A new strategy for meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas

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Experience indicates that significant challenges remain across key humanitarian operational approaches related to the needs of growing numbers of IDPs and refugees who migrate to cities. Addressing these issues more effectively will require scaling up, new tools and humanitarian guidance.

These challenges, as well as potential opportunities, were highlighted in a set of case studies prepared for the IASC as background to its Strategy for urban areas [see box]. The case studies focused on Nairobi and Eldoret in Kenya (post-election violence), Manila (typhoons) and Port-au-Prince (earthquake). Drawing on this experience and lessons which emerged from it, this article considers four of the most pressing challenges and some of the potential opportunities.

Working with community organisations and resources

In all four of these cities, in both chronic and acute crisis situations, urban dwellers relied heavily on the community setting for their protection, housing, access to basic services and support for their livelihoods. The challenge faced by those designing humanitarian responses in these cities was to develop knowledge of these communities and tap their strengths.

The international community’s restricted understanding and knowledge of the urban context are evident in:

- very limited interaction with national and local governments, communities and the local private sector, leading to a supply-driven approach by humanitarian actors which occasionally results in negative impacts on pre-existing capacities
- an inability to stay on top of rapidly moving situations in an urban context
- a registration system for affected populations which focuses on large self-settled camps rather than neighbourhoods: this tends to generate incomplete and inaccurate information which can hamper return to sites of origin by concentrating the distribution of support in the camps (as in Haiti).
- over-reliance on satellite imagery to capture the complexity of the impact on the built environment
- uncoordinated actions, such as the limited damage assessment conducted in Haiti with limited recognition of socio-economic factors and without meaningful communication with communities, owners and previous occupants.

Displacement and urban environmental conditions

Urban communities vary significantly from one city to another, and are very diverse compared with rural areas. Some urban slums and squatter settlements have been more or less stable communities whereas others have chaotic agglomerations of people. Urban growth tends to be rapid and unplanned, and urban populations very mobile; their communities and neighbourhoods can be extremely large and densely built and are often in a state of flux. The traditional camp approach in rural settings, in contrast, relies on the supposed homogeneous character of communities.

Sudden onset emergencies and the arrival of new populations in the case-study cities resulted in extreme pressure on existing infrastructure and services, especially where the displaced people were hosted by friends and relatives. The coping strategy of the vast majority of the urban displaced in all four case-study cities was in fact to find host families to take them in. A strategy to support host families in existing communities is thus urgently needed, given the time it takes for longer-term housing solutions to be implemented. Care should be taken, however, to ensure that the hosting culture is not undermined by formalised host family support programmes.

The case studies identified generic problems for all those affected by crisis in urban settings but forced migrants and other displaced people face particular risks and hazards. The case studies covered all humanitarian sectors; this article looks at just two sectors – protection and shelter – with some of the findings pertaining to these areas.

Security and protection

The security and protection needs of affected urban populations constitute one of the most significant urban challenges. The aftermath of crises is likely to precipitate
an increase in urban violence as affected populations compete for scarce essential resources such as food, water and shelter. At the same time the capacities of national and local government departments tend to become overstretched with arrival of IDPs from the same or neighbouring cities.

Cities are generally not safe havens to which to escape. Indeed, the case studies point out that, out of fear of harassment, detention and possible *refoulement*, many refugee and IDP populations live in a precarious legal status; this reduces and often impedes their access to official protection machinery. Locating displaced persons, identifying them and limiting assistance only to them all run the risk of placing them in danger and this gives rise to problems that are both operational and ethical.

A significant challenge is how to protect a) those IDPs and refugees who wish to remain anonymous and b) others who are hard to identify in dispersed communities.

In Kenya, it is to be hoped that the new draft National IDP Policy will become an integral part of Kenya’s legal framework, serving as a guarantor of IDP protection through all phases of displacement and during the return phase. This should help facilitate the return of IDPs to urban areas from transit settlements. A national IDP Policy such as that adopted in Kenya should become an integral part of the IDP protection framework elsewhere too.

UNHCR has developed a Participatory Protection Appraisal tool for use in training local government to be able to detect and appraise protection problems in communities and in disasters. The tool has specific applications for urban settings and shows great promise; if implementation in the pilot project is successful, it could be scaled up for other urban contexts. Care is needed to ensure that there will be sufficient funds not just to use the appraisal tool but to act on the recommendations that emerge from its use.

