Displaced people: the need for an 'urban first' approach

Comparative research findings on displaced people's wellbeing and livelihoods in cities and camps

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Protracted displacement in an urban world

In brief

The 'Protracted displacement in an urban world' project set out to establish whether life is better for displaced people in cities rather than in camps, to identify displaced people's unmet needs, and to engage with municipal authorities to promote more inclusive attitudes and policies towards urban displacement.

Between 2020 and 2024, IIED led a consortium of partners in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, the UK and the USA in a mixed-methods research study of the different experiences of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) living in cities, compared with those living in camps. This was the first large-scale comparative study of its kind.

Camps are often the default response to displacement crises. Although they are designed to be temporary, they can stay in place for decades. As they are often in remote and inhospitable regions, and because they make residents dependent on humanitarian assistance, camps are not the choice of most of the world's displaced people. Estimates indicate that more than 60% of refugees and most IDPs now live in towns and cities.

The project focused on two main themes: wellbeing, and the economies and enterprises of displaced people. We found that:

- Displaced people have better health and greater food security in urban areas compared with in camps; but there are pockets of extreme deprivation among urban populations
- Camp economies are largely artificial and encampment policies restrict the development of dynamic local enterprises; but local authorities' policies and behaviours also limit displaced people's livelihood potential in urban areas.

The findings demonstrate a clear need for decision makers to consider an 'urban first' approach of integrating displaced people socially and economically into urban centres rather than camps. The findings also show the imperative to relax movement restrictions on encamped populations so they can more easily take the first step towards self-reliance.

Box 1. Research methods and sample size

1. Qualitative interviews: in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya, we undertook 100 interviews in each country with displaced women and men on themes relating to wellbeing, livelihoods and enterprise. We triangulated these with key informant interviews with government officials, NGO workers and local leaders.
2. Survey: we used concept testing focus groups with displaced people and expert consultations to design a survey that we conducted with around 4,000 refugees, IDPs and urban hosts in the four countries.
3. Participatory forums: we held forums in Addis Ababa, Amman, Jalalabad and Nairobi, bringing together displaced people, service providers, NGOs and local government to discuss the research findings and how to respond to the challenges identified.

Why wellbeing matters in protracted displacement

Displacement is now increasingly protracted, with many refugees and IDPs unable to return home for years or even decades. However, data collected about displaced people is often driven by tools designed for use in emergency contexts, which centre on meeting basic needs or on income. Instead of relying on these narrowly conceived vulnerability analyses, we developed a new framework based on displaced people's own understanding of what it means to live a good life in exile. This measures wellbeing along five dimensions: bodily, economic, social, political and psychosocial.

What we discovered

The study exposed high levels of food insecurity, homelessness and inadequate maternal health services in camps — debunking the myth that camps provide a safety net for vulnerable people. We found that bodily and economic wellbeing are higher in urban areas than in camps. Displaced people also rate services in cities better in terms of quality and availability.

The research also demonstrates how camps are poor value for money. They absorb the bulk of humanitarian funding for displaced populations, while, in most contexts, urban refugees do not receive any assistance.

However, much needs to be done to improve life for displaced people in cities. While some urban refugees and IDPs had high levels of wellbeing, we found pockets of extreme poverty, particularly among women.

Our findings on social, political and psychosocial wellbeing were not so clear cut and varied between countries. In urban areas, many displaced people feel they lack representation, are denied their rights and are limited in terms of the life they want to lead by the costs of rent and transport.

Work and enterprise at the root of the 'urban first' approach

The study also compared the difference that urban and camp settings make to refugees and IDPs' ability to achieve self-reliance through work, and their potential wider economic contribution to host communities and economies. We defined the displacement economy as 'the collective economy created over time by refugees and IDPs through their livelihood activities, enterprise, need for services and consumption, and through their mutual support and diaspora inputs'.

