

## Policy pointers

**Crises affecting urban areas** — including disasters, forced migration and violent conflict — are increasingly frequent and complex. This is particularly true in developing countries that lack capacity in urban planning and adapting to emerging risks.

**Evidence on crises** needs to be of better quality and used more effectively if it is to inform innovative approaches and capacities for responses with specific urban relevance.

**There are significant evidence gaps**, including: experiences of local actors; self-recovery; urban systems; direct and indirect long-term impacts of humanitarian interventions; and value for money of humanitarian projects.

**An effective research agenda** for evidence-based humanitarian action in urban areas must focus on: increasing local participation in co-production of knowledge, but also supporting advocacy and public awareness.

## Setting a new research agenda for urban crisis and humanitarian response

The world is urbanising, and so too are humanitarian emergencies. However, many international humanitarian actors have found that traditional approaches — often rurally-derived or camp-focused — are ill-suited to urban environments. This briefing identifies key evidence gaps on urban crises and humanitarian responses, and outlines priorities to guide a future research agenda. Broadly, these priorities call for a better understanding of urban processes and systems, and of local actors' experiences and perceptions, both of which can inform context-appropriate and inclusive approaches to urban humanitarian response. We emphasise the value of communicating evidence in a form that can be used for broader advocacy and public awareness, promoting the need for all actors to develop new approaches and capacities in this increasingly important area.

In response to the urbanisation of humanitarian emergencies, the humanitarian sector is increasingly recognising that:

- Rapid urbanisation, alongside other pressures, is contributing to more frequent and complex urban emergencies (Figure 1). This is especially true in developing countries that lack the capacity to respond (pro- and retroactively)
- Future urban emergencies will require greater levels of humanitarian assistance, yet most international humanitarian actors have a rural focus
- International humanitarian actors are struggling to adapt to the challenges and opportunities presented by urban environments (Table 1).

This briefing draws on a literature review on urban crisis and humanitarian response<sup>1</sup> developed to address these growing concerns. The review uncovered significant evidence gaps in adapting

and developing new humanitarian approaches and capacities that work in urban environments and on engaging local actors.

### Key evidence gaps

We found five key gaps in the evidence on urban crisis and humanitarian response. Here, we identify them and suggest how they might be addressed, with an emphasis on the involvement of local actors.

**Documenting local experiences and perceptions.** Humanitarian action is often based on a subjective and socially constructed view of 'reality' and so needs to consider quantitative and qualitative evidence.<sup>2</sup> Experiential evidence (based on people's experiences and perceptions) can yield valuable qualitative insights into a problem, solution or outcome from multiple perspectives (both 'expert' and 'non-expert').

## *Research would benefit from local actors' first-hand knowledge of the causes and consequences of an urban crisis*

While most evidence on urban humanitarian response is experiential, it is based mainly on the experiences and perceptions of international humanitarian practitioners, seldom documenting those of local actors. This gap is difficult to justify given the growing multitude of local actors engaged in urban response. Documenting their experiences and perceptions would present opportunities to learn about the capacities of local actors and how international humanitarian actors could support more effectively.

### **Understanding self-recovery processes.**

International humanitarian actors have traditionally focused on delivering products to address humanitarian needs.<sup>3</sup> This approach tends to favour 'expert' knowledge and engineering solutions at the expense of the local capacities and processes through which the needs of affected people are usually addressed.

In contrast, demand-driven approaches seek to engage local actors (such as informal builders) in recovery processes — for example, 'sheltering' as opposed to just 'shelter' — according to the self-identified needs of affected people. This approach reflects the reality that humanitarian interventions only reach a minority of urban crisis-affected populations and that the majority cope and recover through their own means ('self-recovery').

This reality was recognised in the revision of the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Framework (PDNA) issued by the World Bank, European Union and United Nations in 2014. This revision emphasised a shift from only counting damages and losses to also analysing local capacities for recovery. This move presents an opportunity to learn more about self-recovery, the skills required to work in a support role, and the local conditions (social, cultural, economic and political) that govern what is possible in urban settings. We need new approaches to sustained monitoring and analysis of self-recovery processes, how people make decisions and mobilise resources, and the dynamics of reconstruction, particularly around service provision, shelter and rental markets.

