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Policy pointers

Agencies seeking to respond to protracted urban internal displacement should address internally displaced persons (IDPs) as city residents, not just a humanitarian caseload. This means working with existing urban systems and avoiding piecemeal project-based assistance.

These responders should align their efforts with the agendas of municipal authorities and seek 'win-win' solutions as a way of bolstering political support for initiatives focused on IDPs.

Donors should increase funding for improved data gathering and analysis in urban areas as a critical step towards meeting the needs of IDPs and supporting their integration.

Donors and the United Nations should address the barriers between humanitarian and development funding that frustrate sustainable support in protracted displacement settings. In particular, they should facilitate direct financing of municipal authorities.

The case for treating long-term urban IDPs as city residents

A significant percentage of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who seek safety in towns and cities will not return home. Yet this is a reality that international actors consistently fail to adapt to and as a result, the complex needs of urban IDPs and their host communities remain unmet. Solving these issues requires a fundamental rethinking of humanitarian and development programming. Agencies and donors must view long-term IDPs as city residents, not just a humanitarian caseload. By engaging with municipal authorities, they could find 'win-win' solutions that both align with local government priorities and address the needs of IDPs. Donors must also consider providing direct financing to municipalities, while creating the flexible programming demanded in complex urban protracted crises. The UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement concludes in Autumn 2021 and should result in increased attention to IDP policies. It remains vital to re-evaluate responses to protracted urban internal displacement, discarding outdated practices and scaling-up promising new approaches.

By 2050, the United Nations estimates that the world's population will be 68% urban. Much of this ongoing urbanisation will occur in developing countries, with urban populations in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa growing to 3.5 billion and 1.3 billion, respectively.¹ Internal displacement will continue to mirror this trend. While accurate data on the exact percentage of IDPs who choose to seek safety in cities and towns is not available, consensus holds that: most IDPs move to urban areas;² internal displacement is often protracted in nature — lasting over five years;³ and many IDPs will choose to remain in urban centres, rather than returning to their areas of origin.⁴ Moreover, urban IDPs tend to settle in low-income informal settlements⁵ and are by definition citizens of the country, making dividing lines between IDPs and the urban poor within 'host' communities difficult to ascertain. These new patterns of urban displacement have major, but insufficiently

explored, implications for humanitarian and development actors in cities and towns.

Outdated mindsets prevent protracted urban IDPs from being seen as city residents

Humanitarian actors generally perceive internal displacement as an acute crisis — an extraordinary situation that needs to be resolved so that life can return to normal. For many such actors, 'success' is measured by the number of people assisted to return to their place of origin. This is one of three outcomes considered a 'durable solution' for IDPs.⁶ By contrast, a situation where large numbers of IDPs permanently remain in informal settlements can be perceived as a failure. Standards of living in these communities may be very low for both IDPs and their non-displaced neighbours, and while 'integration' is also a durable solution, it is hard to

There are striking gaps in the understanding of urban internal displacement and tailored solutions for tackling it

measure.⁷ The predominant focus on return fails to take on board the lessons that should have been learnt from many years of history: a significant proportion of IDPs will never return home —

because they either do not want to or cannot for security and/or economic reasons.

At the same time, municipal authorities and service providers — particularly in lower-income and fragile states — are often poorly prepared to respond to the arrival of

displaced households. Many already face the challenges of rapid urbanisation, the lack of financial and technical capacity to provide adequate basic services and affordable housing to their growing population, and structural problems that reduce livelihood opportunities and exacerbate inequalities. In addition, national political discourses may downplay forced displacement and/or insist that IDPs will shortly return to their areas of origin. Even when displacement has lasted many years, budget allocations from national governments are often based on population figures that exclude IDPs.

The Director of the Durable Solutions Unit in Mogadishu, a participant in a consultation process involving municipal officials from six countries (see Box 1), described the situation in the Somali capital where half a million people are classified as IDPs:

“Those people are Mogadishu citizens, literally residents. So, we need to figure out a way to make sure that their needs are addressed as residents, and not as a humanitarian caseload. ... If you're in a displaced situation for the last 15, 20 years, you're no longer [an] IDP. You are an urban poor [person]. Full stop ... there is no one going to IDPs and saying, 'Well, you're not from Mogadishu, so leave the city!' ... By and large, people are here to stay. And [so the question is] how do we provide service[s] that attend to their needs?”

