



Humanitarian Action in an Urban World

The IRC's role in
Improving Urban Crisis Response

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The humanitarian landscape is changing. The world is urbanising rapidly, and its ever-expanding cities will increasingly be affected by natural disasters and displacement crises. Despite the existence of sprawling refugee camps in countries bordering the world's conflict zones, today some 60 per cent of the world's refugees live in urban contexts, most of them in the cities of conflict-affected or low-income countries struggling to maintain stability and provide services for their host populations. Such trends generate new challenges and opportunities for humanitarian actors.

Adapting to an Urban Context

There is growing recognition that humanitarian organisations such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) must adapt to better support refugees living outside of camps and to foster long-term self-reliance for refugee populations and host communities alike. To start, we must better understand the urban contexts in which we work. We must prioritize building partnerships with multiple stakeholders, including city authorities and civil society organizations, to deliver support and services to affected populations and, in the process, assist them as they build their resilience and capacity to effectively respond to crises.

BELOW: The increased cost of living in urban areas forces refugees to find shelter any way they can, often within unfinished buildings such as those in metropolitan Beirut. *Jacob Russell/IRC*



Urban settings require different approaches to delivering assistance and supporting populations compared to rural areas or refugee camps.

How We Help

The IRC has been working in cities and towns impacted by humanitarian crises for decades and our experience shows that urban settings require new approaches to delivering assistance. We are currently exploring innovative ways to support the displaced and host communities in urban contexts to survive, recover and rebuild their lives. We are dedicated to not only meeting the immediate needs of affected populations, but to also fostering recovery, resilience, and self-reliance in the aftermath of a crisis, so that affected populations are safer and healthier, with less disruption to their education, economic wellbeing, and ability to influence decisions that affect them, and the city is able to better cope with future shocks and stresses. We are committed to improving our response to urban crises and sharing our experience and evidence with the wider humanitarian community.

The IRC is increasingly recognised as a global thought leader and effective practitioner on urban displacement and the challenges posed by humanitarian crises in urban contexts. We advocate and influence policy, generate learning and evidence about what works, and develop new programming models, tools, and approaches to meet the specific challenges and opportunities of working in cities and towns. We are focused on ensuring that the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to respond effectively to urban humanitarian crises are available to a diverse range of actors, producing a more effective response, as well as a more enabling policy environment that takes into account the specificities of urban crises.

COVER: Urban areas are defined in part by the density and scale of the built environment. *Jacob Russell/IRC*

What's Different about Urban Contexts?

Urban contexts differ from rural ones in terms of the greater number, density, and diversity of their stakeholders, their residents and the communities they represent.

Political, social, and service-provision structures and systems are more complex and interconnected in cities and towns. Urban contexts are marked by a greater concentration of resources, reliance on cash-based economies and the scale and density of the physical environment. Displaced populations in urban contexts are often less visible and more difficult to identify for actors who provide support. Additionally, they may face legal and social barriers to accessing employment or local services – particularly health and education.

Delivering aid in urban contexts requires us to develop and implement programmes that are flexible and collaborative, unhindered by sectoral constraints, and which take into account the complex characteristics of the city or town.

We must recognise that in cities, no matter the identified need, there is never one actor capable of fulfilling it alone, nor is there ever just one clear and distinct path to reaching a solution. Understanding this will allow us to deliver better aid and ensure measurable improvements in the lives of urban residents and communities impacted by crises.

IRC Principles of Urban Response

While there is no effective one-size-fits-all approach, the following principles can guide an effective response to humanitarian crises in urban contexts.



URBAN PARTNERSHIPS, COLLABORATION AND INCLUSION

Cities are shaped by a multitude of international, national and local actors from multiple sectors, including government, civil society organizations (CSOs), the academic community, the private sector and development practitioners. These diverse actors, who possess valuable knowledge of and influence over how the city functions, form networks that humanitarians can leverage to inform effective and inclusive responses. Their understanding of how the city operates and provides services, as well as how legal and social frameworks affect the lives of urban residents and communities is a critical, but often overlooked, resource. Humanitarians should support local authorities and service providers to coordinate responses while leveraging the emergence of national and locally led response networks to ensure that activities and advocacy are well coordinated. Such an approach will help build local and sustainable capacity for preparedness and response while striving for the inclusion and empowerment of marginalised groups, such as women and minority groups.



