Flight to the cities

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The conditions from which most crisis migrants have fled – threats to life, health, physical safety and/or subsistence – are likely to be reproduced in some form in their urban destinations, at least in part due to their presence there.

Growing numbers of 'crisis migrants' are settling in cities in their own and other countries. They tend to move into the poorest parts of large and smaller cities, often to informal settlements outside the urban core, where municipal authorities are only nominally in control, services are lacking and conditions are precarious. While adapting to urban life is challenging for all recently arrived, economically disadvantaged populations, those who have been forced to leave places where they might otherwise have remained can rarely move back if they fail to adapt to being in the city. To a greater extent than migrants who are not driven by crises, they lack protective safety nets and survival strategies; and their material, psychological and security needs are urgent but their needs are often difficult to target because their living environments resemble those of more stable urban poor.

Two categories of urban migrant are of special concern: migrants associated with conflict,

and migrants whose movements to urban areas are associated with environmental events and processes. These vulnerable and politically charged groups are mixed together in towns and cities of all sizes with growing numbers of other rural migrants and unemployed youth.

Conflicts in many parts of the world have created seemingly irreversible situations that have been largely responsible for undermining return and reintegration strategies and have pushed people to move to, and remain in, urban areas. In some cities of Colombia, the number of IDPs is larger than the original population. In Iraq today, large numbers of IDPs and returned refugees cannot live in their towns and cities of origin because these have become ethnic and/or sectarian enclaves and the return of minority populations would almost certainly provoke renewed violence.[1] Under such conditions host cities become overcrowded and dangerous. Afghanistan's major cities, especially Kabul, are unable to provide for the people who repatriated from Pakistan and Iran and went to the cities instead of returning to their villages. Repairing and bolstering urban and social infrastructure are understood to be a priority by both humanitarian and development agencies but remain far behind urgent needs.

The Liberian capital, Monrovia, is a quintessential example of conflict-driven urban growth, further exacerbated by rural deterioration and continuing ethnic tensions. During the civil conflict from 1989 to 2003, Liberians from across the country fled to Monrovia and other cities where UNHCR and several agencies provided some humanitarian assistance. After 2005 UNHCR conducted a return programme and the Liberian government ceased to categorise these people as IDPs. Nevertheless, large numbers of them remained, especially in Monrovia, for reasons related to continuing insecurity, loss of land and the lack of rural livelihoods. The population in Monrovia

West Point slum, home to some 75,000 people, near central Monrovia, 2013.

as of 2010 is variously estimated between 800,000 and 1,500,000, while its pre-conflict population was 400,000 to 600,000.

South Sudan presents a similar problem, in which a once rural but now urbanised population is attempting to return to a rural setting. Over a period of decades, people fleeing from the conflict in the south of Sudan had found difficult refuge in Khartoum or other Sudanese cities, as well as in refugee camps and cities outside Sudan. With the end of conflict in 2005, and increasingly from when South Sudan was declared independent in 2011, they began returning to the places regarded as their homes. Humanitarian agencies have brought busloads of hopeful former urban dwellers, with little or no knowledge of farming or awareness of conditions in their places of origin, to the new South Sudan. They have found villages where conditions are primitive, tribal-based violence widespread, and services all but inexistent. Many of the unprepared and poorly served returnees undertake secondary migration from the villages to urban hubs, especially the capital, Juba; the better informed South Sudanese exiles go there directly. But cities in South Sudan not long ago were small towns and are utterly unprepared to absorb the newcomers.

Adapting to urban environments

Humanitarian assistance is minimally present in cities, so while some do well, others face

food insecurity, inadequate shelter and the loss of effective international protection. International humanitarian organisations have lacked the experienced staff required to identify or protect displaced people in cities, although they have more recently been retraining staff for work in urban settings and experimenting with different approaches, partners and indicators of success.[2]

New efforts notwithstanding, there is still a tendency to under-serve displaced people who have gone to large cities. UNHCR has recognised the need to expand its protection function in urban spaces and has elaborated strategies to achieve this goal. As UNHCR and NGOs expand urban activities, they encounter predictable resentment on the part of local citizens living in the same or similar conditions and receiving no assistance.

