

Urban shelter and the limits of humanitarian action

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Shelter requirements for people displaced into or affected within urban areas will pose major challenges for the humanitarian community. Decision-makers and practitioners calling for urban shelter guidelines have expressed concern about the role of humanitarian organisations.

Traditionally there has been a focus on the delivery of ‘products’ to meet the shelter needs of individual families, often in a rural setting. In an urban context, the focus needs to switch to people’s limits and capacities, especially since there are likely to be:

- established markets, a cash economy and various layers of informal and formal financial institutions
- local authorities, planning bodies, housing strategies, legal institutions and building codes
- civil society organisations with various agendas, hierarchies and mechanisms of accountability
- private contractors and workers with ‘urban skills’
- infrastructure and service providers
- households and neighbourhoods with urban coping strategies and livelihoods
- complex, multi-functional use of a variety of outdoor or public spaces. These are generally not envisaged in the concepts or vocabulary of rural-based shelter-response guidelines and need a ‘settlements approach’ – and ultimately an urban planning-based approach.

More and more humanitarian shelter organisations are focusing their responses on people’s shelter needs in urban settings but specific guidelines and assistance methods are not yet available. The production of guidelines for humanitarian assistance in urban areas is a shelter Sector Project supported by Shelter Centre, funded by DfID and

moderated by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) with specialist input from UNOCHA, Médecins Sans Frontières International, World Vision International, Practical Action, Swiss Resource Centre and Consultancies for Development (SKAT) and Habitat for Humanity. The project aims to:

- complement existing humanitarian response tools in different agencies and the sector as a whole such as the Sphere Project, UNHCR’s *Handbook for Emergencies*, *Shelter after disaster: strategies for transitional settlement and reconstruction* (UN, forthcoming 2010¹), the Camp Management Toolkit² and the documentation around the Pinheiro Principles³;
- convey an urban livelihoods perspective which links profiling to a palette of assistance methods such as supervision and technical expertise, capacity building, delivering construction materials, supporting infrastructure and settlement planning
- provide tools for mapping institutions
- provide decision-making tools for selecting appropriate assistance methods
- tap into developmental research on urban and peri-urban vulnerability and environmental and resource impacts inside and beyond cities
- link to existing tools and handbooks on urban planning and housing.

The four themes identified by decision-makers and programme managers that are driving the format of forthcoming urban assistance guidelines are: agreement on the

humanitarian objective of shelter and reconstruction; identification and livelihood profiling; housing, land and property issues; and the role of humanitarian organisations in shelter provision.

The humanitarian objective

Humanitarian assistance to meet shelter needs not only supports protection, privacy, dignity and household/community coping strategies but can also enable the recovery of sustainable livelihoods. There are also known links between adequate shelter and health, as well as multiplier effects in the local economy from investment in shelter. These other objectives do not need to be separately specified but emerge from the primary shelter objectives if these are properly designed and implemented.

Humanitarian assistance needs to address several sets of differences, for example in terms of the vulnerabilities and capacities of displaced people and the urban poor. Should assistance stop once the immediate destabilising impacts of a crisis have abated as it is not the role of these agencies to tackle general urban development or ‘slum upgrading’? Where urban areas themselves have been damaged by conflict or disaster so that people are homeless but not displaced, should shelter assistance only aim to assist the most vulnerable and those least likely to be able to reconstruct (because, for example, they do not have land tenure or have no documentation to prove tenure)? If a city is still the safest place to be, should those affected by a humanitarian crisis receive assistance or only the displaced?

Identification and profiling

Identification and livelihood profiling exercises can inform programme designs so as to avoid exacerbating tension between groups living at close quarters in urban areas and allow agencies to plan. In practice, profiling of all groups in an affected urban area is not always done

systematically during rapid shelter needs assessments as humanitarian organisations find themselves faced with a variety of data and settlement options and limited time to gather evidence before taking action. Special attention may need to be paid to the differences between those displaced within a city, and who may already have urban coping mechanisms and 'city skills', and those who are being displaced into a city for the first time from a rural area.

