SLIPPING THROUGH THE NET
Supporting Refugees in Urban Areas

Ditchley Park Conference Discussion Paper
Executive Summary

Despite the traditional image of a refugee as someone in a sprawling tented ‘camp’, more than two thirds of the world's refugees are displaced outside of camps, with over half living in urban areas; in built up cities, towns, peri-urban settings and informal settlements.\(^1\) Meeting the needs of refugees outside of camps poses challenges for humanitarian agencies. Against a dynamic urban backdrop it can be difficult to identify and quantify the protection and essential service needs of refugees, and to effectively respond to them. Both in sudden influx and protracted crises, large numbers of refugees and displaced people may overwhelm existing services, resources and markets, negatively impacting host communities and creating or exacerbating tensions between hosts and refugees. Nevertheless, urban environments offer unique opportunities for refugees and those assisting them.

While debate and discussion around urban displacement has increased across the humanitarian sector, it has yet to translate into significant improvements in the provision of protection and support. Urban refugees continue to slip through the ‘net’ of assistance afforded by the international community. We must move beyond acknowledging the challenges. Responding to the needs of urban refugees and affected host communities, whether in the midst of a humanitarian crisis or programming for protracted displacement, is not an insurmountable task. We can learn from past and current situations and the broader humanitarian and development world to design effective and innovative programmes for urban refugees. We can implement more sustainable programming that promotes protection and allows refugees to become self-reliant, while sharing up existing urban infrastructure and the well-being of host communities. Improving support for urban refugees and host communities will also contribute to the longer term national and political will to host refugees in urban areas.

This paper provides a brief overview of responses to urban refugees in three different contexts – Nairobi, Kenya; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and the regional Syria displacement crisis – to better understand how donors, humanitarian agencies, host governments, civil society and other local actors have responded to-date. Drawing upon these case studies and other relevant literature, four key areas have been identified as crucial for improving support to urban refugees:

- Greater institutional commitment;
- New approaches and an improved understanding of the urban context;
- Working with new partners, particularly development actors, host communities and local authorities;
- Overcoming political challenges posed by host governments and utilising advocacy to promote protection and remove barriers of access to existing services and support structures.

\(^1\) These figures are now commonly quoted by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and across the sector. See http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4b0e1c8af.html, accessed September 2013. This paper takes the term ‘urban refugee’ to refer to those residing outside of formal refugee camps in predominantly urban or peri-urban settings. Whilst this paper focuses on urban refugees owing to their specific vulnerabilities, any of the challenges, gaps and recommendations of this paper may also apply to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or the more general term of ‘the urban displaced’.

Urbanisation - key facts:

- **3.5 billion** people - 50% of the world’s population - live in urban areas
- By 2060, it is estimated that **70%** of the world’s population will live in urban areas
- **1.5 billion** people live in slums or informal settlements with limited access to basic services

For all references see end credits

The Changing Nature of Urban Displacement – from Camps to Cities

Urban displacement is part of a broader trend of growing urbanisation across the globe, and today more than half of the world's registered refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) reside in urban areas.\(^2\) This number has increased in 2013. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 75 per cent of the more than 2.1 million Syrians who have fled live outside of formal camp settings.\(^3\) The drivers of displacement to urban areas are complex and myriad. Many refugees move to urban areas to join family networks or in the hope of finding work, a home, health and educational services, a sense of community, safety and economic independence. Others move to urban areas out of necessity when there are no other alternatives, out of fear of conditions inside refugee camps or to hide in the anonymity of the urban setting, concerned that registration might identify them to the authorities in their countries of refuge or origin.

Regardless of the reasons for fleeing to an urban area, cities are legitimate places for refugees to reside and exercise their rights\(^4\).

Although theoretically a city may offer a refugee more access to services, employment and support, the life of an urban refugee is often highly challenging. Urban refugees without resources and social networks experience the same problems as the urban poor, such as overcrowded shelter, lack of sanitation, and inadequate services including healthcare.

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\(^2\) International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, World Disasters Report 2012: Focus on Forced Migration and Displacement, 2012, p 113. The total number is likely to be higher as figures are difficult to determine and are generally based on estimates as many refugees do not register with UNHCR or local authorities owing to fear or inability to access registration centres.

\(^3\) See UNHCR ‘Stories from Syrian Refugees’ accessed: September 2013, which notes that of more than 2.1 million refugees, three quarters live outside of camps. Exact figures are difficult to obtain. In recent months, UNHCR has also cited figures of 65%, (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service From Slow Boat to Breaking Point: A Real-time Evaluation of UNHCR’s Response to the Syrian Refugee Emergency, July 2013), and 79% (Inter-Agency Regional Response for Syrian Refugees, 8-14 August 2013, available at Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal accessed: http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php, September 2013)

They also confront specific challenges related to their refugee status. In many cases, urban refugees do not have legal recognition in their adopted city, making it difficult to work, to secure adequate housing, or to access basic services. Even in countries where they do have legal recognition, urban refugees often face discrimination, xenophobia, and harassment by police and others, including beatings, intimidation, illegal detention and demands for bribes. Landlords often charge far above market rates for rent or supply housing that is well below adequate living standards, knowing that refugees often will not or cannot complain to the authorities. Many refugees – adults and children – are forced to find work in the informal or shadow economy, exposing them to unfair wages, exploitation and unsafe conditions.

