

Urban response: three principles for good practice

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A recent review identified three key principles for good practice in urban humanitarian response; taking these on board may help all actors to avoid wasting effort and missing opportunities.

A review was recently conducted of good practice by humanitarian aid agencies (local and international non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, and members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement) in contexts of conflict, violence, displacement and natural disasters, including those exacerbated by climate change.¹ This Good Practice Review (GPR), undertaken for ODI and ALNAP, identified three main principles for good practice in urban humanitarian response.

Take the long-term view

The first principle for engaging in urban areas is to ‘take the long-term view’. This requires paying heed to the long-term impact of any humanitarian response 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. Humanitarian response should, wherever possible, see aid as an investment, wherein limited aid budgets are not used up on short-term measures designed to meet immediate needs only.

An example of this concerns shelter. In Jordan and Lebanon, a number of aid organisations – such as the Norwegian Refugee Council – are addressing the shelter needs of Syrian refugees by working with landlords to upgrade their properties in return for allowing refugees to live in them. This has the advantage of investing aid funds in existing infrastructure (thereby contributing to a city’s improvement, even if only on a modest scale) and engaging positively with host populations. The drawbacks include uncertainty around the length of time that this support will be provided (two years has been the timeframe for some projects) and what happens afterwards.

Within shelter programming, an approach that has a long-term perspective and which has garnered widespread support in recent years is the ‘settlements approach’, also known as an area-based approach (ABA). This approach focuses on neighbourhoods as the starting point for engagement and is also heavily oriented towards supporting local actors (displaced people and host populations) to engage in recovery, upgrading or improving environments, depending on the crisis in question. As such, the growing popularity of ABAs stems from their greater engagement with local actors, and the shift that they represent away from sector-based delivery towards coordinated, cross-sectoral responses.

Implementing ABAs, however, is far from easy. An initiative in the Central African Republic, for example, helped some 20,000 people returning from conflict to resettle in Bangui in 2016–17; it engaged a wide group of stakeholders working in four neighbourhoods and, among other activities, undertook capacity building of local authorities, multi-sectoral settlements-based assessments, and extensive negotiation and discussion with stakeholders. The GPR noted that the initiative faced challenges around coordination (which delayed project implementation), limited local capacities, and limited resources (which prevented project replication in other neighbourhoods). Other examples of ABAs also point to implementation challenges. This reflects the complicated nature of the city and the difficulties inherent in meaningful engagement in such locations.

Engage with complexity

The traditional aid architecture, which evolved from working mostly in rural areas and from providing aid in camps, is

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ill-suited to urban complexity. The cluster approach, which embodies sector-based delivery, has been sharply criticised in terms of its effectiveness in urban response where a more holistic, multi-sectoral response may be needed, with stronger inter-cluster linkages and city-level coordination.² The GPR, however, refers to two approaches that are useful in urban responses: people-centred and systems-oriented.

A people-centred approach focuses on aspects such as the use of ‘assets’ (skills, abilities, friendships and so on) that people build, use and sometimes lose at times of crisis. This reinforces the need for humanitarian action to focus foremost on people – something that risks getting lost in the mire of urban action.

A systems-oriented approach helps to describe the interconnected nature of the elements of city life, such as markets, economies and infrastructure. Having a systems perspective on urban interventions is critical. For example, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) considerations in

urban areas are vast and complicated. A systems-oriented approach helps to map some of these complexities and to determine where to make best efforts to what ends. This may vary according to different crises. As the GPR notes, “During an acute emergency, humanitarian organisations may substitute for a service provider by installing tanks or bladders and initiating water trucking. In protracted settings, considerations include encouraging municipal authorities to cover the financing for the salaries of their staff, as well as funding for operations and maintenance, and mobilising the central government and possibly development actors (once the situation allows for their return) to actively commit to restoring services and helping the utility move towards financial stability.”

Project management tools that might have suited camps and the delivery of goods to remote areas may be much less suitable for urban areas. The GPR reviewed a number of tools and approaches that agencies employ at the outset of operations



Building houses to support returning communities in Bangui, Central African Republic, in 2017.

to better understand what is needed. One of these is **context analysis** – in order to better grasp the dynamics of a city (in its pre-crisis context). One of the best-known forms of context analysis is perhaps the Emergency Market Mapping Analysis (EMMA) toolkit, which has particular resonance for urban areas where markets thrive.³

Another approach involves **assessments and targeting**, geared towards identifying those who are most vulnerable. This can be especially complex in a city, where people may be hidden or dispersed, or may not want to be found. Partly for these reasons, and also because it is obviously not good practice to ignore host communities, ICRC advocates for ‘whole-of-neighbourhood’ assistance in protracted urban emergency settings.⁴ Reinforcing the earlier points on the deficiencies of a single-sector approach, a systematic review of urban assessment approaches found that multi-sectoral assessments work best: “A population’s needs for shelter, WASH, health, food security and livelihoods do not exist in isolation from one another. Rather, needs interact to shape vulnerability, and must thus be met with a multi-sectoral approach to guide targeting.”⁵

The third approach is **profiling** – the collaborative process of identifying internally displaced people or groups through data collection and analysis in order to provide assistance and protection.⁶

Collaborate

The third principle for good practice in urban humanitarian response as identified by the Good Practice Review concerns meaningful collaborations – with local actors and between humanitarian organisations. Taking local actors first: simply put, external humanitarian organisations who work in isolation are most likely doomed to fail, and may well cause harm in doing so. Chief among local actors are city authorities, who are all too often overlooked in humanitarian operations. A 2016 study of a number of cities in crisis found that city authorities, who themselves were often overwhelmed, were ignored by international agencies who failed to understand local dynamics

and to engage with local stakeholders.⁷ The report also found a lack of city-level multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms and that this contributed to a “divergence between international and local actors”.

Urban humanitarian action must be undertaken in close collaboration with authorities if it is to be effective. This means, for instance, adhering to the structures and regulations of a city’s municipal planning; where authorities may not be functioning, agencies are recommended to adhere to the policies that do exist, in order to reduce the risk of creating parallel structures. Other actors include gangs, which present a strong form of governance within the (usually poor) neighbourhoods they control. Research from ALNAP observes that any work carried out by humanitarian players in a city neighbourhood controlled by a gang “will be subject to discussion or authorisation by the gang, whether one is aware of it or not”. The GPR reports on how agencies such as ICRC are “quietly testing” approaches for engaging with gangs.

The need for collaboration between humanitarian actors is hardly new but failure to collaborate in urban response – where sectors are closely linked in the dense, interwoven nature of city life – leads to wasted efforts and missed opportunities.

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