Displacement in urban areas: new challenges, new partnerships

Jeff Crisp Head, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Switzerland, Tim Morris Independent Consultant, United Kingdom, and Hilde Refstie Norwegian Refugee Council, Norway

Rapid urbanisation is a key characteristic of the modern world, interacting with and reinforcing other global mega trends, including armed conflict, climate change, crime, environmental degradation, financial and economic instability, food shortages, underemployment, volatile commodity prices, and weak governance. Displaced people also are affected by and engaged in the process of urbanisation. Increasingly, refugees, returnees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are to be found not in camps or among host communities in rural areas, but in the towns and cities of developing and middle-income countries. The arrival and long-term settlement of displaced populations in urban areas needs to be better anticipated, understood, and planned for, with a particular emphasis on the establishment of new partnerships. Humanitarian actors can no longer liaise only with national governments; they must also develop urgently closer working relationships with mayors and municipal authorities, service providers, urban police forces, and, most importantly, the representatives of both displaced and resident communities. This requires linking up with those development actors that have established such partnerships already.

Keywords: internally displaced persons (IDPs), internal displacement, livelihoods, partnership, refugee, urban, urbanisation

Introduction

An historical turning point was witnessed in 2008: for the first time, more than 50 per cent of the world’s population was recorded as living in cities (Westin and Westin, 2008, p. 21). Such is the pace of urbanisation that it has been suggested that the equivalent of a city of nearly two million people will emerge every week of every year (Setchell and Luther, 2009). Over the course of the next 20 years, the urban population of the world’s two poorest regions, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, is expected to double. One-third of urban dwellers now reside in precarious, under-served informal settlements and slums that compound their vulnerability to humanitarian crises.

Likewise, the displaced also are affected by and engaged in the process of urbanisation. According to recent estimates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), some five million refugees—almost one-half of the world’s total—and approximately 13 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) now live in urban areas. In 2009, the Norwegian Refugee Council’s Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that there were IDPs in urban areas in at least 48 countries.
This paper summarises emerging evidence of the scale of the movement of displaced people to cities. It draws on recent UNHCR experience (much of it not yet documented) of forging new policy approaches to assisting refugees displaced to urban areas. Much remains unknown for there is a dearth of studies on how people displaced to urban areas manage their lives. The voices of ‘urban displacees’ are rarely heard by policymakers.

**Explaining movement to cities**

For those who join the ranks of the urban poor in slums, the quest for jobs and a better future is paramount. For displaced populations, the city can represent a site of independence and safety not necessarily found in camps (Tannerfeldt and Ljung, 2006). A study produced by the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute listed livelihood opportunities and greater security as the two main reasons given by refugees in Kenya for moving to Nairobi—despite forfeiting significant food support from the international community (Pavanello, Elhawary and Pantuliano, 2010).

The dynamics of displacement are complex and interconnected, often based on a number of push and pull factors. An IDP family might leave its place of origin because members feel insecure or because they cannot access local markets safely and therefore have no livelihood opportunities. The anonymity presented by large cities can be a pull factor for some groups of displaced people. Wyrzykowski (2010) points out, for example, how former child soldiers fleeing the Lord’s Resistance Army sometimes seek anonymity in Kampala, Uganda.

Cities can absorb large numbers of people virtually unnoticed since most of those displaced to urban areas maintain a low profile, frequently avoiding registration, enumeration, and profiling exercises. Displaced people and returnees constitute a significant proportion of the population in several cities in which explosive growth has been significantly or primarily driven by influxes of displaced people and returnees. Data are extremely poor since IDPs and refugees, like many migrants to urban areas, often remain unenumerated. Prime examples of cities whose explosive growth is significantly driven by influxes of refugees, returnees, and/or internally displaced people are Kabul (Afghanistan)—where some 70 per cent of the population may be returnees and/or IDPs—Abidjan (Côte d’Ivoire), Bogotá (Colombia), Johannesburg (South Africa), Juba (South Sudan), Karachi (Pakistan), Khartoum (Sudan), Luanda (Angola), Monrovia (Liberia), Nairobi (Kenya), and Sana’a (Yemen). A common assumption is that mainly young men move to cities, but displaced communities also include significant numbers of women, children, and older people.

**Challenges faced by urban displacees**

While they often face challenges familiar to all urban poor and migrants, urban displacees can be further disadvantaged by virtue of the trauma of displacement, loss of social capital, non-possession of sufficient documentation, limited support networks,
Displacement in urban areas

restrictions on rights to work and enter markets, and, in many contexts, antagonism by settled residents (Tufts University and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2008; Pavanello, Elhawary and Pantuliano, 2010; Wyrzykowski, 2010).

Refugees and IDPs in urban areas are confronted by destitution, exploitation, and unemployment. Frequently they are obliged, like equally marginalised migrants and original inhabitants, to live in overcrowded slums and shanty towns with no security of tenure, rudimentary water and sanitation facilities, and very limited access to basic services such as education and health care. As outsiders and new arrivals, they may be the targets of organised crime, forced evictions and expulsions, and xenophobic violence, as well as harassment and extortion by security services, government officials, and community leaders (Pavanello, Elhawary and Pantuliano, 2010).

