

Think Urban and Learn from the City: Exploring Urban Dimensions of Humanitarianism

Summary Report

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Urban Crises Learning Fund

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IIED's Human Settlements Group

The Human Settlements Group at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) works to reduce poverty and improve health and housing conditions in the urban centres of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It seeks to combine this with promoting good governance and more ecologically sustainable patterns of urban development and rural-urban linkages.

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The Urban Crises Learning Partnership (UCLP) was a two-year (2015–17) learning initiative aimed at improving humanitarian preparedness and response in urban areas. It was a partnership between Habitat for Humanity GB, Oxfam GB, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and University College London (UCL). The project carried out primary research in Haiti and Bangladesh through the National Offices of Habitat for Humanity in both countries, and Oxfam in Bangladesh.

The UCLP had two primary objectives: to improve the way stakeholders in urban crises engage with each other to form new partnerships and make better decisions; and to improve disaster preparedness and response in urban areas by developing, testing, and disseminating new approaches to the formation of these relationships and systems.

The project addressed these objectives by exploring four related themes: the role of actors who are not part of the formal national or international humanitarian system; accountability to affected populations (AAP); urban systems; and coordinating urban disaster preparedness.

The UCLP was established on the assumption that the humanitarian sector had a poor understanding of the urban context and needed to improve the manner in which it operated in urban spaces. This paper by Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén of UCL puts forward principles for a better understanding of urban contexts through a cross-disciplinary approach. They argue that the humanitarian sector could greatly benefit from concepts and ideas that have become established in other fields, for example in urban studies, urban geography, and urban design, and which have, as yet, failed to intersect with humanitarianism.

Alan Brouder, UCLP Coordinator
Habitat for Humanity GB
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
Habitat III	UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NUA	New Urban Agenda

Introduction

Just over a year ago, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Peter Maurer, openly reflected on the inevitable transformation that urban conflict has brought to the humanitarian field. The growing demand for international aid in highly contested urban regions, he said, “has altered the humanitarian space, changing the world of emergency relief beyond recognition” (Chonghaile, 2015).

The rapid growth of cities has tilted the scales of humanitarian focus: what was for decades a traditional, rural field of expertise has gradually shifted towards the demands brought on by the crises, conflicts, and politics of the city. This, of course, suggests the need for a complex disciplinary adaptation, and humanitarian organisations have been struggling to cope; it also puts a heavy toll on field practitioners’ knowledge and their capacity to fulfill responsibilities under increased pressure.

There are many examples of this trend of mounting urban demands – from the rise of armed conflicts to the impact of natural hazards in highly dense, highly populated environments. But the transformation required extends beyond a need to deliver more aid to deal with people’s rising vulnerability; it means practices need to be adjusted. Humanitarian logistics now face the very real challenge of being constantly involved in, and susceptible to, risky situations and active violence, which demand engaging in problematic negotiations. For example, the delivery of aid itself – from supplies to infrastructure to human capital – is no longer a guaranteed, self-contained process, because the possibility of disruption needs to always be considered.

Until recently, humanitarian intervention was generally understood as a *post*-disaster activity; but current emergency relief operations tend to run *in parallel* to conflict that often continues after a mission is meant to be completed.

The way that urban conflict is changing the logic and temporality of the aid system has created a pressing challenge. Institutions and organisations around the world have looked for tools and new ways of improving the sector’s approach to this reality. Recent literature in the field – and in urban studies more generally – has given particular weight to the essential task of better defining and understanding what the city is really like and what ‘the urban’ really means.

Current trends suggest that urbanisation is set to keep growing, and conflict-prone areas are expected to become more important targets for aid. This might suggest it is possible for the sector to adopt a language of intervention that covers most humanitarian aid scenarios. However, although some major issues will certainly be broad enough for this to be the case, a substantial degree of context and local expertise is still required in order to ‘understand the urban’.

For this reason, rather than supplying definitions, reviewing analysis toolkits or promoting new agendas (of which there are many), this report puts forward principles for a better understanding of urban contexts through a cross-disciplinary approach. The humanitarian sector, we argue, could greatly benefit from concepts and ideas that have become established in other fields, for example in urban studies, urban geography, and urban design – and which have failed, for various reasons, to intersect with humanitarianism.

This report also aims to contribute to ‘urban systems’ understanding by extracting a set of indicators and parameters from urban studies that can inform the current urban shift of humanitarianism. However, this should be more than a sharing of concepts. Ideally, the adaptation and recognition of some of these sources of knowledge can eventually be converted into functional strategies that improve the humanitarian sector’s operational capacities. We believe that thinking about the humanitarian system through a wider urban mindset will make it possible to learn from the city, and will enrich the practitioner’s tools for dealing with the strenuous conditions of an urban emergency.

Reframing the Urban

The 'urban' is, in itself, an opaque term. It amounts to more than its spatial and geographical parameters, and is characterised by what Edgar Pieterse, South African Research Chair in Urban Policy at the University of Cape Town, documents as the "rich, complex and indeterminate dynamics of 'cityness'" (Pieterse, 2013).

During last year's UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, there was a clear and collective emphasis on urban pressures – territorial, social, political – and an acknowledgement that these pressures are inextricably linked. The New Urban Agenda (NUA) adopted at the conference, though somewhat limited in its applicability, reminds actors that urban processes are always interconnected, and that urban planning mechanisms ought to be understood as complex, multidisciplinary undertakings.

Although not a binding agreement, the NUA captures how some of the world's leading policy and decision makers understand the urban dwelling experience. It highlights the main challenges to be addressed at different scales, and confirms that a renewed understanding of the urban experience is underway. Setting a 20-year vision, the NUA makes a clear prognosis (Habitat III, 2016):

"As the population, economic activities, social and cultural interactions, as well as environmental and humanitarian impacts, are increasingly concentrated in cities, this poses massive sustainability challenges in terms of housing, infrastructure, basic services, food security, health, education, decent jobs, safety, and natural resources, among others."

An Urbanised Future for Emergency Aid

The urban form cannot be isolated from the phenomenon that produces it, namely the resolute march towards urbanisation around the globe. This has become much more than a statistical trend – a distinctly urbanised future is being formed. Urbanisation has progressed in such a way as to adjust to how urban phenomena (such as mobility, shelter, density) are experienced and lived, from the perspective of not just citizens and governance

systems, but of any other group that needs to operate in the urban space. Producing a more nuanced understanding of urban challenges will therefore require a contribution by multiple disciplines, particularly as crises and emergencies continue to capture international attention.

The humanitarian sector has been increasingly pushed to adapt and transform along with this increased urbanisation. It has gradually turned its responses towards an urban setting, and has repeatedly engaged with conflicts, disasters, and emergencies that cannot be isolated from the city dynamics happening around them.

After decades of very specific theoretical and practical strategies in humanitarian practice, the messy nature of cities-as-intervention-areas has forced new discussions, and a renewed understanding of vulnerabilities, risks, and spaces for intervention in crisis areas. Current reflections call for a wide debate and alternative – not necessarily new, but complementary – perspectives on the urban dimension of humanitarian approaches, and the different adaptations that should be considered when planning and intervening.

