

Sanctuary in the city? Reframing responses to protracted urban displacement

Simone Haysom

Key messages

- Protracted urban displacement raises both programmatic and political challenges for humanitarian actors. Responding to these challenges will require fundamental changes in approaches to the urban displaced and host societies.
- Reframing responses to urban displacement will also involve local and national governments, and human rights and development actors.
- Narratives around protracted urban displacement must also change to reflect the ingenuity and fortitude displaced populations typically display, the opportunities for safety and self-sufficiency that urban areas represent and the contribution that the displaced can make to host societies.

Simone Haysom is a Research Officer with the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG).



This HPG Policy Brief draws on the findings of the research project 'Sanctuary in the City', which was made possible by the generous funding of DANIDA/MFA Denmark.

Overseas Development Institute

203 Blackfriars Road,
London SE1 8NJ

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Websites: www.odi.org.uk/hpg
and www.odihpn.org



In 2010, half of the world's refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) were thought to be in urban areas, many of them in protracted displacement with little likelihood of ever returning home.¹ Although there is every reason to believe that the proportion of displaced people in urban areas will rise in coming years, the implications of protracted urban displacement have not been given due weight by an international aid and governance system that has historically focused its displacement responses on rural camps.

Addressing protracted urban displacement is both a programmatic and a political challenge. It calls for projects which support self-sufficiency and address issues of safety and discrimination for the displaced, while also benefiting the host community. Politically, it calls for a commitment to addressing the core vulnerabilities of the displaced, linked to economic participation, the political processes determining how host states invest in their

¹ Roger Zetter (ed.), *World Disasters Report 2012* (Geneva: IFRC, 2012).

own cities and urban populations and their social integration. It also means challenging the narrative of vulnerability and victimhood that so often surrounds discussion of the phenomenon. A new narrative is required, one which gives much more credit to the resilience, ingenuity and fortitude displaced populations typically display, acknowledges the opportunities for safety and self-sufficiency that urban areas represent and highlights the contribution that the displaced can make to the societies in which they have taken refuge.

From camps to slums

Over the last few decades a large proportion of the humanitarian sector's engagement with civilians affected by war has taken place in massive refugee camps. For historical, political and programmatic reasons, camps have shaped humanitarian approaches to displacement by UN agencies and NGOs, as well as states. Camps enable the delivery of large amounts of assistance to large numbers of people, often over many years. They also

give assistance actors a high degree of control in shaping the environment (putting in sanitation, setting standards for shelter size, materials and the width of pathways); the Sphere standards, although ostensibly concerned with the quality of assistance in any context, were initially essentially focussed on how to create a good camp. For host states, encampment is politically tolerable as a way of containing and controlling displaced populations, usually at the expense of the donors that provide the required funding. They also provide huge employment opportunities and revenues for host governments.

Conversely, humanitarian actors almost universally regard urban environments as difficult and challenging. Urban refugee and IDP populations are usually treated with benign neglect or hostility by host state governments, and urban displacement responses have been very poorly funded by international donors. States also see self-settled refugees (and sometimes IDPs) as a much greater risk to local security, and much more likely to cause resentment among local residents, who may regard them as taking 'their' jobs and putting pressure on public services and city resources such as rental housing.

Protracted problems and long-term opportunities

Over the last four years, HPG has been documenting and analysing the situation of the displaced in urban areas, and the extent to which national and international actors are meeting their needs.² The challenges facing the displaced – and the urban poor more generally – include a lack of urban development in informal areas, poor-quality services, scarce employment opportunities and poor transport. Along with other residents they face threats from criminals or the police and enjoy scant access to justice. The urban poor in general often have little influence over how or whether their needs are addressed, and the displaced also often suffer from legal and social discrimination. In Kabul, for instance, incoming migrants from the south face discrimination and hostility derived from their ethnicity, rural background and perceived associations with the insurgency and with drug-smuggling networks.

Irregular status led Iraqi refugees in Amman to accept high rents and extortionate behaviour from landlords, as they felt unable to take complaints to the authorities. In Nairobi, undocumented refugees claimed that the police use irregular status as grounds for harassment and extortion. Registered refugees may be denied core rights that would

² For the project outputs, see <http://www.odi.org.uk/projects/2437-sanctuary-city-displacement-vulnerability>.

enable them to live safely in cities, including the right to work or access public services. In situations where the political discourse around the displaced is negative, even IDPs and refugees with the legal right to be in the city are highly vulnerable to discrimination and aggression. This is the case for Afghan refugees in Peshawar and Somali refugees in Nairobi, where the governments of Pakistan and Kenya have threatened to expel refugees or confine them to camps.³ Increased harassment of refugees by the police has also been reported in both cities.