Both in sudden influx and protracted crises, large numbers of refugees and displaced people may overwhelm existing services, resources and markets, negatively impacting host communities and creating or exacerbating tensions between hosts and refugees. In protracted situations, the impact on resources and resultant growing tensions can create long term structural and security problems that become increasingly insurmountable.

**Urban displacement – key facts:**

At the end of 2012, the global population of refugees was 10.5 million
- 75% reside outside of formal refugee camps
- More than 50% reside in urban areas – in towns and cities across the globe

At the end of 2012, there were an estimated 28.8 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).
- More than 50% are also thought to reside in urban areas

For all references see end credits

Challenges to supporting urban refugees

Historically, United Nations (UN) agencies, humanitarian organisations, donors and host states have predominantly engaged with refugees in camp settings, where protection and assistance programmes have been shaped by this environment. Camps allow for large scale assistance to be delivered by a range of actors, often for many years. They also offer humanitarian actors a high degree of control over how and what services are delivered. In the camp environment, refugees can be more easily tracked, distributions of food and non-food items more easily organised, and vulnerable beneficiaries more easily identified and specifically targeted.

In contrast, the urban environment poses unique challenges to the provision of protection and support. Urban refugees are difficult to identify with many remaining unregistered, hidden due to their lack of legal status or scattered throughout the city. Determining the needs of these refugees requires the use of innovative tools, including mobile outreach from UNHCR and humanitarian organisations. Traditional humanitarian actors need to work with a range of new actors to ensure support to refugees: municipal authorities; local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community groups; faith based networks and the private sector. Such actors may not be familiar partners to humanitarian agencies.

While the challenges are clear, urban areas also provide opportunities for refugees and those trying to support them. Urban areas have better developed infrastructure and technology and increased access to markets and services, attracting many talented and educated refugees. Many urban refugees can earn some form of income, predominantly in the informal sector. Refugees in urban areas are therefore potential assets who contribute to economic growth and stimulation and can fill both skilled and unskilled labour shortages. There will also be opportunities for host governments and host populations if the human and economic resources of refugees are harnessed.

As the following case studies make clear, many of the needs of urban refugees can be met through greater investment in existing services and livelihood opportunities and ensuring that refugees as well as host communities are able to access them. This differs starkly from direct service provision which is generally the only option in camps. Such programming experiences serve to create more sustainable solutions that benefit host communities and refugees alike. Such an approach is also likely to be more politically palatable to host governments and local authorities as it supports and improves local urban infrastructure. In the long term these approaches will provide better value for money to donors as such support reduces longer-term dependency and promotes self-reliance, particularly in protracted situations.

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5 Simone Haycom, Sanctuary in the City? Reframing Responses to Protracted Urban Displacement, Humanitarian Policy Group Brief 52, Overseas Development Institute, 2013, p 1
7 Women's Refugee Commission, Dawn in the City: Guidance for Achieving Urban Refugee Self-Reliance, October 2012
8 UNHCR defines protracted displacement as groups of more than 25,000 refugees displaced for more than five years. In 2004, UNHCR noted that the average duration of major refugee situations had increased from 9 years in 1993 to 17 years in 2003. See UNHCR Protracted Refugee Situations, 2004, accessed: http://www.unhcr.org/40a982172.html, September 2013
Learning from Experience: How have urban refugees been supported across different contexts

Kuala Lumpur: New Models to Support Self-reliance

Malaysia is home to one of the world’s largest urban refugee populations. Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and makes no distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants. Both communities are exposed to a range of risks including detention, torture, and exploitation. Whilst such incidents have lessened in recent times, ongoing government restrictions mean that refugees cannot acquire resident permits, are excluded from the formal economy, and cannot access basic services such as health care or education. Direct support services to meet basic needs are limited as international organisations face restrictions and impediments to working in the country.

In the absence of domestic legislation regarding the protection of refugees, UNHCR has taken responsibility for refugee protection in Malaysia. However, there is no formal agreement between UNHCR and the Malaysian authorities, and there is no dedicated agency within the government to manage refugee affairs. Despite its restricted mandate, UNHCR continues to register refugees, provide documentation, monitor detention, and facilitate resettlement to third countries. UNHCR also provides a range of services in health, education, and other sectors through direct support of local civil society organisations. However, UNHCR has acknowledged that its ability to protect refugees in Malaysia is limited. Despite the significant urban refugee population, its capacity and resources have not kept pace with its growth, and UNHCR’s budget in Malaysia is consistently underfunded.

In 2012, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) conducted a study to assess the issues affecting refugees from Myanmar living in Kuala Lumpur and to identify opportunities to effectively address their needs. UNHCR also reviewed implementation of its urban refugee policy. Many of the findings of both studies align.

Support for urban refugees can be improved through capacity building and increased funding to CBOs.

Supporting urban refugees does not necessarily require direct service provision. Working through networks can be more sustainable and cost effective in the long term.