Emergency aid is now at the point of permanently becoming part of the dynamics of urbanisation. Humanitarianism is no longer an external element that becomes necessary only after extraordinary circumstances. It must acknowledge its inevitable participation in areas of ongoing conflict and disaster, but also in the wider fabric of the city with its multiple economies, local politics, diversity at different regional scales, and formal and informal activity. In time, the sector – including aid agencies, humanitarian institutions, and emergency-driven programmes – needs to come to terms with these new conditions: that their operations will be concentrated in ever-demanding urban corridors of conflict, settled in permanence rather than short-term involvement, and gradually acquiring a more active role in the everyday functioning of a city. These pressures might include social responsibilities that extend beyond a mission's intended objectives and, in more demanding settings, might take over the long-term management of urban infrastructures and services when local institutions fail to do so.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

Until now, the humanitarian sector has been slow in adapting its strategies from a primarily rural-based framework. It needs a re-orientation beyond simply a study of the context in which it operates. This transition not only affects operational strategies and budgets, but creates a safety vacuum where practitioners may be exposed to higher risks and, in turn, compromise the delivery of aid.

Some of these impacts have already been experienced and partially documented by some of the most important actors in the sector, who highlight the countless challenges brought on by the complex dynamics of urban areas.

The ICRC explains how, for almost 30 years, the humanitarian field has been catching up with urban demands without truly reforming its logic (ICRC, 2015). It also diagnoses an imperative need to reformulate the relief paradigm – starting from understanding the complex infrastructure of urban environments and existing systems of aid provision, to defining the urban itself: that is, “the area within which civilians vulnerable to disruptions in essential services reside and the network of components supporting those services” (ICRC, 2015).

Similarly, a 2016 report by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Doctors without Borders) describes how risk-averse strategies adopted by several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and agencies have weakened urban intervention, “giving higher priority to their larger, more visible and more straightforward camp operations than to their smaller, more complicated and more likely to fail urban ones” (MSF, 2016).

A Disciplinary Intersection

Any humanitarian paradigm shift requires a new set of tools centred around urban demands, a spirited advocacy, and long-term vision. In practical terms this translates into adjusting operation manuals, renewing risk assessments, updating appraisals and repurposing any operative structure that puts emergency aid into action. In terms of knowledge, humanitarian workers will inevitably become multi-disciplinary practitioners. They would need to have expertise in a particular area but also be well-versed in the demands of urban complexity: city codes, political structures, cultural cues, social biases, and plenty more.

Several documents have already started promoting alternative practices. Despite their specific terminologies, they seem to have more similarities than differences. The systems-based approach explained by ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance), for example, emphasises the “linkages, interconnections and interrelationships between different parts of a system”, because “a systems approach recognises the potential to arrive at new and different insights than can be gained by looking at each component part individually” (Campbell, 2016). This vision is aligned with ARUP’s City Resilience Index project, where a system-based approach helps to explain “the long-standing notion of cities as ‘systems of systems’. [...] This promotes a sectoral approach and means that interdependencies between different systems at different scales, and the governing structures that influence the way systems work, are not easily considered” (Da Silva, 2016). ALNAP’s vision also acknowledges the variability of urban environments, and in how these environments are defined, while identifying features that shape them: “Their density, diversity and dynamics pose challenges for those seeking to understand or work within them” (Da Silva, 2016).

Some of these features coincide with the following observations in contemporary urban studies (even those that do not relate to the humanitarian field):

- Urban regions – whether cities, metro-areas or other types of built-up areas – impose a territorial centrality that is unavoidable. They consume a great deal of resources, capital, and labour due to what sociologist Luis Wirth defined as their size, density and diversity – characteristics which are, in turn, bounded in a territory: ‘the urban’ (Wirth, 1938). In an emergency, which adds pressure to the capacity of existing systems to respond, this profile is tested to its limit.
- Cities are part of wider systems of social and political relationships that operate at different scales. This wider set of actors and interests means that a city is not just an administrative area but a space where governance, financial interests, and social demands overlap. In times of crisis, humanitarian actors quickly become part of these relationships, in many occasions with no choice but to act as mediators in complex political situation.

An Essential Strategy and Operational Limitations

The observations above lead us to suggest that to *think urban and learn from the city* needs to become an essential strategy for urban humanitarianism. In other words, the city is a social space where urban practices and politics converge and are connected to local institutions, vulnerable groups, and official institutions at different scales. In addition, cities are rarely ‘fixed’; defining their actual space is, perhaps, a futile exercise. Instead, they reflect an intersection between territory, services, infrastructure, economies, and other interconnected systems. As architecture professor Reinhold Martin suggests, a city is a space more akin to hardware (Martin, 2016):

“(The) city is not, in the first instance, a space, a place, a territory, or a zone; nor is it, strictly speaking, a social body. To be more precise, all of these categories and others, such as enclosure, separation, connection, density, and proximity, derive from this basic principle. [...] For identifying a city with hardware – let us also say infrastructure – enables us to recognize it, whatever its specifics may be, as a site of sociotechnical life and production where power is encoded, memories are stored, and possible futures are recorded.

Emergencies, as mentioned earlier, push cities to their limit. Humanitarian interventions increasingly have to rely on improvisation in situations where systemic urban failure compromises a mission’s main objective. For example, medical assistance may be hindered by the collapse of infrastructure in a previously trusted supply route; crises that extend for years drain human capacity and morale; international law, sanctions or embargoes suddenly disrupt intervention plans.

Following up on this idea comes against some concrete limitations faced by humanitarian institutions and practitioners:

- Many humanitarian practices are specialised almost to a fault. When a mission’s objectives follow pre-designed templates of intervention and specific agendas, any disruptions that require stepping outside the planned expertise makes those missions extremely vulnerable to some degree of failure. This is especially the case in urban areas, where conflict is unpredictable and connected with a range of other challenges.
- The need to give ‘the urban’ a universal definition can backfire. If ‘the urban’ and ‘the city’ become generic terms, the danger is that local contexts will be ignored. Humanitarian knowledge must be flexible and able to distinguish between the different layers in definitions of urban spaces – from more general ones that refer to infrastructures, services, and systems, to looser social constructions that refer to segregation, citizen agency, transient humanitarian actors, or the population at-large (Landau *et al.*, 2016).
- Evaluations of humanitarian projects usually demand concrete results specific to the field of expertise in a particular mission, leaving aside factors that could have affected the process of getting those results. Although this is inevitable, we argue that aside from rigid cause-effect descriptions, field practitioners need to develop open-ended questions as part of their methodology. These questions can become a starting point for identifying evidence that can be useful in subsequent interventions, while also openly acknowledging the complexity of the emergency environment where there may be no concrete answers or results.
- Humanitarian actors are often perceived as separate entities, external and alien to the sites of intervention. This precludes thinking about the humanitarian sector as a system that is already embedded in the urban one. On one hand, it perpetuates a misconception that the sector acts as ‘saviour’; on the other, it ignores its capacity to influence and change the urban system itself.

Thinking Urban: Tools of Analysis

There are several valuable urban analysis frameworks that support the case for a humanitarian paradigm shift, including the systems approach suggested by ALNAP and discussed above. Here, we provide an overview of three perspectives developed by experts in urban studies outside the humanitarian field: Levy's Web of Institutionalization (Levy, 1996), Safer's Inter-Dimensional Analysis of Urban Development (Safer, 2004), and Pieterse's Domains of Political Engagement (Pieterse, 2008).

These frameworks emerge from urbanism, urban development or urban studies, and address the following question: how exactly can we interpret the functions inside a city? They make a valuable contribution by complementing frameworks that categorise those functions and by reflecting systemic, complex thinking. Instead of offering definitive tools, they guide humanitarian urban research into an exploration of ideas.

