

Keywords:

Refugees, UNHCR, urban refugee policy, urban poverty, humanitarian response, cities

Policy pointers

The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, needs to update its 2009 urban refugee policy to reflect the wealth of experience gained in towns and cities over the past ten years.

Donors, academics and NGOs should support the generation of evidence and data on the urban refugee experience.

UN agencies, NGOs and local governments should work with refugees and their organisations as producers of highly relevant community- and city-level data.

Municipal authorities need to collaborate with development and humanitarian actors to find 'win-win' solutions that achieve positive results for urban development and service provision, promoting the 'right to the city' for all residents regardless of status.

Cities for all? Rethinking urban displacement

The number of refugees living in towns and cities has greatly increased since the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) released its urban refugee policy in 2009. The agency should reflect on its role in urban settings, and provide practical guidance to its country offices on engaging with municipal authorities. This should be based on improved evidence and recognition of how urban refugees navigate formal and informal systems to meet their basic needs. This type of evidence is critical to refining targeting and establishing resource requirements. As new IIED research shows, refugee organisations themselves can generate data that provide more nuanced understanding of urban poverty; the process can help them develop stronger networks and thus contribute more effectively to local democracy. Equally important is understanding the needs of local authorities responding to displacement, and incentives that drive a positive response. Key actors should take a pragmatic stance to urban displacement, promoting the 'right to the city' for all.

Where are we on urban refugee policy?

The past two decades have seen a number of shifts at the global policy level with regards to urban refugees. Until the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) released a new urban policy in 2009,¹ its official position was that refugees did not belong in towns and cities. The events of the 2000s meant this had to change, with hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees settling in urban centres in countries in the Middle East where, for historical reasons, there was little desire to establish camps. Equally, many Iraqi refugees were educated urbanites who had no intention of living in camps.² UNHCR has stressed the importance of gathering information on location, noting that it assists with identifying protection gaps and improving resource allocations and so

the efficient delivery of refugee support programmes.³ But the policy itself has been described as little more than a 'bill of rights' and does not clearly set out how the agency needs to change its approach to adapt to urban contexts.

In addition, this attention to the location of refugees seems to have been diminished by the introduction of UNHCR's 'alternatives to camps' policy in 2014, which has drawn focus away from the 2009 urban policy. This newer policy explicitly aims to refocus attention on camps and to emphasise that refugees should be supported to exercise their rights wherever they live. Although a minority — around 30% — of refugees live in camps,⁴ and this is recognised in the policy, the agency continues to use the label 'out of camp' to describe the majority refugee population, showing how deeply entrenched the

Only by understanding the experiences and needs of displaced people, their hosts and the authorities that govern them can locally tailored responses be developed

camp model is. Unfortunately, this newer policy does not make clear distinctions between rural or urban areas, and as a result does not acknowledge the specific challenges and

opportunities of these different contexts. Many staff may feel more comfortable operating in rural areas than in the complex environment of towns and cities and this policy does not encourage them to work in a different way or take up the challenge of focusing on urban refugees. The development of a diagnostic tool to measure

the extent to which country offices are promoting 'alternatives to camps' has also led to public-facing progress reports that give no assessment of the agency's capacity to work at the city scale and with the relevant authorities.⁵

It is now estimated that around 60% of refugees are located in towns and cities.⁶ Ten years on from the urban policy, it is time for UNHCR to revisit its role in urban contexts, and update its policies and guidance. A frank conversation is needed on what UNHCR can contribute, along with how it can support the growing number of urban refugees and the local authorities who are on the frontline of responding to their needs. Much has changed since 2009, with a wealth of evidence generated by the Syrian refugee crisis that has seen millions of refugees seeking sanctuary in towns and cities in the region, and an increasing population of urban refugees in East African urban centres. In December 2018, for the first time UNHCR focused on urban refugees at its annual 'protection dialogue'. This was a welcome step, and a new experience for UNHCR, with mayoral participants from around the world sharing their experience of hosting refugees. The next step needs to be a commitment to review its policy and a concerted effort to support country offices to implement it.

What do we know about the urban refugee experience?