The IRC found that there are a range of unmet needs among refugees in Kuala Lumpur, and offered recommendations focusing on five key areas including protection; refugee community development; livelihoods; health; and children and youth. The report recommended expanding advocacy efforts with the Malaysian government around establishing a legal framework and allowing for work permits, whilst also ensuring refugees were able to access national services such as health care and education.

In the restricted operating and funding environment, both studies highlighted the crucial role Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) play as primary providers of services and support to urban refugees. Whilst UNHCR supports a number of local NGOs to assist urban refugees, many lack institutional capacity to support the growing urban refugee population. As a result, refugees in Kuala Lumpur have increasingly turned to refugee-led CBOs. Organised predominantly along ethnic lines, CBOs, with support from community volunteers, provide a range of services for refugees including protection support, employment assistance, help in accessing health services, information distribution, and support for informal community learning centres. These CBOs are located close to where refugees are living and provide services in refugees’ native languages. Perhaps most importantly, these CBOs serve as an initial point of contact for new arrivals, helping refugees orient themselves and improve their odds of survival through essential community networks. CBOs signify an important strategy for self-reliance in the absence of national or state support to refugees in Kuala Lumpur, although the capacity and quality of the CBOs vary widely and many are poorly funded. CBOs demonstrate that improving support to urban refugees does not necessarily require direct service provision from UNHCR or other international organisations. Rather, strengthening support to existing, refugee and community-driven structures may in fact do a better job in providing cost effective, appropriate and sustainable responses to the protection and support needs of urban refugees.

Key Facts

In a restricted operating and funding environment, urban refugees in Kuala Lumpur have formed Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) to fill support gaps.

‘I've been staying here in my cousin's house for two months. I have no legal documents. I have no job. I’m scared of leaving the house and being arrested by the authorities. All I wanted now is to get a UNHCR card so I can get a job and be resettled. I worry about my family. I don't think I can ever go back to Myanmar'  

Mohammed Musa Mozemia

For all quote references see and credits

IRC, In Search of Survival, p 15
IRC, In Search of Survival, p 15
Urban Refugees in Nairobi: Hidden and Exposed

Kenya hosts a significant refugee population. Donors and humanitarian organisations have focused attention on refugees in large camps such as Dadaab, where the number of refugees has now reached close to half a million people. Less attention has been afforded to refugees in urban areas, even though official figures suggest that there are currently 56,000 refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR in Nairobi and other urban areas in Kenya. The true figure could be closer to 100,000.20 Whilst there has been some support for urban refugees, on the whole it remains ad hoc and inadequate to meet needs.

Kenya is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has incorporated refugee protection into domestic law through the passage of the Refugee Act in 2006. Nairobi was one of six cities selected by UNHCR to pilot its new urban refugee policy in 2009. Since that time, UNHCR has worked with Kenya’s Department of Refugee Affairs and a range of international and local NGOs and civil society organisations to support refugees’ access to health, education and other essential services, to develop livelihood opportunities and help refugees protect their rights. For example, IRC works with Kituo Cha Sheria, a national legal aid centre, and other partners to provide specialised legal services for refugees, build capacity and understanding of refugee rights among the police, and strengthen advocacy aimed at advancing the rights of refugees by local actors.21

In 2012 and 2013, a series of security incidents that were allegedly carried out by the Somali community in Kenya significantly increased the harassment and discrimination of urban refugees. In response to increasing security incidents in and around Nairobi, the Kenyan government issued an encampment directive in December 2012 calling for refugees in urban areas to move to designated camps or be forcibly relocated. At the same time, the government directed UNHCR and all other organisations supporting urban refugees to stop. Registration of refugees in Nairobi also ceased.22 The fallout was a dramatic increase in human rights abuses by authorities, forced returns and rising fear among refugees to identify themselves for registration and attendant services.23 Kituo Cha Sheria led a petition to the high court which subsequently overturned the directive in July 2013.24 Local civil society organisations were key in advocating for the rights of urban refugees and importantly, mobilising around structures already in place to promote refugee protection.

The diversity and dispersed nature of the refugee population in Nairobi poses challenges to identifying needs, understanding what services and support structures are in place and the impact urban refugees have on host communities. In recognition of this, the IRC has supported studies undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).25 Urban refugees (and the urban

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20 The current official figures include close to 34,000 Somalis, 11,000 Ethiopians and 7,000 Democratic Republic of Congo nationals. Smaller numbers of refugees from Eritrea, South Sudan and the Great Lakes are also registered. See: UNHCR, UNHCR position on the directive by the Kenyan Government on the relocation of refugees from the urban centres to the refugee camps, Briefing Notes, 25 January 2013, accessed: http://www.unhcr.org/510276690.html, September 2013. The figure could be far higher as many refugees in Nairobi fear registration or have not been able to do so for a range of reasons. The figure of 100,000 comes from Sara Pavanello, Samir Elshayaw, and Sara Pantuliano, Hidden and Exposed: Urban Refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, ODI, HPG Working Paper, March 2010, p. 7.

21 Kituo Cha Sheria only recently started focusing on urban refugees. The centre predominantly provides support for vulnerable Kenyans. See http://kituochasheria.or.ke/?lang=en. This is an example where national structures can be supported to extend services to refugees.