The Web of Institutionalisation

This framework highlights the connection between political power (in terms of institutions and assets) with planning and policy. Although Levy originally applied it to gender roles in society, later interpretations have expanded its scope to explain the linkages between governance, social sectors, and the processes,

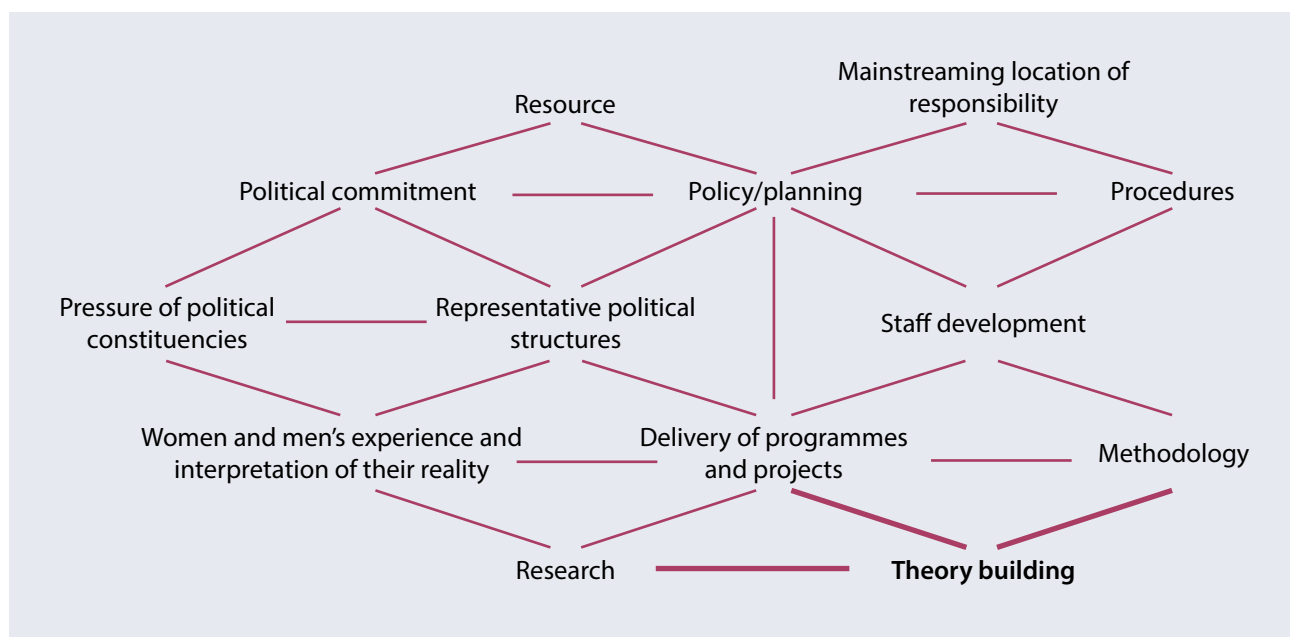
structures, and actions in any situation that involves political institutions.

In the Web, each 'element' represents a site of power (Figure 1). Given the relationships underlying these elements, each will face opportunities for action and resistance. Field practices, Levy recognises, are as much pressured by the fixed components of the urban space (such as the economy or space) as by the complex workings of the city (such as decision-making at the municipal level). This creates a permanent dialogue across the different scales.

More importantly, though, the Web can function as more than just a descriptive framework. Its design is meant to become a methodology in itself, and an open-source tool that allows monitoring, discussion, and implementation of field interventions.

The framework is extremely useful for investigating specific urban environments such as informal settlements or risk-prone areas – how they are understood and produced, and how they embody meanings, identities, practices, and power relationships. These, in Levy's words, "provide a means not only for guiding and even structuring a diagnosis of an existing situation. Once assessed, they indicate room for manoeuvre for change and can provide a means for directing action" (Levy, 1996).

Figure 1. The Web of Institutionalisation (Levy, 1996)



A Multidimensional Analysis Framework

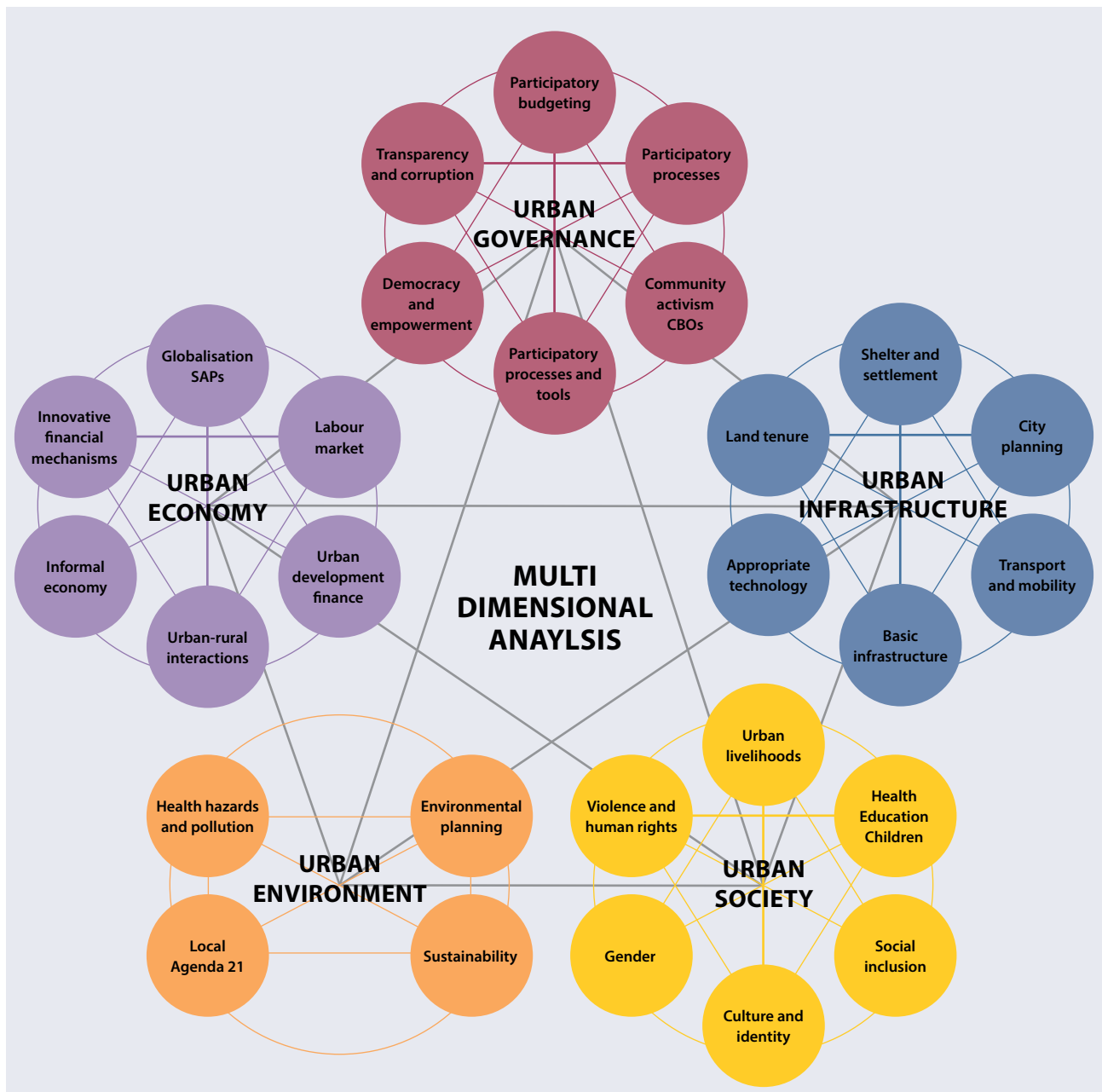
In a rather ambitious and expansive document published in 2004, Michael Safier developed an Inter-Dimensional Analysis of Urban Development – an urban diagram that is “organised around different ‘dimensions’ of urban development and catalogues the accumulation of principles, and examples of innovative practice, which ‘cluster’ around these dimensions” (Safier, 2004).

