

Area-based approaches: an alternative in contexts of urban displacement

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A geographically focused, multi-sectoral, integrated approach is increasingly recognised as more appropriate when responding to the needs of both displaced and host populations, especially in urban contexts.

The last two decades have been characterised by a significant increase in humanitarian emergencies due to the frequency and scale of conflicts, natural hazards, displacement and rapid urbanisation. To strengthen the collective response to these emergencies, the Humanitarian Reform process was launched in 2005. One of the outcomes of this was the establishment of the cluster approach to improve partnerships among humanitarian actors and enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian response. Since then, the sector-focused cluster system has become the default coordination mechanism in most major emergencies.

The cluster system's coordination structure improved response strategies and information management and resulted in relatively consistent allocation of resources to affected populations within specific sectors. However, it also encouraged stakeholders to act in isolation – specialising, collaborating and developing tools only within their own sectors. These silos have been accompanied by: a lack of collaboration across sectors; a tendency to develop responses that operate in parallel with, or are completely disconnected from, host government efforts; and a lack of flexibility in diverse and complex contexts.

A growing consensus has emerged that humanitarian response requires a paradigm shift. Too often, humanitarian actors have been slow to adapt to the changing needs of affected communities in diverse contexts, and have been unable to effectively and consistently adopt the integrated multi-sectoral approaches that are considered essential in complex urban contexts. The value, therefore, of a multi-sectoral integrated approach in urban contexts has been particularly recognised.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Urban Coordination Guidance note, for example, recommends that humanitarian stakeholders "support the operationalization of area-based coordination mechanisms operating at city and/or municipal levels, approaching coordination within a defined geographic area and adopting a multi-sectoral and participatory perspective".¹

Area-based approaches² are not new. This type of approach builds on the experiences of urban and regional planners working on community renewal in poor and vulnerable locations since the 1960s and 1970s.³ The Urban Settlements Working Group (USWG),⁴ while acknowledging small differences in agencies' respective definitions, defines area-/settlements-based approaches as commonly comprising the following four characteristics:

- **Geographic:** targeting geographic areas with high levels of need, delineated by physical, social or administrative boundaries (or a combination of these factors), which can vary in scale from neighbourhoods, through wards and districts, to the whole town or city.
- **Multi-sectoral:** considering needs, capacities and access to services across all sectors (shelter, WASH,⁵ health, livelihoods and so on).
- **Inclusive:** considering all population groups in that location – for example, host, displaced, returnees, (urban) poor and those with specific vulnerabilities.
- **Participatory:** involving all those actors present or operating in that location – notably, local authorities, local civil society and service providers, international organisations and so on.

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In response to increased interest in the approach, and to support humanitarian actors in applying the approach in complex urban contexts, the USWG has compiled and analysed over 30 case-studies. More than a third of these explicitly address the impacts of displacement in cities and towns, outlining how various organisations have adapted their response, both in humanitarian and development contexts, often starting from addressing needs in a single sector and then expanding to an area-based approach in areas that have been identified as vulnerable.⁶

Through analysing these case-studies, a number of key observations and potential benefits of applying the approach in urban displacement contexts have emerged.

Creating platforms for a common approach

Commonplace in the application of an area-based approach is the creation of a 'platform' which brings together a range of actors to agree and implement a collective response. These platforms convene actors operating in different sectors (shelter, WASH, protection, health, livelihoods and so on) from national and international humanitarian and development actors and, increasingly, from local authorities. These platforms help foster a common approach by creating firstly a shared understanding (to inform planning) and secondly a shared vision, resulting in a set of common priorities targeting populations in those locations in need.

A notable example is an area-based approach applied in Ar-Raqqa, in the North and East Syria region (NES). To support affected populations, REACH⁷ undertook a series of area-based assessments in partnership with the NES NGO forum. The assessments provided a comprehensive overview across the city, complemented by granular assessments at the neighbourhood level, including mapping returns, population, needs and access, plus service and infrastructure (and any damage to these). Findings from the multi-sectoral assessments subsequently informed response priorities, coordinated by the NES NGO forum in partnership with cluster system sector

leads. This process has since expanded to several other towns and cities across Syria.

In Iraq, where displaced populations are living in dispersed settings and within host communities, a series of Community Resource Centres (CRCs) have been created as outreach hubs in key governorates of return including Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salah al-Din. These CRCs facilitate service delivery through information provision, referral to service providers and community engagement, targeting the needs of the community holistically rather than based on displacement status or developed by sectors working in isolation.⁸ The priorities of CRCs are established through a comprehensive area-based assessment process, requiring operational actors to collaboratively prioritise short- to medium-term interventions across multiple sectors. This coordination framework is undertaken in partnership with the Iraqi government's Joint Coordination and Monitoring Center.

The neighbourhood approach was also applied to inform the post-earthquake response in 2010 by a number of partners in Ravine Pintade in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince. The Katye platform for response was designed to meet the basic humanitarian needs of earthquake-affected displaced households by providing safe, habitable neighbourhoods and creating the conditions needed to upgrade essential services. Earthquake recovery activities included community mobilisation, protection, health, settlement planning and shelter, and WASH.