Key challenges

For many years, both states and UNHCR shared the assumption that refugees belong in camps and that they should be deterred from taking up residence in urban areas. Many governments have insisted on situating refugee camps in isolated rural areas. In camps, it is relatively easy to determine the numbers and needs of refugees or IDPs and target additional assistance at the particularly vulnerable. The population also is made more visible, which can help in attracting international assistance. In camps, there are usually working relationships and coordination procedures in place with host governments and partner agencies. In general, encamped refugees are fed, sheltered, and provided with primary education.

In cities, however, the humanitarian community is outside of its comfort zone. Supplying aid to the displaced and the urban communities that host them resembles development activities more than the traditional tasks of feeding, protecting, and sheltering encamped people. ‘It is not the kind of work the global refugee system is comfortable with’ (Rosenberg, 2011). Displaced people are not as visibly separated from other marginalised groups, such as migrants and the urban poor. UNHCR often lacks sufficient contacts both with the authorities and the displaced.

Many urban communities of displaced people have been there for years, even if their existence has not been noted officially. It appears likely that a majority will become permanent urban residents for their presence in cities is part and parcel of a seemingly unstoppable global process of urbanisation. The current reluctance of many IDPs to leave Khartoum to start new lives in the newly independent Republic of South Sudan (de Geoffroy, 2011) highlights a widely observed phenomenon: displaced people who move to urban areas for security frequently choose not to return to rural areas, even when security seems to have improved.

In conflict-affected northwest Pakistan, large numbers of IDPs are abandoning rural life, whereas Somalis are forsaking rural livelihoods to shelter on the outskirts of Mogadishu, where relief supplies are more secure. The drift to cities is true of returning refugees: evidence from repatriation programmes for Afghan and Sudanese refugees shows that returnees gravitate towards urban areas in their country of origin.
Jeff Crisp, Tim Morris and Hilde Refstie

S26

UNHCR, 2009a), as they have become accustomed to urban life while in exile, have no land to return to, or have little enthusiasm for farming or the necessary skills.

UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies find that urban refugees demand a disproportionate amount of financial and human resources. It is invariably easier to secure funding for emergency responses and donors often prefer to fund rural rather than urban interventions. Profiling exercises—both of refugee and IDP populations—are costly, time-consuming, and politically sensitive, and they may produce incomplete data. In urban areas, it is generally harder to observe assets and thus more difficult to cope with fraudulent claims for assistance. Many governments and humanitarian agencies have been hesitant therefore to address forced migrants in urban areas (Fielden, 2008; Refstie and Brun, 2011). However, the sheer scope of urban displacement, combined with increasing international recognition of the size of the affected population, is pushing actors to review their policies and practices.

Urban planning, poverty reduction strategies, slum upgrading, and other community development interventions must take full account of new demographic realities. Planning infrastructure or devising livelihood support interventions need to acknowledge the existence, needs, and abilities of communities of displaced people.

Some cities prepare for sudden influxes of people, but most struggle and cannot keep up with the growth of their populations (Cities Alliance, 2010). Consequently, assisting IDPs in an urban context requires building new strategic partnerships both to tap into existing strategies, processes, and programmes, and to include them in disaster preparedness interventions. Humanitarian actors can no longer liaise only with national governments; they must also develop urgently closer working relationships with mayors and municipal authorities, service providers, urban police forces, and, most importantly, the representatives of both displaced and resident communities. This requires linking up with those development actors that have established such partnerships already.

Head-in-the-sand policies

Many developing country governments—at the municipal and national level—view urbanisation as a problem rather than as an opportunity. Few plan actively for urbanisation, treating all newcomers to the city as burdens rather than as the citizens they seek to become. All too often the rhetoric surrounding urbanisation is to slow it down, divert it, or prevent it (Cities Alliance, 2010). It is not surprising that some governments do not welcome assistance initiatives in their cities, fearing that this will attract more IDPs and refugees (Pavanello, Elhawary and Pantuliano, 2010; Refstie, Dolan and Okello, 2010).

It is not helpful to depict the presence of IDPs and refugees in cities in apocalyptic terms: as a factor pushing supposedly already ‘dysfunctional’ cities over ‘tipping points’ of vulnerability. Cities represent opportunities for self-reliance and for some, durable solutions to displacement. However, local and national governments may view this as a threat, seeing their hosting role as temporary. Municipal and national authorities (and frequently the international community as well) may still turn a blind eye to
and ignore the existence of urban refugee and IDP neighbourhoods even though they are well known to all—‘hidden in plain view’ to use the title of a Human Rights Watch report on urban displaced populations in Kampala and Nairobi (Parker, 2002).

Municipal and national authorities often use prejudicial terminology to describe urban refugees. In Kampala, for example, the perception of urban refugees as illegitimate has been widespread among city officials (Refugee Law Project, 2005). Pervasive use of the term ‘illegal immigrant’ has fed into prejudices and misapprehensions about the rights of those without status. Loose language can exacerbate resentment and xenophobia. Across Africa, politicians suggest repeatedly that urban refugees are likely to engage in ‘corrupt practices’ and wilfully refuse to follow procedures unless they are tightly controlled. As indicated in a study on urban refugees in Nairobi, police officers in the city often assume that refugees are criminally minded, while Somalis may be suspected of having links with terrorist organisations because of the nature of the conflict taking place in their country of origin (Pavanello, Elhawary and Pantuliano, 2010).