22 The Kenyan Government’s Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA) has responsibility for the administration, coordination and management of refugee affairs previously, including the registration of refugees in Nairobi and other urban areas. Until mid December 2012, UNHCR registered urban refugees in parallel with the DRA registration process. In December 2012, the DRA issued a directive for all urban refugees to relocate to refugee camps, citing national security. See Department of Refugee Affairs, Press Statement, December 2012 accessed: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reporting/2012/December%202012.pdf, September 2013.


24 The Kenyan government is appealing the high court ruling.

25 Pavanello et al., Hidden and Exposed: Urban Refugees in Nairobi; and Victoria Metcalfe and Sara Pavanello with Prafulla Chandra, Sanctuary in the City? Urban Displacement and Vulnerability in Nairobi, Humanitarian Policy Group, Working Paper, September 2011 accessed September 2013: http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/5943-sanctuary-city-urban-displacement-vulnerability-nai- robi. A number of other studies have also been conducted to build the sector’s

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Andrew McConnell/Panos Pictures/International Rescue Committee
displaced) in Nairobi face similar challenges in daily life as the urban poor, such as lack of access to basic services, dire living conditions, harassment, exploitation and other forms of violence. Already challenged in meeting the infrastructure and service needs of its own population, Kenyan institutions are further strained by the plight of refugees. Urban refugees in Nairobi also face distinct challenges owing to their status. For example, refugees often pay higher rent, face greater charges for health and education, and are more often exposed to arbitrary detention or extortion by state actors. As in Kuala Lumpur, the limited dedicated assistance available in the urban setting has resulted in refugees developing their own community based mechanisms to support their needs. Faith based organisations and community based initiatives are thus vital service providers for urban refugees in Nairobi. Efforts to support urban refugees are also undermined by the overall lack of dedicated funding and resources. Donors should build capacity of the host state, by providing support for training of police and other government agencies on refugee rights and for humanitarian organisations to increase legal aid services targeting refugees.

In protracted refugee situations such as Nairobi it is vital to understand the impact of long-term refugee populations on the economy, infrastructure and social fabric of the urban environment. The ODI study highlights that urban refugees, particularly the Somali community, have benefited the urban economy. Donors should support efforts to increase livelihood opportunities, and invest in improving the sector’s understanding of the nature of the urban economy and how best to facilitate urban refugees’ success within it. Given the impact of the urban refugee population on the host community and local infrastructure, humanitarian actors should identify development partners and private sector organisations to support urban infrastructure and services for both communities.

Key Facts

Many urban refugees in Nairobi face similar challenges to daily life as the urban poor, including lack of access to basic services and dire living conditions. They also face challenges unique to their status as refugees including increased harassment and extortion.

Efforts to support urban refugees in Nairobi are undermined by a lack of dedicated funding and resources.

Building partnerships with national and local level authorities, civil society, community and faith based organisations is crucial to informing programming and advocacy.

Greater investment is needed from donors and others to improve understanding of the political economy and broader urban context.

I have been here for four years. We didn’t go to Dadaab because what refugees are given there isn’t enough to feed a large family; people there either have other income or relatives who send them money. It is also better for children here because they can go to public school.’

Amina Abdi Hassan

Syrian Refugees Outside of Camps are Slipping Though the ‘Net’

The Syrian refugee crisis is described as “the worst humanitarian disaster since the end of the Cold War,” by Antonio Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. With an average of 5,000 Syrians fleeing across the border every day, the number of Syrian refugees has surpassed two million; those displaced inside Syria now number over 4.26 million. More than 97% of Syrian refugees are being hosted by their neighbours in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, a display of humanity that Guterres describes as “the only solace of this crisis.” The scale of this humanitarian catastrophe is vast. More concerning still is the trend in displacement and serious gaps in support to the majority of those displaced. According to UNHCR, some 75% of refugees across the region have fled to urban centres, towns and villages outside of formal refugee camps.

The needs of refugees who have fled to urban areas are vast. Many Syrians are in poor neighbourhoods that lack the capacity to absorb or assist them. While some have found shelter with host families, most are renting small, overcrowded, run down apartments that they increasingly cannot afford. Others are finding shelter in abandoned buildings. Multiple families share rooms to reduce the impact of soaring rent costs - the IRC has documented accounts of more than 20 people sharing rooms with no running water or toilets. In Lebanon, refugees live in over 1,500 villages and communities across the country and increasingly reside in informal settlements. Refugees in urban areas struggle to access needed medical care and education, and to purchase food, water, fuel, clothing and other essentials to survive. There is a lack of specialised services for survivors of physical and sexual violence in host states and such services have not been adequately funded.

The crisis is now recognised as one with a significant urban dimension. However funding and support has not shifted to reflect the reality of displacement patterns. There remains an urgent need to significantly boost the humanitarian community’s outreach to non-camp refugees, to strengthen mass information activities and to ensure refugee access to public services and to expand international support to public services in host countries. It is clear to many organisations working on the ground that the majority of funding continues to be disproportionately channelled to camp environments. In August 2013 the IRC reported that of the

33 IRC, Syria: A Regional Crisis, p. 12.
34 UNHCR PDES, From Slow Boat to Breaking Point, p. 8.
meagre resources allocated to support Syrian refugees in Iraq,
new funds go to Syrians seeking safely outside of camps despite
the fact they form the majority of the Syrian refugee population.35
While many donors continue to provide generous amounts of
funding toward addressing humanitarian needs, there is an urgent
requirement to target funding in new and more effective ways to
meet the needs of the majority of those displaced and their host
communities.

