WHAT PRACTICES ARE USED TO IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AFFECTED BY URBAN HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES?

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View of Kathmandu in February 2016. Kieran Doherty/Oxfam.

0   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The systematic review *What practices are used to identify and prioritize vulnerable populations affected by urban humanitarian emergencies?* represents the first ever attempt to systematically search, sort and synthesize existing evidence on targeting the most vulnerable in urban humanitarian crises in low and middle-income countries. It was commissioned by the Humanitarian Evidence Programme (HEP) and carried out by a team from Stanford University, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and University of New South Wales.[1] Specifically, the research aims to consolidate findings on the practices (tools, methods and metrics) used to identify and prioritize vulnerable people, households and communities in humanitarian emergencies, including those displaced within and to urban areas. Targeting is difficult to design given that vulnerability is a complex attribute to measure; it is both dynamic and relative, and depends on programme objectives. The review investigates vulnerability assessment as a means of identifying target beneficiaries of humanitarian aid programmes in both disasters caused by natural hazards and complex emergency settings since 1985.

The research team:
- mapped and documented existing research
- identified gaps in existing research and knowledge
- synthesized the evidence in response to a considered research question.

> **Definitions**
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> This review encompasses a broad definition of '**urban environments**', which may be determined by: 'administrative criteria or political boundaries (e.g. area within the jurisdiction of a municipality or town committee); a threshold population size (where the minimum for an urban settlement is typically in the region of 2,000 people, although this varies globally between 200 and 50,000); population density (typically 400 per square kilometre); economic function (e.g. where a significant majority of the population is not primarily engaged in agriculture, or where there is surplus employment); or the presence of urban characteristics (e.g. paved streets, electric lighting, sewerage)' (UNICEF, 2012, p. 10). This definition allows for the inclusion of towns and cities, as well as peri-urban settlements with non-agriculture-based economies and informal spaces that lack official recognition.
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> **Vulnerable populations** can make up the majority of some cities, depending on the definition and metrics used. This review aims to synthesize evidence on practices used to identify vulnerable populations and hence relies a great deal on agencies' own definitions.
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> In this review, we use the term '**urban humanitarian emergency or crisis'** to refer to any humanitarian action taken within an urban environment, irrespective of where the crisis originated, as long as the intervention was implemented in an urban area. Many urban populations live below Sphere minimum standards, which can result in greater vulnerability when overlapped with other **types of emergencies** (Humanitarian Coalition, 2013).

What practices and methods are used to identify and prioritize vulnerable populations affected by urban humanitarian emergencies?

- The research team identified seven main methods or attributes of identifying and targeting vulnerable people in urban humanitarian contexts for consideration from 19 reports that had evidence meeting the synthesis criteria:
  - targeting by displacement status (i.e. internally displaced person (IDP) or refugee versus host population)
  - using locally derived assessment tools
  - categorical targeting (i.e. targeting by demographic category such as gender, age, ability, ethnicity)
  - using pre-existing administrative data
  - self-targeting
  - community-based targeting
  - using a sampling frame.

Figure 0.1: Summary of findings. Source: The research team

Identification practice type	Number of studies[*]	Quality of study[†]	Sectors/ themes	Locations
Targeting by displacement status Evidence calls into question the practice of using IDP/refugee versus host population as a targeting delineation in humanitarian programming in urban contexts, where there may be significant underlying vulnerability and poverty among resident populations.	6	High: 1 Medium: 2 Low: 3	Food security Nutrition Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)	Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Mogadishu, Somalia; Nairobi, Kenya; Peshawar, Pakistan; urban south-central Somalia
Categorical targeting Evidence shows that, while targeting by category of person using demographics such as gender or age can be useful, it must be context specific. Defining vulnerable groups by demographic identifier must ensure that those classified are truly the most in need of a humanitarian intervention.	4	High: 1 Medium: 1 Low: 2	Food security	Urban Burkina Faso; Damascus, Syria; Darfur, Sudan
Using pre-existing data Use of pre-existing administrative data must consider that it will often be imperfect in its representativeness, how it was collected and how up to date it may be. Given rapidly changing urban environments and disruptions caused by the crisis itself, pre-existing administrative data should be used with caution, bearing in mind the need to determine the supplementary secondary data needed for identifying vulnerable populations.	3	High: - Medium: 2 Low: 1	Food security Livelihoods	Bam, Iran; Darfur; urban Syria
Locally-derived tools Many reports stress the importance of local insight to the process of informing vulnerability assessments whether developing a brand new context-specific scale or adding locally relevant indicators to a pre-existing tool. Evidence from both gender-based violence (GBV) and food security assessments supports developing entirely new scales or adapting scales with local data.	3	High: 3 Medium: - Low: -	Food security GBV	Accra, Ghana; Mocoa, Colombia; Nairobi
Self-targeting Evidence indicates that the self-targeting method is expensive and difficult to maintain long-term or to transition to local authorities. Self-targeting through a physical centre is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable who wish to remain hidden.	2	High: - Medium: 1 Low: 1		Damascus, Mogadishu
Community-based targeting Evidence reveals some success in identifying the most vulnerable through community-based targeting, which leverages local knowledge and contextual understanding – critical to urban response. The evidence also shows that to avoid bias, a nuanced understanding of the community, motivating factors for participation and local power dynamics is required.	2	High: 1 Medium: - Low: 1	Food security, WASH, livelihoods	Gaza, Occupied Palestinian Territory; Nairobi, Port-au-Prince, Haiti; urban south-central Somalia
Sampling frame Evidence indicates that the density and heterogeneity of cities necessitates larger sample sizes, more clusters or smaller geographic units during data collection to ensure pockets of vulnerability and diversity are captured to inform targeting.	1	High: 1 Medium: - Low: -		Grozny (Chechnya)

