

GUIDANCE FOR RESPONDING TO DISPLACEMENT IN URBAN AREAS



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PREFACE

Urbanization is a defining global phenomenon of the 21st century: more than half of the world's population (55%) live in urbanⁱ areas and this is estimated to grow to two-thirds by 2050ⁱ. In parallel, there has been an increase in the proportion of displaced people living in cities, with over 60 percent of refugees^{2,3} and the majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) now estimated to be living in urban environmentsⁱⁱ.

In December 2019, UN-Habitat and UNHCR signed a revised Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to advance their shared mandate to improve assistance for UNHCR's persons of concern (PoC). This was done to maximize synergies along the humanitarian-development continuum.

Through the MoU, both agencies have committed to both support and cooperate with States and other stakeholders to achieve the objectives of the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR), including to: (i) ease pressures on host countries; (ii) enhance refugee self-reliance; (iii) expand access to third country solutions; and (iv) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity. UNHCR and UN-Habitat have committed to continue upholding the rights of refugees, IDPs and other persons of concern to UNHCR and affected communities in pursuit of "the attainment of durable solutions with a specific focus on urban, camp, and out-of-camp approaches and activities."⁴

Both Parties also committed to supporting national and local governments in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda in accordance with their respective mandates, including in the commitment of member states to ensure "full respect for the human rights of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants, regardless of their migration status, and support their host cities in the spirit of international cooperation, taking into account national circumstances and recognizing that, although the movement of large populations into towns and cities poses a variety of challenges, it can also bring significant social, economic and cultural contributions to urban life."⁵

The partnership will be implemented to advance the triple nexusⁱⁱⁱ (humanitarian-development-peace) through preparedness, humanitarian response and transition to development, particularly in the case of protracted and recurrent crises. The partnership covers both normative and operational aspects related to humanitarian and development responses in support of both agencies' respective mandates.

To work towards the commitments set out in the MoU, *Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas* is an effort to bring together and mobilize humanitarian and development partners to ensure coordinated efforts for resilience in cities and towns. Through this lens, the document elucidates the various systems at work, the actors and stakeholders involved in the decision-making processes, and key factors in preparing for and responding to displacement in urban areas.

This *Guidance* will identify key considerations, to be contextualized and used in conjunction with existing policies and technical guidelines. It is designed to build upon organizational mandates to protect vulnerable populations through inclusive and sustainable urban planning. It aims to reaffirm and expand a multi-faceted understanding of urban contexts and their specific conditions and dynamics. This will further support UNHCR Country Operations and other humanitarian and development actors operating in cities.

i Countries often establish their own definition of 'urban' as it relates to their own needs. The threshold for defining urban may be quantitative (e.g. based on absolute population, or population density) or it may be qualitative (e.g. the primary economic activity of population). See: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/densurb/densurbmethods.htm>

ii Although the true scale of urban internal displacement is hard to assess due to lack of available data. See IDMC UnSettlement: Urban Displacement in the 21st Century, 2018. See: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/unsettlement-urban-displacement-in-the-21st-century>

iii "The 'triple nexus' refers to the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actors. In the UN's 'New Way of Working (NWOW),' these actors are expected to work towards collective outcomes over multiple years, when appropriate."

INTRODUCTION

The escalating frequency, scale, and duration of crises has led to unprecedented and overwhelming levels of displacement. Insufficient resources, inadequate encampment policies, and burdensome periods of protraction pose additional challenges to address resettlement needs. In 2019, over 95% of global resettlement needs were unmet^{iv}. These unmet needs are both a cause and impetus for migration to cities and towns with more diverse economic opportunities.

Increased displacement to urban areas poses unique challenges which need to be met with new, innovative and sustainable responses that go beyond technical solutions. These responses must also strengthen the self-reliance of refugees in urban settings in line with the GCR, advance the triple nexus, and bring benefits to hosting populations. As the actors, policies, and dynamics involved in human settlements continue to evolve, so too must the approach for programming and coordination in urban areas.

