A Haitian woman walking through an IDP camp in Port-au-Prince following the earthquake of January 2010. © Ulises Rodriguez/photolibrary

The urbanisation of displaced people

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"Too many of the underlying assumptions, the analytical tools and the operational approaches that guide our work are based on the outmoded notion that refugees and displaced people belong in camps, where their needs are best and most easily met through the provision of direct and dedicated humanitarian services. We have not yet thought through the full challenge of operating in cities, where displaced populations are intermingled with other urban residents and where the activities of humanitarian agencies must evidently be supportive of – rather than separate from – those of the authorities and development actors."[1]

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1 Judy Cheng-Hopkins, Assistant High Commissioner, UNHCR, Presentation to Cities Alliance Consultative Group Meeting, 22 January 2009, Barcelona.

The displaced within the context of rapid urbanisation

The year 2008 marked a historical turning point as, for the first time, more than half the world's total population now lives in urbanised landscapes. This urbanisation process will be at its most intense over the next three decades, with over 90 per cent of global urban growth happening in the developing world. Rapid urbanisation interacts with, and is reinforced by, stressors such as climate change, environmental degradation, food shortages, volatile commodity prices, financial and economic instability, under/unemployment, crime and weak governance.

Rapid urbanisation is also influenced by conflict and war, as people flee the violence in their home areas and seek refuge in cities. As the world becomes increasingly urban, so too are these displaced populations. While it is impossible to gather uncontested data, there may be over ten million refugees – and at least twice as many internally displaced persons (IDPs) – in urban areas.

The available evidence suggests that displaced people are often confronted with additional risks when compared to other elements of the urban poor. They have often lost all of their assets and do not enjoy secure housing, land or property rights. In addition, they frequently lack supportive social networks and may not be in possession of the skills and knowledge required to survive in a city. Displaced people may also be unable to obtain the identity documents that are required to access public services such as rations or subsidised food. Or, in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, they may be formally excluded from the labour market and denied access to educational opportunities and health services.

2 Article 1A, paragraph 1, of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

At the same time, the large-scale presence of displaced people in urban areas has wider implications for the economy, society and administration of these cities. When forced migrants move in significant numbers to an urban area, they place additional pressure on the infrastructure and environment and add to existing competition in employment, housing and other markets. Moreover, many of these displaced people take up residence with family and friends, resulting in overcrowding with negative consequences for the health and welfare of all concerned. Urban displacement may also stretch the capacity of governmental and non-governmental agencies to the breaking point, especially when movements to urban areas take place in large numbers and within short periods of time. In sum, while displacement contributes to the urbanisation process, it also complicates and has the potential to obstruct the tasks of urban planning and poverty reduction.

The generally negative attitudes of many developing country governments to urbanisation also compound the challenges forced migrants face. These most commonly take the form of the failure to provide well-located land for settlement or services such as water, sanitation, solid waste disposal, energy, as well as the lack of access to health and education. It is into this generally negative policy environment that urban refugees and IDPs – and policies to address their issues – will need to be placed.

This complex urban environment calls for a different response to displacement than the traditional camp-based approach. While populations in camps are highly visible and easy to target, displaced people in urban areas live together with other marginalised groups as the urban poor. Any strategies attempting to assist the displaced populations must take into

account the broader population of their urban poor neighbours. For local governments, the arrival and long-term settlement of displaced populations in cities needs to be anticipated, understood and planned for as one factor within an accumulation of challenging trends.

To assist in addressing the challenge of urban displacement, UNHCR and other agencies working with displaced urban populations must develop new sets of relationships. They can no longer work only with national governments and line ministries; they must also establish relationships with mayors, municipal authorities, urban police forces, service providers and – most importantly of all – representatives of displaced and resident communities. Humanitarians can learn from the experience of development actors who have developed such links.

Addressing the knowledge gap on urbanisation and the displaced

Most studies advocate on behalf of urban refugees/IDPs and do not consider the impacts of their urbanisation on settled populations as well as on municipal and national authorities. Little is known about the impact of displaced communities on the cost and availability of food, housing and jobs. While many urban communities of displaced people have been around for years, their existence has not been

Displaced peoples camp in Kabul, Afghanistan. © Tom Koene/photolibrary

officially noted. It is highly likely a majority will become permanent urban residents, and their presence must be fully accounted for in urban planning, poverty reduction strategies, slum upgrading and other community development interventions.

This relationship between displacement and urbanisation is one that urban planners, demographers and development specialists have not significantly addressed, even though forced migration – and in particular internal displacement – has clearly impacted urban transformation. There are few documented examples of linkages between displacement and urban planning, administration, poverty reduction and emergency preparedness. There is also a dearth of studies on how people displaced to urban areas manage their lives, and the voices of urban refugees and IDPs are very rarely heard by policymakers. In the absence of sufficient research, it is hard to generalise about the reasons why displaced people congregate in cities, the impacts that they have on urban areas and their residents, their coping strategies and their means of livelihood. Considerably more research is needed but this cannot happen without much wider acknowledgement – by national governments, municipalities and development actors – of the extent of the phenomenon.

Findings of the Cities Alliance/UNHCR scoping study on urban displacement

In an effort to address this gap in knowledge and policy response, Cities Alliance and UNHCR conducted a scoping study in 2010 on urban displacement with the objective of identifying the challenges in responding to forced displacement to urban areas. The study focused on refugees

and internally displaced persons living in, or who have returned or relocated to, urban environments in developing countries as a result of or after conflict-induced humanitarian crises. It was based on a desk review of existing and ongoing research on urban displacement and adopted a global approach. The key findings from the study are:

■ Cities can absorb large numbers of people unnoticed, as most of those displaced to urban areas keep a low profile, often avoiding registration, enumeration and profiling exercises.