Notes:

* Total sample size: 19 articles (14 grey literature, 5 academic).

† Quality: the research team developed a quality assessment formula based on: representativeness of urban population described (whether the sample size was large enough and the composition was adequate to draw meaningful conclusions); methods used (whether they were relevant and appropriate for assessing the targeting strategy used and whether those methods could generate reliable data); justified conclusions (whether or not they follow logically from the observations or results of the study); and risk and discussion of bias. The quality assessment scale is included in Appendix C of the full report.

- Six of the nineteen studies eligible for inclusion in this study contain evidence on **targeting by displaced and host populations**. Only one study – a review of NRC's programming in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where many displaced people rented accommodation with less secure tenure than host populations – indicates there was more vulnerability among displaced populations than resident communities. (Bailey, 2015). The majority of studies argue against targeting by displacement status to identify the most vulnerable populations in urban crises. In addition to missing some of the most vulnerable groups in a city, targeting by displacement status can foster resentment, in some instances further exacerbating the vulnerability of targeted groups (Metcalfe and Pavanello, 2011; CRS, 2015).
    - A study In Nairobi, Kenya, found that slum residents faced similar difficulties in accessing healthcare, adequate shelter, water and sanitation and education as IDPs (Metcalfe and Pavanello, 2011).
    - A livelihood nutrition assessment conducted in 14 districts of Mogadishu, Somalia, found only minor differences in vulnerability between host and IDP populations, determining that the differences were insufficient to justify excluding host populations from emergency nutritional support (ACF, 2012).
    - A Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM) report found that IDP community centres in several Yemeni cities had run into problems distinguishing host and displaced households in situations where host populations were found to be in equally 'dire need as IDPs' (CCCM 2014).
    - In the same report, a vulnerability mapping exercise in Lebanon showed the majority of poor Lebanese lived side by side with Syrian refugees within 225 localities that have a combined population of both vulnerable Lebanese and registered refugees (CCCM, 2014). Additionally, longer-term residents in Peshawar, Pakistan, pointed out that refugees and IDPs are straining basic services and infrastructure within the city, suggesting that funding should be provided for strengthening services in host communities that display similar vulnerability (Mosel and Jackson, 2013).

- Four of the included studies incorporate **categorical targeting methods** (i.e. targeting by demographic categories such as gender, age, disability and ethnicity). The outward transparency of this approach is stated as a benefit by one study because those meeting criteria for inclusion are often easily distinguishable (Fortin et al., 2015); the 2015 evaluation of NRC's urban assistance in Goma found that both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries estimated inclusion error for the categorical targeting programme to be minor (Bailey, 2015). However, nuanced analysis and contextual understanding are essential to ensure against oversight and mitigate the risk of overlooking certain types of vulnerability in particular situations.
    - In Syria, unaccompanied Iraqi men, who were not initially included as a vulnerable category were not considered for resettlement though they were particularly isolated due to their lack of family networks within Damascus (Haysom and Pavanello, 2011).
    - A DRC report focused on Syrian refugees in Turkey found female-headed households and male-headed households had similar levels of vulnerability on a majority of socioeconomic and protection indicators (Armstrong and Jacobsen, 2015).

- **Using pre-existing data** can be valuable in the design of targeting approaches – an example is following the 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran, when relief organizations were able to make use of the existing categorical vulnerability criteria defined by the local Welfare Organization and to rapidly begin targeting resources to people in need (Bagheri et al., 2006). However, two of the three studies referencing the use of pre-existing data underscore the importance of data verification and supplementation.
    - An evaluation of geographic targeting for food aid concluded that pre-existing data or analytical constructs must be supplemented by primary data (Bailey et al., 2005).
    - In Syria, Palestinian refugees were targeted for United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) assistance based on data held with its Relief and Social Service Programme, which effectively identified vulnerable beneficiaries early on in the programme. However, the registry was out of date and no longer sufficient to guarantee 'effective targeting of [the] abject poor' (Bucciarelli and Goldman, 2014).