### **Understanding complex urban systems.**

Crises can generate indirect impacts on the infrastructure networks and ecosystems that support core urban functions and human well-being.<sup>4</sup> For example, the loss of a power station might disrupt water supply and distribution. It is increasingly recognised that effective responses to indirect impacts require a better understanding of how urban areas function as complex systems.

However, most research on urban crisis and humanitarian response has failed to look across sectors (eg water, sanitation, shelter) and scales (individual, household, neighbourhood and city-wide). This has hindered understanding of interconnections within urban systems, how a crisis may result in cascading failures, and which communities are most affected and why. More needs to be understood about how urban systems function, feel the impacts of a crisis, can be restored and made more resilient.

### **Knowing more about long-term impacts.**

Most documentation and analysis of humanitarian response covers short timeframes. This can severely compromise the quality and validity of data in dynamic urban emergencies. The long-term impacts of humanitarian interventions are also poorly documented, despite outcomes often taking time to materialise. For example, capacity building is not an end in itself, but a means to support further action requiring time to execute and evaluate fully.

There is even less documentation on the indirect impacts that the long-term presence of international humanitarian actors may have on processes of urban transformation such as state reform.<sup>5</sup> Indirect impacts may be particularly significant in protracted situations where international humanitarian actors have become increasingly involved in urban decision-making, planning and service provision. There is a clear need for insight into the long-term impacts

**Table 1. Humanitarian challenges and opportunities presented by urban environments**

<b>Urban conditions</b>	<b>Humanitarian challenges and opportunities</b>
Diverse and unequal populations	Assessing needs among people with multiple, intersecting social identities
Densely populated environments	Accessing settlements and planning responses with limited open space
Prevalence of people living in informal settlements	Engaging 'hidden' populations (such as the displaced) in insecure situations
Prevalence of rental populations and rapid mobility	Affected households are less visible and accessible
Links between acute and chronic vulnerability	Understanding where 'emergency' ends and 'normal' conditions begin
Interconnected infrastructure systems	Working across sectors and taking a city-wide perspective
Role of markets	Working within a cash-based economy
Multitude of actors	Working with, not around, local actors and agendas
Complex policy frameworks	Understanding applicable policies and regulations

(intentional and unintentional, direct and indirect) of humanitarian actors and the changes in approach that may be required.

**Assessing value for money.** International humanitarian debates on urban response are increasingly interested in 'best' practice. However, surprisingly little documentation exists on how funds were spent or whether value for money was achieved. This gap seems difficult to defend given that the operating costs of international agencies and the expectations of crisis-affected populations are often significantly higher in urban than in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> Greater consideration of the economics of urban crisis and humanitarian response may motivate international actors to develop different approaches for interventions and local partnerships.

In addition, many international humanitarian agencies are reluctant to fund evaluations and share findings that reflect poorly on their programmes, as most donors require them to document the impacts of their interventions. This results in serious concerns about the quality and objectivity of reporting by many international agencies.

## Research priorities

Based on these evidence gaps, we recommend five priorities to guide a future research agenda:

**Increase local participation in co-production and review of knowledge.** It is frequently reported that local actors feel excluded by the international humanitarian system, including 'cluster' operations (those involving multiple agencies with different expertise working together). This is despite repeated recommendations to improve local engagement, particularly in large crisis situations where incoming humanitarian agencies (usually working in English) often exclude local voices.<sup>7</sup>

Supporting local participation in the co-production and review of knowledge would enable local actors to articulate their experiences and perceptions; question external researchers; and identify lessons for local audiences, including affected communities, local officials and newly arrived international responding agencies.

**Look across evidence from multiple perspectives.** 'Triangulating' (cross-referencing data gathered via different methods) experiential evidence from inside and outside the international humanitarian sector can minimise research biases and broaden perspectives. This must involve greater efforts to capture local actors' experiences and perceptions of their own roles, actions, options, successes, challenges and impacts, and of international humanitarian agencies and donors.

