

# 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 relating 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 detailed 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

The Task Force of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group on Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas approved a Final Strategy and two-year Action Plan in Rome in November 2010.<sup>4</sup> The principal aim of the Strategy is to recommend ways in which humanitarian actors can deliver more effective responses to humanitarian crises in urban areas, including accelerating early recovery. The Strategy is designed to be relevant for all international actors, mandates and types of crises. Specifically it seeks to strengthen four key elements: partnerships; host country national and local leadership; preparedness planning and understanding/analysis of vulnerability; and community resilience and beneficiary targeting.

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



Bacoor, near Manila, the Philippines.

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,

medium-rise apartments for those who can pay modest rents. This is an interesting disaster reconstruction model of an integrated approach, including infrastructure planning, livelihoods and training on home enterprises (among other activities).

The predominant gap is what to do with the large number of homeless people who used to live in informal settlements but have neither independent means to rebuild their destroyed homes (even though they were often little more than fragile shacks), nor clear title to the land that they previously occupied. International agencies will not go against government regulations (or their own principles) by providing reconstruction assistance to those living in informal settlements or on land where ownership or right-of-use does not exist or is contested. The establishment of peri-urban camps without a clear strategy to develop permanent settlements is contributing to chaotic urban sprawl. While

relocation represents one option for a long-term solution, and conforms with urban planning regulations, an urgent solution is needed while waiting for new housing to be built. In some cases, as appropriate, a written agreement between the municipality and the IDPs is called for that the IDPs will vacate their current sites once permanent housing becomes available.

### Conclusion

The Strategy focuses on how the traditional humanitarian actors, both UN and NGOs, can and need not only to continue to improve and adapt their responses but also to break out of the mould of humanitarian response in the context of people affected by crises in urban settings. A key to this is acknowledging that towns and cities have existing social and institutional infrastructure that should be incorporated into the response.

Thus the Strategy identifies many opportunities for closer cooperation

between international humanitarian assistance actors, governments and non-traditional partners in civil society and the private sector. The large scale and increasing incidence of urban-based emergencies call for closer collaboration of these actors in both the design of emergency responses in order to reach the vulnerable and affected populations and in the delivery of humanitarian assistance itself.

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1. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/IASC-MHCUA>