■ Many of those displaced to urban areas live alongside other urban poor in slums/informal settlements where resources and services are

Displaced women and children in a war damaged building in Decamare, Eritrea. © Eye Ubiquitous/photolibrary

■ People and returnees displaced from conflict constitute a significant proportion of the population in many cities in developing countries and include significant numbers of women, children and older people.

already overstretched, social relations fragile and communal solidarity lacking.

■ Exceptionally high rates of urbanisation in conflict states do not necessarily subside when the conflict ends.

■ Establishment of residence in urban areas by significant numbers of displaced people from a different ethnic or sectarian group is potentially destabilising if not mitigated properly.

■ The assistance provided to IDPs, refugees and returnees in urban areas is ad hoc and almost invariably inadequate.

■ Many of the poorly built urban environments in which most urban refugees/IDPs live are in areas that are increasingly vulnerable to natural hazards, such as flood plains, coastal areas and on hillsides. However, disaster risk reduction strategies rarely consider displaced populations.

■ There are fundamental methodological problems with gathering data on IDPs, refugees and returnees in urban areas where they are scattered and rarely homogenous. There is no statistical universe from which to extract plausibly representative samples.

■ The international legal protection available to urban IDPs is often significantly less than that for recognised refugees, although in theory IDPs are protected by their national laws.

Rethinking policy approaches to refugees and IDPs in urban areas

The issue of refugees and IDPs in urban areas poses a new set of challenges for humanitarian actors such as UNHCR and requires special attention from a policy perspective. Broadly speaking, the organisation will need to revisit a number of assumptions that underpin current approaches to the issue of refugees and IDPs. Traditional humanitarian assistance has dealt with refugees and IDPs in spatially distinctive contexts normally separate from the host communities, such as in tented villages. It is also generally assumed that refugee status is a transient condition, and that refugees and IDPs will return to their place of origin as soon as circumstances allow. At least one of these assumptions will not apply to the treatment of refugees and IDPs in an urban setting.

To respond to the increased focus on displaced persons in cities, UNHCR in September 2009 issued new operational guidelines, with the title indicating the agency's new approach to urban issues – UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas.[9] The new policy focuses on refugees, not IDPs, and frankly acknowledges failures to provide protection and assistance in urban areas. The policy emphasises that UNHCR's mandated responsibilities to refugees are not affected by their location: cities are legitimate places for refugees to reside in. Most significantly, however, the document stresses that providing urban refugees with protection, solutions and assistance depends on national and municipal actors.

While UNHCR now has a policy addressing urban refugees, their policy approach to urban IDPs is not clear. The relationship between government and UNHCR mandates needs to be clarified in situations where governments are unable or unwilling to assist IDPs. More work needs to be done on this, considering there are twice as many IDPs in the world as refugees.

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9 http://www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab6.pdf

Darfur – IDPs and refugees integrating in the cities

"By the early 2000s, the country [Sudan] was about 35% urbanized, and the drift to the cities was accelerating, notwithstanding the ceasefire and peace agreement in the south. Darfur was lagging: at the outbreak of the war there in 2003 it was only 18% urbanized. Six years on, the demography of Darfur is approximately one third urban, one third rural and one third displaced. Most of the IDP camps are on the margins of the cities and are fast becoming socially and economically integrated into the cities. Most of the IDPs are equally well described as urban migrants or squatters. Should there be a peace agreement and the possibility of return home, it is likely that half or more of the IDPs will remain where they are, move to Darfur's cities, or relocate to central Sudan."[10]

10 De Waal 2009.

UNHCR Refugee camp in Katale, Congo. © Wim van Capellen/photolibrary

Recommendations for agencies working with displaced people

Key tasks which humanitarians, development practitioners, urban planners and donors should focus greater attention on include:

■ Assisting local governments in planning for and dealing with large rapid influxes of people to urban areas

■ Addressing the needs of IDPs, refugees, residents and returnees together in ways that help promote social reintegration, including co-existence/reconciliation projects to tackle discrimination and xenophobia in urban areas

■ Mobilising and capacitating displaced urban populations and the urban poor they live with through enterprise development and vocational training in order to preserve and promote their dignity, self-esteem, productive and creative potential

■ Enhancing the skills of humanitarian staff as yet only experienced in camp-based management and conducting trainings for municipal authorities, mayors, judges and police on international humanitarian law as well as their obligations towards displaced people

■ Being more realistic about the potential for self-reliance. Unassisted refugees/IDPs cannot be regarded as self-reliant if they are living in abject poverty, or if they are obliged to survive by means of illicit or degrading activities. As such, there is a need for urban policies to address urban poor living in informal settlements together with displaced people living among them.

■ Improving registration/interview procedures to learn more about refugee/IDP post-return intentions, expectations and needs

■ UNHCR and other agencies working with displaced urban populations must develop new sets of relationships, no longer just with national governments and line ministries, but with mayors, municipal authorities, urban police forces, service providers and – most importantly of all – representatives of displaced and resident communities.

The key challenge for humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR will be to find a way to access urban refugees and IDPs without isolating them as one group of people in a whole population of urban poor that finds itself the subject of discrimination. Failure to do so could result in incidents such as that in the South African town of de Doorns, where Zimbabwean refugees – easily identifiable and vulnerable as scapegoats for a local population already struggling to make ends meet – were violently attacked. The complex urban context therefore requires an integrated response in which humanitarian agencies work with development institutions to address the needs of forced migrants as well as the urban poor with whom they live. It is the reality faced by a world in which all populations, including the displaced, are increasingly urbanised.