Some municipal officials refer disparagingly to members of IDP communities as non-residents even when the majority was born in the city. A historical perspective suggests that resentment of urban refugees was less political and more manageable in Africa prior to the spread of multiparty democracy. Today, as in many ‘mature’ Western democracies, politicians compete to play the blame game, ascribing all manner of social ills to refugees and making dire threats of resolute action against them if elected.

Enumeration

Counting IDPs, returnees, and urban refugees is, and will remain, an inexact science. The greatest data-collection constraint is the ‘invisibility factor’. Displaced people in urban areas generally seek to melt into the crowd, to go unnoticed, as part of their survival strategies. The fact that cities often lack data and information on their informal settlements adds to the challenge of counting and identifying the displaced.

Governments also may refuse to acknowledge as IDPs those recognised by the humanitarian community. States that are keen to minimise the scale of conflict-induced migration, or to declare prematurely an end to internal conflicts, may classify urban-based IDPs as urban migrants. Some states, such as Uganda, have only recognised camp-based IDPs, not providing urban IDPs with documents attesting to their displacement.

While registration primarily should be a state responsibility, often it falls on the shoulders of UNHCR. It is difficult, though, to undertake systematic registration and enumeration of dispersed groups of city-based refugees. The interface with urban refugees is limited by a lack of waiting and reception facilities and the (deterrent) presence of national security authorities/private security guards untrained in human rights and refugee protection principles. Identifying IDPs is even more problematic as there is less clarity on the definition of an IDP and how to determine when their displacement can be said to have ended.
Since many people of concern to UNHCR are ‘illegal’ urban residents, they may not make themselves known to the agency. In large cities, many cannot afford transportation to UNHCR offices from the marginalised ghettos on urban fringes where typically they live. It is particularly difficult for members of female-headed households to reach UNHCR offices due to childcare, mobility, and transport constraints. A lack of education/literacy—and difficulty with enlisting help from literate fellow refugees—prevents many urban refugees from completing resettlement applications, requesting interviews, or submitting other correspondence.

Another major data-collection challenge is poor coordination between humanitarian agencies operating in urban areas. In IDP and refugee camps, the tasks of each agency usually are allocated unambiguously, regular inter-agency meetings are held, and numerical data on caseloads are exchanged regularly. This is not the case, however, in the city. When local authorities do gather some information, rarely is this done in conjunction with humanitarian agencies.

A further complicating factor is secondary displacement—whereby returning refugees become IDPs as a result of land/property disputes and/or state-led eviction (‘clean-up’ ‘urban renewal’) campaigns. This is increasingly apparent in places such as Kabul, Khartoum, Juba, and Luanda. Secondary displacement is hard to quantify and such blurring of IDP/returnee categories complicates profiling.

**Ethnicity and displacement: a volatile mixture?**

Many humanitarians have tended to believe that IDPs and refugees share the language and culture of their local hosts. This assumption is particularly flawed in urban contexts. Displacement processes are transforming the ethnic composition of many cities, creating tensions between different groups of newcomers and original residents.

Kabul’s current population is now, for the first time in the history of Afghanistan, highly heterogeneous. While it can be said to be ‘de-Pashtunising’, the opposite trend is apparent in major cities in Pakistan, particularly Karachi and Quetta. The perceived ‘Pashtunisation’ of Karachi has enormous potential to destabilise a metropolis with a violent history. Due to conflict in northwest Pakistan and Afghanistan, there are now more Pashtuns living in Karachi than in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the former North-West Frontier Province). Afraid of becoming a minority in their own province, and already concerned about the numbers of Pashtun refugees who have not returned to Afghanistan, Sindhi nationalists have called for IDPs to be returned forcibly to the north.

**Registration and documentation**

Provision of documents attesting to identity and status can help to prevent and resolve many protection problems. Without identification (ID) it is generally impossible to sign a lease, cash a cheque, obtain credit, receive remittances, travel legally, seek
formal employment, or perhaps even legitimately access a mobile telephone or the internet. Non-possession of ID makes urban displacees highly vulnerable to arrest, bribes, and other forms of intimidation. Urban IDPs without documentation can be denied access to education, health care, and other social services. In cities where substantial numbers of children have been born to IDP parents, such as Bogotá, Khartoum, and Luanda, their status can be uncertain and significant numbers of people may grow up document-less.

**Limited access to education**

For outsiders, access to education usually is more difficult in urban areas. UNHCR recognises that limited data makes it hard to quantify confidently enrolment, retention, or completion of education by urban refugee children. It recognises too that enrolment rates in urban areas are lower than in camps. UNHCR’s budget for urban education generally is limited—in the case of Kenya in 2009, only USD 40,000 of the USD 3.7 million of total country education expenditure was allocated to urban education. The level of provision varies enormously from country to country, as a result of funding constraints, the attitudes of local education ministries, the presence of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and whether UNHCR is able to advocate successfully for the integration of refugee children into public school systems.