Various reports have been published highlighting the needs of both
urban refugees and host communities.36 Whilst general
understanding of needs has increased and practical
recommendations for improving support across a number of
locations exist, the ability to comprehensively assess the urban
context to build a full picture of both refugee and host community
needs, local capacity and services available remains a gap. This
makes it challenging for all actors to provide support and for
donors to strategically fund programme interventions to close
gaps. Greater investment in tools and assessments to overcome
this barrier is required from all actors. Improving context analysis
and comprehensive needs assessments will also require improved
coordination. Many organisations support refugees through
specific interventions targeting certain vulnerable groups. As
programme interventions in urban areas increase there is an
urgency to ensure that efforts are coordinated and common
vulnerability assessments are used. For actors working on the
ground it is now crucial that sector working groups in each country
integrate an urban focus to improve coordination. As it stands, it
remains difficult to develop inter-agency strategies to address the
range of support needs for both refugee and host communities,
for example, around shelter, income generation or strategies for
bolstering local service capacity.

The lessons from other ‘protracted’ urban situations must be
identified and incorporated into the overall response now as the
nature of the crisis suggests refugees will not be returning in the
foreseeable future. As the crisis continues, the pressure on host
countries’ resources, infrastructure and citizens will only continue
to increase. Syria’s neighbours—both governments and individuals
—have shown remarkable generosity providing housing, food, and
services for many refugees that continue to cross the border. This
level of support, however, cannot be sustained without a
significant increase in funding to build local actors’ capacity and
long term support to refugees and the countries hosting them.
Programming and support must move from only meeting the acute
needs of refugees to also addressing longer support required,
including ongoing protection needs, promoting legal rights,
ensuring access to basic services and the promotion of
self-reliance through livelihood training and support. This will
involve a range of actors beyond the humanitarian sector. In the
real-time evaluation of its response to the refugee crisis, UNHCR
found that a ‘far more substantial and coherent strategy is
needed’ involving ‘development actors, financial institutions,
donors and the private sector’ in supporting host countries, host
communities and refugees outside of camps.37 Development
actors, host governments and humanitarian actors must all be
involved in identifying needs, planning programmes and solutions
as well as committing resources to support this response.
Mechanisms to ensure that development actors and humanitarian
actors work in coordination to support host communities and the
urban displaced will be crucial going forward.

The Syrian crisis starkly illustrates the need for new approaches
to humanitarian funding and action. The crisis underscores the
challenges we as the collective humanitarian community continue
to face in a large scale, rapid and largely urban refugee crisis.
Traditional responses cannot address the needs of refugees and
host communities with thousands of refugees streaming across
borders daily and settling outside of refugee camps.

It demonstrates the importance of supporting local service
structures, promoting self-reliance and improving the sector’s
ability to reach displaced people outside of the camp environment.
Finally, like Nairobi, this is bound to be a protracted refugee
crisis that will demand development-oriented support to host
country infrastructure and vulnerable host community members
to ensure their ability to provide for the needs of Syrian refugees in
the long term.

35 IRC, Hidden but Hopeful: Life Beyond the Camp for Syrian Refugees in
September 2013. In August 2013, 40,000 new arrivals crossed the border
from Syria to Iraq. At that time, approximately 100,000 refugees were living in
urban areas, and 50,000 in Domiz refugee camp (p 2). Most funding has been
allocated to those in Domiz.
36 For example, IRC, Syria: A Regional Crisis; IRC, Reaching Breaking Point;
An IRC briefing note on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, June 2013, accessed:
Papers%20Final%20%20June%202013.pdf, September 2013, IRC, Hidden
But Hopeful, World Vision Under Pressure: the impact of the Syrian refugee
Crisis on host communities in Lebanon, Advocacy Report, July 2013, accessed:
-host-communities-lebanon, September 2013; CARE Jordan, Syrian Refugees
in Urban Jordan: Baseline assessment of Community-identified Vulnerabilities
among Syrian refugees living in Irbid, Madaba, Mafraq, and Zarqa, April 2013,
September 2013
37 UNHCR, From Slow Boat to Breaking Point, p 6
Everything is missing. We are not even psychologically okay – we live in a crowded shelter, it is stressful. I left with only the clothes on my back – everything else, I left behind. The basic needs of my family are not being met.'

A Syrian refugee living in Dohum

**What Can We Learn?**

These three distinct urban refugee situations each illustrate specific challenges to supporting refugees in the urban environment. At the same time, common themes have been identified which can inform future policy priorities, funding responses and programme implementation.

