Briefing

iied   **URBAN** CRISES   FUTUREPROOF IDEAS

Policy pointers

Local actors should be at the centre of programme design. International actors should fit into the local humanitarian or developmental agenda rather than vice versa.

Donors must be willing to take more (perceived) risk and give funding directly to local organisations, rather than funnelling money through other organisations which then subcontract the local organisations.

Interventions by all actors should use an area-based trans-sectoral participatory approach.

More local actors are required across all levels — and especially the higher levels — of decision making, strategy and programming, in both national and international forums.

Urban humanitarian response: why local and international collaboration matters

Humanitarian crises are increasingly taking place in urban contexts. Urban areas are highly dynamic and present complex challenges. But while local actors best understand the context, international actors continue to dominate the funding, strategic design and decision making. While this gap needs to be bridged, the policy and practice of how to do so lacks a systematic approach. This briefing presents the findings of a study assessing existing collaboration between local and international actors working in urban humanitarian response. Recommendations include empowering local agencies by funding them directly, and taking a holistic approach by designing programmes in line with local humanitarian or developmental agendas.

Why are urban crises so complex?

As the world's population becomes increasingly urbanised, the locus of humanitarian action is shifting to urban contexts. The humanitarian sector has traditionally responded to emergencies in rural contexts. Yet the increasing number of urban crises means a re-evaluation of standard procedures is needed.[1]

Humanitarian needs in modern and future urban contexts are posing new, urgent and complex challenges. These must be met by both traditional and emerging actors. But understanding the urban context, especially in relation to humanitarian response, is fraught with challenges.[2] Each urban centre has a unique combination of interrelated physical, social, economic and environmental characteristics.[3] What is considered an 'urban crisis' is highly political — and there is no consensus in the literature about who the key actors are.

Urban contexts concentrate people and power, poverty and inequality. Armed conflict is also increasingly taking place in urban settings.[4] The most vulnerable groups — including internally displaced people (IDPs) and those living in extreme poverty — are likely to be scattered across densely populated areas and difficult to access locations, such as informal settlements.

Responding to an urban disaster

In this briefing, we present the findings of an exploratory qualitative study assessing the existing collaboration between local and international actors working in urban humanitarian response.[5] The study took place across three distinct contexts:

- Natural disasters in Tacloban City, Ormoc City and Palo municipality, the Philippines (specifically Typhoon Haiyan in 2013)

- Protracted displacement in Medellín, Colombia
- Conflict in Juba, South Sudan.

Local and international collaboration should be a fundamental part of urban humanitarian response

We interviewed 44 professionals from local and international organisations, academic research institutions, and community and local government leaders. The results from the study were thematically categorised to inform the urban-specific challenges and recommendations provided in this briefing (for a context-specific overview of each study setting, please see the accompanying working paper to this research).[6] As our research reflects, urban areas are highly dynamic settings and our study findings emphasise the need for improved collaboration between international actors and local actors, who best understand the context (see Box 1).

What are the urban-specific challenges to humanitarian response?

It's difficult to relocate a large displaced population in an urban setting. Disasters in urban areas invariably lead to large populations of IDPs. The space and resources required to build new accommodation are not readily available. People end up living in informal settlements — in the most hazardous parts of the city. This places a huge burden on the urban services, affecting equitable access to those in need.

Those living in extreme poverty often endure the same hardships. The line between those affected by the crisis and requiring humanitarian assistance and the poorest is blurred. The difference between victims and non-victims is often simply administrative.

Urban context understanding is not necessarily transferable. Even though some challenges arise in multiple settings, each setting is unique. Caution must be applied when transferring lessons from one context to another.

International presence in post-disaster settings leads to more expensive amenities. International presence, particularly in low-income settings, can skew the economy. The flow of money into the local economy by international actors can result in inflation. This prices urban citizens out of the market for basic supplies. This problem is difficult to avoid, but it is essential that it is recognised. The mere arrival of international actors can exacerbate conditions for those who do not receive assistance. For example, the cost of local transport in Tacloban after Typhoon Haiyan at one point more than doubled in price.

An integrated approach in a city means reframing how we understand the city. At first, a crisis may only be felt in isolation in one part of the city. But the interconnections of city systems mean that eventually the crisis will affect all urban citizens. Urban settings need to be framed in a more socially integrated way. This means changing how they are understood: rather than districts or administrative institutions, consider people and communities, all driven by a common goal.