This framework looks at dimensions of urban life, including clusters that reflect the “richness and diversity of innovations” (Safier, 2004); but most importantly,

it looks at the multiple inter-linkages between governance, infrastructure, society, economy, and environment (Figure 2). By doing this, the analytical framework can identify the potential for better partnerships and possible improvements to the urban environment – and this makes it an asset for analysis of urban dimensions of humanitarian work.

Figure 2 shows how Safier designed the spheres as large categories (similar to systems frameworks), but supported by an addition of clusters (similar to those in the Web of Institutionalisation) that establish the principles, policies, and practices that may support an analysis of urban spaces.

Figure 2. Interdimensional Analysis of Urban Development (Safier, 2004)



As the urban-rural divide becomes less clear-cut in practical terms, a more nuanced view of urban dynamics can be gained through this framework. It sets forth a series of interconnections that explain how urban development takes shape on the ground, describing it through five main dimensions, and showing possible connections between the urban processes involved. This is true in any context, but particularly when dealing with urban environments where large swathes of populations are increasingly vulnerable to hazards such as earthquakes, war, political strife, terrorism, or flooding. By understanding why those vulnerabilities exist, field practices can develop strategies that restore calm in the present while at the same time allowing enough foresight to strengthen their capacity to respond into the future.

Michael Safier also attempted to outline a framework for estimating the potential for transformative urban planning (Safier, 2002). While this is designed for urban planning processes, it can also link the fields of disaster risk reduction and humanitarianism by helping to identify key catalysts for change, key processes to sustain change, and key structural goals for urban transformation.

For Safier, the four dimensions of any specific areas where planners can be proactive are the following (Safier, 2004):

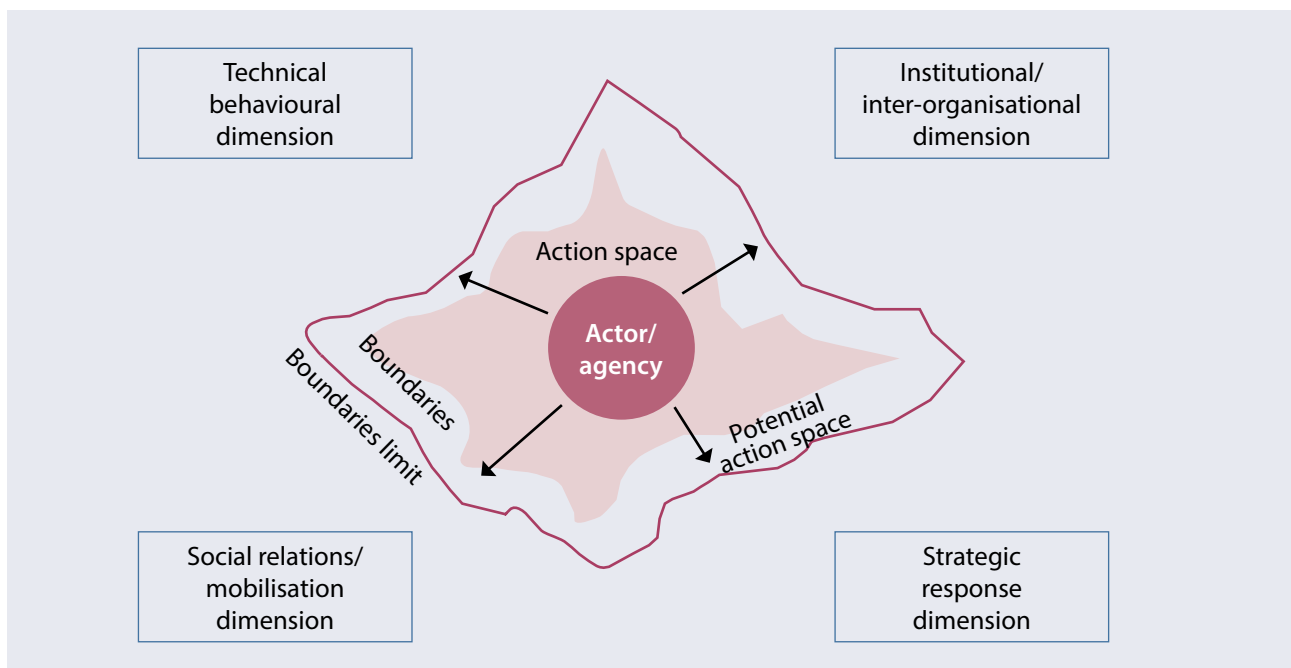
- Improving technical or operational innovations, and upholding the ethics and behaviours of individuals or groups.

- Implementing institutional and inter-organisational reforms – of goals, roles, priorities, procedures, and resource allocations.
- Expanding social interaction and mobilisation – by getting involved in inclusive, participatory, and equitable negotiation.
- Broadening the scope of strategic analysis and tactical responses to the dynamics of urban development.

Safier defines a planners' 'action space' that includes multiple dimensions (Figure 3), which may involve the following actions in a humanitarian or disaster context:

- **In the technical and behavioural dimension:** putting in place capacity-building initiatives; conducting academic and technical studies on housing construction and urban risk; supporting innovations that bring together technical and local knowledge; identifying ways of using resources more efficiently; and responding with more flexibility and with 'strategic compromise'.
- **In the institutional and inter-organisational dimension:** creating space and time for inter-institutional coordination, and for dialogue; analysing institutional roles, responsibilities, and administrative and management capacities; finding synergies to maximise available personnel and resources; and making space for creating new institutions.

Figure 3. Planners' actions space (Safier, 2002)



- **In the social-relations dimension:** engaging the community to identify key stakeholders for local risk reduction; respecting and valuing local initiatives that aim to improve collective and individual coping strategies; encouraging civil society participation in platforms related to risk planning; enabling the participation of previously excluded groups; and creating partnerships to advocate for change at a local, national, or international level.
- **In the strategic response dimension:** conducting a more detailed analysis of local resource availability and capacity to change the allocation of limited resources for disaster risk reduction; initiating a drive towards more participatory analysis, management of budgets, and local planning processes where they raise questions about the responsibilities of the State, the private sector, and civil society to reduce risk and build resilience.

society, and private sectors engage politically at different scales. Particularly relevant to humanitarian action are the power relationships that emerge from these urban dynamics, which reflect inequalities between actors and the difficulties of working through them.

