

# Adapting to urban displacement

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**The forces that have always generated displacement are now more than ever pushing people to become refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in urban areas.**

The majority of the world's population already lives in towns and cities – with nearly 1.5 billion people living in precarious informal and slum settlements. Climate change and the natural disasters linked to it, rising global food crises and higher costs of living, and the proliferation of hostilities and complex emergencies are global trends. They incite the movement of millions of people to new urban locations from rural areas or other cities, and are causing the issue of urban displacement to come to the forefront of both our humanitarian and development efforts.

Urban displacement has emerged as a new dimension to the challenges we face in meeting the humanitarian needs of IDPs and refugees. Besides disrupting the family life of the displaced and the social fabric of communities, the movement of people to non-camp, urban settings is further exacerbating the vulnerability of the already resident urban poor. The arrival of new IDPs and refugees further stresses already inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, shelter and access to land. Competition for resources and livelihoods among the urban displaced and host populations increases social tension and can result in new conflict.

The arrival of displaced people in a city or town may not only generate problems for the city but also jeopardise its ability to plan for its future. Overcrowding, use of space and amenities for living that should be available for education or recreation, for example, and uncontrolled urban sprawl are a drain and a burden on the ability of a city and its residents to see that conditions improve or at least do not deteriorate. Poorer cities undoubtedly are more vulnerable to this than wealthier ones.

Whatever the nature of the city, the dynamics of rural-urban

migration present radical challenges, especially when this happens under duress. These same dynamics also provide challenges to those who wish to provide assistance, especially because so much of the experience of the international community has previously been concentrated elsewhere. The processes and modalities of humanitarian work need to be adapted – maybe even transformed – to enable us to meet the basic living requirements and protection needs of the urban displaced.

Cities have always had a social and a political identity separate from, though linked to, that of national identity and national government. Increasingly, cities have their own 'governments' which build their own relationships, have their own networks and have a political presence both nationally and internationally. Cities have power. This provides opportunities for organisations that want to ensure that those who are displaced can live in security, with dignity and with the hope of improvement of their living conditions.

UN-HABITAT strongly believes that partnerships with local governments, NGOs and the private sector are critical resources that cities bring to bear in meeting the needs of the urban displaced and their host communities. UN agencies, national governments and donors all need to seize the opportunities for stronger engagement and more productive partnerships in order to find innovative ways to do business.

UN-HABITAT and partnering agencies can also bring to bear more effective assistance initiatives by strengthening their partnerships through the transfer of good practices and through building institutional and organisational capacity. Building sustainable local capacity is the key to tackling the immediate needs of urban IDPs, refugees and their host

communities and to making all our world's cities better places to live.

It is very timely to have a publication such as FMR touch on much of this. The articles that follow bring together academic, policy and operational viewpoints and offer examples of how displaced people are affected by and cope with urban environments, how the international community does – or should – manage its business on their behalf, and lessons for the future.

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Manshiet Nasser, an informal settlement on the edge of Cairo, Egypt, is one of the most densely populated areas in Africa.



A family washes in the River Buriganga, Dhaka, Bangladesh.