Even where refugee children have gained access to educational institutions, they may face discrimination by school administrators who do not wish to see non-national children in class. Enrolment of urban refugees in secondary schools—and the capacity of the international community to support them to enrol and to complete schooling—is extremely limited.

Mindful of the numbers of displaced children receiving no or little relevant education, UNHCR highlights the need to work closely with education ministries and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), to link urban refugee education to the global Education for All movement and to address shortages of quality teachers and structures to teach in. UNHCR warns that the inherently political nature of the content and the structures of refugee education can exacerbate conflict, alienate individual children, and lead to education that is neither of high quality nor protective (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

**Gender and displacement**

Wherever they find themselves, urban refugee women report gender-based violence, harassment, and intimidation. While in recent years the international humanitarian community has paid considerable attention to the sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) risks faced by women in camps—especially as they collect firewood, fodder, and water—there has been far less engagement with the issue in urban areas and little
evaluation of the threat of gender-based violence. There is poor understanding of, and relatively few studies on, how the safety of urban refugee women—who generally find it easier than men to obtain work—can be compromised by going out to work. Working as maids and waitresses, women often report being forced into labour situations where they are vulnerable to sexual abuse by colleagues and employers. Rape survivors rarely contact authorities or speak out, knowing that little will be done. UNHCR is able to provide only a limited number of safe houses. Urban refugees consulted in six cities in 2010 all called for more action to ensure counselling, legal, or medical support to survivors of SGBV (Pittaway, 2010). This is consistent with the findings of the Dialogues with Refugee Women (UNHCR, 2011a), sponsored by UNHCR in seven countries in 2011 during the sixtieth anniversary commemoration of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Survival/transactional sex is commonly reported in urban refugee communities. A UNHCR study in Burundi found prostitution to be a common coping strategy, with women often forced to succumb to unprotected sex (Narayan, 2008). In Nairobi, nine per cent of respondents in focus groups convened by the Refugee Consortium of Kenya cited prostitution earnings as a means of livelihood (Refugee Consortium of Kenya, 2005). In Damascus, Syria, there have been numerous reports of Iraqi refugees forced to turn to prostitution and women becoming the main earners for households that have depleted resources brought from Iraq (Zoepf, 2007). In Kathmandu, Nepal, IDP women are forced to work in massage parlours, cabin room restaurants, or in other establishments where they are subjected to sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking (IRIN, 2009). For many Liberian girls in Accra, Ghana, prostitution is the only solution to the pressure to support parents (Porter et al., 2008). Despite the enormous challenges, the budgets of protection-focused NGOs have been cut as international humanitarian assistance for the displaced declines.

In many patriarchal societies, the reality of women becoming the sole or principal income-earner can be destabilising for men (due to diminished self-esteem). Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence from Iraqi and Somali urban refugee communities that this can lead to increases in domestic violence. Research in Nairobi revealed instances of male refugees accusing female UNHCR staff members of using their position of power to challenge their masculinity and to demean them (Jaji, 2009). The full extent of this phenomenon and the effects of prolonged periods of idleness and helplessness on notions of masculinity and self-worth need further investigation.

**Limited access to health care services**

Urban displaced populations experience great difficulty accessing health care services. Provision of medical assistance is limited to the most vulnerable and generally only is temporary. While many UNHCR country offices emphasise endeavours to negotiate access for refugees to state health care systems, there is little comprehensive data on the success of this advocacy.
Health services provided by the international community are hardly ever adequate and almost all urban refugees complain about lack of access to government facilities. Many are deemed to be ineligible, only entitled to basic services, or are required by UNHCR implementing partners to seek authorisation that is so time-consuming to obtain that they do not apply. Transfers to government health institutions frequently are problematic, dependent on chance, accompaniment by UNHCR or NGO partner staff, and ability to pay bribes. Post-traumatic stress disorder among urban populations rarely is identified, and significant linkages with apathy, crime, violence, and prospects of post-conflict reconciliation generally remain unexplored.

UNHCR has a strategy to increase access to health services by urban refugees and other persons of concern—focusing on advocacy, supporting existing capacities, and monitoring delivery (UNHCR, 2011b). Access to good quality primary health care and emergency health services remains the priority of UNHCR and its partners, but sufficient funding seldom is found.

Land and shelter

In countries coping with high-speed urbanisation, land markets generally are ill-suited for receiving large influxes of poor people. Many cities are struggling to keep up with the urbanisation process. Complex systems of tenure, local government jurisdictions not relating to actual settlement patterns, weak land registries, and a lack of political will make access to land one of the most volatile and contested aspects of contemporary urban development. The informality or illegality of the urban poor often is used as a pretext for extracting premium rents and bribes for access to land and utility services. While the poor frequently pay high prices, they remain without rights to the land and are vulnerable to eviction. This is a widespread policy challenge, found all over the developing world, affecting the urban poor, migrants, and the displaced alike (Cities Alliance, 2010).

UNHCR interviews and experience gained from its partners suggest that accommodation costs and bribes are the main expenses of many displaced to urban areas. Landlords and employers often exploit the urban poor and IDPs/refugees who similarly lack legal protection. They must compete in the low-cost housing market without enough money for a deposit, local references, or permanent employment. Local or national housing regulations that require proof of residence or citizenship may make housing more expensive or inaccessible.