The case studies show the value of setting up information centres for newly arrived refugees and IDPs – which can then be tapped as sources for information on urban vulnerability and IDP profiling. Community Information Centres and Safe Houses are useful in enabling urban communities to identify and target displaced people where there is a need to identify ‘invisible’ caseloads. These models could be replicated in more communities but such activities are resource-intensive and may not find sufficient donor support.

Information centres can help newly arriving refugees to learn about the availability of community goods and services, better understand their rights and responsibilities, learn where to get treatment for ‘stigma’ issues such as SGBV and HIV/AIDS and, in the case of refugees, find out where to get language lessons. If they were open to all in the community it could serve to reduce the possibility of tensions between displaced people and the host community.

These approaches require guarantees of ‘tolerance space’ by national and local authorities to protect information and the identities of visitors to such centres. This is crucial as visitors to the information centres will shun them if they suspect their anonymity may be at risk.

Agencies could make greater use of information technologies, for example by periodically text-messaging to community groups information about community services, events, new legislation and human rights issues relevant to refugees and IDPs in urban areas.

**Shelter**

A salient feature of all four case studies is that the crises left a significant number of displaced people with no satisfactory shelter for protracted periods. The common challenge was how to provide adequate shelter to all, especially in cities where the sheer numbers and density of populations generate chronic conditions since longer-term housing solutions are generally only slowly implemented and where there already exist enormous backlogs in providing satisfactory housing.

For example, in Manila over 5,000 families displaced by floods caused by typhoon Ketsana remained homeless in evacuation centres and transitional shelters and with host families over a year later, adding to the pre-disaster backlog of 500,000 persons in need of permanent housing solutions. While the Shelter Clusters in both Kenya and the Philippines devised strategies for shelter solutions, these are proving very slow to implement. Clearly, new thinking is required to assist IDPs with faster and better housing options. For example, many people displaced within Manila were paying some kind of rent prior to the emergency; this pre-existing culture of rent-paying could offer a way to provide shelter to the homeless. Shelter materials were provided to urban IDPs in Eldoret. However, since many IDPs had been used to living in concrete structures, they were not willing to accept assistance in the form of what they considered inferior materials. Nor should transitional shelter solutions be an indirect means to shelve permanent housing plans and continue to allow people to live in hazardous conditions.

In Haiti, Shelter Cluster discussions over the use and appropriateness of emergency centres resulted in these being confirmed as the only option for emergency shelter provision. Other options such as providing dedicated evacuation facilities were thought likely to result in these being taken over as new informal settlements.

In the Philippines, a private company was assisting relocation through the development of low-cost,
Preventing partner violence in refugee and immigrant communities

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For many refugees and other forced migrants, sexual and gender-based violence does not necessarily stop after resettlement; for some, that may be when it starts.

Although some research suggests that domestic or intimate partner violence (IPV) is no more or less prevalent among minority groups in the United States than in the general population, refugees and immigrants face special barriers to receiving appropriate services. The causes of violence are multiple and complex but the intense stress associated with adjustment to a new life can create tension and conflict that may make IPV more likely. In the US, changes involving greater female empowerment or independence may disrupt a previously established balance of power within a family and precipitate forms of emotional, psychological or physical abuse. It has also been argued that the psychological effects of experiencing the normalisation of violence in countries at war may be contributing factors for intimate partner violence.

Although there is no universally accepted definition of IPV, it is generally understood as actual or threatened acts of physical, sexual, psychological, financial and verbal harm, including stalking. Intimate partners include current or former spouses (including common-law), boyfriends, girlfriends and persons wishing to be in a romantic relationship. They may or may not be cohabiting.

Over the past decade, a growing body of research suggests that there is not one but several types of violence that occurs in intimate relationships and that these different types require different kinds of interventions. What is not yet known is the extent to which IPV as experienced by refugees and immigrants falls into the same types.

Addressing IPV in refugee and immigrant communities is complicated by a number of factors. The domestic violence prevention community in the US is largely organised around separating perpetrators and victims. The assumption is that violence occurs in a cycle and that separating the perpetrator and victim is the best and most long-lasting solution. However, for cultural reasons and due to the vulnerability created by migration, separating a refugee or immigrant IPV survivor from her or his family may not be the most advisable course of action; many refugees prefer to find remedies within their relationships. As one service provider put it, “Over the last decade, I’ve learned that the priority [among refugee clients], rather than safety, is family preservation.”