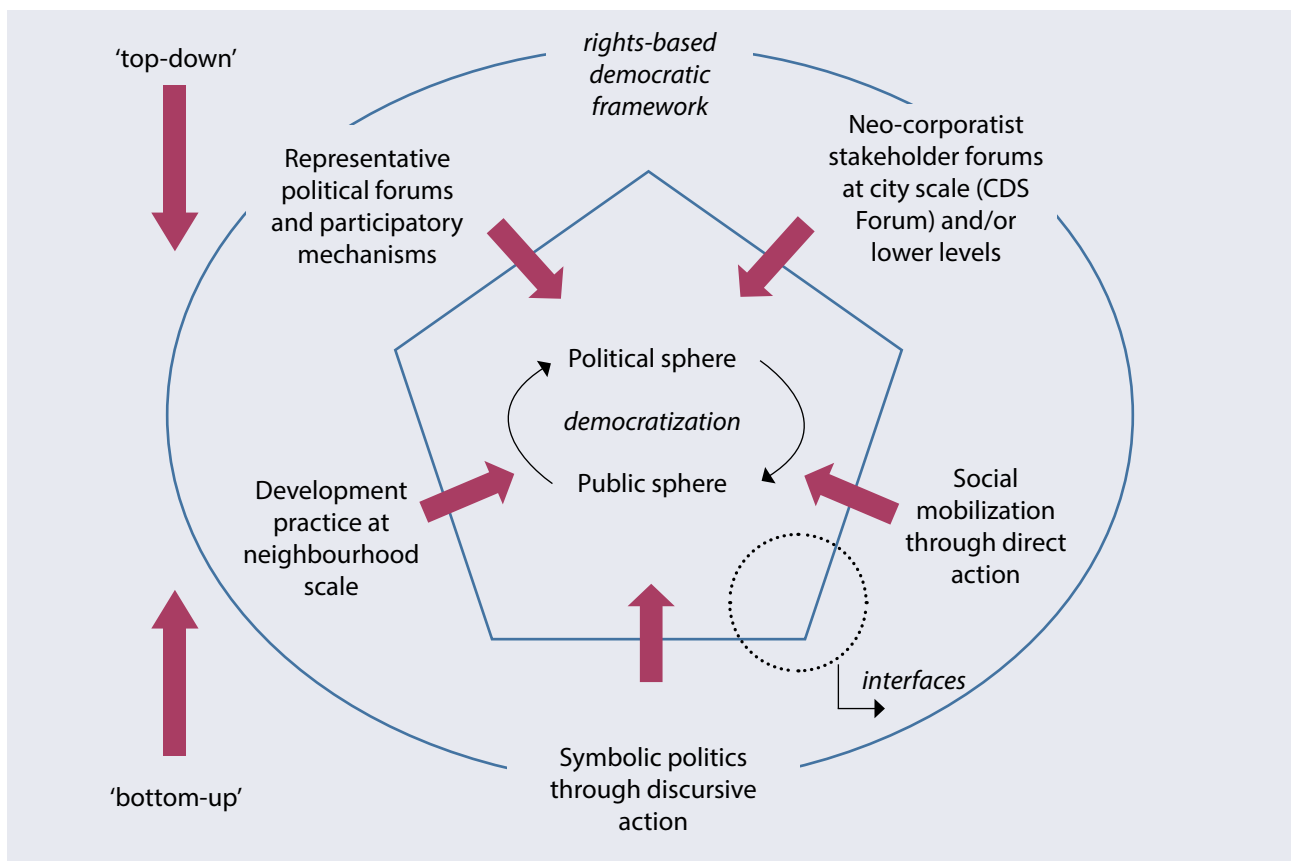
The domains of engagement that Pieterse describes in his framework (Figure 4) – though somewhat reductive in the way they break down politics in a city – still offer an informative way of grouping the characteristics of that engagement:

- **Representative political forums and associated participatory mechanisms:** this domain refers to the formal political system at national, regional, or local levels; the quality and maturity of regulations and how they function in decision making; and the diverse actions of participatory governance and other mechanisms of civic involvement.
- **Neo-corporatist stakeholder forums:** these refer to spaces where advocates and other stakeholders negotiate positions around issues that affect the urban poor. This allows a space for alternative discourses to emerge, and a space for lobbying groups that might advocate for the protection of rights, or specific methodologies, or justice.

Pieterse’s Domains of Political Engagement

Edgar Pieterse developed a model that aimed to capture the multiple, interconnected, and overlapping political practices in a city (Pieterse, 2008). It deliberately looked at domains where the State, civil

Figure 4. Domains of political engagement (Pieterse, 2008)



- **Social mobilisation through direct action:** this refers to the various collective actions of social movements or organised advocacy groups that upset 'business as usual' and challenge middle-class interests; but it might also be manifested in public protest.
- **Development practice at the neighbourhood scale:** this involves the everyday practice of development projects and their institutional frameworks. They are often very visible at the neighbourhood scale, where autonomous or semi-autonomous groups manage risks and take charge of improving the quality of their life. These groups practise participation, a concrete sense of democratic citizenship, and experimental practices.
- **Symbolic politics through discursive action:** this is a domain in which an official discourse about the city, its development, and its configuration is shaped. It comprises both specialised knowledge and the politically constructed dialogue that characterises a city – defining it, and positioning it in global debates (about strategic development plans, investments, the smart-cities rhetoric, etc.) as well as in municipal debates around labelling and promoting a city's identity in terms of tourism, heritage, and other characteristics.

Learning from the City

A competent urban humanitarianism should be one that speaks to current urban pressures, while also understanding that these pressures remain in constant flux and can suddenly change. At times, urban analysis will alternate between factual, data-driven information and speculative, subjective interpretations. A report by the Urban Institute that focuses on urban humanitarianism summarises the challenge as follows (Landau *et al.*, 2016):

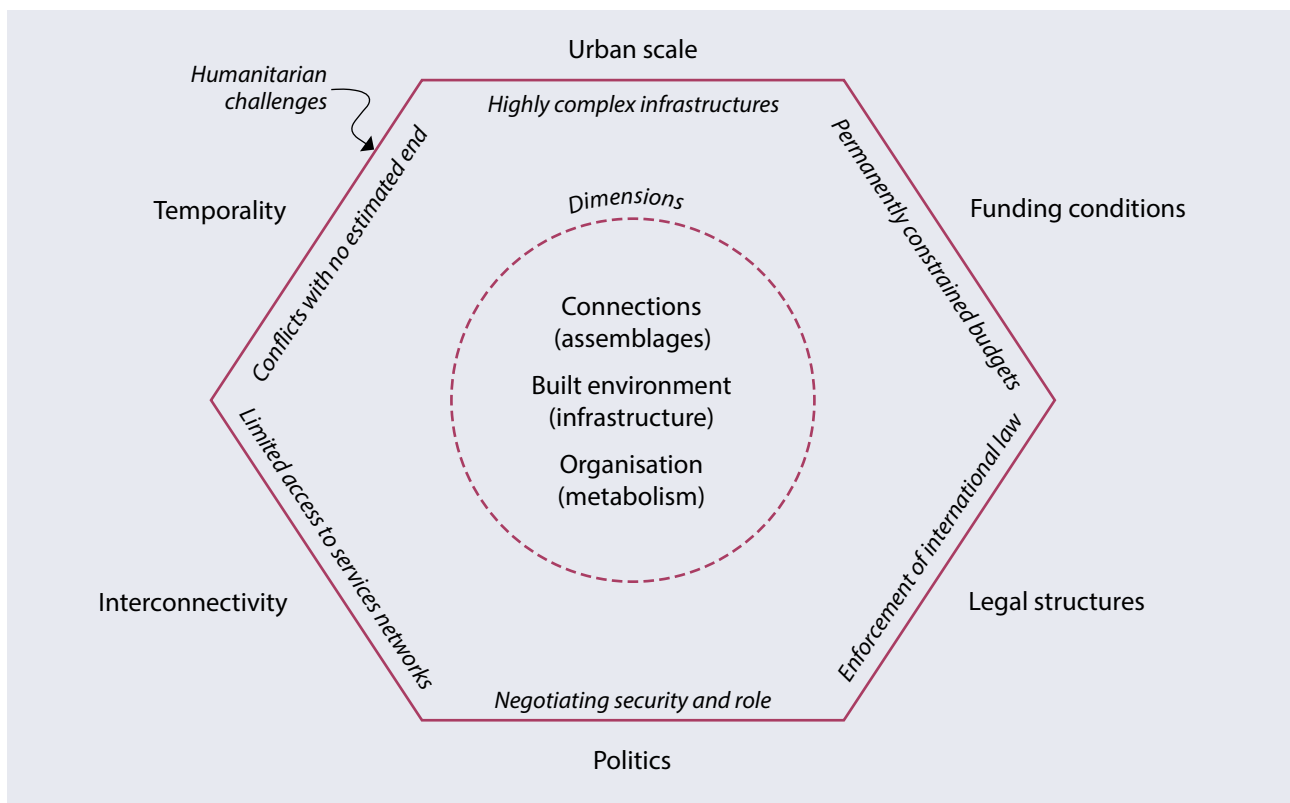
“Humanitarians are encouraged to work toward a complementary politics informed by spatial, social, and political understandings of rights violations and potential for protection. At the heart of this is the need to find “back routes to rights” and social solidarity with locally legitimate actors – local officials, businesspeople, landlords, service providers – who have the power to bring about immediate positive change. [...] In engaging with local authorities, humanitarians should look for new opportunities for solidarity and appeals to interest. To do this requires a new spatial perspective.”

