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OPERATIONAL PRACTICE PAPER 4

August 2018

Vulnerabilities in Urban Protracted Displacement: Exploring the Roles of Space and Time

In 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit issued a clarion call for crisis responses to better work within the local context. Such crisis settings have significantly shifted in many countries from traditional camp environments to cities, small towns, and their peri-urban hinterlands. While hard figures are missing, more than half of the world's 21 million refugees and 40 million internally displaced people (IDPs) are estimated to live in urban areas.¹ Moreover, conflict-related displacement of refugees is now projected to last 26 years, on average.² As a consequence, questions about how to make connections between acute humanitarian relief and more long-term oriented development interventions in urban settings are rapidly rising on the agendas of policymakers and practitioners.

This Operational Practice Paper explores how better understandings of the ways in which the functioning of cities as systems interacts with the vulnerabilities, exposure to risks and ultimately, wellbeing of vulnerable communities can inform more effective humanitarian and development practice. In particular, it considers in what ways attention to the roles of time and space can complement mainstream thinking about vulnerabilities in conditions of urban protracted displacement.

Typically, urban poverty and vulnerability analyses contemplate deficits of various kinds, such as of income, assets, food security, lack of sanitation, education, legal status, and rights. Such deficits are, however, produced in relation to space and over time. Here, it is proposed that a spatial lens, whether applied at the scale of the city, neighbourhood, or street, or honing in on distinct functional uses of space (e.g. public, work, and home spaces), can help identify

which people face distinct vulnerabilities. A temporal lens can additionally show patterns in the ways in which city life interacts with, diffuses, and generates particular kinds of vulnerabilities and risks over time.

First, methods are outlined, after which urban vulnerabilities are reviewed, followed by a discussion of cities as complex systems and spatial and temporal dimensions of vulnerability. The final section identifies recommendations for practitioners and policymakers operating in the urban humanitarian/development nexus.

Method

This paper is based on a brief review of literature, seeking to draw connections across humanitarian, development, and urban planning disciplines. It was supported by consultations, review, and discussions at events in Paris, London, and Strasbourg during 2017–18 attended by members of the Working Group on Urban Protracted Displacement of the Global Alliance for Urban Crises.

Urban vulnerabilities

Globally, the great majority of forced displacement occurs within conflict- and disaster-affected countries and their neighbouring countries. This advances the likelihood that displaced groups are hosted in societies with broadly similar socioeconomic profiles. Although not all displaced people are poor, 'their dislocation from physical, social, economic, financial and political capital makes them vulnerable'.³ Yet, urban refugee and host populations' diverse social histories, ethnic, religious, age, and economic backgrounds suggest a diversity of capacities, vulnerabilities, and needs.⁴ For instance, the elderly and infants are particularly vulnerable to the

effects of environmental conditions on ill health; young men more likely to be victims of physical violence; and women more vulnerable to sexual predators. Group histories matter too: where communities have come in multiple waves over time to cities, newcomers find stronger support networks upon arrival. In Kampala, Uganda, Congolese refugees scatter to keep a low profile while Somali displacees relocate to areas where countrymen reside, allowing them, for instance, to more easily access start-up capital to commence a small business and find their feet.⁵

Some vulnerabilities result from trauma at displacees' place of origin or during the journey, but others are more specific to the situation that people find themselves in after arrival in urban areas. Such conditions include lack of livelihoods, food insecurity, lack of social capital, limited access to basic services, informality of tenure, and others. