

Urban planning in times of displacement: secondary cities in Ukraine and Niger

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Urban displacement can have a major impact on the local ecosystems of secondary towns and cities. In Niger and Ukraine, an area-based approach has proved effective in identifying priority needs and enabling a multi-stakeholder approach.

Urban displacement can have a significant impact on secondary towns and cities. This is especially true in southeastern Niger and eastern Ukraine, where some small urban areas are coping with considerable levels of conflict-induced displacement yet are particularly ill-prepared to meet the needs of local and displaced communities.

The fundamental contextual differences between Niger and Ukraine should not overshadow their interesting commonalities in terms of urban displacement. In both cases, local authorities struggle to respond to the increased demand for public services, in large part because of a lack of resources allocated by central or regional authorities and because of disruptions to the rule of law. External resources in the form of humanitarian and development aid programmes aim to fill this resource gap but this too raises significant challenges in both cases.

Different contexts, similar challenges

In the predominantly rural Diffa region in Niger, an estimated 250,000 displaced persons¹ have fled villages in the Niger–Nigeria border zone in search of safety. Many have made their way to secondary towns such as Diffa, N'Guigmi, Chétimari and Mainé Soroa. These towns, usually home to fewer than 50,000 inhabitants each, have a very limited absorptive capacity and yet are hosting an additional 10–20,000 displaced persons. This inflow is putting considerable strain on already limited basic services. With the Boko Haram insurgency in the region showing no signs of abating, returns cannot be safely facilitated. Hence, local governments and aid agencies are promoting resettlement solutions for displaced communities and opportunities for local integration by building

new neighbourhoods near existing urban centres. While this initiative provides much-needed housing, it remains insufficiently supported by investments in essential services such as clean water, sanitation, education, health and access to livelihoods. Furthermore, it remains unclear where to allocate investments in a way that will not discriminate against either host or displaced communities.

In Ukraine, government-controlled areas (GCA) of the disputed provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk host more than 750,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have fled large urban centres in non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) of these provinces. Larger cities in the government-controlled area can support this rapid population increase but smaller cities like Severodonetsk (100,000 residents), Bakhmut (90,000) and Kurakhove (21,000) cannot. In some instances, regional and local authorities themselves have had to relocate their administrative centres. For example, the administrations of Donetsk and Luhansk had to relocate to the cities of Kramatorsk and Severodonetsk respectively, leaving behind documents and valuable assets in addition to losing staff to displacement, which had a significant impact on their ability to provide administrative and social services. While population growth may generate long-term benefits, the sudden arrival of displaced persons has created short- and medium-term challenges for small and medium-sized towns, including spikes in rent costs and increased demand for education, health and administrative services. In parallel, between 400,000 and 640,000 residents from non-government-controlled areas continue to commute across the Line of Contact (LoC), a physical 427-km-long

barrier that separates the warring parties, in order to access Ukrainian administrative, social and banking services (including provision of pensions and social benefits). Finally, these important changes in service delivery dynamics in Ukraine are happening in parallel to a significant decentralisation reform led by the Ukrainian government that is proving difficult to implement in areas where key cities are no longer under the control of the central authorities.

With each town facing its own challenges, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to responding to urban displacement. What is needed in each secondary town is reliable information to inform strategies at the local level.

Robust analysis and joint planning

Without significant investment in public services in these fast-growing towns, there is a risk that displaced communities will be left stranded if humanitarian assistance ends without development projects having been implemented. Conversely, existing local development plans, such as Niger's Plans de Développement Communaux, do not fully account for the urban displaced; the voices of thousands of de facto residents risk being ignored in these development schemes. Local and municipal governments in Niger and Ukraine are well aware of the benefits of fast-tracking urban development and service enhancement in areas that are increasingly becoming new hotspots of economic and social activity as a result of displacement inflows. Such fast-tracking requires both a better understanding of how to direct assistance where it is most relevant and the mainstreaming of urban migration and displacement response in local development strategies.