Knowing where refugees are located — in rural, urban, camp and peri-urban areas — is critical for enabling donors and implementing agencies to assess where to allocate resources and what types of programming are appropriate. But being an urban refugee is more than just about location. Urban centres are generally characterised by their size, density and institutional complexity. It can be helpful to conceptualise them as running on a series of

systems — such as governance, infrastructure and market systems. Individuals must navigate these systems to meet basic needs, find work, move around and engage in democratic spaces. They may draw on social networks to help them do this. In many countries, particularly in the developing world, formal systems are often complemented by informal ones — informal economies, housing markets, jobs, and other forms of governance, sometimes described as 'traditional'. Urban refugees, who often gravitate towards informal settlements, may struggle to navigate these systems without functioning social networks, lacking familiarity with local languages and culture, and perhaps facing stigma, harassment or abuse.

Bridging the evidence gap

Urban refugees are not a new phenomenon. Their presence has been documented in towns and cities for decades.⁷ Only recently has the body of evidence begun to grow substantially, with researchers and agencies responding to a series of crises in the Middle East and to the change in UNHCR's policy regime. A balance needs to be struck, however. Much research currently focuses on producing actionable recommendations for humanitarian organisations working with refugees. This can lead to an exclusion of other vulnerable people, whether citizens or non-nationals. It also serves to make visible those refugees who may choose to remain hidden.² An alternative approach would be to incorporate experiences of displacement into research on low-income settlements, generating a more nuanced understanding of urban poverty and barriers to service provision. This would examine how local populations are affected by inflows of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and others, and how displacement intersects with urban poverty. But this would only provide a partial picture of the urban refugee experience. Such an approach should be complemented by research at the municipal level to understand the drivers behind the behaviours and practices that impact on displaced populations — both negative and positive. It is only by understanding the experiences and needs of displaced people, their hosts and the authorities that govern them that targeting can be refined, appropriate resources allocated and locally tailored responses developed.

How can refugee organisations be part of the solution?

Relatively little research has been undertaken on how refugees organise in urban areas and

what this can achieve. IIED conducted research in Kampala working with a refugee organisation whose members gathered data on how refugees access healthcare, shelter and other services in the city. Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) is an NGO founded in 2007 by a group of young refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo living in Uganda.⁸ This engagement builds on IIED's history of working with low-income groups in urban areas around the world, which has documented the benefits of the creation of local networks of residents of informal settlements. Amongst IIED's partners, Shack/Slum Dwellers International and its affiliates stand out for their emphasis on collecting data about the urban centres they live in. Their 'know your city' campaigns, in which local residents gather data on access to services, have had significant impact on municipal authorities across the world.⁹ These successes demonstrate that with knowledge comes influence, and these methods and forms of organisation are also of relevance to refugees and other displaced people.

Not all refugees will be comfortable joining an organisation or engaging with networks of the urban poor. But for YARID, the process of data gathering has opened up new possibilities. It has helped to shed light on the specific barriers faced by refugees of different nationalities, generating knowledge that the organisation can use as it begins to engage with the Kampala Capital City Authority, which has demonstrated some willingness to respond to the challenges faced by displaced people in the city.¹⁰ The research process created new connections between YARID and the Burundian refugee community in Kampala, and has attracted the attention of other donors, leading to new institutional relationships for the organisation. YARID has trained refugee community leaders in research and participatory methods, which may have helped refugee respondents to open up about their experiences. Having a space to organise brings benefits to refugees: enhancing the networks that contribute to their welfare and security² and potentially contributing to local democracy as they begin to challenge discrimination and barriers to services at the city scale. In summary, this methodology has the potential to add important nuance to understandings of urban poverty and to support the institutional development of refugee organisations. Over the coming years, displacement into urban areas is likely to increase globally in response to environmental changes. This type of evidence on how displacement and

urbanisation intersect, and the vulnerabilities that these processes can create, will be critical to urban poverty analysis and will inform appropriate responses from local, national and international actors.

How can we rethink our approach to urban displacement?

Humanitarian advocates are often concerned with the national policy environment for refugees, particularly on ensuring freedom of movement and the right to work. Clearly these rights can have an impact on livelihood opportunities and wellbeing, but research has increasingly shown that the policy and regulatory environment is just one of many factors creating a positive or negative environment for urban refugees. The behaviours and practices of urban authorities and service providers are of paramount importance. Indeed, some researchers see these as having a greater bearing on outcomes for refugees.¹¹

Other researchers suggest that using a discourse of refugee rights to promote access to protection, shelter and services can have unintended negative consequences, creating a backlash against an identifiable population who can be accused of straining resources.¹² This has led researchers to suggest taking a pragmatic approach and looking for solutions that constitute a 'win-win', drawing on an understanding of the local political context.¹³ An example could be demonstrating to a civil servant that their personal targets could be reached by enrolling refugees in a local health

