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Brief: Urban Response Practitioner Workshop

Meeting Needs in a Context of Protracted Urban Displacement in Asia



Bangkok, Thailand
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Executive Summary

Today, more than half of the world's 59.5 million forcibly displaced people live in urban areas¹ and their average length of displacement is over a decade.² In Asia, the world's fastest urbanizing continent, countries like Iran and Pakistan are among the top-10 major refugee-hosting countries in the world, while Afghanistan remains the second largest source of refugees globally behind Syria.³ In Southeast Asia, Thailand serves as the region's primary destination for refugees and asylum seekers, with over half a million people of concern living in the country in 2015.⁴ All the while, these countries are becoming more urban. While estimates vary, Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand are all urbanizing at rates over 2.5 percent annually, with Afghanistan nearing 4 percent.⁵ To add to this pressure, natural disasters and the impacts of climate change can have severe consequences in urban contexts, as Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and the recent earthquake in Nepal have shown.

These trends have significant implications for cities within the region, including heightened challenges for providing basic services to the city's existing inhabitants as well as new residents. They also impact the changing humanitarian landscape, where traditional humanitarian responses have been most often designed for camp or rural/remote contexts. Humanitarian organizations must adapt to this new reality in order to meet the needs of impacted populations and to support the city, its local actors, and its systems. This raises questions around the interplay between urban local actors (such as municipal officials or urban planners) and humanitarian agencies.

In order to better understand these issues, to learn from challenges and successes, and to identify more appropriate ways of working, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) hosted an **Urban Practitioner Workshop on Meeting Needs in a Context of Urban Displacement in Asia**.

The aim of the workshop was to bring together humanitarian, international development, community organizations, and local municipal actors called into action by various urban crises within the region.

Based on the workshop's discussions, the IRC developed the following three key recommendations to meeting needs in a context of urban displacement:

- 1. Leverage the added value of humanitarian intervention**
- 2. Meaningfully engage urban communities**
- 3. Emphasize demand over supply and opportunities over challenges**

At the conclusion of the two-day workshop, attendees agreed that humanitarian organizations have a critical role to play in meeting the needs of urban displacement in the region. While the exact nature of this role depends on the context and nature of the crisis, it is clear that humanitarians should be generally a.) **rethinking traditional programming models** and b.) **acting as a part of a larger network of urban responders** to collaboratively address the needs of urban crises.

¹Protracted displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile. ODI. September 2015. Available at: <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9851.pdf>. Accessed July 25, 2016.

²World at War. UNCHR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014. June 2015. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>. Accessed July 25, 2016.

³Global Refugee Crisis by the numbers. Amnesty International. October 2015. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/global-refugee-crisis-by-the-numbers/>. Accessed July 25, 2016.

⁴ UNHCR Thailand Country Data. Available at: http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2552#_ga=1.240669955.1299153731.1466084998. Accessed July 25, 2016.

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/fields/2212.html>. Accessed July 25, 2016.

Overview

In November 2016, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) hosted a practitioner workshop entitled **Meeting Needs in a Context of Urban Displacement in Asia** in Bangkok, Thailand. The workshop is part of IRC's Urban Crises Program, which is divided into two components: learning and advocacy. The goal of the Urban Crises Program is to generate practical evidence as to what constitutes effective urban humanitarian response for both beneficiaries and the places in which they live, and to use this evidence to improve humanitarian urban programming and advocate for innovative and sustainable approaches to urban response within the international community.

To this end, the aim of the workshop was to bring together humanitarian (both international and local), international development, and local municipal actors currently responding to crises affecting Asia's urban areas. As many publications written about the topic of urban humanitarian response highlight the need for non-governmental and public sector actors to collaborate,⁶ this workshop sought to gain insight from these various perspectives in order to determine the challenges, opportunities, and potential solutions to meeting needs in a context of urban displacement. With this in mind, the workshop's organizers encouraged each invitee from an international non-governmental organization (INGO) to invite a local municipal or national actor with whom they may or may not coordinate with on the ground. This allowed a forum where actors working in the same country but representing different perspectives engaged with one another over the two-day period. Workshop participants are listed in the **Annex**.

The Bangkok Urban Practitioner Workshop is the third and final regional workshop of its kind. The previous two took place in Istanbul (September 2015)⁷ and Nairobi (May 2016) and focused on the Syria Response Region (SRR) and Horn and East Africa (HEA) regions, respectively.

This brief is meant to provide an overview of the key points generally agreed upon during the workshop. The following recommendations are meant as a general overview and are the sole opinion of the Urban Crises Program project team and the IRC.

⁶ For a comprehensive database of publications on the topic, please visit ALNAP's Urban Humanitarian Response research portal at www.urban-response.org.

