



Cities and towns

This **Editors' briefing** provides an overview of **FMR issue 63's** feature theme articles on **Cities and towns**, with links to the relevant articles.

Cities and towns are on the frontline of receiving and welcoming people who have been displaced. In the 20 articles on **Cities and towns** in this issue of FMR, policymakers, practitioners, researchers, representatives of cities and international city-focused alliances, and displaced people themselves debate the challenges facing both the urban authorities and their partners, and those who have sought refuge.

A number of authors explore new ways of working in urban settings – including area-based approaches, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and city-to-city collaboration – while others offer insights and inspiration from local responses and the perspectives of displaced and host communities. Other authors examine how camp management practices can be applied in urban settings, how resilience can be bolstered by improved communication and information sharing, and how municipal capacity and community dialogue can be strengthened in order to improve protection in high-risk neighbourhoods. The issue also draws out practical lessons for promoting inclusive climate action, negotiating contested authority, and encouraging urban planning that takes account of both displaced and host community needs.

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Taking centre stage on forced migration

Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, introduces the issue with a Foreword that finds hope in the growing power and influence of cities to shape a more just and humanely ordered world ([Rees](#)). Already on the frontline of receiving and integrating those forced to flee their homes, cities and city leaders are finding new ways to make the inclusion of refugees a reality. Alongside city-level innovation and sharing, however, is a need for concerted efforts to increase the profile and influence of cities in the global mechanisms that govern and enable human mobility. Efforts are bearing fruit, but there is much further to go if cities and networks of cities are to sit alongside national governments as equal partners.

Cities as partners, communities as stakeholders

Many articles explore the urgent need to recognise cities as key actors and **equal partners** – both in current responses to displacement and so that they can plan for future displacement ([Saliba-Silver](#); [Sanderson](#)). The arrival of large numbers of refugees in western European cities since 2015 has spurred widespread endorsement of the role of these city governments in addressing displacement but authors from the International Rescue Committee and the Kampala Capital City Authority emphasise that displacement to cities in other countries worldwide also demands the international community's attention. For example, despite Kampala's membership of **international initiatives** like the Global Alliance for Urban Crises, humanitarian actors have only just begun to view its city authority as a viable partner. Since beginning to engage with the International Rescue Committee in 2017, however, the city authority has significantly increased its coordination with humanitarian, development and private sector partners to support the city's marginalised and displaced residents, regardless of their migration status ([Saliba-Silver](#)).

Focusing on a recent Good Practice Review undertaken for ODI and ALNAP, one article identifies three main **principles for good practice** in urban humanitarian response ([Sanderson](#)). One of these principles is to collaborate and engage local stakeholders, recognising that in many situations city authorities have been ignored by international agencies, who have failed to understand them. Collaboration with authorities includes, for example, adhering to the structures and regulations of existing municipal planning in order to reduce the risk of creating parallel structures. Another principle of good practice is to take the **long-term view**, which means paying heed to the long-term impact any humanitarian response has on a city. Many quick decisions and short-term measures – such as where to site a 'temporary' camp that in time becomes permanent – can have a lasting impact. And it is also imperative to **engage with complexity**, recognising that urban responses need to take account of the interconnected nature of the elements of city life, such as markets, economies and infrastructure, and must focus on people ([Sanderson](#)).

A case-study of the local response to the sudden arrival of around 1,300 registered IDP households in the city of Adama in Ethiopia shows a successful

multi-level response by both local government and members of the local community ([EastonCalabria-Abadi-Gebremedhin](#)). Government bureaus, private sector actors, neighbourhood districts, community-based associations and many local NGOs participated in supporting and settling the IDPs. The **media** (including social media and TV) were used to call society to action, provide reports about the IDPs and publicise private investors' support. Most private sector actors responded to the call for assistance and donated cash, basic necessities, and housing construction materials; responses from local NGOs and community associations were also important ([EastonCalabria-Abadi-Gebremedhin](#)).