**Support for urban refugees requires greater institutional commitment**

Each case study highlights a series of gaps in responding to the needs of urban refugees which could be closed through greater institutional commitment in policy and funding. There is a growing body of research into how to adapt approaches to protect and assist displaced people in urban contexts.38

However, we still need to effectively translate this learning into substantially better policy from host governments and practice across the humanitarian sector which includes funding and commitment to new policies and good practice. There have been some important policy developments in recent years. In 2009, UNHCR published a revised policy on refugee protection and support in urban areas. The policy recognises that the rights of refugees and UNHCR’s mandated responsibilities towards them are not affected by their location, calling for collaboration between UNHCR and host governments to support this.

38 A list of key reports is provided as an appendix to this paper. This list is not exhaustive. UNHCR has recently developed an online database capturing good practices for professionals working with urban refugees which includes a range of research, evaluations and tools. See www.urbangoodpractices.org, ALNAP has also developed a learning and accountability portal focused on urban humanitarian response, including a section on refugees and IDPs.

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41 See for example, British Red Cross, Learning from the City: British Red Cross Urban Learning Project Scoping Study, 2012, ALNAP Responding to urban disasters: Learning from previous relief and recovery operations, November 2012.

42 For example, the review highlights including a need for improving engagement with key government actors; a need for greater innovation and more extensive community outreach, and a need to develop stronger linkages between material assistance, livelihoods/self-reliance and community development. UNHCR, The Implementation of UNHCR’s Policy on Urban Refugee Protection, p. 6.

43 This is noted in Simone Haymes, Sanctuary in the City? p 3.

Beyond policy, donors should also fund and support specific interventions. The case studies have each demonstrated that urban refugee responses tend to be significantly underfunded. This is not unique to these three cases. A recent report from ODI highlights key findings from research on urban vulnerability and displacement across seven locations. Across most locations studied, residents, host government officials and humanitarian organisations all criticised the response of the humanitarian community for its short term results and the lack of continuity imposed by short term funding contracts. ODI also found that two crucial areas for intervention in protracted situations - livelihoods and protection - were largely neglected in humanitarian projects. It is clear that innovative programmes exist to respond to the needs of the urban displaced, however, these tend to be local and context-specific. There is scope for capturing and sharing this information across the sector, yet 'more knowledge will only lead to better policy and practice if there is commitment and leadership within the humanitarian sector to translate lessons into action.' This will also require strong commitment to engage with the development aspects of supporting the urban displaced.

Supporting urban refugees is a humanitarian and development concern

Protecting and supporting refugees is a humanitarian concern and humanitarian actors will likely remain the key responders to acute displacement into urban settings. However, each of the three case studies demonstrate the range of actors involved in supporting refugees in urban areas goes beyond humanitarian agencies. Urban refugees interact with the host community, various levels of local administration, the private sector, faith based organisations, local civil society groups or groups formed by refugees such as NGOs in Kuala Lumpur. Meeting urban refugees' service and protection needs and supporting long term self reliance will require humanitarian, development, human rights and political actors to collaborate together at 'international, national and very local levels,' leveraging capacities across the sectors involved. Development actors have a particularly important role in supporting the needs of the displaced in urban areas. They can support host authorities to prepare for and manage urbanisation and ensure that support for the needs of urban refugees is included in this process. Along with funding through humanitarian streams, development actors can also provide direct budget support for host community infrastructure development, benefitting both the urban poor and displaced population. Development actors also have a role in longer term efforts to promote self-reliance and resilience, particularly given that the average length of displacement in 'protracted crises' is 17 years.

To date, there has been little engagement between the development community and urban specialists with regard to the needs of the urban displaced. In 2010, UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with the World Bank, released a concept note outlining the Transitional Solutions Initiative (TSI). TSI recognises the role of development in addressing durable solutions for the displaced, articulating that situation specific comprehensive approaches require the 'engagement of government,'

43 Simone Hayson, Sanctuary in the City?, p 23. The report highlights the situation of Yei, Kaful, Naivasha and Pashawar.
44 Simone Hayson, Sanctuary in the City?, p 24
46 See for example, British Red Cross, Learning from the City's recommendation 1 and ALNAP Responding to Urban Disasters: Learning from Previous Relief and Recovery Operations Lesson 1
47 See Appendix for a non-exhaustive list of key studies
48 See for example, Women's Refugee Commission Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Refugees Struggle to Make a Living in New Delhi, July 2011; Women's Refugee Commission, No Place to Go But Up: Urban Refugees in Johannesburg, South Africa, October 2011; Women's Refugee Commission The Living Ain't Easy: Urban Refugees in Kampala, March 2011
49 In 2004, UNHCR noted that: 'it is estimated that the average duration of major refugee situations, protracted or not, has increased: from 9 years in 1993 to 17 years' (UNHCR Protracted Refugee Situations, 2004, p 2, accessed: http://www.unhcr.org/40c682172.html, September 2013). There are also a number of sources which now reference 20 years as the average length of refugee displacement. See for example, Gill Loescher and James Miller, 'Understanding the Challenge', Forced Migration Review, Issue 33, September 2009.
humanitarian and development actors with additional bilateral and multilateral assistance.\textsuperscript{55} Whilst this is an important initiative, it remains focused on a limited number of situations and it is not yet clear how this strategy is being applied in urban displacement settings.