Box 1. The 'right to the city'

The 'right to the city' is a concept that originated with the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s. It has had appeal ever since as an aspirational idea and a call to action and has been taken up by urban social movements that organise for better urban services and well-located housing for low-income groups, particularly in Latin America. At heart, it promotes the idea that all urban residents should have the right to a decent standard of living within the city, and to enjoy the benefits of urban life. In addition, Lefebvre promoted the idea that through participation, city residents should be shaping the city so it more closely resembles the one they want to live in. The concept is of relevance for those working with refugees and displaced people in urban areas, as it is about promoting a better urban life for all residents, regardless of their nationality or ethnic origin. Traditionally, agencies working with refugees take the specific protection concerns and basic needs of refugees as their starting point, and then may also extend services or other forms of assistance to host communities. An approach based on the 'right to the city' would start with a consideration of what the city can offer to everyone, and where services need to be strengthened. This could be combined with targeted support to particularly vulnerable refugees and measures to remove barriers that prevent displaced people from accessing services.¹⁴

insurance scheme.¹² Or at a larger scale, municipalities can be encouraged to unlock donor finance available for refugee response, and use it to also benefit the wider community by improving provision of services for all residents.

Another effective approach to engaging with local authorities could be to align humanitarian strategies more closely with local authorities' priorities.¹² Moving away from an emphasis on refugee rights and starting to think at a city scale will be challenging for some institutions. Working in the urban environment is still relatively new for many humanitarian actors, and high-level policy changes can take time to filter through to implementation. For city actors, extending overstretched public services to non-nationals can be a difficult political decision.

But taking an approach based on the 'right to the city' (see Box 1) — the right (generally not enshrined in law) for all to enjoy what the city and urban life have to offer — and recognising refugees and other displaced people as urban residents deserving of this right is one step in this direction. IIED will be developing new research projects on urban displacement over the coming years, building the evidence on how humanitarian and development agencies and municipal authorities can jointly work towards realising this right for all urban residents.

Lucy Earle

Lucy Earle is a principal researcher in IIED's Human Settlements Group.



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.

Contact

Lucy Earle
lucy.earle@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

IIED welcomes feedback
via: @IIED and
www.facebook.com/theiied

ISBN 978-1-78431-668-6

This project is funded by the
British Academy's Cities &
Infrastructure Programme.

Notes

¹ UNHCR (2009) UNHCR policy on refugee protection and solutions in urban areas. / ² Landau, L (2014) Urban refugees and IDPs. In: Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, E, Loescher, G, Long, K and Sigon, N (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. / ³ UNHCR (2013) UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2013, 63. / ⁴ UNHCR (2017) UNHCR Diagnostic Tool for Alternatives to Camps. 2017 Global Results. www.unhcr.org/59b2a6f07.pdf / ⁵ An example of one such report can be found here: www.unhcr.org/59b2a6f07.pdf / ⁶ Gaynor, T (19 December 2018) Global cities take the lead in welcoming refugees. www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2018/12/5c1a250f4/global-cities-lead-welcoming-refugees.html / ⁷ Crisp, J (2017) Finding Space for Protection: An Inside Account of the Evolution of UNHCR's Urban Refugee Policy. *Refuge: Canada's journal on refugees* 33(1). / ⁸ For more information, see: www.yarid.org / ⁹ See: www.sasdialliance.org.za/tag/know-your-city / ¹⁰ Saliba, S (2018) Urban Refuge: How cities are building inclusive communities. International Rescue Committee, New York. / ¹¹ Haysom, S (2013) Sanctuary in the city? Urban displacement and vulnerability. Final report. Overseas Development Institute, London, 9. / ¹² Landau, L, Wanjiku-Kihato, C, Misago, JP, Obot, D and Edwards, B (2016) Becoming Urban Humanitarians. Engaging Local Government to Protect Displaced People. Urban Institute, Washington DC, 13. / ¹³ Betts, A, Ali, A and Memişoğlu, F (2017) Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford. / ¹⁴ For a discussion of how the right to the city might be applied to the situation of refugees in Dar es Salaam, see: International Rescue Committee (2017) The Right to the City for Urban Displaced. www.rescue.org/report/right-city-urban-displaced