Looking to the future, then, urban humanitarian practitioners face at least three major tasks:

- First, to consolidate a thorough knowledge on what ‘the urban’ means for their practice, and which factors are part of its loose definition.
- Second, to develop a consistent practice methodology to better engage in urban environments and deal with the range of stakeholders in those environments.
- Third, to adopt a flexible worldview where different ways of acting are acknowledged as having a role in the transformative process of co-producing the meaning of the city.

In order to produce a thorough assessment that builds on these tasks, we propose a three-dimensional analysis. The analysis aggregates independent yet complementary visions of how cities work, while posing questions that can help to better ‘diagnose’ an urban setting. Illustrated in **Figure 5**, it describes six humanitarian challenges (scale, funding, legal

Figure 5: Urban Humanitarian Challenges and resulting dimensions of analysis



structures, politics, interconnections and time) while proposing three dimensions that we believe are fundamental areas of analysis. These are essential aspects of urban life that are indispensable for humanitarian fieldwork: connections between urban processes; the built environment; and the city as a living organism.

Assemblages: Connections between Urban Processes

The field of urbanism has embraced the concept of an assemblage at various points in its development, and with various objectives. Thinking in terms of assemblages, or groupings, offers flexibility – both theoretical and methodological – to explore the complexities of the city and examine processes where “urbanity emerges in relation to intricate socio-spatial networks at multiple scales” (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015).

The concept of assemblages is an alternative to visualising the city as an interlocked grouping of elements such as the physical environment, economies, cultures, and institutions. Instead, it focuses on the processes that enable, and morph around, those elements – where a city’s identity, character, and territory run across and connect those elements. Simply put, assemblages are about the city’s interconnections (McFarlane and Anderson, 2011).

The usefulness of this concept for urban analysis lies in its reliance on multiple scales, and in depicting the dual nature of any relationship: internal/external, formal/informal, hierarchy/network, to name a few (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015). It works as a metaphorical zoom lens, focusing in and out of a complex mesh of elements and relationships. Applying the lens of a ‘contextualised assemblage’ illustrates how an informal micro-economy might lead to an adjustment in a neighbourhood’s spatial arrangement, just as implementing a governmental policy might affect a city’s administrative limits.

By combining elements from politics, geography and philosophy (Legg, 2009), the concept of assemblages considers a number of forces shaping a specific urban reality: discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, and even moral attitudes. In practice, these forces lead to the adoption of specific strategies for urban planning as part of humanitarian operations.

Infrastructures: The Built Environment

Where assemblages provide an abstract illustration of relationships between actors and the intangible elements in any city, infrastructures represent the material and physical space where these occur.

Looking at the urban through the concept of assemblages

	Assemblages	Key questions
‘Learning the city’ as:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfinished, unbounded • Subject to change • A fluid set of processes: economic, physical, natural, etc. • Organised at different scales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which networks are in place? • Which processes are shaping spaces and relationships? • What makes up an urban territory?
What to examine?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The connective capacities of people, knowledge, power-relations • Processes of change and transformation • Connections between actors • Power relationships • Discourses • Meeting spaces and timings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What types of relationships are in place (supportive or disruptive, internal or external, etc.)? • Which actors have control over relationships and discourses? • Where are the meeting spaces located geographically?
At which scale?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking phenomena at all scales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there different territorial scales to consider?
What are the urban-humanitarian implications?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid seeing cities as areas disconnected from their surroundings • Develop alliances with other actors • Strengthen existing capacities • Inform, amend and influence urban processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where in the assemblage is the humanitarian actor? • Is field practice an external input or an existing dimension of the urban?

Although there is a tendency to define infrastructures in the traditional sense – that of physical and organisational structures defined by their functionality – contemporary debates have broadened the scope of what constitutes an infrastructure, how to measure it, and its impact.

Infrastructures also exist and can function outside established, official systems of provision – whether in everyday practices such as informal markets and savings groups (Simone, 2004), or in unusual urban areas such as securitised compounds and criminal-operated areas (De Boeck, 2015). The growth of privatisation and the normalisation of fractured cities not only creates a complex urban landscape, it also distorts the rules and regulations meant to set the parameters of a democratic city (Graham and Marvin, 2001). ‘Private pockets’ exempted from regulation and no-go areas due to safety concerns are becoming more commonplace.

Humanitarian aid missions frequently deal with the physical divisions created by infrastructure appropriation – for example transit networks controlled by non-official groups including informal dwellers organisations, criminal organisations, and military

contractors. They also deal with the social divides that follow, such as isolated populations or profiling based on social status.

Still, in the midst of apparent chaos, “the traces of the city remain, even under progressive erasure” (Simone, 2016). A humanitarianism that operates primarily in urban environments needs to consider that the built environment is a permanent exchange of habitats, territories, platforms, commodities, and information (Simone, 2016). Humanitarian activities, the institutions behind them, and the people on the ground stand before this richness, but also at the threshold of negotiating their space among all these different structures.

Urban Metabolism: The City as a Living Organism

Though it may appear simple, the analogy between urban processes and the metabolism of living organisms has developed considerably into the notion of urban metabolism. This is a useful way to symbolise a city’s inputs and outputs, as well as how energy, water, nutrients, materials, and wastes get produced and mix

Looking at the urban through infrastructures

	Infrastructures	Key questions
‘Learning the city’ as:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed and contradictory landscapes • Untamed, dynamic territories • In a permanent state of transformation and evolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which systems of provision are functional and active? • Which decision-making structures are dictating terms of engagement and relationships? • How are urban territories organised?
What to examine?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local strategies to build resilience • Habitats • Territories and landscapes • Physical structures • Everyday practices: uses of space, strategies, tactics • Processes of production: the environment, buildings • Encounters, social exchanges and transactions • Political and economic ideologies, platforms • Commodities and information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies of service provision and supply are in place? • Who holds power in economically productive activities? • At which levels does power manifest? • What are the mechanisms of control (e.g. rules, norms)?
At which scale?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not spatial but temporal scale, e.g. rhythms, speed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there different time scales to consider?
What are the urban-humanitarian implications?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid thinking in terms of areas, but in terms of infrastructures • Base activities on everyday practices and rhythms • Make operations information-based • Become embedded in power relationships and disputes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do humanitarian interventions affect existing infrastructures? • Do field practices aim to correct a failing infrastructure or to construct an alternative one?

in any given urban region. Seen in this way, cities are similar to organisms in that they consume resources from their surroundings and excrete wastes: “cities transform raw materials, fuel, and water into the built environment, human biomass and waste” (Decker *et al.*, 2000). This perspective considers what constitutes the city’s DNA, focusing on its structural elements and their interconnections (Rapoport, 2011); it also focuses on the organic functions provided by a city, and on the flow of inputs and outputs needed to maintain them (Kennedy and Hoornweg, 2012).

