Urban Research Initiative

Responding to crises in complex, interconnected urban contexts

ALNAP

Why do we need to look at urban?

Over the past decade, humanitarians have found themselves operating more and more in urban contexts. Several recent urban crises - including the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal, urban violence in Honduras and Colombia, the Ebola Outbreak in West African cities and the on-going displacement of Syrians in cities across the Middle East and Europe – have repeatedly highlighted the failure of the humanitarian sector to understand and connect with 'what's already there' in urban situations.

A number of recent initiatives aim to address these challenges by 'thinking differently' about urban, using 'area-based' approaches that focus on understanding the dynamics within a particular area, working with and building capacity of local authorities, incorporating the expertise of urban built environment professionals, and using new tools to improve understanding of urban response. These trends indicate a shift in how humanitarians perceive, and respond to, urban crises. However, despite growing interest, there is a lack of clarity around what it means to truly understand and work with the stakeholders and systems pre-existing in urban contexts.

What has ALNAP done?

ALNAP's work on urban humanitarian response began in 2012 with a range of activities that promote the exchange of learning around urban crises, including the **Urban Humanitarian Response Portal**, a **community of practice** and **webinar series**. In 2015, ALNAP also started research into urban humanitarian response, exploring how humanitarians could respond more effectively in complex, interconnected urban environments.

In 2016, ALNAP produced *Stepping Back: Understanding Cities and their Systems* in **English**, **Spanish** and **Arabic**. This paper explores issues around what defines urban and why understanding urban contexts is important.
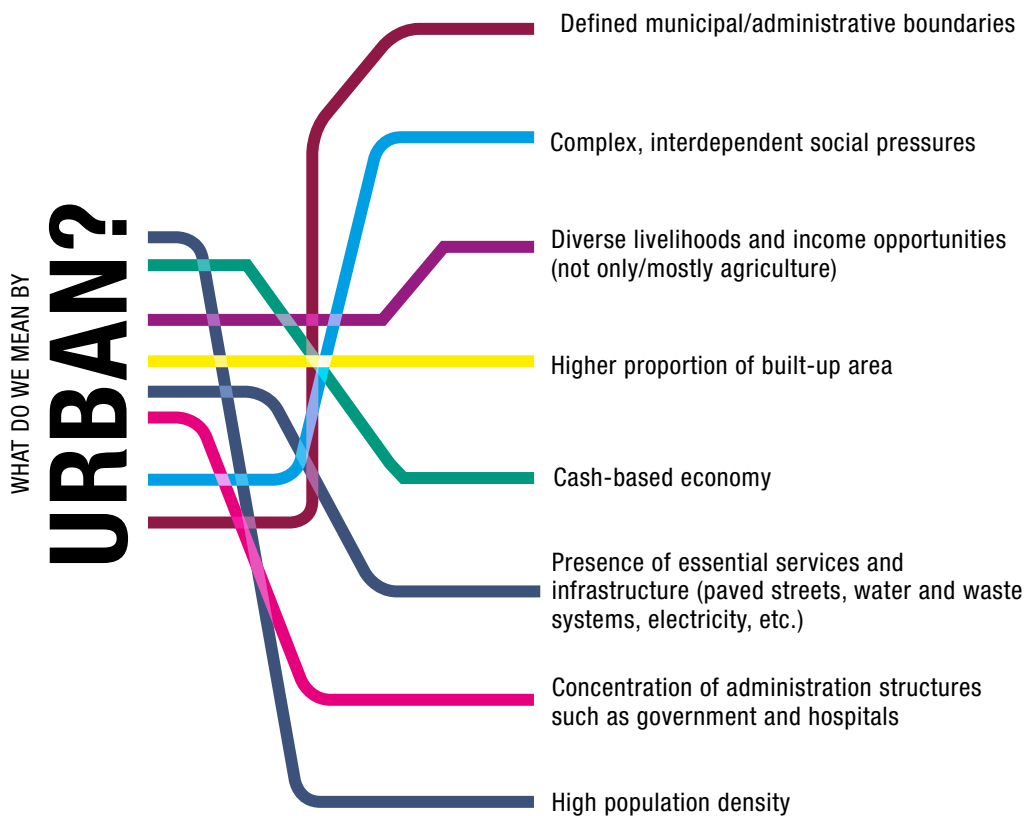
The paper proposes a 'systems approach' to understanding cities in order to effectively address the linkages, interconnections and interrelationships between different parts of the urban system. Using a typology to illustrate the systems found in cities, the paper explores the changes needed in how humanitarians think about urban environments. These changes include:

- Recognising that cities are systems
- Accepting uncertainty, complexity and change
- Thinking at multiple scales, across sectors, using both holistic and reductionist lenses
- Acknowledging interconnectedness and relationships

Overall, this paper advocates for the need to 'step back' in order to change our approach to urban contexts. It argues that, in order to ensure a response is not disconnected, does not lead to negative impacts or exacerbate tensions, or miss crucial information or undermine local actors, urban humanitarian response needs to be informed by solid contextual understanding. 'Stepping Back' recognises the importance of making practical and system-wide changes in order to move forward and respond effectively to urban crises.