The response of the urban poor and many displaced people is to settle on urban peripheries or on land inappropriate for normal residential development—next to waste sites, along major transport arteries (canals, railways, rivers, or roads), or on steep slopes. New residents are exposed therefore both to high levels of risk and the uncertainties of living in expanding informal settlements without any security of tenure or prospects of land ownership. Like other exploited members of the urban poor, refugees/IDPs squatting on the outskirts of towns are forced to pay something even when they have occupied empty land and built their own shelter.
As cities urbanise, the once marginal land on which the urban poor settle, including IDPs and refugees, acquires value. Peace settlements can lead to a dramatic inflation of urban land prices. A prime example is Juba, the capital of the Republic of South Sudan, where the value of urban land rose 30-fold in the three years following the end of the north–south civil war in January 2005 (Pantuliano et al., 2008). Here, and elsewhere, the well-connected and private-sector speculators with political connections may seize property without the consent of owners.

In many such contexts, people face eviction, especially as part of master-plans that create social cleavages, concentrating high-value, low-density plots in inner urban areas and situating high-density plots on the outskirts far from markets and services. Examples can be found in Accra (World Bank, 2009), Johannesburg (COHRE, 2005), and in the Philippines (COHRE, 2007).

Secondary, or in some cases, tertiary forced displacement of urban IDPs is frequent. Sometimes this occurs on a massive scale. At least 665,000 IDPs have been forcibly relocated in Khartoum since 1989. The United Nations (UN) estimates that, in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 2005, some 700,000 people lost their homes or livelihoods due to Operation Murambatsvina—‘clear the filth’ in government parlance, but described as ‘Zimbabwe’s tsunami’ by its victims (IRIN, 2007).

**Nutrition**

There have been relatively few studies on the nutritional status of urban refugees and IDPs—in contrast to the intense scrutiny accorded to the health and well-being of IDPs and refugees in camps and determined efforts by the World Food Programme and other international agencies to conform to agreed international minimum standards. Cuts in the food entitlements of encamped IDPs and refugees may attract media and NGO attention while the chronic hunger of urban displaced people goes unreported.

In urban areas, it is usually the case that IDPs and refugees do not receive any food support. Those who do may obtain it from an NGO that has raised funds to provide it, rather than from a UN implementing partner, as in camps. Very little is known about what urban IDPs and refugees eat. There are consistent reports that, often, most are hungry. Donor and media interest generally determines whether the humanitarian community feeds IDPs and refugees in cities. By way of example, while 90 per cent of Iraqi refugee households surveyed in Damascus reported receiving some type of food aid, those in Cairo, Egypt, complain that they do not get any food support (Minnick and Nashaat, 2009).

**Corruption and the right to work**

The right to work is established in Article 23.1 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in Article 6 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In relation to the right to engage in wage-earning employment or self-employment, the Refugee Convention (Art 17(1), 18)
guarantees refugees ‘the most favourable treatment’ possible, meaning that, with regard to their right to participate in wage-earning employment and self-employment, they must be treated as well as foreign nationals in similar circumstances. For urban refugees, protection and livelihoods are intertwined. To pay for food and shelter they must work. The right to work is integral to protection in all countries. However, UNHCR (2009b) found that refugees were forced to work illegally in cities in approximately 100 countries.

Everywhere they work urban refugees are at risk, forced to bribe officials or robbed with impunity. A Somali refugee in Nairobi expressed a global reality: ‘refugees are jokingly known as “ATMs”, a quick and easy route to cash! People know that it’s easy to scare refugees and take advantage of their ignorance about their rights. Refugees will just pay up’ (Offer, 2009). For many, paying bribes is their most significant expense after meeting accommodation costs. If left unchecked, the phenomenon adds to alienation and compromises interventions for the general improvement of urban governance. Restrictions imposed on IDP/refugee livelihood activities and failures to address workplace exploitation distort labour markets and drive down employment standards for all.

If they are not constrained by discriminatory regulations and corruption, many IDPs and refugees can inject assets into urban economies, stimulate innovation, offer employment to local people, stop having to obtain water and electricity illegally, start paying utility bills, and generate revenue for municipalities and central governments.

**Assistance programmes: a drop in the ocean**

The assistance provided to IDPs, refugees, and returnees in urban areas is ad hoc in nature and almost invariably inadequate. Protection, material assistance, and livelihood interventions for urban displaced populations generally are also often dependent on the ability of relatively small NGOs to raise their own funds. Host governments and the international community have neglected the situation of urban IDPs and refugees, fearing that they would not be able to cope with all of the needs that exist. This lack of support is the prime reason that ‘nearly every study of refugee livelihoods has observed negative coping strategies’, including crime, the use of violence and prostitution (de Vrieze, 2006, p. 11).