Box 1. Consultations with mayors in six countries

The UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement was convened between February 2020 and Autumn 2021. IIED, UN-Habitat and the Joint Internal Displacement Profiling Service (JIPS) advocated for the Panel to give special attention to internal displacement in urban contexts. They also collaborated with the Panel Secretariat to organise a series of discussions with local officials of towns and cities affected by internal displacement in Burkina Faso, Colombia, Honduras, Iraq, Somalia and Ukraine.

The findings, which include the need for a fundamental shift in the response to urban displacement, were presented and discussed at a global roundtable in April 2021.¹⁴ A related series of IIED/UN-Habitat/JIPS submissions¹⁵ and a journal article² have argued for a new perspective on urban forced displacement, which demands tailored, urban-oriented responses and the need to work more closely with those responsible for most IDPs — municipal authorities.

While there is growing focus on what has been dubbed the ‘urbanisation of displacement’, there are still striking gaps in the understanding of urban internal displacement and a lack of tailored solutions for tackling it. There is also a lack of actors sufficiently familiar with operating in urban contexts. International NGOs and multilateral agencies often sidestep municipal authorities to work directly with affected populations through short-term, project-based assistance. This leaves local authorities without technical and financial assistance that would allow them to provide essential services to all residents, even in situations where populations have multiplied many times over. The ultimate result is a failure to meet the specific needs of protracted urban IDPs and the cities that strain to accommodate them.

Identifying ‘win-win’ solutions with municipal authorities

It is important to stress that not all local authorities are sympathetic to the needs of IDPs in their towns or cities. There are clearly cases where municipal officials are at best ambivalent and at worst openly hostile to displaced people, considering return the only desirable solution for them. Notable, however, was the inclusive attitudes towards displaced people shown by mayors and municipal officials in discussions organised by IIED, the Joint Internal Displacement Profiling Service (JIPS) and UN-Habitat (see Box 1), as well as the extent to which they referred to their responsibilities to serve all residents, regardless of their origins.

The same discussions highlighted how important it is for external actors to engage with local politics and to seek ways to secure the political will to improve life for IDPs in situ. Municipal authorities and local systems are present and will continue to be in the future, so seeking to understand the institutional and political structures that incentivise and constrain them should be a priority for external actors. Failure to address the political dynamics of cities and an overemphasis on ‘technical’ solutions will likely result in failed programmes.

As the Vice Mayor of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, put it: “...municipalities should not be treated nor should cities be treated with a single [cookie cutter] approach. The focus of [international] cooperation should be to support and promote local efforts, not to impose their own agendas.”

The coordination of humanitarian responses — currently based on the emergency cluster system — has inherent shortcomings that work against real, sustainable change. These include the tendency to work in sectoral silos, to eschew collaborating with local authorities and an inherent focus on individuals or households (as opposed to communities) as the unit of intervention.⁸ A

contrasting approach that can help to build political will is to place support for urban services and the local economy front and centre in displacement response. These issues are critical to IDP protection, wellbeing, increased self-reliance and, eventually, integration, and they are also the key concerns of local political actors.

There are promising approaches that can and should be scaled up (see Box 2). These include 'settlements-based'⁹ and cross-sectoral approaches, enhancing local capacity and strengthening municipal service delivery systems. A range of urban planning tools are being integrated into humanitarian programming by UN-Habitat and others, and are also showing promise. These include fit-for-purpose planning, land administration and municipal finance tools to increase revenue. Another part of the solution involves facilitating spaces where local authorities can coordinate and negotiate with humanitarian and development actors, so that existing development plans are taken into account, agendas are aligned from the outset and urban displacement is better managed.

Getting more of the right data

Many urban displacement contexts suffer from a dearth of data. City officials have difficulty tracking IDPs' movements into and within their jurisdictions. While this is a matter of resources, it is also related to the inherent difficulties in identifying displaced populations in urban areas, including endemic insecurity in places where IDPs tend to settle and their frequent desire to remain anonymous in the face of persecution or discrimination.¹⁰ However, there have been significant advances in the development of tools designed for urban areas that can help identify IDPs and assess their needs sensitively.¹¹ The widespread adoption and scaling-up of these techniques across a broader range of organisations and humanitarian responses will be critical.

There is also a need for improved data regarding the impacts that displacement (and external actors' efforts to respond to the displacement) have on urban systems. This information could help identify and prioritise interventions in areas such as water and sanitation or solid waste collection, and map responsible institutions. Similarly, better data on geophysical hazards, such as floods and earthquakes, can help to design solutions that will mitigate risks and reduce the occurrence of further displacement.

Finally, data on IDPs would ideally be complemented by information on the circumstances that led to their displacement, as well as on their intentions to stay, return or move to another location. This will help to identify underlying

socio-economic or political dynamics and ensure that the response is appropriate, conflict-sensitive and accepted by IDPs and host populations.