The concept of urban metabolism can help to assess how a city operates, as well as its performance and impact, through an understanding of how environmental, social, and economic factors interact. With the notion of integration at its core, the concept of metabolism can provide a “holistic conceptual framework recognising the inter-dependency of a broad range of actors, as well as [placing] an emphasis on the different timeframes and scales within the city” (Faraud, 2017).

This framework has implications for supply-chain processes. Although these are examined through the systemic approach discussed earlier, the point here is about making explicit how important it is to explain the connections between urban flows and inequality. The degree of efficiency in the distribution of goods and assets is, in itself, a measure of the structural inequalities between urban and peri-urban areas (Castan-Broto *et al.*, 2012).

The humanitarian sector could benefit from the flexibility in this idea of urban metabolism – it can help determine the key elements present in a city (e.g. health network, road systems, political structure) and examine which inputs or outputs are needed to maintain them.

In summary: assemblages provide maps to interconnections; infrastructures explain the physical environment; and metabolism encapsulates the entire urban space as an organism constantly self-correcting, adjusting, and evaluating its capacities – and, most importantly, its weaknesses.

Looking at the urban through metabolism

	Metabolism	Key questions
‘Learning the city’ as:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A living organism • An ecosystem • Material and energy flows • A social process of transforming and reconfiguring nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the resources that enable the organism to live? • What are the wastes or by-products?
What to examine?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A city’s structural elements and their interconnections • Cycles in nature • Production systems, including natural production systems (e.g. water, food) • Urban agricultures • Food supply processes and economic production • Governance of markets and materials flows • Income and economic activities • Biodiversity and landscapes • Public spaces • Creation and widening of inequalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies, plans, and management structures are in place? • Which forms of cultural production and routine interactions are visible? • How do environmental strategies relate to policy? • What informal environmental strategies are successful?
At which scale?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural and urban • Regional • State 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which organisations manage and operate at each of these scales?
What are the urban-humanitarian implications?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inequality and limited access to provisions • Resistance from groups that are discriminated against due to situations such as conflict, segregation, or environmental disputes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of humanitarian interventions on local urban ecosystems? • What capacity for adaptation (programmatic or improvisational) do field practices have available?

Conclusion

This paper sets out to unpack the meaning of ‘the urban’, rather than leaping ahead to programmatic steps designed to intervene in it. By thinking with a wider urban mindset, we believe it is possible to understand the city in a way that enriches the practitioner’s tools for dealing with the strenuous conditions brought on by a crisis.

Cities are embedded in wider social and political systems that operate at different scales. These systems both shape and are shaped by human and institutional actions. The city needs to be thought of and navigated as a social object – one in which there is a convergence of countless urban practices and politics connected to each other at varying scales of organisation, from governance bodies to States.

In the city, things are never fixed – and the city itself, when seen as a ‘thing’, is not fixed either; rather, it is a living, political space. This is based on the assumption that ‘the urban’ is both a material complex and a discursive system. “Whatever exists in the city is a manifestation of something”, Simone and Pieterse (2017) remind us, where “that something is usually a convergence of multiple forces and backgrounds”. That convergence happens both in formal governance structures and ‘insurgent’ practices – humanitarianism included – that continuously shape life in the city.

The current dynamics of urbanisation, where population density is linked with conflict, demand that the humanitarian sector adopts a broader, more flexible concept of the city. Such a concept can help to go beyond looking at the city as a complex collection of operating systems that may include infrastructure, land, and cultural systems. It can also calibrate and acknowledge multiple economies of place, political mechanisms at different scales (in many cases not official, yet effective), and the transformative actions of all actors, formal and informal.

These parameters do not have fixed boundaries. Though this may suggest it is impossible to reach a shared, common definition of ‘the urban’, it also recognises that a variety of approaches, reflections, and studies complement each other’s value for developing better-informed field practices.

Figure 6 summarises the approach to expanding knowledge of the city for humanitarian action that this report puts forward. Once urban thinking is adopted, the next step is to ‘learn from the city’ rather than look

to prescriptive frameworks. The questions suggested in each quadrant serve as a guide for interpreting, and bring into the political debate, the reality of humanitarian practice in the city.

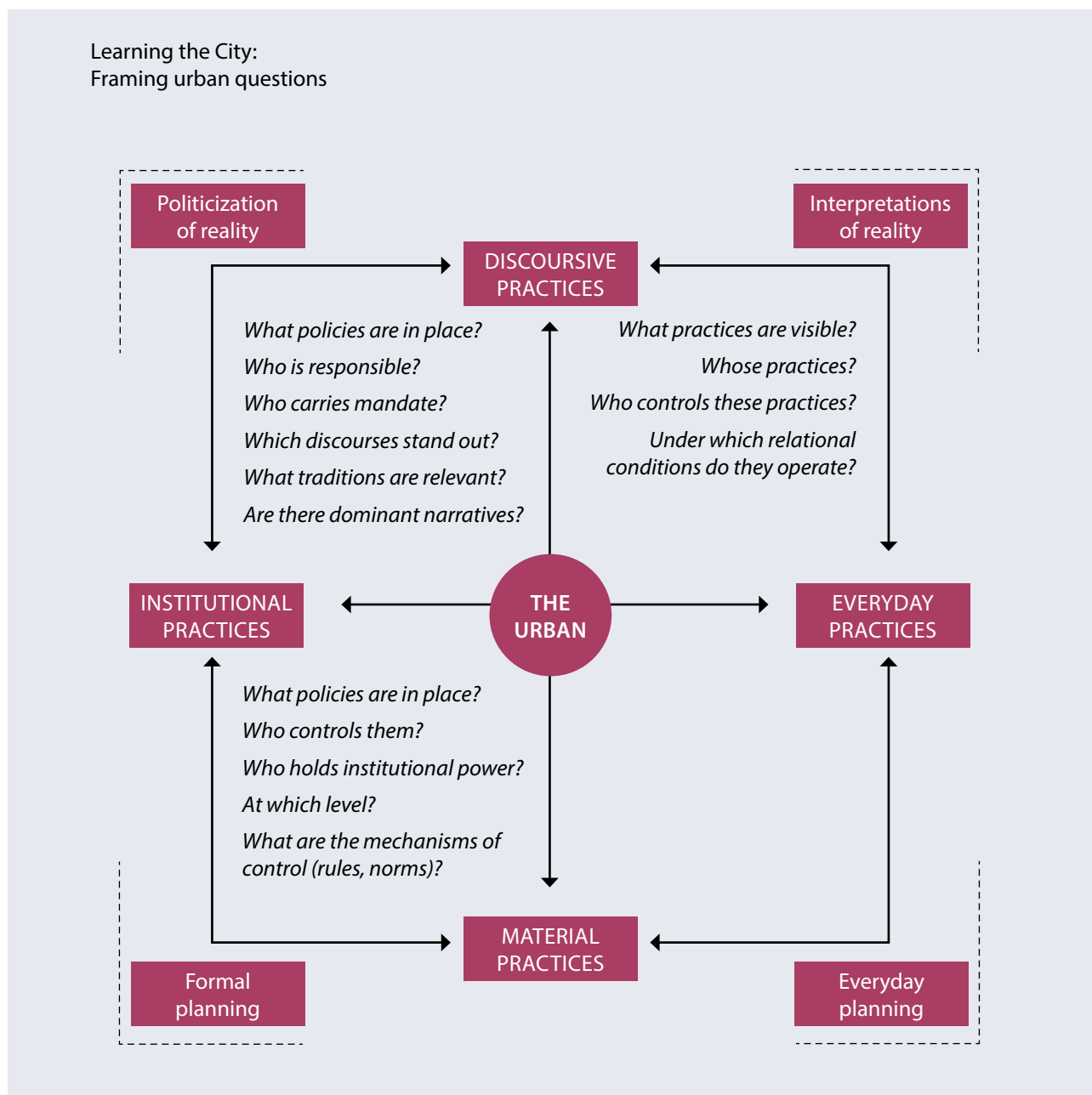
Humanitarianism is relatively new at facing and reflecting on ‘the urban’. However, doing so only opens up opportunities and possibilities for innovative, evidence-based approaches that are enriched by the sector’s many strengths: its inherent transdisciplinary nature, its reliance on field practice, its constant engagement with communities and politics, and its diverse, rich make-up of both practitioners and ideas. Though it may depend on structured frameworks, humanitarian thinking has the capacity to allow additional layers of thought on what represents the urban and how we talk about it.