Efforts to protect displaced urban populations and to find solutions to their problems are shaped significantly by host government policies. A punitive approach has been taken to urban refugees in some countries, based on appeasement to host governments, which has included little or no assistance and little access to resettlement. In many countries, including many that have signed the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, refugee status determination (RSD) systems either are non-existent or dysfunctional, requiring UNHCR to exercise its mandate in relation to the examination of asylum applications and the recognition of refugees. In urban areas, UNHCR has limited capacity to do so thoroughly and efficiently due to dispersal of asylum-seekers throughout a city and the difficulty of maintaining contact while claims are considered.
UNHCR has been reluctant to be drawn into a long-term engagement with RSD systems in urban areas, both out of concern that this would substitute for the principle of state responsibility and because of budgetary and human resource constraints. The organisation has realised that, as a result, it is often the better-educated and better-off urban refugees—those who can afford to travel to UNHCR offices and file applications of their own accord—who join resettlement queues.

There are many complaints about the difficulties of applying for assistance. For instance, research conducted by the Refugee Consortium of Kenya found that a large percentage of respondents who had never applied for UNHCR support, did not do so out of apathy but rather because of the stringent eligibility criterion and the time-consuming challenge of trying to produce evidence (Refugee Consortium of Kenya, 2005, p. 29).

While refugees are entitled to certain forms of assistance, targeting support at them in an urban environment can have unintended consequences if the host population is not considered in the process. When the urban poor see neighbours receiving material assistance while they do not there is potential for violence and xenophobia. The challenge therefore lies in finding the right methods and partnerships to assist urban refugees without alienating them from their neighbours.

**UNHCR’s 2009 urban refugee policy**

After extensive consultation, UNHCR issued new operational guidance in September 2009: ‘UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas’ (the title indicating the agency’s new approach to urban issues). It recognises that the organisation will need to revisit a number of assumptions that underpin current approaches to the issue of IDPs and refugees. The policy emphasises that UNHCR’s mandated responsibilities to refugees are not affected by their location: cities are legitimate places for refugees to reside. UNHCR is committed to advocating for the expansion of protection space for urban refugees so that their internationally recognised rights may be respected and their needs met.

The document stresses that providing urban refugees with protection, solutions, and assistance depends on national and municipal actors, for its objectives ‘will not be attained by the Office alone. If those goals are to be achieved, an appropriate resource base will be required, coupled with effective cooperation and support from a wide range of other actors, especially those host governments and city authorities in the developing world that so generously host the growing number of urban refugees’.

While the revised urban refugee policy has been broadly welcomed by the humanitarian community for its candour and realism, some question UNHCR’s capacity to advocate for and monitor refugee access to basic services. Clearly it has a number of risks. As more urban refugees are educated about their rights their expectations to realise these rights also rise. If refugees are not aware of the access and funding constraints UNHCR is facing this can be a source of increased frustration and resentment. The policy also is not clear on how to treat urban host populations. The
extent of UNHCR’s responsibilities towards, and engagement with, urban IDPs, differs greatly from region to region. The significant gap in funding questions UNHCR’s capacity to address displacement generally and illustrates the limits of humanitarianism in contexts of widespread vulnerability.

**Urban IDPs still ignored**

Refugees in urban areas are far from a homogenous group. They might face a highly diverse set of challenges depending on age, gender, where they are from, where they are situated, their poverty level, their access to social networks, their skill set, and so on. In addition, IDPs and refugees might face different challenges related to their origin and status. There are numerous obstacles to finding solutions for urban IDPs. The term ‘IDP’ remains politically contentious in many countries—not just those with displacement crises—as governments fear a violation of national sovereignty. Difficulty in identifying them hinders data collection, research, and policymaking. The dynamics of displacement are complex and interconnected and hard to analyse: an IDP family might leave its place of origin because it feels insecure or because it cannot access safely local markets and it finds cities to be safer and to offer more job opportunities.

Displacement can have many phases during which IDPs may move in and out of urban environments, often leaving household members in different locations. A further problem is that urban IDPs are not photogenic: an urban hovel surrounded by thousands of others lacks the compelling visual imagery and fundraising appeal of a tent. Agencies focusing on shelter find it unrealistic even to begin to plan to meet minimum standards in densely-packed neighbourhoods.

Urban IDPs are, in short, a ‘messy’ beneficiary and continue to receive little attention from donors and international aid agencies. Some humanitarian actors continue to regard IDPs in cities as ‘inconveniently located’ (Refstie, Dolan and Okello, 2010). Scope for advocacy thus may be limited. In Uganda, for example, UNHCR advocated for IDP freedom of movement but limited assistance to IDPs residing in camps.

**Key challenges facing UNHCR and its partners**

UNHCR is not a development agency and cannot, in any case, afford to provide education, health care, shelter, and water services. It has no mandate for prolonged involvement in peace-building, reconciliation, reintegration, and return. Given the extent of its global responsibilities—which have increased in recent years to encompass IDPs originally outside the agency’s mandate, but without a corresponding rise in budgetary resources—it is perilously dependent on caseload-by-caseload fundraising. It is clear that UNHCR faces a major funding gap, threatening its ability to meet its mandated obligations. Rebuilding and recovery from conflict, as well as the provision of basic services, also should be, ideally, a government-led process supported by civil society and development agencies.
Frequently there are problems of coordination of (often large numbers of) development agencies and government ministries/agencies in urban areas, especially in capital cities. UNHCR may have a series of relationships with implementing partners but it has no regular forum in which to bring them together. UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies must find a way therefore to build such partnerships and to make sure that the needs of urban IDPs and refugees are included in overall urban planning. What is evident is that the challenges displaced people bring to urban planning are enormous, and no actor alone will be able to address them.