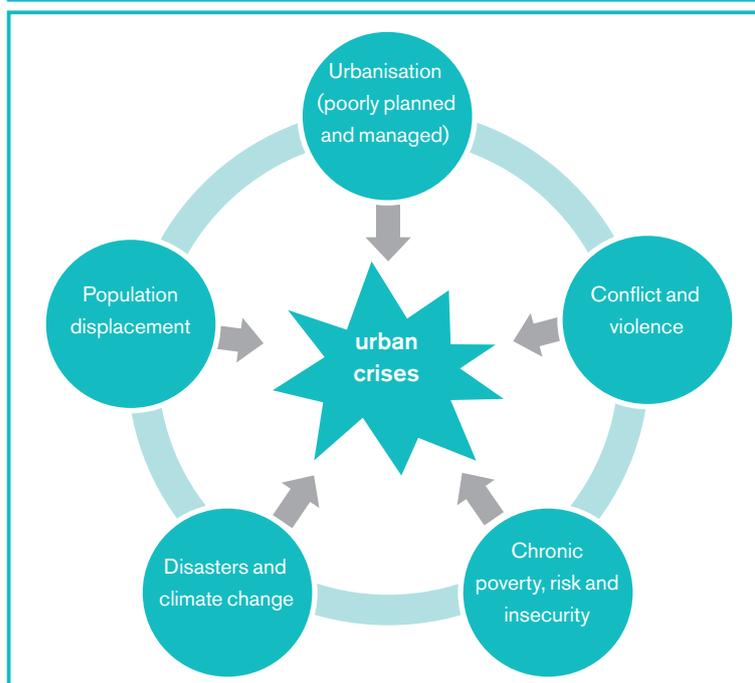
## Box 1. Key terms

**Humanitarian emergency:** an event that significantly threatens the health, safety and well-being of a population and that requires humanitarian assistance.

**Humanitarian assistance:** resources/aid and action by local and/or international humanitarian actors designed to address the needs of affected people.

**International humanitarian actors/agencies:** traditional UN and non-UN humanitarian agencies and donors that typically respond to large-scale humanitarian emergencies.

**Local humanitarian actors:** existing actors (governmental and non-governmental, public and private, formal and informal) involved in responding to humanitarian emergencies in their vicinity



**Figure 1.**  
Converging pressures affecting urban crises

Various types of qualitative data may need to be triangulated with quantitative data to ensure that subjective interpretations of an issue, impact or outcome are balanced with more objective measurements. However, in other instances, qualitative data may be required to capture impacts and outcomes that are difficult to quantify, such as changes in local power structures. A balanced research approach requires a mix of methods as well as more representative samples of the whole range of actors engaged in urban humanitarian response and the diversity of affected communities

**Increase contextual understanding.** There are serious concerns about whether a 'best' practice culture is failing to foster contextually appropriate, iterative and dynamic urban humanitarian responses, and leading instead to an approach that favours 'how to' questions over more fundamental queries about 'why' urban settings require different ways of thinking and doing.

Developing better contextual understanding could be supported by local actors and researchers documenting the normal (non-crisis) operation of urban systems (ie understanding 'normal' as part of understanding recovery as 'returning to normal'). This is part of the preparation process, becoming valuable when crises disrupt urban systems and make them more difficult to analyse. For example, a series of briefs about the normal operation of the city and its governance structure would help to inform the responses of existing and newly arrived humanitarian actors.

**Learn from other fields.** Much of the literature on urban humanitarian response is self-referential: it rarely looks elsewhere for knowledge and evidence. Broadening learning to other fields and bodies of literature could create opportunities to learn about new approaches to humanitarian response in urban settings. For example, the literature on urban development planning presents a number of lessons for addressing questions of access, exclusion and justice, which could be of relevance to post-crisis shelter interventions in particular.<sup>8</sup> This literature could present additional lessons for integrating 'area-based' approaches to co-ordination and service delivery into broader urban planning.<sup>9</sup> There may also be value in broadening the analysis of cash programming beyond a traditional focus on food security, looking specifically at how rental markets and service provision function in urban settings.