Although multiple documents guiding humanitarian and development action in urban areas have already been set in motion (see “Global Policy Framework”), this particular *Guidance* is intended to serve two purposes. Firstly, it is meant to provide an overview of the complexity of urban systems and guide UNHCR how to proceed when developing context-appropriate programming. Secondly, it is a critical step forward by UNHCR and UN-Habitat to identify cross-sectoral opportunities for collaboration. Better coordinated and more comprehensive planning will serve to protect displaced and host populations, reduce social tensions, as well as facilitate cultural and economic integration. This underpins Member States’ commitment to “leaving no one behind” and will help advance the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in addition to strengthening the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

This *Guidance* builds on area-based approaches (ABA)^{iv} to introduce an inclusive and cross-sectoral planning approach for working in cities. It advocates for a contextual understanding of the city as a system. Before responding effectively to the needs of displaced people, it is crucial to understand the role that local and national governments, non-state actors including development agencies, the private sector, (in)formal markets, existing and planned infrastructure and the built environment play in cities. These urban institutions and actors define the opportunities and constraints in providing services and cannot always align their work with UNHCR’s sectoral approaches. Civil society, NGOs, the private sector, and humanitarian and development organizations need to partner with local and national authorities through coordination mechanisms that integrate urban systems.

The following sections frame a joint UN-Habitat-UNHCR view on how spatial planning can address the needs of displaced populations, building on existing “Global Policy Frameworks”, supporting a sustainable way forward for *Preparing for Response* and key considerations for each *Thematic Area* in cities. “Preparing for Response in Urban Areas” provides an overview of urban dimensions that should be assessed for a deeper contextual understanding of a city in the early stages of an emergency response. “Thematic Areas of Spatial Planning” describes six thematic areas to guide UNHCR’s operational approach in urban contexts. Key considerations are listed under each Thematic Area through a spatial planning lens. These considerations support residents’ self-reliance, enabling sustainable and resilient responses to the impacts of economic, social, political, and natural shocks and stressors. Some of these factors are contextualized through case studies.

iv Area-based approaches define interventions by area rather than by sector. ABAs involve working with the population in need (i.e. displaced, refugee, and host populations) within a geographic area. They involve all sectors to provide a holistic response that reduces gaps in services. These sectors include international humanitarian sectors/clusters, national humanitarian service providers, and national and local institutions/authorities/municipalities. In an urban context, area-based approaches have three defining characteristics: they are geographically targeted, multi-sectoral and adopt a participatory approach. See: <https://www.sheltercluster.org/settlements-approaches-urban-areas-wg/documents/settlements-terminology-paper-draftapr2018> and Maynard, V. & Parker, E. 2015, “Humanitarian response to urban crises: a review of area-based approaches”. International Institute for Environment and Development <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/10742IIED.pdf>.

UNHCR's Guiding Principles^{7, 8}

Protection Outcomes:

Protection, safety and privacy considerations should be integrated into all responses in urban areas. This will ensure that the legal rights of displaced people and host communities are respected in practice, and their various legal and physical protection needs are addressed. Physical and psychological trauma can be the consequence, implicit side-effect or even a cause of the conflict, violence or disasters that force people to flee in the first place. In urban contexts, certain groups are at a higher risk of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). For example, child labour, human trafficking, and youth exposure to violence may occur more frequently in urban settings. In public spaces, displaced people may be subjected to sexual harassment, assault, and violence on the streets. This can occur when they access public services or while commuting. In private spaces, overcrowding can exacerbate tensions within families, increasing the risk of SGBV. Similarly, SGBV and other risks arise when refugees and IDPs must share spaces with strangers in communal settings or shared private dwellings. The implementation of programmes in cities should prioritize the most vulnerable and those at heightened risk of SGBV, in line with UNHCR's Strategic Directions 2017-2021.

