emergency Economies: The Impact of Cash Assistance in Lebanon*, IRC, London, 2014.

19 Karen Jacobsen, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2006; Alexander Betts, Louise Bloom, Josiah Kaplan and Naohiko Omata, *Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions*, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford, 2014.

income and increase their financial independence in urban areas[20] (although cultural attitudes amongst some displaced groups and fears of harassment and gender-based violence may also prevent women from accessing work outside the home). Encouragingly, over the course of 2016, a number of refugee-hosting countries have announced their intention to provide greater access to livelihood opportunities for displaced people, with support from international donors.

Traditional responses to displacement, whether caused by a disaster or conflict, are also often centred on accommodating populations in camps. Today, however, despite popular perceptions, only a minority of refugees and IDPs are housed in camps. In the Middle East, for example, most refugees from Syria are living in rented accommodation, unfinished buildings, or makeshift shacks within or on the outskirts of urban centres. But images of displaced populations living in rows of tents are still widely distributed in the media, disproportionate amounts of funding are channelled towards camp-based responses, and politicians and celebrities continue to have photo calls in places like Dadaab or Zatari. So dominant is this paradigm that some actors (notably the UNHCR) use the labels "camp" and "non-camp" for displaced populations, thus classifying the majority with reference to a minority and with one fell swoop erasing the critical distinctions in capacities, needs, access to services and protection concerns between displaced people living in urban environments and those in rural areas.

Humanitarian actors struggle to deal with the complexity of towns and cities and to take full advantage of the capabilities and resources present in urban areas. Acknowledging this lack of capacity and the general dearth of evidence on how best to assess need, target interventions, communicate with affected populations and assess outcomes is an important first step. While there is no magic bullet, the knowledge and expertise of urban development actors, and of the formal and informal institutions they operate within, should more routinely inform humanitarian action. The exclusion of development perspectives in immediate humanitarian response can impede long-term recovery. While humanitarian actors cannot solve structural urban problems, they can operate in ways that better support city systems and establish new frameworks within which future urban development can flourish, while limiting disruption to urban development trajectories. It should be stressed here that the imperative to save lives can be aligned with the fast-tracking of recovery and strengthening of resilience.

Opportunities to bridge the humanitarian-development divide

The World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 saw the launch of the Global Alliance for Urban Crises, a platform designed to bridge the divide between

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20   Victoria Metcalfe and Simone Haysom, with Ellen Martin, *Sanctuary in the City: Urban Displacement in Kabul*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2012.

humanitarian responders and a range of actors with urban expertise, including networks of local authorities, professional associations of planners, architects and engineers, and development actors.[21] With more than seventy organizations as members, the Alliance is involved in a range of activities that will support and promote more appropriate humanitarian action in towns and cities affected by crisis. Above all, Alliance members will seek to make the most of the opportunities that towns and cities provide, and to find different, more appropriate ways of working that support both crisis-affected populations and their urban environments, helping them to return to normality as soon as possible. The Alliance is premised on the idea that bringing together the two constituencies of urbanists and humanitarians will engender collaborations which meet both short-term humanitarian and longer-term development needs of urban populations and their environments. The Alliance is just one example of an initiative that seeks to "bridge the humanitarian-development divide" – there is scope for much more. The following paragraphs outline some of the recommendations developed by members of the Alliance, which they are now putting in to practice. These could serve to guide innovation and intervention by other actors and networks.

One key area that can help bridge the humanitarian development divide is greater engagement with municipal authorities.[22] Moving beyond simply informing local governance actors of their plans, and getting consent, responders to humanitarian crises should, where possible, be striving to find more substantive ways to engage. This will vary depending on local circumstances – including capacity, financial probity and ability to work with external actors – but even in the most difficult of circumstances, including cities in conflict, this engagement is critical. Humanitarian agencies should be making the most of local knowledge held within these institutions – of populations, existing services and infrastructure – and working with authorities to communicate with urban residents, ensuring clarity on eligibility and mitigating social tensions while also taking future development needs and aspirations into account. As mayors often point out, they are the closest interface between urban populations and the State, and are generally the first port of call for residents in difficulty. Efforts to coordinate and collaborate with municipal authorities should also seek to build local capacity for disaster risk reduction, preparedness and crisis response, generating longer-term returns from short-term emergency interventions. Attempts to this end were made in the response to Typhoon Haiyan, with the municipality of Tacloban.[23]

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21 See: www.urbancrises.org.
22 Mercy Corps has made collaboration with municipality authorities in Lebanon a central part of its approach to the Syrian refugee crises; for a range of materials related to this issue, see: www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/role-municipalities-syria-refugee-crisis. The World Bank and other donors are also providing additional support to municipalities in Jordan where municipal services are under strain as a result of large influxes of Syrian refugees. Background documents can be accessed at: http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/532171468273353365/Jordan-Emergency-Services-and-Social-Resilience-Project.
23 See V. Maynard, above note 2, for a discussion on this.