In recent years, UNHCR’s branch office in Nairobi—like offices in other cities with significant populations or refugees, such as Sana’a—has significantly reoriented its programme, registering and documenting more urban refugees, steadily expanding protection space, and widening partnerships. However, while it has learnt more about urban refugees and developed initiatives with the potential for scale up and replication elsewhere, UNHCR’s capacity to meet their needs remains seriously constrained by a lack of funds, limited staff capacity, and other actors’ relative lack of interest in urban refugees (Campbell, Crisp and Kiragu, 2011). A recent study found that most refugees in Nairobi believe that they are not receiving even minimum levels of assistance (Pavanello, Elhawary and Pantuliano, 2010).

UNHCR’s relationship with refugees in urban areas often has been tense. Urban refugees sometimes have unrealistic expectations of what UNHCR can provide in terms of protection, solutions, and assistance. While more informed and empowered refugees are better equipped to hold their governments and UNHCR accountable, it is also important that they understand their resource constraints. To avoid unrealistic expectations leading to frustration, laudable attempts to open new channels of communication with urban refugees also should reflect on how to communicate mandates and resource constraints.

**Supporting livelihoods**

Across the world, municipal authorities frequently stifle, rather than promote, IDP/refugee enterprise. While in many cities the police often raid informal businesses and try to prevent hawking and other forms of street trading, they are more likely to seize the goods of refugees or ask them to pay protection money.

However, cities also present opportunities for self-reliance, an important reason why IDPs and refugees congregate in them. Many humanitarian actors have talked of promoting refugee self-reliance, but the term rarely is defined. An observation arising from a 2000 review of UNHCR’s efforts to promote the self-reliance of Afghan refugees in New Delhi, India, remains valid, namely that unassisted refugees cannot really be regarded as ‘self-reliant’ if they live in abject poverty and also are obliged to engage in illicit activities to make ends meet (Obi and Crisp, 2000). Mobilising and capacitating displaced urban populations, so as to preserve and promote their dignity, self-esteem, and productive and creative potential, is more than a matter of human rights. The provision of education and training opportunities for urban IDPs and refugees is the best foundation for the acquisition of self-reliance.
In recent years, a wide range of practitioners and researchers have sought to give the issue of livelihoods much greater prominence in international discussions on displacement. As livelihoods support has to be the cornerstone of self-reliance of urban IDPs and refugees, it is highly unfortunate that micro credit, saving groups, small business support, and vocational training programmes generally are small-scale, time-bound, greatly under-funded, and rarely sustainable. It is particularly important for governments, humanitarian actors, and donors to expand micro-credit and savings programmes aimed at women—and childcare provision—so that they do not have to choose between working in an abusive situation as housemaids or as prostitutes.

UNHCR’s livelihood interventions seek to allow asylum-seekers, IDPs, and refugees to protect and build their own futures. Recently, the organisation has begun to boost its programming capacity in complex urban and/or protracted refugee situations. The agency is aware of the need to develop a deeper understanding of barriers to decent employment and economic opportunities for refugees and to find more effective means of building their capacity for productive living. It seeks opportunities to remind governments, municipalities, and other stakeholders that displaced populations carry their knowledge, skills, and life experiences wherever they go; that significant numbers bring precious productive assets—knowledge, tools, working animals, and/or financial capital—and that displaced people whose entrepreneurship is permitted/encouraged are likely to contribute to government coffers.

UNHCR livelihood activities are often promoted as successes, but the organisation faces considerable constraints. There is little comprehensive information on its experience of providing micro finance. The agency faces the dilemma of whether to promote refugee livelihoods and self-reliance in countries where they are denied the right to secure an income or to move freely under national law and practice. In times of budget constraints, livelihoods promotion, micro finance, and small business promotion are among the first things to be cut.

While, commendably, UNHCR is strengthening its livelihoods approach, it is important that it is integrated into existing initiatives in slums and informal settlements and that it learns from the experience of development actors. Establishing a common evidence base requires strong partnerships between the humanitarian and development communities as well as with the population of concern and its local and national authorities or host government.

**Knowledge gaps**

The literature on urban IDPs and refugees remains scant, confined primarily to the realms of anthropology and forced migration studies. Most of the relatively small number of studies advocate on behalf of urban IDPs/refugees and do not consider their effects on settled populations and municipal and national authorities. Little is known about the impact of displaced communities on the cost and availability of food, housing, and jobs. Urban planners, demographers, and development specialists have not addressed significantly the relationship between displacement and urbanisation.
There are few examples of linkages between displacement and urban planning, administration, poverty reduction, and emergency preparedness. The voices of urban IDPs and refugees are rarely heard by policymakers, as multiple factors inhibit research—those imposed by governments and by displaced people fearful of exposure.

Occasionally, some urban populations—those who attract media attention and contain educated and articulate English-speakers—find themselves the focus of extensive research. However, the reality in places out of the media spotlight, and most particularly in urban Africa, is very different. The knowledge gap is striking.