Experience shows that collaborating with local governments on data collection and analysis can catalyse change in their attitudes, counter misconceptions about internal displacement and help align competing agendas.¹² Supporting local governments to take the lead in gathering and analysing data can strengthen political will and accountability for their role as primary duty bearers in urban displacement contexts.

In non-displacement contexts, low-income urban communities have taken the lead in data collection and analysis. This has proven to be a powerful tool in raising awareness of rights. It can build the confidence of residents of informal settlements to engage with local authorities and to co-design solutions for the issues that most affect them. Supporting IDPs to take up a similar initiative would be a complex endeavour, particularly in conflict zones where the socio-economic, political, religious or ethnic profiles of IDPs can strongly influence the level of political support for assistance or integration. However, donors rallying behind this type of effort would signal greater recognition of IDPs as city residents and active citizens, rather than passive recipients of humanitarian assistance.

Making funding fit for purpose

Many of the challenges laid out above are compounded by structural constraints within the international aid and assistance architecture that inhibit the flow of funds to local institutions and tend to direct support towards short-term emergency interventions, even when displacement is protracted.

Globally, there is a lack of funding and of associated financial mechanisms that can be used to channel badly needed resources to cities and relevant authorities. This gap results from the

Box 2. Examples of 'win-win' solutions for cities and displaced people

A pilot project in Baidoa, Somalia, has brought together longer-term investments in urban infrastructure by the World Bank with investment in social infrastructure by various organisations. The result is expected to increase the value of publicly owned land partly settled on by IDPs. The pilot supports the local authority to leverage the increased land value to finance social housing, public spaces and basic infrastructure, which will benefit the entire city, not just IDPs.

In Lebanon, UN-Habitat supported the public financial management capacity of local government to manage an increased budget, supported technical capacity in service delivery and procurement, and monitored income and expenditure. This gave UN agencies and donors the confidence to invest their resources through local government. This approach can be easily replicated and strengthens the credibility of local government and service providers since they are seen to be paying attention and responding to the priorities of the community.

reluctance of donors to fund municipalities directly, and is also symptomatic of implementing agencies' lack of familiarity with local authorities' needs, systems and ways of working. As a result, resources fail to reach some of the very actors whose roles in addressing urban displacement are both most important and most under-resourced.

Achieving real change in response to protracted urban displacement will require adaptations to funding models, some of which could be achieved relatively easily and others which might require more fundamental changes to the international aid system. Adaptations should include:

- Donor flexibility in terms of duration and use of funding for urban IDP response, which would allow programming to be responsive to rapidly changing political dynamics and promote a focus on systems-level improvements. This can only be achieved over multi-year timelines.
- More opportunities that support longer-term capacity development and promote the role of municipalities in addressing protracted urban displacement, either through direct grants or close partnerships with other organisations.
- Sequenced funding that not only provides for short- and medium-term needs, but also helps city officials strengthen revenue bases and draw in external financing.

Bringing about these changes will require policy and legislative shifts in some key donor countries. USAID, for example, has provided leadership on the 'settlements-based approach' to urban displacement but has been constrained by regulations that typically prohibit emergency funding from being used for permanent construction.¹³ Other donors place similarly rigid divisions between interventions that are considered 'humanitarian' and those classed as

'development'. This reduces the ability of field staff and implementing partners to respond to the complexities of protracted displacement in cities.

Conclusion

Rapid urbanisation in the global South is affecting all aspects of life, including the dynamics of forced displacement. New approaches are needed to keep pace with the ways in which protracted forced displacement and urbanisation are intertwined. As voiced by the local officials cited earlier, failure to tailor approaches to the urban context can lead to unsatisfactory outcomes for both IDPs and host communities, and undermine confidence in local government institutions.

Working with and through, and funding municipal actors to the greatest extent possible will be critical. This will require a shift in how donors do business. International partners must make it a priority to align their efforts with the agendas of municipal authorities and establish more flexible programming. They can do so by finding 'win-win' solutions that will bolster political support for initiatives focused on IDPs, improve the capacity of municipalities to respond to significant flows of IDPs and benefit affected urban communities.

It is urgent that donors, implementing agencies and researchers build on the recent momentum exemplified by the creation of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement to continue to refine and improve how the international community understands and responds to protracted urban displacement.

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This briefing draws on the work the authors have developed over the past year with Dyfed Aubrey and Stephanie Loose at UN-Habitat and Isis Nuñez Ferrera formerly of JIPS.

Notes

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