Related to the above, "area"- or "settlement"-based approaches can render humanitarian interventions more legible to local actors and institutions, and find ways to ensure their buy-in and cooperation. These approaches take a specific geographical area (a municipality or neighbourhood, for example) as the primary reference for planning and delivering assistance, and focus on providing a range of different types of support to the whole population of the area. This is in contrast to approaches to the delivery of humanitarian assistance based on particular population groups (such as displaced people) or that provide just one type of assistance (such as shelter, or water and sanitation). While there is still debate on the precise definition of area-based approaches and very little evaluative material on how they have operated in practice, the fact that these are generally multi-sector, and as such take into account the range of needs an individual or family living in an urban area will have, means they are more likely than other types of interventions to reflect how towns and cities were managed before a crisis.[24] They can help alter the scale of interventions, complementing the traditional humanitarian focus on the affected individual or family with a broader lens that considers how those individuals can get the goods and services they need from existing urban systems, and ensuring that interventions in one geographical area do not obstruct or hinder work elsewhere. An area-based approach can also go some way to mitigating the problem of who is affected, critical in circumstances of chronic poverty amongst populations hosting displaced people, or a large event, such as an earthquake, that impacts an entire city. It can also help to avoid social tensions when one group, for example refugees, is provided with assistance while others with similar needs are not targeted. This type of tension has arisen as a result of the support received by Syrian refugees living in impoverished urban areas of Jordan and Lebanon.[25] A geographical approach to assessment, targeting and programming will have implications for the coordination of humanitarian assistance, which is generally managed along sectoral lines. The way that agencies are encouraged to work together in sectoral "clusters" (e.g. coordination amongst all actors providing shelter assistance) prevents a more holistic view of the needs of urban populations and their surroundings, and runs contrary to the intersectoral way in which towns and cities are generally managed.

One additional way in which the humanitarian–development divide could be bridged is by ensuring that the right type of urban expertise is available to municipal and national authorities, humanitarian agencies and UN country teams. The types of skills and experience needed to, for example, improve or repair municipal water systems are not often found in humanitarian agencies, or on the rosters of experts that can be deployed in emergencies, as a review of the

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24 Elizabeth Parker and Victoria Maynard, *Humanitarian Response to Urban Crises: A Review of Area-Based Approaches*, Human Settlements working paper, IIED, London, 2015.

25 See Emily Sloane, *The Impact of Oxfam's Cash Distributions on Syrian Refugees Households in Host Communities and Informal Settlements in Jordan*, Oxfam, Oxford, 2014; Silvia Hidalgo *et al.*, *Beyond Humanitarian Assistance: UNHCR and the Response to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and Jordan*, Independent Programme Evaluation, TRANSTEC, Brussels, 2015.

water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector has shown.[26] Deployment of people with skills who are able to work on urban water systems, for example, and of urban planners, architects and engineers, could also help inform emergency response with a longer-term, more developmental approach that ensures temporary interventions do not have long-term negative consequences for the urban fabric and its economies, infrastructure and societies.

Conclusion

Discussions on the world's "urban future" are gaining ground, not least in view of the UN's Habitat III conference, which was held in Quito in October 2016. The outcome document of the conference, *The New Urban Agenda*, references the need to support crisis-affected people in ways that also contribute to sustainable urban development. Other references to humanitarian issues – notably urban resilience and disaster preparedness – in what is primarily a document focused on urban development, would suggest that the international policy arena is gradually becoming more open to dialogue across the development and humanitarian spheres on the issue of urban crises. The establishment of the Global Alliance for Urban Crises, and related commitments made by its broad range of members, should help to ensure that these very welcome changes in the policy environment translate to innovations in operations on the ground, and an overall move towards humanitarian response that is more appropriately tailored to the urban environment. Over the coming years, the Alliance will stimulate the right types of conversations and collaborations between diverse actors that share an interest in safe, sustainable and resilient cities, but there is scope for many other actors to become involved. Equally, humanitarian agencies must realize that our shared urban future will require them to fundamentally rethink how they operate in cities experiencing crises, including how they recruit and train their own staff, engage with local actors and deliver assistance to populations in need.

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26   Richard Luff, *Review of Humanitarian WASH Preparedness and Response in Urban Areas*, consultancy report prepared for UNICEF (mimeo), 2014.