- The research team found an insufficient number of trials to be able to make more evidence-based claims about the effectiveness of **locally derived** and **situation-specific instruments and practices to identify and prioritize vulnerability**. However, the three studies included in this review emphasize the significance of such practice both in terms of developing new context-specific scales and adding locally relevant indicators to pre-existing tools. Evidence comes from both the gender-based violence (GBV) and food security areas of practice.
  - An example of such a tool is a screening tool developed in Ethiopia and validated in Colombia (ASIST-GBV) to rapidly identify female survivors of GBV and appropriately target services. The authors of the study developed a screening tool for the various forms of GBV experienced by Ethiopian refugees through interviews and focus group discussions (Wirtz et al., 2013). The tool was refined and validated by another study of IDPs in hospital sites in Colombia, adding one additional question on forced abortion that specifically applied in the Colombian context. The tool shows high internal reliability and is able to distinguish between levels of GBV across a spectrum in both the Ethiopian and Colombian context. The evidence does not speak to the comparability of GBV levels across countries or outcomes of the interventions applied but it does show internal reliability in identifying affected populations (Vu et al., 2016).
  - One study among slum populations in Nairobi employed item response theory (IRT) models to quickly and effectively measure food insecurity. Researchers in this study narrowed down to only four dichotomous indicator variables to develop a hunger index, which they validated for accuracy against other measures (Faye et al., 2011).

- Both of the eligible studies covering **self-targeting** highlight concerns with the approach in their contexts: one documents the situation of vulnerable Iraqi refugees in Syria in 2006 (Haysom and Pavanello, 2011) and the other experiences of reaching the most vulnerable in Mogadishu (CCCM, 2014). The concerns are that self-targeting is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable who wish to remain hidden and it proved expensive and difficult to maintain long term or to transition to local authorities.

- The two pieces of evidence on **community-based targeting** reveal some success but also highlight the need for awareness of local power dynamics in order to avoid exclusion and bias.

- One study (Grozny, Chechnya) provides guidance on **sampling frames for surveys and focus groups** in urban areas, advising that the density and heterogeneity of cities necessitates large sample sizes, more clusters or smaller geographic units (Drysdale et al., 2000).

- The varied and varying nature of crisis, vulnerability, goals of humanitarian programming, local conditions and quality of available data mean that no single approach will be generically applicable to all contexts.

What evidence was eligible for synthesis?

- Some 29,000 English language documents were identified through database and website searches (of think tanks, consortia working groups and partnerships, UN agencies and international bodies, government agencies, university and institution-based research programmes and operational organizations) as well as through referrals made by experts from both the Urban Community of Practice listserv operated by ALNAP and the Urban Expert Working Group for the World Humanitarian Summit:
  - 304 articles were included in a full text review
  - 19 articles were eventually selected for inclusion in the review; 14 from grey literature and 5 academic articles
  - of the 19 included articles, 11 were qualitative studies, 5 quantitative and 3 mixed methods.[2]

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[2] The initial database and website searches took place during January and February 2016.

- The search covered all urban populations that have experienced a humanitarian crisis response since 1985 in urban areas – including IDPs, refugees and residents affected by an emergency:
  - all 19 of the included studies were published after 1999; 15 of them were published after 2010 (see the full report, Figure 4.1, for details of included studies for evidence-based findings).

- While the research team is confident in the methodology employed and the search terms and databases included, the state of humanitarian literature – how it is produced, published, catalogued and consolidated – results in some specific limitations.
  - For example, humanitarian literature in the databases searched does not treat urban search and rescue in the same way as the various other types of documentation detailing aid targeting do, and it was therefore not included in this review. In a technical sense, from an engineering and damage perspective, determining which structures should be prioritized for search and evacuation, and thus which occupants should be offered shelter first, can be described as targeting in urban humanitarian emergencies. Yet its treatment in these databases does not consider it as 'targeting' in the same manner as the other topics considered here. Additionally, while there is a wide literature base on urban search and rescue, the majority of this likely deals with examples from higher income countries, which are excluded from this review.
  - Expanding the scope to include evidence from various other bodies of literature, such as development and poverty alleviation, as well as work on intimate partner violence or human trafficking, may have identified additional evidence of potential interest to humanitarian practitioners but this was beyond the scope of this review.

What's the state of the evidence on practices used to identify and prioritize vulnerable populations affected by urban humanitarian emergencies? Where are the gaps?

