

OVERVIEW

IIED Human Settlements Group

Project name:

Urban Crisis Learning Fund

Project leader:

Diane Archer

Time frame:

November 2014–December 2017

Budget:

£2.5 million

Objective:

To generate knowledge and evidence of good practice to inform better collaboration between humanitarian and urban stakeholders when responding to urban crises, and to foster recovery and sustainable development, through a programme of research, documentation and development of tools.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Engaging researchers and practitioners around the world, the Urban Crises Learning Fund supported over 30 research projects on key issues shaping humanitarian responses in urban areas. Two learning partnerships, led by the International Rescue Committee and Habitat for Humanity, developed tools for urban settings and documented past urban responses. Local and international workshops gathered stakeholders, disseminated good practice and advocacy messages and analysed earlier learning to build capacity for future crisis response. The initiative highlighted the need to integrate the responses of local actors and humanitarian agencies in the face of an urban crisis, as well as knowledge gaps for further research.

CHANGE IN ACTION

Urban populations are increasingly facing both acute and chronic crises that arise from the impacts of climate change, other natural disasters and human-induced conflicts. Yet too often humanitarian agencies overlook the considerable experience and expertise of affected local populations in responding to a crisis. Further, these agencies often address a

Empowering local actors in an urban crisis

Better coordination can improve effectiveness of urban humanitarian responses

Between 2014 and 2017, IIED explored how humanitarian agencies can work more effectively with local actors in response to urban crises. The Urban Crisis Learning Fund supported 31 pieces of innovative thematic and regional research on key issues. Additionally, it helped develop tools and document effective principles and practices by two learning partnerships led by the International Rescue Committee and Habitat for Humanity. The programme identified the need to integrate the responses of local actors and humanitarian agencies to address urban crises and remaining knowledge gaps more effectively.

Empowering local actors

Following a natural disaster or conflict, media reports commonly depict victims anxiously awaiting emergency aid from international humanitarian agencies. In fact, away from the cameras many local communities, local governments and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have the knowledge – if not always the capacity – to address the crisis. If humanitarian agencies don't coordinate their response with local actors, they may duplicate local efforts, or worse, undermine them.

For example, when Typhoon Haiyan devastated the city of Tacloban in the Philippines in 2013, an influx of international humanitarian assistance followed, reaching 355 registered NGOs in mid-2014. In response, a city-led taskforce tracked which NGOs were working where, facilitating their coordination with the municipality's own activities.

In a crisis zone, humanitarian agencies need to engage with local actors right from the start. In this way, they can strengthen systems and networks (such as utilities) and supplement or complement city development plans, as well as the initiatives of local community organisations. For their part, cities should involve local communities, the private sector and civil society in municipal disaster planning. When developing city plans, they should consider the needs of the displaced and other vulnerable populations.

Crisis as opportunity

While crises can be devastating to affected populations, they may also present opportunities to strengthen local capacity and plan for long-term recovery and development. In Lebanon, for example, weak coordination between humanitarian agencies and municipalities led to inequitable and uneven distribution of humanitarian support for Syrian refugees. There is scope for improved coordination at the local level, and between local authorities and national actors and their frameworks for crisis response.

Indeed, UN agencies and international NGOs increasingly integrate short-term projects into longer-term programmes. With better coordination, local and international actors can boost the effectiveness of their collective action.

Moving to area-based, integrated approaches

The humanitarian system is structured around clusters. Some humanitarian

single sector, such as education, water and sanitation or shelter, without reference to existing systems and structures. By empowering local actors and supporting their leadership, humanitarian agencies can address immediate needs while fostering more resilient development. In addition to building local capacity through collaboration, agencies operating in urban settings are increasingly adopting area-based approaches that address interlinked challenges within a geographical area. Humanitarian interventions tailored to urban settings can be integrated with municipal planning processes and support the best possible post-crisis future. These approaches can strengthen the impact of humanitarian responses and support sustainable development.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT & INNOVATIONS

- Populations affected by crisis or disaster often have some resources and knowledge to act without the involvement of humanitarian agencies. However, these agencies can play a role in supporting and complementing what is already happening on the ground.
- A crisis can represent an opportunity to empower locally affected populations to organise around recovery, through livelihoods and physical rebuilding. Humanitarian agencies, local populations and urban planners should seize opportunities to integrate links between immediate response and long-term development.
- In many cases, we have knowledge of what approaches work, but research gaps remain around operationalisation, including changes in practice, financing streams and policy at national and local levels.

PARTNER'S VIEW

"I have now realised that the empowerment side of urban humanitarian responses is equally or more important than relief work, donations and all the charitable work that goes with it."

Head of Communications, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Sierra Leone

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the UK Government. The fund is part of DFID's Urban Crises Programme on the urban aspects of humanitarian action, which involves IIED and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).



The Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon's capital city of Beirut

Credit: Trocaire/Flickr via Creative Commons (CC BY 2.0)

agencies will work on emergency shelter, for example, while others may focus on water and sanitation. Further, they traditionally work with individuals or households, rather than a community or neighbourhood.

Urban populations are increasingly large, diverse and mobile, which may make it difficult to identify their needs in a crisis. In addition, the focus on individuals may create tensions between 'affected' populations who receive aid and the 'host' populations who usually don't. As a result, humanitarians are shifting to a less sectoral response to urban crises.

In area-based approaches, humanitarian agencies provide multi-sector support in specific geographical areas, such as a neighbourhood, settlement or district. Research has shown how such approaches can reduce friction between host populations and the displaced. They address collective deficits in service provision — in sanitation, housing, health or education, for example — rather than focusing on individuals.

If poorly designed, however, area-based approaches can increase inequalities between the target area and surrounding neighbourhoods. They can also be costly, creating challenges for humanitarian agencies not specialised in infrastructure provision. Further, engaging the local population in setting priorities and planning action takes time. Interventions must be integrated into local development plans, and wider city or regional plans.

Some local governments may lack the knowledge, experience, time, tools or technology to develop recovery and reconstruction plans. By providing support for urban planning, humanitarian agencies can empower urban communities and local government to take charge of their own recovery.

A role for IIED

IIED's Urban Crisis Learning Fund generated a wealth of insights into how humanitarian agencies can work more effectively with local actors, particularly in urban areas. But these lessons around local collaboration and partnership must be put into practice, and stronger connections are needed between short-term humanitarian interventions and longer-term development programmes. Local actors, including authorities and communities, must develop capacities to plan for potential future shocks and stresses — and donors need to support them.

Building on our partnerships with humanitarian agencies, local community organisations and municipal actors, IIED can generate valuable knowledge. All the stakeholders involved require support in putting these emerging lessons into practice — we can build on our trusted partnerships with these diverse actors to help enable this. By documenting and gathering evidence from this experience, we can inform policy and programming on a larger scale so that humanitarian responses in urban areas support highly vulnerable groups and build longer-term resilience.



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.