Housing, land and property issues

The great variety of land ownership and land-use patterns makes it difficult to navigate housing, land and property (HLP) issues and, often, the physical terrain of the city itself. This raises questions about assisting both displaced and non-displaced populations:

- in multiple occupancy, high-rise dwellings
- living with host families
- in private or social/state rental housing
- without legal status or in slum areas.

Without an accurate understanding – obtained by rapid participatory methods – of habitation patterns, security of tenure issues and the key institutional actors involved in developing and formalising urban areas, emergency shelter assistance may do more harm than good.⁴

The role of humanitarian organisations

In an urban context, engagement with local partners – particularly building good working relationships with government – and participatory planning with the affected populations are crucial. It may also be necessary to design programmes based on a broader palette of assistance methods and to recognise that a more regulated urban environment has implications for the legal liability of humanitarian organisations.

NRC's work in collective centres in Beirut (2007-09) and in the reconstruction of the adjacent area to the Nahr El-Bared Camp in north Lebanon (2009-11), for

example, suggests that humanitarian organisations can bring experience in participatory methodologies that local authorities and private sector contractors may not offer. NRC was able to act on behalf of refugee clients by recognising the need for and then building its internal capacity to conduct people-oriented planning (POP) exercises and to negotiate sensitive HLP issues with a wide range of stakeholders. The reconstruction and the future responsibility for multiple-occupancy high-rise dwellings were taken on by contractors under NRC management.

A similar approach to managing specialist contractors was taken by NRC in Georgia in August 2007 when 150,000 people displaced by conflict were on the move and had to be accommodated in 300 collective centres – abandoned buildings used as transitional shelters. Experienced local contractors were tasked by NRC with implementing a series of upgrades to these collective centres. This intervention required a combination of planning for humanitarian relief and strong contract management.

The evaluation of CARE International's Umoja project in Goma, DRC⁵ noted the importance of working with local leadership structures in both IDP and non-IDP populations. The key actors were the local authorities, the clergy and the teachers. Female leaders of savings groups were also able to provide initial assistance. These women were highly organised and accessible and as such were already involving IDPs in their groups. Not every urban area has these structures but agencies are increasingly making efforts to assess, map and work with the institutions that work in and develop urban areas.

It is important that humanitarian agencies carefully evaluate their contribution to the humanitarian objective and the added humanitarian value of taking on specialist activities such as:

- contract management for sophisticated reconstruction or retrofits
- specialist negotiation of the legal aspects of land tenure

- brokering multi-stakeholder consensus
- convening forums for participatory settlement planning
- facilitating and supporting local authorities in strategic planning for return, local integration or resettlement
- taking on advocacy and information-dissemination roles regarding HLP issues.

Conclusion

Responses in urban environments must be based upon agreeing a clear intended outcome or humanitarian objective. The entire population affected should be considered, rather than only those displaced. The policies and strategies, developed with government, will be improved if the options facing individuals in these populations are known. Similarly, categorising and combining methods of assistance, such as materials or legal aid, support more integrated programming.

Preliminary findings suggest that, to be useful, guidelines for practitioners must be part of a wider integrated programme of policy development, training and, perhaps most importantly, timely, small-scale practical support to practitioners faced with these issues in the field.

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1. <http://www.sheltercentre.org/library/Shelter+After+Disaster>

2. <http://www.nrc.no/camp>

3. UN Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons <http://tinyurl.com/UNPinheiro>

4. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN/OCHA) and Shelter Centre, 2010, *Shelter after disaster: strategies for transitional settlement and reconstruction* <http://www.sheltercentre.org/library/Shelter+After+Disaster>

5. RALSA Foundation, 2009. See article by Jeene on p48.

6. For example in the IASC Task Force <http://tinyurl.com/IASC-MHCUA> and at the UNHCR High Commissioner's Dialogue <http://www.unhcr.org/4b1e3c589.html>