Improving urban humanitarian collaborations: challenges and recommendations

In urban contexts, international actors should play more of a support role to local actors and decision makers — something they may not be used to. But the policy and practice of how to bridge local and international actors is still vague and lacks a systematic approach to strengthening collaboration. In this section, we highlight some key challenges identified in our study — as well as recommendations for improvements.

Focus on locally driven programming. In any collaboration, there will always be a trade-off between the skills and expertise of each party involved. But a working relationship is difficult to foster when one party is or feels excluded. The humanitarian system is filled with industry jargon, has a very specific architecture, composition and hierarchy, and has to move quickly while making decisions on imperfect

---

Box 1. Who are local actors?

Precise definitions of who local actors are varied across and within all contexts. There was confusion on the part of our international respondents over who exactly is a local actor and what designation they should have during a response.

Technically, local actors might not be 'professional' humanitarians, but their involvement in response means they are involved in humanitarian action and in effect become humanitarians. For this reason, we recommend the use of the terms local and international actors, or local and international humanitarians, but never local actors and humanitarians.

In our study, international actors often used the term 'local' interchangeably with 'national'. However, local actors from the affected communities stressed that those from other parts of the country do not understand the context well enough to represent them.

We therefore define a local actor as an organisation or an individual, from and based in the country and within the area affected, who has influence and is working directly or indirectly with the humanitarian response.

information regarding highly complex disaster situations involving multiple stakeholders. However, it encourages competition for funding between various actors — notably international and local counterparts — rather than collaboration. Furthermore, the humanitarian system has rigid processes, permits a high turnover of staff, continues to hold power over money and resources, and channels finances through costly middle management. This does not favour collaboration.

Instead, collaboration should begin at the grassroots and work upwards. Local actors should be at the centre of programme design — and international actors should fit into the local humanitarian or developmental agenda rather than vice versa. To achieve this, greater flexibility is required from international actors in partnering processes with non-registered, non-traditional local actors. Projects large and small should focus on having partnerships or consortia of different organisations working together.

Build local capacity. Local capacity can be limited — but should not be under-estimated. Our study found that the sentiment from international actors in acute crises was that local capacity was low, due to lack of financial and operational resources. However, the sentiment from local actors was that they understand the context and are best placed to prioritise interventions. In this respect, their capacity is high. But they face challenges in strengthening their intrinsic attributes and qualities.

Local actors are often seen as a tool to help internationally driven humanitarian programming. Instead, they should be seen as an asset in their own right. They have knowledge and expertise that can enhance the work of all actors at a strategic level. Donors should build the capacity of local organisations to support the growth of their staff and, where possible, invest in institutions and not individuals, especially when staff turnover is high. For example, workshops are not an effective use of money as they invest in individuals.

Improve local access to funding. Better access to funding for local actors is also key. International actors have control over the finances and set the agenda. There is often a lack of agreement with local actors about priorities and local protocols are often bypassed. This leads to the duplication of services in some areas, while other areas are neglected. In addition, many local organisations end up changing their remit and working outside of their speciality, in order to access funding.

Donors and international partnering agencies must be willing to take more (perceived) risk and give funding directly to local organisations, rather than funnelling money through other organisations which then subcontract the local organisations. Protocols could be waived during the response phase and funding could be simplified. For example, one-page proposal templates for small grants could be created for local actors to complete quickly and easily at the end of coordination meetings.

Make time to understand the context. Time is one of the scarcest resources during a response, and time constraints affect our ability to understand context. For new arrivals, there are many things that need quickly to be understood: the immediate context, the evolving situation, and — crucially — what the background and culture is of the disaster-affected area. This will influence decisions and programmes.

Generally, local actors felt that international actors, and even national actors, lack a contextualised knowledge and cultural understanding, and limited attention is paid to local involvement in the responses. Not enough time is spent in the setting by international actors to understand the situation (see for example Box 2). Both the response and established community processes are harmed if international actors focus on what they believe is the problem and not what the real problem is. Problems can only really be viewed, and the correct solutions identified, if the context is well understood. Spending time fully immersed in the setting is the best way to begin understanding it.

Build trust by favouring pre-existing networks and structures. The foundation on which successful collaborations are built is trust.

