

Urban Crises and the New Urban Agenda

April 2016



Amman, Jordan, September 2015
The city is home to approximately 170,000 registered refugees.

Photo: Samer Saliba/IRC

- Urbanisation is inevitable and brings challenges related to both natural and man-made hazards – disasters, epidemics, conflict and displacement.
- The New Urban Agenda must recognise the growing intensity and frequency of urban crises and their considerable impacts on local economies, societies, infrastructure and governments.
- Achieving the urban SDG (no. 11) will be impossible if towns and cities are not prepared to respond to humanitarian emergencies.
- Habitat III provides an opportunity to promote closer collaboration between municipal actors and humanitarian responders so that our towns and cities are safer for everyone.

The global phenomenon of urbanisation is now being recognised both for its inevitability and for the opportunities it provides. These opportunities spring from the diversity and strength of the economies, societies and cultures that characterise urban areas. The focus of the New Urban Agenda (to be agreed at the Habitat III Summit in Quito, October 2016) is likely to concentrate on harnessing the potential of towns and cities to ensure they are economically dynamic, yet liveable and safe environments for the next generation of urban dwellers.

But alongside the opportunities for sustainable development that urbanisation proffers, the phenomenon also brings considerable risks. The links between urbanisation and climate change are considerable. Activities in towns and cities around the world contribute significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions – but they can also play a leading role in mitigating climate change. And while many urban centres are exposed to extreme weather events, effective action can reduce these significantly for large numbers of people.

The rising vulnerability of cities and their populations is due to the growing concentration of people and industries in low-lying coastal zones and other areas where there is risk from increasingly frequent flooding and extreme weather events, and the inadequate institutions and infrastructure to reduce the impacts of these.¹ The location of many of the world's largest cities in these zones is putting huge numbers of people at risk. These risks are exacerbated by poorly managed urban growth. It is often urban dwellers with the lowest incomes, living in informal settlements, who are not only most exposed to these hazards, but also least able to cope with their impacts.

While urbanisation may be creating or exacerbating existing risks, cities are also seen as safe havens – places to go to in the event of failed harvests, natural disasters in rural areas, and increasingly, to escape conflict. In today's complex world, migration flows in to urban areas may be linked to both climate change and conflict. For example, it is thought that droughts between 2007 and 2010 in Syria produced migration from rural areas in to cities, where migrants joined the protests that eventually sparked war.² This war has contributed to a massive global increase in displacement in recent years. The numbers of refugees and IDPs have reached record levels since the end of WWII, with around 60 million displaced people in total around the world. Critically, the majority of displaced people look for safety in urban areas.

Globally, at least 59% of all refugees are in urban areas – a figure that is growing each year according to UNHCR.³ Similar percentages of IDPs are also in towns and cities.⁴

With more than half of the world's population in urban areas, we know that the SDGs cannot be achieved without a specific focus on towns and cities. SDG 11 provides us with a vision of urban centres as inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Building resilience is obviously a critical part of the New Urban Agenda, but not all risks associated with natural hazards can be completely mitigated. Further, as long as towns and cities are perceived as safe havens, movements of people in to urban centres as a result of conflict or disaster elsewhere cannot be avoided. It should be recognised that urban migration and displacement is also occurring in fragile states where city governments and regulatory capacity are very weak. Achieving SDG 11 will be impossible if towns and cities are not prepared for crises. We risk leaving behind huge swathes of poor urban populations if steps are not taken to build their understanding of risk, and ensure they know what to do in an emergency.

Urbanisation and urban crises go hand in hand. These crises have long-lasting impacts on urban infrastructure, societies and governments, and can set back economic growth significantly – not just at the city level but nationally too. Large refugee flows can have drastic consequences for sustainable urban development if not managed well. Emergency response and recovery efforts that are not governed by adequate planning processes can do further damage to urban systems and economies. This is demonstrated by the proliferation of informal settlements in Port au Prince following the 2010 earthquake, where little support was given to families to rebuild their homes safely, and in line with a city plan.

It does not have to be this way: crises can also be opportunities to course correct and reduce risk for cities and their populations, putting them on more sustainable urban development trajectories. This is why the New Urban Agenda must acknowledge the 'urbanisation of emergencies'

and encourage Member States present at Quito to incorporate into their national urban plans appropriate measures for local preparedness and municipal capacity building for crisis response and recovery – including response to inflows of refugees and IDPs. Commitments from other institutions to support local urban actors are also needed.

Humanitarian actors have begun to recognise that they need to take a new approach to urban crises – working in support of and in collaboration with municipal authorities and ensuring these have a much stronger role in crisis response. They are also giving greater focus to restoring or bolstering existing city systems, rather than creating parallel services or providing short-term, unsustainable solutions for housing, water or healthcare. This change in mindset will be reflected in commitments to be made at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016. As humanitarians look to better tailor their efforts to the urban environment, so municipal authorities and national governments should take steps to incorporate preparedness and response to humanitarian crises in to national and local urban development plans. Habitat III provides a critical opportunity for closer collaboration between these different types of institutions, which are united in their desire to ensure the safety of future urban populations.

- 1 Dodman, D., Brown, D., Francis, K., Hardoy, J., Johnson, C. and Satterthwaite, D. (2013) 'Understanding the nature and scale of urban risk in low- and middle-income countries and its implications for humanitarian preparedness, planning and response'. London, International Institute for Environment and Development, p. 3.
- 2 Kelley, C., Mohtadi, S., Cane, M., Seager, R. and Kushnir, Y. (2015) Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* vol. 112, no. 11.
- 3 Crawford, N, J Cosgrave, S Haysom and N Walicki (2015), *Protracted displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile*, Overseas Development Institute, London.
- 4 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2015), *Home sweet home: Housing practices and tools that support durable solutions for urban IDPs*, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Geneva.



This briefing paper was generously funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) through the DfID-IRC Advocacy and Learning Partnership on Urban Crises. The partnership is part of the DfID Urban Crises Programme on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

Outputs from the programme will feed into a broader consultative process on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, focused on the World Humanitarian Summit and Habitat III. The process is led by UN-Habitat, IRC and DfID.

For more information on this project, visit www.rescue-uk.org/what-we-do/urban-crisis