In cities, restrictions on employment push some refugees into low-paid work with very poor conditions, with women often engaged in the most risk-prone activities and locations. Despite hostile regulation, many urban refugees and IDPs work, often informally, in self-employment and/or small enterprises. Having previous work experience or household savings were predictors of self-employment. Because many refugee and displaced populations include young people entering the labour force for the first time without savings or previous experience, policy should find ways to bridge this gap.

In refugee-hosting countries, we found urban refugee entrepreneurs working in partnership with hosts so they could register their businesses — a relationship that can be positive but is sometimes exploitative.

In camps, the few jobs available were often more secure than those in cities, but these were frequently short-term opportunities provided by NGOs, paying below market rates.

The role of municipal authorities in promoting a welcoming and inclusive environment

The project established participatory forums in each city, which partners convened five or six times over the course of the four years. The forums' overarching aim was to bring displaced people into conversation with local authorities and service providers, and to raise awareness of the challenges they faced living in cities, as evidenced by the research. The forums evolved in different ways.

Particular progress was made in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, where the discussions helped draw attention to the potential role for municipal authorities to respond to the needs of urban refugees and IDPs. Discussions and forums are continuing in both cities, with the support of new donors, and Nairobi County is developing a new strategy for inclusive planning for refugees. In Afghanistan, international agencies are extending the model to other areas to encourage greater dialogue between local officials and IDPs.

Next steps

We are promoting debate locally and internationally on innovations in hosting urban refugees and IDPs. We are introducing the idea of an 'urban first' strategy that sees cities as the primary location for hosting displaced people, and where humanitarian and development agendas can be combined to benefit all urban populations. Through new action research we are encouraging municipal authorities to take the lead in providing urban services to displaced people and other vulnerable populations.

We are also refining our wellbeing framework, carrying out further pilots and validating results with displaced people. We aim to create a tool that can support municipal authorities in designing their responses based on vulnerable urban populations' needs and capacities, and in monitoring development towards inclusive, resilient cities.

Partners

Cardiff University is a member of the Russell Group of the UK's top universities, ranked second in the UK for research impact.

Dilla University is a public university based in Dilla, southern Ethiopia.

Hashemite University is a Jordanian state-run university established by royal decree in 1991.

Maseno University is a public university in Kenya established by Act of Parliament in 1991.

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research in countries affected by migration and displacement.

Slum Dwellers International Kenya is the non-profit technical and professional secretariat of the federation of Kenyan slum residents known as Muungano wa Wanavijiji.

The Women's Refugee Commission works to improve the lives and protect the rights of women, children and youth displaced by conflict and crisis.

Hamdi (not her real name), 25, sells tea in Eastleigh, Nairobi. Hamdi fled Somalia at the age of 21. Credit: Arete/Brian Ongoro/IIED

Get involved

For more information on this area of work and all of our related publications see: www.protracteddisplacement.org

Get in touch

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Find out more

For an overview of the project, see www.protracteddisplacement.org and:

Earle, L (2023) Why the international community is failing urban refugees: four myths about protracted displacement. IIED, London. www.iied.org/21631iied

Majidi, M and Barratt, S (2024) Displaced people in Afghanistan's cities need support. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22261iied

Earle, L, Brown, A, Garcia Amado, P, Mackie, P and McAteer, B (2023) Finding urban solutions for Ethiopia's Eritrean refugees. IIED, London. www.iied.org/21856iied

Dajani, D, Garcia Amado, P, Alhaj Hasan, S and Betawi, Y (2023) A decade on: improving outcomes for Syrian refugees in Jordan. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22211iied

Earle, L, McAteer, B, Garcia Amado, P and Brown, A (2023) Exploring new approaches to urban refugee hosting in Kenya. IIED, London. www.iied.org/21951iied

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Project Materials

Urban; Policy and planning

Keywords:
Housing, urban development, urban planning, informal settlements (slums), inequality, social justice

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Cover image: Hubi Ali, 45, has tea at home in Eastleigh, Kenya. She left Somalia at the age of 29, spending over 2 years in camps before relocating to Nairobi. Credit: Arete/ Brian Ongoro/IIED