<div style="border: 2px solid pink; padding: 1em;">

Box 2. Divided living

It emerged from the interviews that international and local actors led largely separate existences with widely different security protocols. International actors lived in hotels or guarded compounds and were driven around in agency vehicles, avoiding public transportation and socialising in 'expat-friendly' areas of the city.

The stark separation between the lives of international and local actors, and the discrepancy in wages and access to expenses, led to feelings of resentment from local actors and limited the opportunities for interaction and mutual learning.

With this degree of isolation, can international actors ever truly understand a crisis? Local and international actors face different challenges, but separation of the two harms the response and resentment is not a foundation on which to build collaborative projects. As one of our respondents, a local government official in Juba, said:

"So whenever the situation became really hard, the local staff stayed behind to continue with the work. Whereas, because of liabilities and other issues, no agencies would want to keep any of their international staff out here."

</div>

International actors tend to go to where access is easiest and installed capacity already exists, so that they can guarantee getting their mandate delivered on time — but is this approach appropriate?

If there is a lack of cultural sensitivity or the input of local actors is overlooked, then a programme is unlikely to succeed. International actors must at all times harness pre-existing partnerships, signs and symbols of trust, and use them carefully under direction from local actors.

Improve the institutional framework. New administrations often fail to recognise successful work that has been carried out before, and will look to implement a new project rather than continuing a current one. Frequent personnel changes also impede the progress of programming — often without a proper hand-over from one person to another when they finish their role. To reduce high staff turnover rates and to facilitate contextual understanding, contracts for international actors should avoid being short term.

Real long-term thinking: take a holistic approach. Sustainability is a core component of a successful intervention. Strategies towards longevity must be factored in at the design stage of a programme: an integrated, long-term plan that seeks to view the city as a whole — rather than as districts, administrations and sectors — will lead to sustainability and avoid issues with the transition from humanitarian to developmental work. To achieve this, all interventions by international actors should be area-based, to ensure those living in extreme

poverty are not left behind; trans-sectoral, to take a holistic approach towards complex overlapping issues; and participatory, to ensure local actors are at the centre of design.

Value the intrinsic worth of local actors. The benefit of working with local actors is often not valued. International and local respondents believed collaboration only occurred when the international actor was obliged to work with local actors, in a 'tick-box' manner. If international actors can work alone, they often will choose to do so.

Working with local actors is not yet a core requirement of international assistance. Yet as our study has shown, local actors are an asset in their own right, work in more dangerous situations, will continue projects and programmes after the departure of international actors, and are best placed to understand what will or will not work.

Local and international collaboration should be a fundamental part of urban humanitarian response. As such, local actors must be present at all levels — and especially the high levels — of decision making, strategy and programming, in both national and international forums.

Tilly Alcayna and Furat Al-Murani

Tilly Alcayna is a research consultant focusing on disaster risk reduction and humanitarian assistance. She consults for the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and previously worked for the British Red Cross, European Commission and the Royal Geographical Society. Furat Al-Murani trained as a medical doctor and has consulted at the department of Public Health Sciences, Karolinska Institute. His work focuses on community based initiatives and fostering partnerships between multiple stakeholders. They are the directors and co-founders of Futureproof-Ideas.

Knowledge Products

Notes

[1] Currion, P (2015) Rapid humanitarian assessment in urban settings. ACAPS, Geneva. www.alnap.org/resource/20125 / [2] McGranahan, G and Satterthwaite, D (2014) Urbanisation concepts and trends. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/10709IIED / [3] IFRC (2015) World disasters report: focus on local actors, the key to humanitarian effectiveness. IFRC, Geneva. http://ifrc-media.org/interactive/world-disasters-report-2015 / [4] ICRC (2016) Armed violence and the new urban agenda: The ICRC's recommendations for Habitat III. Policy Paper, ICRC, Geneva. www.icrc.org/en/document/armed-violence-and-new-urban-agenda-recommendations-habitat-iii / [5] Alcayna, T and Al-Murani, F (2016) Local and international collaboration in urban humanitarian response. IIED, London. / [6] Alcayna, T and Al-Murani, F (2016) A city-specific focus on local and international collaboration: Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo (the Philippines); Medellín (Colombia); Juba (South Sudan). IIED, London.

Download the pdf at **http://pubs.iied.org/17378IIED**