⁷ The SRR workshop brief is available here: <http://www.urban-response.org/resource/21629>

Leverage the added value of humanitarian intervention

During the Urban Practitioner Workshop for the Horn and East Africa region, practitioners stressed the need to recognize that their work doesn't start from scratch. This is because humanitarians working in urban environments are often joining the ranks of a large and diverse network of stakeholders and systems that, for better or worse, are connected by the context in which they function. During the Bangkok workshop, practitioners elaborated on this principle, focusing not just on the need for humanitarians to recognize existing stakeholders and systems in urban areas, but the need for humanitarians to recognize how they themselves can add value to a city's overall response and the response network. This means not simply working alongside existing infrastructure and institutions, but actively committing to improving their functionality, inclusivity, and resilience.

International NGOs are uniquely positioned as “outsiders” to the urban system.⁸ While this certainly presents challenges, humanitarians should also recognize opportunities to leverage their presence in order to add value wherever possible. Possible examples discussed among attendees include: A.) serving as a convener of urban stakeholders and establishing platforms of collaboration, coordination, communication, and data sharing, B.) advocating for more inclusive institutions and service delivery mechanisms, particularly when it comes to human rights based approaches, and C.) investing in the capacities of local organizations, be they governmental, civil, or private, to better respond to various shocks and stresses.

In practice, this approach would benefit cities such as Peshawar, which must deal with chronic flooding and terrorism in addition to influxes of both refugees and internally displaced persons. Despite facing a greater and more diverse set of challenges than arguably any other major Pakistani city, Peshawar lacks the local mandate to plan and collaborate on their own accord. While the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province (of which Peshawar is the capital city) cannot advocate on its own behalf, representatives of the provincial government expressed willingness to partner with International NGOs to develop local plans, pilot community-level projects, and use successful evidence from those projects to advocate for a greater local mandate to bring successful pilots to scale. This potential strategy would be best implemented with the support of an International NGO partner willing to work collaboratively with the provincial government to add value to their response efforts.

⁸ A recent report from ALNAP states that the urban system includes economics and livelihoods, politics and governance, society and culture, infrastructure and services, and space and settlement. Campbell, Leah. “Stepping Back: Understanding Cities and their Systems.” ALNAP. October 2016. Available at: <http://www.alnap.org/resource/23595.aspx>. Accessed 19 January 2017.

Meaningfully engage urban communities

A major theme throughout the workshop's discussion was the importance of community engagement in urban humanitarian response. This reflects the attendance of numerous civil society organizations and local authorities who are mandated to represent urban communities and their various needs. Participants discussed the need for urban responders to create space for communities to influence decision making, particularly those communities for whom programs seek to benefit. Meaningful community engagement is particularly challenging in urban areas where residents can belong to many different communities, while communities themselves have porous and ill-defined boundaries. As a recent World Vision report states, urban residents "belong to several communities simultaneously and with overlap. These can be communities united around interest, practice and culture, and not [just] communities of place."⁹

Nonetheless, urban practitioners should endeavor to view community engagement not only as a means of outreach and obtaining client feedback, but also as a means of designing more effective programs and projects with active participation of the community. When humanitarians engage urban communities as opposed to simply reaching out to them, communities in turn may be able to better inform program design and contribute resources (labor, data, etc.) to implementation processes, thereby improving both local viability and cost-effectiveness.

While humanitarians have made strides in empowering community voices, they have yet to mainstream community engagement into program design processes. As the need for urban response increases, so too will the need for humanitarians to solicit the feedback and participation of diverse urban communities. To do so, they may learn from the practices of civil society organizations and local NGOs, such as the Homeless Peoples Federation Inc. (HPFPI)'s work in the urban areas of the Philippines. HPFPI uses community engagement strategies to address specific vulnerabilities, such as homelessness, low access to financing opportunities, or helping those living in high risk areas of a city. No matter the vulnerability in question, HPFPI's approach is to organize and mobilize communities into savings or learning groups where they may take collective action. Examples include community-driven mapping exercises where residents map the risks associated with their own neighborhoods, thereby becoming more aware of the risks they face on a daily basis and more involved in strategies to reduce them.

While HPFPI's approach is focused on mobilizing local communities, the City of Tacloban approached community engagement on a larger scale. In order to raise public awareness of the city's Tacloban Recovery and Rehabilitation Plan (TRRP) following Typhoon Haiyan, the City hosted a public consultation at a local stadium where thousands of local residents could voice their concerns or approval.¹⁰ While certainly a stark contrast to HPFPI's engagement strategy, the City viewed the public consultation as a necessary step in the recovery process. The base lesson, as agreed upon by workshop participants, is the same: urban response is most effective when it includes the meaningful engagement of local communities. Achieving meaningful community engagement, as attending practitioners evinced, can be accomplished in different ways.

⁹ Making Sense of the City. World Vision. September 2016. Available at: <http://www.wvi.org/our-urban-research-learning-initiative/publication/making-sense-city>. Accessed 9 December 2016.

¹⁰ For more about Tacloban's response to Typhoon Haiyan, please see IIED's report, [Tacloban after Haiyan: working together towards recovery](#).