In all the cities we looked at, livelihoods were a key concern. In Kabul unskilled men go to a central square and wait to be selected by prospective employers looking for manual labourers for construction work. In Nairobi unskilled labourers compete on a daily basis, often incurring considerable transport costs in their search for work. Jobs in the informal sector tend to be very badly paid, carry no labour benefits and entail long working hours. In the formal sector wages can be unsustainably low, even for key public sector workers such as teachers and the police. By far the largest group of concern are people who are poorly educated and lack skills marketable in the urban economy, as is almost always the case for IDPs who have fled rural areas. A key challenge to securing livelihoods is the necessity for networks or contacts through family, ethnic or social ties – contacts which can be hard for newcomers, outsiders or chronically marginalised people to attain.

The urban displaced also bring skills and resources to local economies and develop relationships with host societies. In Peshawar, locals acknowledged that certain industries relied on the labour of Afghan refugees to function; likewise, Afghan refugees have established successful businesses with Pakistani partners (due to restrictions on ownership). Displaced people who have established themselves in business often inject economic dynamism into local economies. In Nairobi, for example, the rise of the suburb of Eastleigh as an economic hub is attributed to the activities of Somali traders. Urban displacement can thus represent a chance for self-reliance and the development of new skills, and an opportunity for the displaced to contribute to local societies.

From tools to approaches: programmatic and political challenges

In response to the changing demographics of displacement there has been much debate in the humanitarian sector about how practice and policy will have to change. This has been part of a broader

³ Refugees International, 'Kenya: Government Directive Leads to Severe Abuses and Forced Returns', 27 February 2013, <http://refugeesinternational.org>.

conversation about the challenges presented by urban humanitarian crises, with a particular focus on post-disaster relief and reconstruction and disaster preparedness and response.⁴ These debates have often been preoccupied with a need for new ‘tools’ – i.e. the retrofitting of instruments used in camps and rural areas for urban environments, or the design of new tools to identify humanitarian need and determine the type and standards of assistance required. Some progress has been made over the last few years, in particular through the large-scale post-earthquake operation in Haiti and refugee responses in Middle Eastern cities,⁵ and there is a growing body of documented practice.

Policy is also changing. In 2009 UNHCR published a landmark statement on urban displacement which recognised the presence of refugees in cities and their right to assistance.⁶ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas launched a strategy in 2010 which sets out recommendations for improving urban response, such as promoting the protection of vulnerable populations and prioritising the restoration of livelihoods and economic opportunities. Several large humanitarian NGOs have undertaken internal reviews of their urban programmes.⁷

While these developments are laudable and encouraging, they have not yet gained the critical mass necessary to shift focus, funding and institutional commitment in due proportion to the scale of urban displacement. The humanitarian sector is still unprepared for major urban crises, and ad hoc and tentative in its engagement with urban displacement. The IASC strategy does not seem to have been taken on board by major agencies, and there are few examples of effective coordination between humanitarian and development actors. Large populations of the displaced in urban areas go without assistance or attention, and there is general uncertainty about what role the international humanitarian system should have in urban areas; despite a recognition that humanitarian actors should and can operate there, institutional priorities remain focussed on camp

⁴ ALNAP, *Responding to Urban Disasters: Learning from Previous Relief and Recovery Operations* (London: ALNAP, 2013).

⁵ Jeff Crisp et al., *Surviving in the City: A Review of UNHCR's Operation for Iraqi Refugees in Urban Areas of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria* (Geneva: UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service, 2009); *Haiti Humanitarian Assistance Evaluation: From a Resilience Perspective* (New Orleans, LA: Tulane University, 2013).

⁶ UNHCR *Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2009).

⁷ See for example *Learning from the City: British Red Cross Urban Learning Project Scoping Study*, British Red Cross, 2009; *Framework for Urban Self-Reliance: A How-to Guide*, Women's Refugee Commission, 2012.

populations, and agencies struggle to design and secure funding for programme responses to urban displacement. This hesitation can be attributed to both programmatic and political challenges.