The Women’s Refugee Commission notes that, without more information, the practical implications of UNHCR’s revised urban refugee policy remain unclear: ‘Establishing an evidence base to develop practical and operational guidance is crucial in promoting policy and program implementation that supports effective and safe livelihoods for urban displaced populations and mitigates tensions between host and displaced communities’ (Krause-Vilmar, 2011, p. 4).

In addition to discovering the number of IDPs and refugees in urban areas, there is an urgent need to improve understanding of their lives, the impacts of their presence on the indigenous population, and their degree of access to education, health care, sanitation, water, and other municipal/state services. We need to understand better the implications of the presence of displaced people in urban areas for municipal administration, urban planning, and poverty reduction strategies. Moreover, it is particularly important to learn more about livelihoods strategies. We still know extremely little about how urban IDPs/refugees survive.

**The way forward**

While the humanitarian community has shown some interest recently in the issue of urban displacement, the development community has not yet followed suit. There is little exchange of information between forced migration and development scholars and practitioners working in urban areas and even less between them and municipal authorities and displaced communities. There have been few efforts to establish lines of communication with displaced communities in urban areas. In some cases, urban displaced populations may be part of organisations established by the urban poor in informal settlements, but they have no umbrella group to advocate on their behalf, akin to Shack/Slum Dwellers International.

As one of the most precariously funded UN agencies, UNHCR is aware that it lacks the financial resources to realise the refugee entitlements set out in its new urban refugee policy. The agency is not a development actor and recognises that it cannot discharge its mandated responsibilities in urban areas without much greater engagement with development actors. It can play a major part in advocating for recognition of IDPs and refugees in long-term development planning and for emergency preparedness in cities. In addition, it advocates for freedom of movement and the right to work, often a prerequisite for IDPs and refugees to become self-reliant. In addition, there is a need to facilitate understanding and respect between IDP and refugee populations and their hosts.
UNHCR and other agencies working with displaced urban populations are aware of the need to develop the skills—and, where necessary, to change the mindsets—of staff members whose previous experience is primarily in the management of camps and to develop new sets of relationships, no longer just with national governments and line ministries, but with mayors, municipal authorities, urban police forces, providers of sanitation, waste disposal, and water services, and, most importantly, the representatives of both displaced and resident communities. Humanitarians need to learn from the experience of development actors that have developed such links.

This special issue of Disasters is evidence of a groundswell of humanitarian recognition of the need for collaborative approaches to urban displacement challenges. This was stimulated in December 2009 at the annual Dialogue on Protection Challenges organised by UNHCR, which focused on the urgent need for collaborative approaches to meet the requirements of people of concern in urban settings. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has established a Task Force on Meeting Challenges in Urban Areas and published a long-term strategy document in October 2010 (IASC, 2010). The January 2012 meeting of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) focused on adapting humanitarian response to urban realities.

Moving forward, municipal, national, and international actors need above all else to be sensitised to the concept that IDPs/refugees are not simply ‘a UNHCR issue’. Development practitioners, donors, humanitarians, and urban planners must work together to promote co-existence/reconciliation to tackle discrimination and xenophobia in urban areas by addressing the needs of IDPs, refugees, residents, and returnees together in ways that help to advance social reintegration.

The needs of the urban poor and local hosts, as well as the design of municipal and national development strategies, must all be taken into account when designing and implementing initiatives for the urban displaced. It must be demonstrated to the donor community that a) the presence of displaced persons in urban areas is a development issue and b) that the dangers of funding discontinuities continue to bedevil the transition between humanitarian response and early recovery.

Although the issue of displacement to urban areas rose to the top of the humanitarian agenda in 2009, the relative lack of subsequent follow-up highlights the need for action. It is important to share more widely information on and experience of urban displacement data and programming. It is unfortunate that many agencies still do not appear to know what others are doing or planning. There also is a need to create a directory of specialists—from academia, municipal authorities, NGOs, the development and humanitarian communities, and the UN—who are working on urban displacement issues.

Working more effectively on behalf of displaced people in urban areas will undoubtedly be a challenging undertaking for UNHCR and its partners. For most of the past six decades, the agency’s activities have been focused on situations in which refugees are concentrated in camps and organised settlement where it is relatively easy to gain access to them, to estimate and meet their needs, and to monitor their well-being. New approaches will be required to provide protection and assistance to the growing number of refugees and displaced people who are living in urban agglomerations, scattered among a much larger population of city dwellers, many of whom also are poor and whose rights are not respected.
Correspondence

Jeff Crisp, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Case Postale 2500, CH-1211 Genève 2 Dépôt, Switzerland. E-mail: crisp@unhcr.org

Endnotes

1 The term is used here to refer to persons displaced from their place of habitual residence to an urban environment in their own country. IDP is a descriptive, not a legal, definition, since the legal rights of IDPs are upheld by their national government. The international community has recognised the reality of internal displacement. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (see http://www.idpguidingprinciples.org/) are slowly acquiring the characteristics of international law and have been incorporated in national legislation in many countries.

2 The term is used here to refer to refugees, repatriated ex-refugees, and IDPs residing in urban areas.


4 One should note that many countries with significant urban refugee populations have not signed the Refugee Convention, including Bangladesh, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Syria, and Thailand.

References