Next year's World Humanitarian Summit<sup>10</sup> provides an important opportunity for wider learning in terms of considering urban development processes more closely and using lessons learned to find innovative ways of making humanitarian response more effective in this context.

#### **Increase timeframes and co-ordination.**

Supporting research over a long period ('longitudinal research') would provide much needed evidence on the direct and indirect impacts of international humanitarian actions. This research would benefit from the participation of local actors with first-hand knowledge of the

causes and consequences of an urban crisis, the planning and implementation process from the beginning of that particular response, and the urban transformations that may have occurred as a result of prolonged humanitarian presence.

Donors could promote co-ordination that enables humanitarian agencies to share and consolidate their resources collectively and to undertake joint monitoring and evaluation with longer timeframes, common methodologies, larger aggregated results, and comparative analysis. Investment in this activity would include preparation, facilitation, capacity building and other considerations to capture tacit knowledge and triangulate at different levels. Clusters, local governments and other co-ordinating bodies can also play a key role in promoting these efforts.

### **Towards a new research agenda**

A more effective research agenda on urban crises and humanitarian responses requires more than the joint generation of new and better evidence. It must also communicate that evidence in a manner that supports advocacy and raises public awareness about the increasing importance of urban humanitarian response.

Evidence can be communicated beyond traditional humanitarian forums (academic journals, agency reports etc), using popular mediums such as the Guardian's 'cities' blog.<sup>11</sup> Adopting a broader communication strategy could have a number of benefits, including: motivating the public in at-risk towns and cities to help build safer and stronger communities; providing opportunities for different groups to engage in humanitarian debates; and compelling local decision-makers, international humanitarian agencies and donors to take urban crisis and the need for new approaches to urban response more seriously.

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## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

The Development Planning Unit (DPU) is part of the Bartlett: University College London's global faculty of the built environment.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This literature review, commissioned by DFID in 2014, was led by the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU) at University College London (UCL). See Brown et al. 2015. Urban crises and humanitarian responses: a literature review. *Bartlett Development Planning (DPU) Working Paper*. UCL. London. Available at: [www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/publications/dpu-report-1](http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/publications/dpu-report-1) / <sup>2</sup> Knox Clarke, P and Darcy, J. 2014. *Insufficient evidence? The quality of evidence in humanitarian action*. ALNAP/ODI. London. / <sup>3</sup> Davis, I. 2011. What have we learned from 40 years' experience of Disaster Shelter? *Environmental Hazards*, 10(3-4), pp 193–212. / <sup>4</sup> da Silva, J, Kernaghan, S and Luque, A. 2012. A systems approach to meeting the challenges of urban climate change. *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development*, 4(2), pp 125–145. / <sup>5</sup> Büscher, K and Vlassenroot, K. 2010. Humanitarian presence and urban development: new opportunities and contrasts in Goma, DRC. *Disasters*, 34 Suppl 2, pp S256–73. / <sup>6</sup> Cosgrave, J. 2013. *Ready to Respond: Skills gaps for responding to humanitarian crises in urban settings in the WASH and shelter sectors*. RedR UK. / <sup>7</sup> Humphries, V. 2013. Improving Humanitarian Coordination: Common Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Approach. *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, April. / <sup>8</sup> Fan, L. 2012. Shelter strategies, humanitarian praxis and critical urban theory in post-crisis reconstruction. *Disasters*, 36 Suppl 1, pp S64–86. / <sup>9</sup> Gupta, H. 2015. *Home sweet home: Housing practices and tools that support durable solutions for urban IDPs*. MIT, DRAN and IDMC. / <sup>10</sup> To be held in May 2016, organised by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). See [www.worldhumanitariansummit.org](http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org). / <sup>11</sup> A blog 'reporting and discussing urban life and the future of cities around the world'. See [www.theguardian.com/cities](http://www.theguardian.com/cities).