Area-based approaches

Many articles acknowledge the insufficiency of more established humanitarian approaches in complex urban contexts and draw attention to the need for a more complex, multi-sectoral response ([Sanderson](#); [Schell-Hilmi-Hirano](#)). These **area-based approaches** commonly comprise four characteristics: they are geographic (targeting defined areas, which can vary in scale); they are multi-sectoral (considering needs, capacities and access to services across all sectors of humanitarian response); they are inclusive (considering all population groups in that area); and they are participatory (involving all actors present or operating in the location). Applying an area-based approach often creates a **platform** which convenes a range of actors – increasingly including local authorities – to agree and implement a collective response. These platforms help foster a common approach and can help arrive at a set of common priorities targeting populations in those locations in need. Area-based approaches can also be used to try to reduce tensions and inequalities and to **improve social cohesion** by applying the approach to improve the living conditions of both refugees and host communities ([Schell-Hilmi-Hirano](#)).

Applying an area-based approach in **secondary cities and towns** in southeastern Niger and eastern Ukraine has also proved effective in identifying priority needs and enabling a multi-stakeholder approach ([Wetterwald-Thaller](#)). In both cases, local authorities struggle to meet **increased demand for public services** – largely because of a lack of resources allocated by central or regional authorities or because of disruptions to the rule of law. Undertaking area-based assessments in Niger revealed the scale at which services require support if they are to operate effectively and, in Ukraine, provided the information needed to identify new urban 'service provision hubs' that have organically formed as a result of disruption in urban systems caused by the physical barrier separating the warring parties. Findings from area-based assessments like these provide an analytical framework for all relevant community representatives to look beyond mandate-specific interventions and develop multi-sectoral plans ([Wetterwald-Thaller](#)).

In Somalia, where many **internally displaced people** (IDPs) have moved from rural areas to the main cities in search of shelter, protection and humanitarian assistance, weak urban systems are unable to cope with the demands of the ever-growing population, and the majority of IDPs face similar challenges to those confronting the urban poor ([Taruri-Bennison-Kirubi-Galli](#)). The UN and NGOs in

Somalia have developed a set of programming principles (endorsed by the Federal Government of Somalia for use throughout the country) in order to make the transition to integrated area-based programming, and a number of multi-year, multi-sector consortia have been created. A key challenge, however, is how to foster social cohesion between urban displaced and host communities in a **politically and ethnically divided** context. Participatory, inclusive and transparent processes are essential to achieving this. The **Community Action Plans** that have been developed for the cities of Kismayo and Baidoa reflect needs identified by displaced and host communities and these community plans have now been consolidated into integrated district-level plans. These and other collaborative, multi-stakeholder responses in Somalia's cities show how different actors can work together to provide a coordinated and comprehensive response through inclusive, community-led processes ([Taruri-Bennison-Kirubi-Galli](#)).

Elsewhere, World Vision Bangladesh has applied World Vision's **citywide approach** to urban programming ([Dutta](#)). This approach is rolled out at different levels of city administration – at neighbourhood, district and national levels – and is based on partnerships and collaboration, promoting **local community support mechanisms** and drawing on the knowledge and feedback gained from those neighbourhood activities to undertake **advocacy** at district and national policy levels. Despite challenges in implementation, including the mobile and dynamic nature of urban life and resulting difficulties in reaching populations, this citywide approach has had significant results in the aim, in this instance, of removing displaced children from hazardous work and ensuring they can enjoy their basic rights ([Dutta](#)).

Data and evidence

Many challenges exist around **obtaining data** on urban displacement, first of all relating to the lack of general consensus about what constitutes an urban area ([Anzellini-Leduc](#)). In cities, IDPs tend to be dispersed and many seek anonymity because of potential threats to their security. As a result it can be challenging to obtain **geo-located information** on IDPs in urban settings. However, good examples of geo-located data, such as the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix in Iraq, do exist, and provide a useful picture of the relationship of internal displacement to cities and urbanisation processes. Another challenge is a lack of **longitudinal data**, which would enable assessment of IDPs' living conditions over time, facilitating a fuller understanding of the causes and characteristics of protracted displacement in cities. Alternative data sources and technologies, including mobile phone data, satellite imagery analysis and community mapping, could be used to tackle this ([Anzellini-Leduc](#)).