The impacts of environmental deterioration and climate change provoke sustained migration, often along previously established domestic or international routes. An exodus to urban areas inevitably exacerbates resource and environmental problems in the destination cities, as new arrivals generally have no choice but to settle in densely populated, unregulated, informal slums, where environmental hazards multiply. Urban land rights and environmental hazards need to be addressed just as urgently as they do in war-torn rural areas. As national and municipal leaders recognise the urgency of strengthening mechanisms of adaptation to cope with current and future population expansion, they need support for stronger, more reliable and protective municipal governance and more robust environmental risk reduction.

In sum, crisis migrants are not new to cities but the combined effects of conflicts, environmental degradation and economic models that have undermined rural economies have now produced an unprecedented urban movement. On the positive side, experts and policymakers are aware that urban spaces are major venues for addressing poverty, and for providing services and

economic opportunities. There are, however, also widespread negative assumptions prevalent among national authorities, donors, international organisations and humanitarian agencies about expanding cities. The widely shared but highly questionable mantra has been that cities are bad places for rural migrants, and rural migrants are bad for urban prosperity. It is fundamentally important to target actions aimed both at preventing and managing crises that give rise to displacement and to address the crises in urban destination locations, improving protection mechanisms in both.

The impacts in cities of natural or industrial disasters and epidemics are exacerbated by large-scale unplanned migration. Ultimately, the urban core and its densely inhabited and unregulated periphery need to be upgraded with land legally accounted for and registered so as to benefit recent migrants as well as longstanding residents. Urban planning often ignores the needs of new arrivals and the especially vulnerable crisis migrants.

Urban modernisation and reforms that include slum clearance are valid development tools. Unfortunately, because crisis migrants and refugees are generally unwanted, they are likely not to be taken into account when local authorities put into action their urban reform plans. In addition, the poor in marginal areas are likely to be the first to be evicted when the urban landscape is upgraded and under more solid environmental control. To evict a population recently displaced by conflict or to oblige displaced persons to reside in remote settlements lacking services or employment possibilities is surely contrary to the intention of the Guiding Principles and is unacceptable even in the name of development. Governments undertaking forced urban resettlement should adhere to international resettlement guidelines, such as those long used by the World Bank.[3]

Having accepted that long-term migrants to the city fall within its responsibility, the humanitarian community is now moving more decisively to address the needs of

urban-based victims of conflict, disasters and environmental degradation. Advocates in urban areas have until recently largely focused on helping forcibly displaced people to return to small communities, or they have initiated projects on behalf of specific segments of the urban population, such as for street children and trafficked women. It is difficult to overstate the challenges now facing UNHCR and numerous NGOs in reorienting their staff and deploying their resources to cities but it is particularly important that humanitarian agencies work in closer partnerships with development actors and government officials than has been the case historically.

Urban planners in most places are very well aware of the severity of the problems they face as a result of rapid growth. They seem less aware, however, of the dimensions of the problems that are producing such rapid urbanisation. Development actors too often, and mistakenly, consider crisis migration as a temporary phenomenon and primarily a humanitarian problem. As has become abundantly clear, people forced to flee and to move to cities more often than not remain there for long or indefinite periods. Municipal and national authorities now need to find ways to integrate them.

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1. Unlike most crisis migration situations, those Iraqis who fled were mainly urban dwellers who went to other cities.

2. FMR issue 34, published in February 2010, is devoted to 'Adapting to urban displacement'. The various articles describe the often miserable conditions and lack of security that refugees experience in cities, and offer guidelines related to various sectors of humanitarian operations.

3. World Bank, *Involuntary Resettlement Sourcebook: Planning and Implementation in Development Projects*, 2004
http://tinyurl.com/WB-InvoluntaryResettlement