Emphasize demand over supply and opportunities over challenges

Similar to the theme of community engagement, attendees stressed a need for humanitarians to focus on meeting the demand for services versus focusing on their supply. What's more, attendees spoke of the need for humanitarians to leverage the opportunities cities provide in meeting these demands, as opposed to simply focusing on the challenges of service delivery, meeting basic needs, and combating different forms of violence. While these challenges are significant and must be addressed, designing programs based on a supply-side/challenge-driven approach limits the capacity of those programs to build on existing opportunities, meet the demands of urban residents as they define them, and do so in a creative and collaborative manner.

In Bangkok, for example, displaced residents face many legal and social challenges that inhibit their ability to provide for themselves. While these challenges are well-documented, workshop attendees representing the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, headquartered in Bangkok, expressed that not enough is known about the positive contributions and general resilience of the displaced within the city. What's more, programs meant to meet the needs of the displaced within Bangkok have traditionally been driven by the challenges they face. Agencies such as the IRC and Asylum Access Thailand feature programs that are largely reactionary in that they provide legal assistance to refugees or asylum seekers only after they've been detained or incarcerated. While these programs are crucial, they do not address the core of the problem, such as the city's restrictive legal frameworks or marginalized urban communities. Focusing on the opportunities cities like Bangkok provide – such as its active communities and diverse sets of urban markets – may better enable humanitarians to meet the demands of the urban displaced and help them avoid these challenges altogether.

One concrete example of this approach is a project implemented by the Ramon Aboitz Foundation Inc. (RAFI) in Cebu City, Philippines. Cebu City is home to a large community of the Sama-Bajau tribe, an often marginalized minority tribe of Southeast Asia that has been displaced several times in recent decades. In order to meet the Sama-Bajau community's need for a permanent and safe home within Cebu City, RAFI and its partners collaborated with community members and the municipality to find a space within the city to construct a social housing complex. The 140-unit complex features several amenities meant to empower its residents, such as health and livelihoods centers, and help them feel more welcome within their adopted city. By putting the demands of the community first and working with the city and local partners to identify an appropriate site for the complex, RAFI's approach was driven by the opportunities offered by the urban environment and led to a holistic, community-driven outcome.

Future research priorities

In addition to the above recommendations, workshop attendees collectively identified the following topics as possible future research priorities and program design needs given current gaps in understanding and practice around urban humanitarian response:

- Understanding difference between shocks and stresses to identify intervention strategies. This is particularly needed as it relates to urban displacement, which may be categorized as either a shock or a stress, therefore leading to different framework of response.
- Developing detailed mapping methodologies in order to map the risks facing local displaced populations according to geography, especially in coastal areas.
- Understanding the positive contributions of urban displaced to a city, especially quantifying economic contributions of the displaced to urban economies.
- Actionable and evidence-backed strategies to achieving integration and durable solutions, particularly in diverse and highly populated urban areas

Conclusion and Next Steps

Urban crises are not humanitarian issues alone. They affect municipalities, central governments, civil society, urban systems, and city residents of every kind. Their impacts are complex, far reaching, context-specific, and difficult to assess. And, as the above examples evince, their solutions require humanitarian actions delivered creatively and in tandem with those municipal and development actors working to solve beyond them. When delivered effectively, humanitarian response to urban crises can leverage a tremendous support network of responders and urban systems in a way that offers sustainable and community-based solutions.

The humanitarian community is engaged in an ongoing learning process to better understand specific steps needed to improve urban response. The findings of this workshop serve as one step along the way to improving our collective knowledge of how to better support cities' diverse residents and the most vulnerable within them.

Annex

The following organizations and authorities and their associated countries were represented at the workshop:

- Advisor to Municipality of Tacloban, Philippines
- Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)
- Association for Aid and Relief (Japan and Myanmar)
- City of Davao, Philippines
- Homeless Peoples Federation of the Philippines, Inc.
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED, global)
- International Rescue Committee (Myanmar, Pakistan, and Thailand)
- Philippine Business for Social Progress
- Provincial Disaster Management Authority, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province, Pakistan
- Ramon Aboitz Foundation, Inc. (Philippines)
- World Vision International (Asia region)

Topics of discussion included opportunities and challenges to urban response, municipal and humanitarian collaboration, potential solutions to urban response, case studies of urban response around the Asia region, and opportunities for innovation, amongst others.

The Urban Crises team wishes to thank all workshop participants for their insight and continued dedication to urban response. Thank you also to Leah Campbell of ALNAP for contributing to the workshop.

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These products are convened and produced in coordination with the **Global Alliance for Urban Crises**. To learn more about the Global Alliance, please visit www.urban-crises.org.

To learn more about the Partnership, or to get involved in future Urban Practitioner Workshops, please contact Samer Saliba, Urban Response Learning Manager of the IRC, at Samer.Saliba@rescue.org. Additional information and similar publications may be found online at www.rescue-uk.org/what-we-do/urban-crisis.

Cover photo of Bangkok taken by Samer Saliba for the IRC.