The Syrian displacement case study highlights the crucial role of development actors in supporting the urban displaced and the host states' capacity to offer sanctuary and support. The IRC's reports on the situation of urban refugees in Lebanon and Iraq note the role for development actors in supporting urban refugees and recommend greater co-ordination between development and humanitarian funding streams and needs assessments. UNHCR's Syria real-time evaluation also notes that UNHCR and partners must urgently complement emergency response activities with 'comprehensive and proactive strategies' that focus on five key areas, including 'ensuring the immediate involvement of development actors so as to mitigate the impact of the refugee influx on host states and communities.'\textsuperscript{106} The World Bank's recently published Lebanon Economic and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) of the Syrian crisis demonstrates the vital role played by development actors. The assessment will complement humanitarian efforts to support refugees, serve as a guide for government policy decisions and to coordinate global support.\textsuperscript{57}

The political challenge: the host state and advocating for urban refugees

In each urban context the host state will play a significant role in supporting the needs of refugees. Whilst UNHCR's 2009 urban refugee policy recognises cities and urban areas as legitimate places for refugees to settle and seek protection and support, host governments and local authorities do not always see supporting urban refugees as a responsibility, priority or as desirable, and in many circumstances may seek to reduce the rights or protection available. Some see refugees in urban areas as a 'pull factor' to cities, a huge expense to support, a burden on services for nationals, and a security threat, as evidenced by recent developments in Nairobi. Host communities meanwhile suffer the effects of significant pressure on all resources, from job opportunities, housing, and health care. Overcoming negative attitudes of the host state to maintain protection space and remove barriers to accessing services can be helped by ensuring programming for urban refugees also supports the host population, in addition to supporting local infrastructure and services.

Each case study has highlighted the importance of advocacy to secure refugee rights and remove barriers of access to services for urban refugees. The importance of advocacy is also recognised in a range of best practice guidance and policies.\textsuperscript{58} However, advocacy to host governments and communities will only succeed if refugee interests and needs are framed as part of broader domestic interests around urbanisation and the urban environment, and focus on the positive contributions the displaced can make to the city.

However, "the humanitarian sector tends to focus on narratives of vulnerability and victimhood when dealing with urban displacement."\textsuperscript{106} Such narratives will need to change to garner support for longer term residency of refugees in urban areas, particularly when governments and host communities are concerned that refugees are a burden on resources. Both humanitarian and development actors will need to better understand how to work with the politics and actors of urban areas and how to use advocacy to change negative attitudes of government and host populations.

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\textsuperscript{55} UNHCR, UNDP and World Bank: Transitional Solutions Initiative Concept Note, October 2010, p 1, accessed: http://www.unhcr.org/4e27e6206.html, September 2013

\textsuperscript{56} UNHCR, From Soot Blow to Breaking Point, p 2


\textsuperscript{59} Hayeson, "Sanctuary in the City? Urban Vulnerability and Displacement Final Report", p 25
Improving support for Urban Refugees - Key Recommendations:

Drawing on the case studies, IRC experience and other relevant literature, recommendations for improving support across policy, funding and programming have been collated. These are not exhaustive, but are set out to inform discussion during the 2013 International Rescue Committee Ditchley Park conference: 'Slipping through the Net: Supporting Refugees in Urban Areas'.

All actors:

All actors (particularly donors), should invest in targeted assistance for urban refugees. Programmes to promote livelihood opportunities and self reliance and those which promote protection are particularly vital and should equally engage host communities, especially in countries where there is high unemployment;

All actors should recognise the impact of urban refugees on host populations and ensure that funding and programme implementation also supports host populations where appropriate;

All actors should work in partnership with national and local authorities to extend access to existing services in cities to urban refugees, rather than creating parallel delivery structures;

All actors should improve mechanisms to share learning and best practice to ensure more effective overall response to urban refugees and displaced;

All actors should assist governments and local authorities to plan for and manage rapid influxes of displaced to urban areas. Building relationships with urban specialists and around existing urban plans can enhance such efforts.

Donors, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies:

Policy

Humanitarian agencies and donors working in urban areas should develop policies or guidance around urban displacement informed by existing best practice. Such policies should recognise advocacy as an important strategy to protect refugee rights, and remove barriers to refugees accessing services. Advocacy should focus on the local as well as national level;

Donors and other humanitarian agencies should support UNHCR to implement the 2009 urban refugee policy and work collectively to overcome barriers to implementation;

Host governments should be encouraged to develop national level policies in line with the 2009 UNHCR urban refugee policy as it relates to local implementation. Those with large and long term urban refugee populations should include the issue of refugees in national development plans.

Funding

Donors, UNHCR and other relevant agencies should increase funding to urban refugees commensurate with proportion and needs of refugees in urban areas:

- UN funding appeals should include specific funding allocations for urban displacement and supporting host communities;
- Where appropriate, UNHCR Regional Response Plans or other country plans should identify urban refugees as a priority and outline needs;
- Refugees should be included from programmes for vulnerable urban populations (especially relevant in protracted situations).

Donors should consider responding to the needs of urban refugees across humanitarian, early recovery and development responses;

Donors should review funding mechanisms that respond to the needs of refugees in urban areas to ensure that funding and programming also supports the needs of host communities and the host state.