- A major finding of this systematic review is the striking lack of high quality evidence on targeting vulnerable populations in urban humanitarian emergencies. The research team's own experience of assessing the strength of the evidence in many papers revealed:
  - minimal information about methods – while some studies (particularly the academic articles) have robust methods sections, many methods sections are sparse and light on detail
  - reports do not always clearly attribute findings to the study results
  - much of the literature informing humanitarian practice does not incorporate experimental design
  - while many papers discuss the number of people enrolled or targeted by a programme, the actual size of the sample used to evaluate the targeting approach and its representativeness is not clear
  - often an observational approach is taken to evaluate targeting but the methods of observation are not always clearly described
  - descriptions of limitations and risks of bias are nearly always absent in the grey literature reports, which tend to focus more on the effectiveness of a specific intervention for pre-determined outputs, than on formally seeking to evaluate the targeting approach
  - the academic papers have more direct focus on evaluating a targeting approach as the main purpose of the research and tend to compare targeting approaches to one another or to an accepted standard, or to perform validity tests; the academic literature scored higher in this review's quality rubric because it mandates a methodology section, requires presentation of data and discussion of limitations (allowing clear evaluation of validity) and has a peer review filter for publication that some grey literature does not.

- Specific areas that would benefit from better disaggregated data and focused research include:
  - war, conflict and violence – while these may be some of the most difficult situations in which to perform quality research, the dearth of evidence highlights a glaring gap in environments that require effort and funding as populations become increasingly exposed to conflict

    – age, gender and (dis)ability – future evaluations could specifically aim to investigate and report on the experience of these groups with regard to specific targeting approaches

    – urban shelter – outside the literature base on urban search and rescue, and on engineering assessments, there is a lack of evidence to guide targeting

    – user and beneficiary generated data – data obtained through crowdsourcing platforms and social media is often presented as a potentially valuable way of incorporating community perspectives and local knowledge in targeting; however, we found no evidence on these methods in our searches

    – evidence is lacking on how targeting during a humanitarian emergency can emerge from disaster risk reduction efforts, or be folded back into social protection programmes post-crisis as an exit strategy

    – absorptive capacity – urban humanitarian response that is moving towards understanding how cities, communities and households can enable the aid response will necessitate better assessments of local absorptive capacity; this includes, for example, the capacity to shelter or host IDPs, or to upgrade the existing healthcare infrastructure.

Research team reflections

● These identified gaps speak to the lack of outcome-based research in the humanitarian sector, where process indicators are preferentially collected and reported. Without true outcomes, the risks and benefits of selected approaches cannot be validated. The humanitarian sector should move towards outcome indicators based on potential risks and benefits when designing the monitoring and evaluation of programmes – supported by adequate funding to allow the construction of a firm evidence base. This research would likely adopt mixed-methods approaches. The multidimensional nature of vulnerability and complexity of the urban environment will likely require both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

● Our review excludes lessons and forms of practice used in non-acute crisis settings. The nature of rapid urbanization, however, has created many situations of chronic crisis. Lessons for identifying and targeting the most vulnerable from such non-acute crisis situations from a wider body of literature such as development practice would be valuable to inform humanitarian practice in acute crises. The existing evidence on this topic comes from many sources but commonly resides in post-crisis reports of strategies used such as agency evaluations, rather than pre-planned studies.

● When resources are limited and needs are vast, there is some limitation to any targeting approach, whether in numbers of people that can be served or the amount/quality of aid that can be provided. Also, while there may be a preferred targeting approach for a given situation, political and security concerns that restrict operations can be as limiting as budgets and time.

● We believe urban areas are most amenable to targeting based on socioeconomic indicators supplemented by deeper contextual analyses of vulnerability. Sector-based vulnerability analyses and targeting approaches are ill suited to complex urban crises, where needs are interrelated.

● Efforts to improve urban data before a crisis begins are an opportunity to align development and humanitarian priorities. As local governments play a larger role in humanitarian aid operations, and as practice is placed in a broader development and resilience framework, pre-existing and baseline data to inform targeting will become increasingly valuable. This pre-existing data, however, may be out-dated, aggregated or biased, and loses value in rapidly changing situations such as displacement. Protracted crises represent examples of cases in which pre-existing data and existing humanitarian assessments can be combined to inform targeting.

Creating tools to drive sector-specific interventions in urban settings

The NRC and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, along with some NGOs and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are creating new guidelines for the provision of shelter in urban settings. UNHCR has worked with NGOs to develop a toolkit to identify at-risk urban refugees for resettlement (UNHCR, 2015). Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has developed a vulnerability assessment tool to identify victims of violence and improve targeting to prioritize areas of high need (MSF, 2015). Additionally, Concern Worldwide has received funding from the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance to develop a tool for slow-onset urban emergencies. This would function as an early warning system to alert governments and humanitarian organizations in the case of escalating concern. Many other organizations are also working on tools for targeting vulnerable populations, including but not limited to the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) and the Feinstein International Center's work on urban profiling (JIPS et al., 2013). These very specific efforts aim to prompt early response to crises, and facilitate the distribution of aid quickly and effectively to those most vulnerable to shocks.

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