Support to municipalities in Diffa was initiated by launching an area-based approach (ABA) in four urban centres where resettlement neighbourhoods were being built. The ABA assessment identified which basic services would be accessible to current and future residents, explored how access to basic amenities could be enhanced based on projections of future needs and current

absorptive capacities, and clarified the challenges relating to supply and demand for basic services. The assessment revealed that most of the basic services were available to the residents of the newly developed neighbourhoods – but not at a sufficient level to meet their needs. It detailed the scale at which these services require support, either in terms of infrastructure, rehabilitation, human resources or equipment, if they are to operate effectively. In the city of Chétimari, for example, five education facilities, ranging from pre-school to secondary school, are within reach of residents of the new neighbourhoods but they do not have the capacity to welcome additional students. Service providers called for greater investments in existing structures, including training for teaching staff, instead of constructing new facilities that would risk segregating displaced children and unnecessarily duplicating efforts. The ABA also measured each service's geographical coverage, and in doing so demonstrated that residents of the new neighbourhoods need to cover, on average, a much greater distance than other residents to access higher-standard services or those public amenities with greater capacity to meet demand.

In eastern Ukraine, undertaking an ABA assessment in the government-controlled peripheries of large non-government-controlled urban centres helped facilitate a shared understanding between key stakeholders of how communities have organically reorganised after the physical separation created by the conflict. The study focused on mapping basic service networks in order to understand the new socio-economic geography of a region divided by a 427-km barrier. This analysis provided the information needed to identify new urban 'service provision hubs' that have organically formed in the region as a result of the disruption in urban systems created by the LoC. Large numbers of people had to change jobs and lost access to their usual health-care providers due to the restrictions on population movement caused by the LoC. On the other hand, use of other neighbourhood networks such as primary schools and shops

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showed less disruption with most respondents sending their children to school and purchasing food in the same location as prior to the conflict.

If displacement in the Diffa region continues at the current pace, and if the number of residents crossing the LoC to access services in government-controlled cities keeps adding to the pressure on administrative, social and banking services in the key destination cities, it is likely that, in both contexts, any lack of investment in expanding existing services will severely limit access and reduce quality in the future.

Evidence and data are strong catalysts for integrated aid programming. Findings from ABA assessments not only enable a shared understanding of priorities but also provide an analytical framework for all relevant community representatives to look beyond mandate-specific interventions and develop multi-sectoral plans. The benefits of this process are readily apparent in the case of Niger, where the ABA approach enabled a range of actors to explore and unite the visions of populations from a variety of backgrounds in order to prioritise needs. Most importantly, participatory planning workshops helped identify how to foster the integration of the urban resettlement neighbourhoods into a larger urban development vision. This process relied on building partnerships with municipalities, who led the planning process and were encouraged, based on data-driven evidence, to appoint technical experts and civil servants to implement these plans and determine detailed investment strategies.² Local coordination committees have been formed to monitor the



Two women approach a checkpoint and a sign warning of landmines in war-torn Donetsk, east Ukraine. The de facto border has disrupted the lives of people simply going to work, buying food, visiting relatives, checking on homes in the conflict zone and accessing medical services.

implementation of the plans twice a year, and to mobilise external and public funds.

Similarly, in Ukraine, by studying conflict-related disruptions to basic services in the peripheries of large cities, the ABA proved a powerful tool for local authorities to advocate for their priority needs. The benefits of this approach will be particularly relevant in terms of supporting good local governance practices and accountability, especially in contexts where weakness of multi-stakeholder relationships might generate continued distrust in local authorities.

Conclusion

These case-studies from both low-income and lower middle-income urban economies highlight that urban displacement can have major repercussions on local ecosystems within secondary towns and cities. In such instances, local governments need to rely on sound knowledge and practical collaborations with aid actors to find immediate sustainable solutions to displacement, which support longer-term urban recovery planning. The data and evidence resulting from robust

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joint analysis provide a strong basis for local authorities to advocate for what citizens (both displaced persons and long-term residents) and service providers have identified as priorities within their communities. Such an approach allows different stakeholders with often differing priorities to reconcile their perspectives in order to make effective interventions in cities, addressing the lack of accountability and community participation in decision making which are even more pronounced in times of crisis.

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1. Comprising IDPS, refugees from Nigeria and Chad, and returnees.

2. AGORA (2019) *Plans de priorisation des interventions dans 4 sites urbanisés de la région de Diffa, au Niger* bit.ly/AGORA-Niger