Improving context analysis and programming

UNHCR, donors and other humanitarian actors should invest in developing or adapting tools which provide a comprehensive overview of the urban context. Such tools might include the ability to map the location of refugees, the needs of refugees and the host community (particularly the most vulnerable) and identify services already available and barriers to access;

UNHCR and donors should design and test a range of interventions to respond to the needs of refugees and host communities to continue to build an evidence base to inform programming improvements;

UNHCR and donors should invest in programmes to train, engage and build capacity of host authorities, the police, judicial services and refugee communities around refugee rights and responsibilities;

UNHCR, humanitarian agencies and donors should develop programmes that engage with and partner with national governments, local/municipal authorities, local businesses, civil society and other local organisations such as community or faith based organisations.

Research

UNHCR, donors and other humanitarian agencies should invest in targeted research and/or profiling exercises to improve understandings of contexts in which refugees reside;

UNHCR, donors and other humanitarian agencies should invest in research to close knowledge gaps. For example, areas of research might include understanding social networks and how these impact support for urban refugees, and the interaction between urban refugees and the broader economy.

Development and Financial Agencies

Development and financial institutions such as UNDP and the World Bank should ensure urban displacement features in various interventions or programmes.
Economic Empowerment of Urban Refugee Youth: Guiding Principles
Women's Refugee Commission (January 2013)
A qualitative survey of young (15-24 year old) urban refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, Panama City, Panama and Cairo, Egypt focusing on education and livelihood opportunities. The report recommends various measures for increasing the capacity of youth livelihood services and their suitability to the needs of young urban refugees.

No Place to Go But Up: Urban Refugees in Johannesburg, South Africa
Women's Refugee Commission (October 2011)
Assessment of the economic coping strategies, associated protection risks and potential market opportunities for urban refugees living in Johannesburg (part of a year-long study). It recommends creating safe, legal channels for economic migration to alleviate stress on the asylum-processing system, integrating protection strategies into livelihood programmes and capitalising on the potential of forced migrants by creating a skills database.

Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Refugees Struggle to Make a Living in New Delhi
Women's Refugee Commission (July 2011)
Assessment of the economic coping strategies, associated protection risks and potential market opportunities for urban refugees living in New Delhi (part of a year-long study). The report finds that New Delhi is home to a growing number of job opportunities however domestic migrants are prepared to work for less than refugees, often excluding them from the job market. Recommendations include continuing to shift towards a self-reliance model and utilising funded income generating activities to increase experience.

The Living Ain't Easy: Urban Refugees in Kampala
Women's Refugee Commission (March 2011)
This report examines the constraints and opportunities surrounding livelihoods for urban refugees in Kampala, Uganda. The report suggests that many refugees do earn a living, albeit small, and utilise social networks to survive. Diverse approaches are recommended, including addressing barriers to employment and linking the refugee communities with Ugandan nationals.

Feinstein International Center
Refugee Livelihoods in Urban Areas: Identifying Program Opportunities:
Recommendations for Programming and Advocacy
Feinstein International Center, Tufts University (2012)
Overarching report providing recommendations derived from three published case studies on refugee livelihoods in Cairo, Egypt, Tel Aviv, Israel and Quito, Ecuador. The overall project analysed urban livelihoods programming and highlighted ideas for increasing effectiveness and sustainability. The three case studies are also available online and provide context specific analysis and suggestions.
Credits

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About the International Rescue Committee

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives. Founded in 1933 at the request of Albert Einstein, the IRC offers lifesaving care and life-changing assistance to refugees forced to flee from war, persecution or natural disaster. At work today in over 40 countries, we restore safety, dignity and hope to millions who are uprooted and struggling to endure. The IRC leads the way from harm to home.

Front cover image:

Lanier Lovely, 18, Haitian internally displaced by the earthquake of 12 January 2010. Lanier is pictured with her son, Lovinsky, in Port-au-Prince. Andrew McConnell/Panos Pictures/International Rescue Committee

Key facts references

Urbanisation:
Sources:
1. 3. 5. billion people live in urban areas, by 2050 it is estimated 70% will live in urban areas: Mary Beth Morand, Katherine Mahoney with Shangye Below and Janice Rubkin, The Implementation of UNHCR's Urban Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions, p.7
2. 1.5 billion people live in slums or informal settlements: British Red Cross, Amelia B Kyazze, Paula Bazinga, Samuel Carpenter, 'Learning from the City: British Red Cross Urban Learning Project Scoping Study', Executive Summary p.6.

Urban displacement:
Sources:
1. At the end of 2012, the global population of refugees was 10.5 million: UNHCR Global Trends 2012: Displacement: the New 21st Century Challenge
2. 75% of refugees reside outside of formal refugee camps. More than 50% reside in urban areas - in towns and cities across the globe: UNHCR http://www.unhcr.org/pages/460e4ecba6.html
3. At the end of 2012, there were an estimated 28.8 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). More than 50% are also thought to reside in urban areas: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies,'World Disasters Report 2012: Focus on Forced Migration and Displacement', Chapter 4

Quotes