The programmatic challenge

Urban environments raise several significant challenges for agencies accustomed to providing assistance in camps. Humanitarian actors have less control over the urban environment, and local authorities play a larger role in shaping the context and responding to vulnerability. Material needs, for instance for food assistance and shelter, may be less urgent than in camps as urban residents can access goods and services in urban markets. Conversely, issues related to protection, such as police harassment, exploitation by employers and realisation of the right to work, may be more prominent and harder to tackle.⁸

Our studies found that, for the displaced in protracted situations, livelihoods and protection were crucial areas for intervention, yet neither was a prominent focus in humanitarian projects. Despite huge demand, most IDPs and refugees interviewed did not have access to skills training programmes, vocational training or loans to set up their own businesses. There were few efforts to find out what skills displaced residents had, or how these skills could be used to create employment opportunities. Likewise, while the displaced faced many protection threats, including gender-based violence and police harassment, there were few attempts to document or report them, or to raise these issues with government authorities. Responding to protection threats in urban areas is likely to require working with the justice sector and tackling issues related to policing. Humanitarian agencies will also need to develop expertise in unfamiliar areas, such as analysis of local labour markets and economies.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem that humanitarian actors have encountered in urban areas has been the shift from ‘wholesale’ service provision in camps, where all residents are potential beneficiaries, to operating in contexts where it is not possible or necessarily ethical to identify beneficiaries by displacement status. Many organisations have still not resolved the problem of targeting displaced populations dispersed in the midst of an equally or even poorer host population. The difficulties that can arise were evident in Jordan during the Iraqi refugee crisis. Some projects in Amman tried to resolve this problem by including quotas for needy host community beneficiaries, but these were insufficient to meet demand. Some

⁸ This is not to downplay the relevance of protection issues in camps, where assault, theft and rape are often problems.

humanitarian workers claim that this led to rising levels of resentment towards both Iraqis and foreign NGOs. Community-based and area-based approaches could help to address this problem as they target areas with high concentrations of displaced residents, but also include host communities in projects. However, this approach has not been widely used and experience has not been well-documented. There is a need to refine these approaches so that they can be implemented at scale.

The political challenge

The development of sustainable solutions for IDPs in countries where displacement and rapid urbanisation have occurred in tandem will require an engagement with urban development debates, and working with host states and host communities. Defending the rights of the urban displaced, such as refugees in Pakistan and Kenya, who face movement restrictions, protection threats related to their identity and forcible relocation from cities to camps, will require raising the profile of refugees' social and economic rights.

In general there is reluctance to broaden humanitarian activities to encompass more developmental approaches. This is despite the fact that projects that foster self-reliance or encourage social integration are supported by existing legal frameworks and by ongoing initiatives in the UN system to improve the prospects for the displaced to find 'solutions'. Approaches which involve the host state and promote self-sufficiency accord with the IASC strategy on humanitarian response in urban areas (Strategic Objectives 1 and 4), as well as the Transitional Solutions Initiative Plus and the UN Secretary-General Decision on Durable Solutions. Such approaches are also supportive of legal frameworks on displacement such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Humanitarian actors increasingly call for development actors to assume the primary responsibility for responding to the needs of the displaced. There is no doubt that development actors should facilitate the inclusion of displaced populations in development plans and fund projects which would alleviate the strain they place on local services or open up protection space.⁹

⁹ See A. Betts, *Development Assistance and Refugees: Towards a North-South Grand Bargain?*, Forced Migration Policy Briefing, Refugee Studies Centre, 2009.

Transferring responsibility for the urban displaced from humanitarian to development actors will not solve the problem. 'Early recovery' initiatives and other variations of 'bridging the relief to development divide' have repeatedly failed to gain traction.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it may be possible to increase collaboration at local levels on urban displacement responses if humanitarians are able to convince other actors of the relevance of urban displacement to their mandates. As a starting point, humanitarians could translate their analysis into the 'language' of other sectors, for instance engaging with the development discourse around 'inclusive' and 'sustainable' cities and expanding on how responding to displacement fits into these objectives.

This point applies equally to engagement with host states and communities. Generating support for long-term settlement will involve a much greater focus on the positive aspects of migration, and the contributions displaced people can make to the social and economic life of the cities in which they live. Evidence-based and strategic communication about the character and implications of influxes of displaced populations will be critical in influencing how the displaced are received in society. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) argues that 'accurately informing relevant stakeholders and the wider public about migration may be the single most important policy tool in all societies faced with increasing diversity'.¹¹ In a similar vein, in its evaluation of its urban programmes UNHCR concludes that the relationship between refugees and the host government and other factors related to civil society and socio-economic conditions are as significant in influencing the lives and livelihoods of the displaced as their formal legal status.

The humanitarian sector's adaption to urban displacement is not just about new tools, but about changing approaches too. The agenda is larger than the concerns of humanitarians alone, spanning human rights, development and political action. Likewise, the condition of urban displacement is not just about vulnerability, but also about opportunity, inclusion and participation. Achieving this orientation may be one of the sternest tests of whether the international community is equal to the challenge that urbanisation presents.

¹⁰ B. Descamps and S. Lohse, *Still Minding the Gap: A Review of Efforts To Link Relief and Development in Situations of Human Displacement, 2001-2012* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2013).

¹¹ IOM, *World Migration Report 2011* (Geneva: International Organisation of Migration, 2011), p. xiii.