The idea behind putting forward the three frameworks of assemblages, infrastructures and metabolism is not to impose them as a template with which to analyse humanitarian practice – it is to propose them as alternative perspectives that may be lost or hidden in other analytical perspectives.

The three frameworks reveal the following learnings from the city: that there are numerous and rich intersections between practices – those in everyday activities, by professionals, and in long-term planning – which make up the urban. Therefore, the humanitarian responsibility is to shape its energy and focus accordingly – to accept and engage with the various disciplinary perspectives that can offer insights from the range of contemporary reflections around urbanism and urban studies. Again, to cite the words of Simone and Pieterse (2017), “inhabiting the urban is inhabiting a paradox”. This is a paradox that arises from the constant inability to define and understand the city’s condition, and the urgency to solve problems and improve urban life.

Encountering a new city is not easy for anyone, be it migrants, displaced populations, or aid organisations. Each must develop the tools to acquire practical knowledge of how to access places they do not yet occupy; and they also must learn what the city has to offer them. Put differently, “this entails an apprenticeship of, on the one side, the skills, know-how and standards of evaluation for getting about in the city and, on the other, a repertoire of places and possibilities available for use” (Buhr, 2017). To lack in one or the other means to limit one’s urban experience, and therefore the need to learn the city.

Figure 6: Thinking and learning the urban (Adapted from Harvey, 1996, Boano, 2012)



If we understand the city as a series of activities that are pulled together, make up the structure of the city itself, and stay in continuous flux, it might help to see urban inhabitants as an integral part of their surroundings. We hope that this approach helps to build a notion of 'humanitarian emplacement' which may have been overshadowed by more traditional approaches to urban humanitarianism. This perspective favours practice and activity over representation. It also emphasises an understanding that is rooted in, and dependent on, the realities of 'the urban' – rather than a simplified

concept that just considers buildings, management practicalities, and knowledge about the city and its resources. A city is something we use, something we learn to use, and something that changes according to the uses we make of it. Knowledge about the urban space, and the skills it takes to use it, affects inhabitants' capacity to practise city life. Insofar as much of that knowledge and many of those skills are embedded in local experience, learning them becomes a matter of great relevance and urgency for the humanitarian industry.

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Annex: An interpretative framework for urban humanitarian engagement [to revise according to/after the text]

URBAN CHARACTERISTICS			
	Assemblages	Infrastructures	Metabolism
The urban system is...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unfinished, unbounded Contingent Fluid set of processes (economic, physical, energetic, natural, etc) Organised at different scales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed and contradictory landscapes Untamed but dynamic territories In permanent transformation and in continuous evolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A living organism An ecosystem Material and energy flows A social process of transforming and reconfiguring
Space can be...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connective capacities (of people, of knowledge, of energies) Processes of changes and transformations Interfaces (connections) Relations Discourses Spaces and moment of encounters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local resilient strategies Habitats Territories and landscapes Materialities Everyday practices (uses, strategies, tactics) Processes of production (environment, buildings) Encounters, exchanges and transactions Political and economical ideologies Platforms, Commodities and information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City structuring elements and their interconnections Cycles of nature and production systems Natural systems (e.g. water, food) Urban agricultures and food production Governments on markets and flows Incomes and economies Biodiversity and landscapes Public spaces Production and reproduction of inequalities
Actions must...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not see simple areas disconnected from the rest Develop alliances with actors Strengthen in-place capacities Inform, correct and influence processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not think only on regions but on infrastructures Rely on everyday practices and rhythms Be information based Be embedded in power relations and contestations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deal with inequality and access Engage with resistive process and social claims (right to the city, environmental tensions)

FIELD QUESTIONS: Learning the City	
Thinking the urban as an assemblage	<p>Which networks are in place?</p> <p>Which processes are shaping spaces and relations?</p> <p>What constitutes urban territories?</p> <p>What types of relations are in place (supportive/disruptive; internal, external, etc.)</p> <p>Which actors hold control over relations and discourses</p> <p>Where are the spaces located geographically?</p> <p>Where is the humanitarian actor acting in the assemblage?</p> <p>Is field practice an external input or an existing dimension?</p>
Thinking the urban as infrastructures	<p>Which systems of provision are functional and active?</p> <p>Which decision-making structures are dictating spaces and relations?</p> <p>What organises urban territories?</p> <p>What policies of provision and supply are in place?</p> <p>Who holds productive power and at which levels is power materialised?</p> <p>What are the mechanisms of control (rules, norms)?</p> <p>How do humanitarian interventions affect existing infrastructures?</p> <p>Are field practices aimed to correct an infrastructure failure or to construct an alternative one?</p>
Thinking the urban as a metabolism	<p>What are the resources that make the organism live?</p> <p>What are the wastes or the by-products?</p> <p>What array of policies, designs, and management are in place?</p> <p>Which forms of cultural production, and routine interactions are visible?</p> <p>How are environmental strategies related to policy?</p> <p>What informal environmental strategies are successful?</p> <p>What is the impact of humanitarian interventions on local urban ecosystems?</p> <p>What capacity of adaptation do field practices have available? (whether programmatic or improvisational)</p>



The UCLP was established on the assumption that the humanitarian sector had a poor understanding of the urban context and needed to improve the manner in which it operated in urban spaces. This paper by Camillo Boano and Ricardo Martén of UCL puts forward principles for a better understanding of urban contexts through a cross-disciplinary approach. They argue that the humanitarian sector could greatly benefit from concepts and ideas that have become established in other fields, for example in urban studies, urban geography, and urban design, and which have, as yet, failed to intersect with humanitarianism.

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