SUPPORTING RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

Building long-term recovery and resilience must be considered from the outset of a crisis, as the transition from emergency response to recovery can be rapid and normally involves a period in which the two phases overlap. Cities operate on longstanding and interconnected networks of service provision channels (such as education, health, and legal services), markets, governance structures and social systems. Humanitarians should strive to work within these systems, to avoid their duplication or disruption, and to work in ways that leaves them stronger and better able to ensure long-term recovery and resilience.



WORKING WITHIN A COMPLEX CONTEXT

As no two cities are alike, no two cities in crisis are alike. Effective urban humanitarian response requires a full understanding of the scale and complexities of the local context, its interconnected systems and stakeholders, and the way in which diverse urban communities live within it and alongside one another. To be most effective, humanitarian actors working in an urban context should take into account local power dynamics, social networks, existing structures, systems and geography in order to identify suitable entry points and opportunities to leverage the distinct characteristics of the city or town.

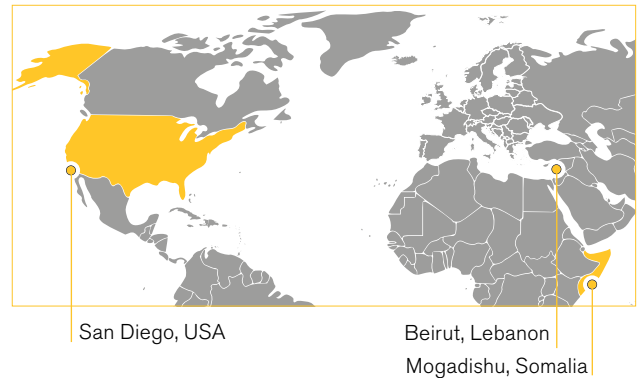
Where We Work

The IRC operates in cities around the world, responding to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helping people whose lives and livelihoods are shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and gain control of their future.

Beirut, Lebanon



The IRC is helping children who live or work on the streets of Beirut - begging, selling tissues, flowers, or shining shoes - to find safety and security. The IRC engages with parents of street and working children through a small pilot community development program aimed at reducing parents' need to send children to work. At the same time, the IRC works closely with national law enforcement to raise awareness of how to appropriately and sensitively deal with street children; in 2014, the IRC trained 100 police officers in child protection.



Mogadishu, Somalia



To support the livelihoods of people forced to flee to Mogadishu, the IRC is pursuing systematic and transformative programmes, often in partnership with local authorities. We promote sustainable urban development, connect urban youth to better work prospects and support local market development.

San Diego, USA



With a particular focus on refugee, asylum seekers and new immigrant populations, the IRC in San Diego collaborates with an array of public and private organisations focused on urban community development and creating inclusive societies. San Diego leads innovative approaches in social, cultural and economic integration programming and is at the forefront of building welcoming communities that embrace inclusive civic policies and practices that value the contributions of new American populations.

On the International Stage: The Global Alliance for Urban Crises

The IRC is a co-convenor of the **Global Alliance for Urban Crises**, a new global, multi-disciplinary and collaborative community of practice working to prevent, prepare for and more effectively respond to humanitarian crises in urban settings. The Alliance brings together more than 70 diverse stakeholders to work collectively toward common goals and to jointly deliver initiatives that will have real impact on the ground. The Alliance places affected communities and municipalities at the centre of its work and encourages a supportive and collaborative approach from member states, humanitarian, development and other relevant actors during urban humanitarian crises.



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For more information, please visit: www.rescue-uk.org/what-we-do/urban-crisis

LEFT: The IRC helps families seeking refuge in the city, such as those in Nairobi, Kenya, rebuild their lives. *Peter Biro/IRC*