What is urban?

Urban areas come in many shapes and sizes. Their high density, porous boundaries and propensity for change mean that, rather than having a set definition, it is better and more useful to think of urban areas as on a continuum, with fuzzy boundaries. Broadly speaking, urban areas contain a high population density, concentration of administrative structures, services and infrastructure, rely on a cash-based economy, have a significant built-up area and a range of livelihood opportunities, experience complex social pressures and have some defined administrative boundaries.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY
URBAN?

Defined municipal/administrative boundaries

Complex, interdependent social pressures

Diverse livelihoods and income opportunities (not only/mostly agriculture)

Higher proportion of built-up area

Cash-based economy

Presence of essential services and infrastructure (paved streets, water and waste systems, electricity, etc.)

Concentration of administration structures such as government and hospitals

High population density

Next steps

ALNAP is now working on two further related pieces of research to address the following questions:

Paper 1: Can context analysis and city profiling tools improve humanitarians' ability to think and act more effectively in urban environments?

While **Stepping Back: Understanding Cities and their Systems** outlines the case for **why** improving our understanding of urban contexts is an important part of being able to respond effectively within these environments, the question of **how** humanitarians can get this information, and how it could be used to improve practice, remains. While working on these issues over the past year and a half, ALNAP has identified a number of existing and newly developed tools which hold potential for filling this gap in understanding. This research paper considers whether these tools (including context analysis, situation analysis, urban profiling and others) are able to provide the information humanitarians need to improve their response, and if so, how it can be used to inform practice. Using interviews, literature review, miniature case studies and group discussions, this paper aims to address three audiences: those new to these tools and wondering where to begin and why, those currently using the identified tools or similar, and donors or policy makers wondering how best to support informed urban humanitarian response.

Paper 2: How can humanitarians effectively respond in urban crises that are complex and interconnected?

Recognising that cities are complex and interconnected may improve humanitarian response. In **Stepping Back**, we proposed several principles on how organisations can respond more effectively to urban crises. These include being adaptive and flexible to change, working at multiple levels and across sectors, taking steps to understand what we can, paying particular attention to interconnectedness and relationships, and how cities exhibit complexity.

However, it is unclear whether these ideas can be operationalised in humanitarian response, and what impact they may have on the response. Few humanitarians are using this sort of approach in urban response, and as such it is difficult to gauge whether adopting it is useful, or even possible. This paper builds on the concepts in 'Stepping Back' through additional interviews, literature review as well as three case studies and a questionnaire, to explore the potential for humanitarians to respond more effectively to the complexity and interconnectedness found in urban contexts.

Both papers will consider the various factors that may enable or act as obstacles for these new ways of working. This may include key relationships and 'buy-in' needed, the wider funding and policy environment, the way individuals and organisations behave and what shapes this (including their policies, culture, mind-set, decision-making structure, and programmatic approach in a response), as well as other issues identified during the research.

It is likely that both new pieces of research will raise even more questions about the best way to work in complex, changing urban environments. Once these two papers and related activities are completed, ALNAP will consider whether to continue this work. This may include additional research, workshops or training.

How can you get involved?

There are lots of ways to get involved in this research initiative, so please get in touch!

1 Do you have a relevant experience to share? Do you know of a relevant publication or tool for review, or want to share your own experiences through a key informant interview, or participating in our questionnaire?

2 Do you know of a current or recent humanitarian response programme with a similar approach to what is described here? Was it flexible? Multi-sectoral? Draw on contextual understanding? Look at different scales? Considers the long-term impacts? You might be able to suggest our next case study!

3 Are you organising an event which deals with similar themes? ALNAP has already contributed to events on related issues organised by the Red Cross, Impact Initiatives, UN Habitat, InterAction and International Rescue Committee (IRC). We would be happy to discuss, participate and contribute.

4 Are you interested or working on similar issues? Do you just want to find out more? We are always interested in talking to ALNAP Members and other colleagues to expand our understanding of these issues, and would value your thoughts. Get in touch!

For more information or to get involved in the research, contact ALNAP's Senior Research Officer Leah Campbell at **l.campbell@alnap.org**.

Related ALNAP publications

ALNAPs urban links and publications

www.alnap.org/urban

Stepping Back: Understanding Cities and their Systems

English | www.alnap.org/resource/23595

Español | www.alnap.org/resource/23926

Arabic | www.alnap.org/resource/24121

Urban Humanitarian Response Portal

www.urban-response.org

Urban Humanitarian Community of Practice

partnerplatform.org/alnap/urban-response

Urban humanitarian webinar series

www.alnap.org/whats-going-on/webinars#urban-webinars