Applying lessons from camps to an urban context

One article highlights how experience gained in camp-based responses can relate to an urban setting ([HirschHolland](#)). The **camp management approach** addresses needs that are just as relevant in out-of-camp settings: access to information and feedback mechanisms; structures for community participation and

self-management; and coordination between multiple stakeholders. In its response to Afghan returnees from Pakistan, the Norwegian Refugee Council in Afghanistan, for example, applied camp management methods to an **urban out-of-camp setting** by focusing on a defined geographical urban area and creating three inter-linking components: community outreach teams, community centres and neighbourhood committees. Some encouraging results emerged, including a widespread perception among neighbourhood residents that their access to information had improved. Key challenges to applying this approach include: the lack of clarity in the humanitarian architecture regarding the coordination of the response; the need to have a narrow geographical remit (which poses a challenge for scalability); and the challenge of engaging with local and national authorities, where there are complex power dynamics at play ([HirschHolland](#)).

Improving communication and information flows

Other authors identify the fact that information and urban refugees do not easily 'find' each other as an obstacle to self-reliance ([Buffoni-Hopkins](#)). Refugees can become isolated and 'lost' in the urban environment, partly because they relocate frequently, making contact difficult to maintain, and partly because they join impoverished, forgotten local communities at the city's margins. A community-led assessment in Eastleigh, Nairobi, revealed that refugees felt they had few or no mechanisms through which to provide feedback to UNHCR and partners, and wanted information to flow in both directions, replicating the **two-way dialogue** that is more readily and routinely sustained in camps. Respondents asked for local, centralised information points for accessing information about the type, location and source of services available. They also suggested that by formalising NGO-trained community counsellors through paid employment and certification this could create a more professionalised system that could then facilitate information and feedback flows. The assessment highlighted a **local information ecosystem** that gives agency to refugees and refugee community leaders ([Buffoni-Hopkins](#)).

Economic contributors

Several authors highlight the energy and contribution of displaced people in urban environments. In Pakistan, 68% of Afghan refugees live outside camps, mostly in and around urban centres, primarily because of the need to **access livelihood activities** ([AbbasKhan](#)). They face many challenges, including negative perceptions of them as criminals and as a burden on the economy, and in terms of friction with host communities because of competition over limited resources. Almost all urban refugees are involved in some sort of livelihood activity, largely the transport business, gemstones trading and carpet weaving, and make a considerable **contribution to the urban economy**. Given the right support, writes the Commissioner for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, most Afghans would be able to contribute positively during their stay in Pakistan. The recent move by the government to grant those Afghan refugees who have a valid registration

card the right to open commercial bank accounts will boost Afghan business (and help put an end to their vulnerability to potential exploitation by those acting as proxies) as well as Pakistan's economy ([AbbasKhan](#)).

Active citizens

Three core team members of the Athens-based Syrian and Greek Youth Forum (SGYF) show how by coming together as a team of activists to support **community-building** activities among refugees, asylum seekers, second-generation Syrians and Greek nationals they can help these and other urban communities to become fully **active citizens**. SGYF has worked through various programmes and activities to connect, empower and represent the Syrian community in Athens, demanding greater rights but also embracing their **responsibilities** and contributing to the **city's well-being** ([Alkabbani-Habbal-Western](#)).

Urban planning

Many authors consider the implications that displacement has for urban planning ([Wolff](#); [WardGeorge-Hodgkin](#); [Linn](#)). Drawing on the example of Hamburg, a city that received large numbers of asylum seekers in 2015, one author examines the city's innovative urban planning policy of building temporary refugee accommodation in non-residential areas ([Wolff](#)). The lessons that can be drawn for urban refugee **housing policymaking** elsewhere include how to facilitate a transition between the historically divided phases of emergency housing and long-term development by increasing social housing stock, thus benefiting both refugees and host country citizens. Challenges to doing so, however, include those relating to questions of **site selection**, which has a considerable bearing on refugees' integration and self-sufficiency and can be a concern to local residents. Such factors may lead to a disproportionate locating of refugee accommodation in poorer neighbourhoods ([Wolff](#)).

In terms of **humanitarian shelter programming**, the authors identify three fundamental aspects for measuring the success of shelter programme response. These are: the flexibility (rather than adaptability) of shelter assistance programmes; the **invisibility** of the final response within the urban landscape; and its **vitality** – how well the programme resonates and self-propagates ([WardGeorge-Hodgkin](#)). Product-centred shelter projects tend to stamp a single repetitive pattern on the community and by promoting a universal design such programmes fail to address the diverse needs of individual households. Rather than focusing on engineering perfect high-level housing interventions for a limited number of families, the authors urge agencies to focus on smaller, less intrusive, flexible interventions for more households. Simple solutions that resonate and are easily replicated – 'go viral', in other words – can empower communities to help themselves, ensuring a better overall humanitarian outcome for more of the affected population, and leading to a greater reduction in future risk. Authors examine recent successes in terms of this kind of 'flexibility', as seen in Tacloban in the Philippines and in Palu in Indonesia ([WardGeorge-Hodgkin](#)).

