

Displacement in urban areas: implications for humanitarian action

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IDPs and refugees living in urban contexts are most often beyond the reach of humanitarian and development agencies and outside formal assistance structures.

In trying to develop and implement strategies that support displaced populations, humanitarian and development agencies are faced with a range of difficulties, including the displaced people's 'invisibility' among other urban poor and the consequent lack of available data on them. Humanitarian agencies have only recently started to develop or release policies and guidelines that take into account the specificity of the urban context for their work; and urban IDPs and refugees have begun to surface in the literature on forced migration and urbanisation only in recent years. Research has also been limited. Studies to date have analysed urban displacement from a livelihoods perspective and highlighted the various sources of vulnerability and the protection needs of urban IDPs. Furthermore, the role of humanitarian actors and the strategies and approaches that are best suited to addressing the assistance and protection needs of urban IDPs and refugees remain under-analysed.

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute in partnership with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and ICRC and in collaboration with the Feinstein International Center

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) works to provide assistance and protection to refugees and displaced people in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. www.nrc.no/engindex.htm

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is part of NRC and is an international non-profit organisation that monitors internal displacement caused by conflicts.

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at Tufts University, UN-HABITAT and UNHCR are currently working on a joint three-year research project exploring the phenomenon of displacement in the urban environment and the implications and challenges that it poses for humanitarian action. In particular, the project aims to explore the specific policy and operational constraints that humanitarian agencies are faced with when working with urban refugees and IDPs, and seeks to identify effective strategies for intervention in collaboration with development actors, national organisations and municipal and state authorities.¹

The first case study of this research project has been recently undertaken in Nairobi, Kenya. The first phase of the study has focused only on refugees but will be followed by further research on the IDP population in Nairobi. Preliminary findings have pointed to a number of specific vulnerabilities of the thousands of Somali, Ethiopian, Sudanese, Rwandan, Congolese and Burundian refugees living in the city. For example, in Eastleigh, a neighbourhood where the majority of the population is of Somali and Ethiopian origin, refugees are stopped by the police on a daily basis for identity and documentation checks. Regardless of their legal status, refugees are systematically threatened with detention and targeted for extortion. They are often victims of verbal, physical and sexual violence. Compared to other areas of the city, neighbourhoods hosting high concentrations of refugees are home to significantly heightened levels of police activity and harassment.

Refugees who are more dispersed among Kenyan nationals also suffer from serious protection threats. For example, despite their apparent linguistic and cultural affinities,

many refugees from the Great Lakes region who live in predominantly Kenyan neighbourhoods face discrimination, hostility and verbal abuse from the local community. Some prefer to keep their anonymity and conceal their refugee status in order to reduce these threats.

The harsh and precarious living conditions of Kenya's overcrowded Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps and the protracted crises in Kenya's neighbours have contributed to sustaining the regular influx of refugees into Nairobi for the past decade and more. However, despite the acute assistance and protection needs of the rapidly growing urban refugee population, the humanitarian response has lagged behind. The relatively few organisations working with the urban displaced in Nairobi have overstretched resources and are unable to fully address the different needs of the different populations co-existing in the city, including new arrivals, protracted displaced populations, UNHCR-mandated refugees, refugees lacking legal status, and so on. Humanitarian actors are finding it difficult to shift from a predominantly camp-based mode of assistance to a response specifically tailored to addressing the risks and vulnerabilities that afflict urban refugee and displaced populations as well as host communities.

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1. Primary research will be done in selected urban centres in Latin America, Africa and Asia.