These examples highlight the potential added value of this approach in humanitarian crises in complex urban contexts. The fact that the approach does not – at first glance – sit neatly within standard humanitarian coordination structures and ways of working brings both benefits and challenges. For example, as area-based or multi-sectoral urban working groups are not necessarily bound by any decision to activate or deactivate individual clusters or sectors, they can play an important contributory role in the longer-term transition to recovery and stabilisation. Furthermore, a multi-sectoral, geographically defined coordination platform can effectively

support existing city governance structures. On the other hand, there are often limitations relating to resourcing and sustainability. As these area-based structures are not yet commonplace, nor part of the established humanitarian coordination architecture, it is difficult to secure the financial and human resources needed to support them, and as such they are often time-bound and linked to a specific (often short-term) project.

Despite this, these platforms do not necessarily operate in isolation from the current humanitarian coordination architecture, and there are examples of the sector-/cluster-led mechanism being adapted to reflect this approach. This occurred in Mogadishu, Somalia, with the establishment of a tri-cluster system. In this case, a group of 14 partners across shelter, WASH and health sectors implemented 16 projects in a location which had been identified as having the densest concentration of internally displaced persons (IDPs). This coordinated initiative aimed to improve the protection of residents in the target locations through improved settlement planning and the provision of integrated services from multiple sectors. Once a common understanding and a framework for coordination had been established, the tri-cluster initiative was expanded to include the education and protection concerns of many of the partners.

While different agencies apply the approach in different ways, these case-studies highlight the importance of establishing forums to bring together actors in creating a common understanding and common vision.

Improving social cohesion

A number of case-studies further identified how area-based approaches have been used to try to reduce tensions and inequalities and to improve social cohesion.

Tripoli, a highly vulnerable city in Lebanon, hosts an estimated 72,000 refugees in its densely populated urban centre. With insufficient public services and inadequate sanitation and housing in its poorer neighbourhoods, Tripoli's living conditions pose significant problems for Syrian refugees and host communities alike. Acknowledging

the interdependent needs and also the need to strengthen social cohesion, CARE International Lebanon applied an area-based approach to improve the living conditions of refugees and host communities, with a focus on shelter, WASH and strengthened community governance. CARE concentrated on specific vulnerable neighbourhoods in inner Tripoli, including by repairing or upgrading communal infrastructure and access to services in whole streets and specific buildings, alongside providing individual household support. The establishment of neighbourhood committees to raise awareness of protection issues and to understand the sources of community tension and possible ways to resolution served as key initiatives.

Another area-based approach was implemented across a number of cities in Afghanistan by UN-Habitat in order to address the needs of certain urban communities comprising large numbers of IDPs and vulnerable host-community populations. This programme, which came to be known locally as the 'people's process', identified common priorities across all population groups: returnees, demobilised combatants, IDPs and low-income households across 145 communities.

Where to from here?

The above examples reflect just some of the potential benefits of applying an area-based approach in contexts of urban displacement. As we enter 2020, however, despite growing interest and evidence of their effectiveness, the application of area-based approaches in these contexts remains piecemeal, with examples often the result of an individual or agency/inter-agency champion and often remaining within short time-bound project-based parameters.

Area-based approaches are not a global panacea, and may not be applicable in certain circumstances (such as fast-changing contexts or when local and international expertise is lacking). However, there is much merit in this approach becoming another available tool in the toolkit for humanitarian and development actors, enabling them to work increasingly in partnership with city authorities to

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support both displaced and vulnerable host communities in cities and towns.

In summary

The approach can complement and co-exist within the current humanitarian architecture, used where the cluster system is not activated, and would be of use both in contexts of long-term recovery and/or protracted crises or in a developing emergency (by providing a platform to conduct a multi-sector assessment in any context).

The approach does not advocate for addressing or meeting all the needs of the affected communities. Rather, it can provide an overall strategy where certain priority needs can be addressed and others met at later stages.

The approach may not be applicable in certain contexts. Key enabling factors include: the presence of local and international expertise; local authority buy-in and engagement; and a relatively stable, non-transient population.

A challenge for many organisations applying area-based approaches is to contribute towards developing and implementing a collectively owned, long-term strategy that may not neatly fit within their own mandate, expertise or available

resources. Further, a collectively owned response strategy must monitor and evaluate multi-agency contributions to change rather than purely having individual agencies attributing response outcomes to their own, single-agency contributions.

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1. bit.ly/IASC-UrbanGuidanceNote-2018
2. Also known as neighbourhood-, settlement- or place-based approaches.
3. Sanderson D and Sitko P (2017) *Urban area-based approaches in post-disaster contexts: Guidance note for Humanitarian Practitioners*, IIED <https://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/10825IIED.pdf>
4. Currently housed within the Global Shelter Cluster.
5. Water, sanitation and hygiene
6. USWG (2019) *Area Based Approaches in Urban Settings: Compendium of Case Studies* bit.ly/USWG-ABA-compendium-2019
7. A joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the UN Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT).
8. CCCM (2019) *CCCM Case Studies 2016–2019: Chapter 2* bit.ly/CCCM-CS-chapter2-2019