Protection Mainstreaming:

Protection mainstreaming is a key principle guiding UNHCR interventions across the range of its operational engagements, including in urban areas. It involves incorporating protection principles and promoting meaningful access, safety, dignity, accountability, participation, and empowerment in interventions across all aspects of programme implementation. It also specifies the requirement to do no harm, and to prevent and mitigate the risk of any unintended negative effects of interventions.^v

Age, Gender, and Diversity⁹ Inclusion:

The UNHCR policy on Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) aims to ensure that all segments of a population have equitable and non-discriminatory access to assistance and protection. It affirms that they should have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Through this approach, responses in urban areas should suitably and sustainably address a variety of needs. All planning interventions must be appropriate to different groups within the displaced and host communities. Special measures to ensure inclusiveness and accessibility for specific groups of concern must inform and guide relevant actions. Groups of concern may include women, girls and boys, older persons and persons with disabilities.

Equity:

Responses to displacement in urban areas must promote equity for all and support should be extended to surrounding communities wherever possible. Host communities may require particular assistance in the context of a humanitarian operation or to address their housing and service needs. The SDGs provide a basis for such an inclusive approach: the principle of leaving no one behind.

Participation and Empowerment:

Meaningful community participation will ensure that the agency and capacities of both displaced and host communities are recognized and engaged in developing interventions that support local authorities in the design and delivery of urban responses.

Sustainability:

UNHCR will prioritize energy solutions that meet the current energy needs of refugees and host communities without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own energy needs. This will mean understanding refugees' energy needs, prioritizing renewable energy technologies, enhancing livelihood opportunities and strengthening the technical and managerial capacities of staff and partners. Occupation of environmentally sensitive areas, degradation of land, poor waste management and imprudent use of resources can jeopardize the natural and built environment, increasing vulnerabilities and causing irrevocable harm. This is especially the case in urban areas. Ensuring sensitivity to the ecological context, as well as using traditional knowledge and sustainable practices can enhance the quality of life for all urban residents.

Efficiency:

UNHCR is aiming to deliver high quality, efficient services in its operations. This includes giving priority to the provision of housing and delivery of services essential for the protection of displaced people in urban areas.

Accessibility:

People have various needs and different abilities which, among other factors (including legal status), affects how they access housing, services and facilities. Without safe and equitable access, response strategies run the risk of being exclusionary in practice. When providing housing, services and facilities for health, nutrition, security and comfort, it is essential to consider their availability, sustainability and to what extent they are non-discriminatory.

^v For more information see the GPC - <http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/themes/protection-mainstreaming/>

UN-Habitat's Cross-Cutting Themes¹⁰

Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is inherent in the United-Nations-wide human rights-based approach. It emphasizes that the most vulnerable groups (including women, children, youth, older persons, and persons with disabilities) are specifically targeted in all programmes. Long-term solutions that focus on the systemic economic, social and spatial causes of inequality need to replace siloed, segregated approaches. This will better achieve the prosperity and self-determination outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Resilience

UN-Habitat understands urban resilience as the ability of any urban system to maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming towards sustainability. A resilient city is one that assesses, plans and acts to prepare for, and respond to all hazards, whether sudden or slow onset, expected or unexpected. By doing so, cities are better able to protect and enhance people's lives, secure development gains, foster a positive environment for investment and drive positive change. Transitory humanitarian and emergency interventions should be coupled with planning-based responses for inclusive and sustainable urban development that prioritizes resilience with the aim of protecting the life, assets, and dignity of all residents.

Safety

The New Urban Agenda calls for a safe and secure environment in cities and human settlements, enabling all to live, work and participate in urban life without fear of violence and intimidation, taking into consideration that women and girls, children and youth, and persons in vulnerable situations are often particularly affected.¹¹ UN-Habitat elevates safety as a transversal issue to be considered as a marker across all the domains of change and their respective outcomes. Particular regard must be paid to improving standards of living and the inclusion of migrants, refugees, and internally displaced persons. Only if such groups are safe can they meaningfully participate in decision-making. The New Urban Agenda calls for crime prevention policies to be integrated into urban strategies and initiatives.¹² In this integrated perspective, safety intersects with social inclusion in relation to sustainable mobility, effective access to and use of public space and basic services, and the fostering of social cohesion and integration. It is also important for the promotion and preservation of productive and competitive cities, decent jobs, and livelihoods.

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