Urban planners must also give appropriate consideration to the importance of access to **safe urban**

Leisure spaces, which facilitate the well-being and integration of displaced women ([Linn](#)). Evidence from Amman and Beirut demonstrates that affordable and accessible green spaces can be instrumental to well-being and help build stronger links with the host community. Obstacles to accessing existing spaces include societal and cultural norms, and vulnerability to verbal, sexual and physical harassment. The leisure spaces that are available are also often seen as neglected and unsafe and a potential breeding ground for conflict and tension between refugees and the local community. Consequently, many women spent their leisure time in seclusion. Planners should prioritise those areas of the city that are under intense social change, highly-resource compromised and suffering environmental pollution. Spatial mapping is one tool which can help planners and NGOs consider the ways in which women use space ([Linn](#)).

The future of refugee resettlement

One article focuses on efforts being made by some EU cities to locally organise resettlement for refugees ([Sabchev-Baumgartel](#)). Some cities like Barcelona, Vienna and Hamburg have openly declared their willingness to host and support refugees, and others have attempted to establish city-to-city refugee relocation mechanisms. Firstly, local authorities are in a position to assess, easily and accurately, local capacity to host and integrate refugees; secondly, many local authorities have gained significant expertise in managing refugee reception and integration and are willing to continue investing in this field; and, thirdly, local governments have begun to collaborate directly with UN organisations and NGOs and can build on these relationships. **Locally managed routes to resettlement** like these could place cities at the centre of migration governance, offering better protection to displaced people ([Sabchev-Baumgartel](#)).

Challenges to authority in humanitarian response

In some urban contexts multiple governance actors may **compete for authority**, and humanitarians require a clearer approach as to whether and how to engage these various actors in order to reach the most vulnerable host and refugee populations ([teLintelo-Ford-Liptrot-Mansour-Rahbany](#); [Zapata](#); [Wetterwald-Thaller](#)).

The increasing donor support for urban municipalities and mayors has led in some contexts to competition for authority between national and municipal actors. In some cases, municipalities have historically refused to provide basic services to informal settlements. This has created space for non-State actors to play a key contemporary role in governing the most vulnerable displaced populations and host groups. The neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian interventions can therefore be compromised if/when they inadvertently or intentionally support or deny the legitimacy of local actors who seek to exercise authority. Building on programming work in low-income urban settings in Jordan and Lebanon, a coalition of authors make recommendations for creating wider, more principled engagement with non-State urban actors ([teLintelo-Ford-Liptrot-Mansour-Rahbany](#)).

Lessons about how to partner with municipalities to improve protection can also be drawn from work in **high-risk urban neighbourhoods** ([Zapata](#)). Between 2004 and 2014 San Pedro Sula hosted more than 20% of Honduras' IDPs; meanwhile in 2015 gangs were estimated to be present in more than 50 of its neighbourhoods, mainly those that are poorest and most marginalised. Since 2016, UNHCR has been working with municipal authorities and communities to develop mechanisms to help provide protection and prevent displacement. This includes working with municipal authorities to design methodologies and strategies that promote rapprochement and dialogue with high-risk communities and neighbourhoods ([Zapata](#)).

Climate action

Elsewhere, a coalition of authors recognises that cities today are at the forefront of climate change ([Gemenne-Zickgraf-Depoux-Pettinotti-Cavicchioli-Rosengaertner](#)). Unpacking the particular vulnerabilities of forced migrants to urban climate change – including the social, political and geographical marginalisation that affects their abilities to cope with slow-onset and sudden shocks – the authors make the case for the inclusion of urban migrants in climate change adaptation planning, disaster risk reduction and preparedness, and relief programmes. They also urge greater research into how migrants access and use transport, housing, food and health services. Recognising that migrants are often unable to fully exert their political rights, the authors suggest that **political participation and mobilisation** around climate action lie at the heart of realising their transformational potential.

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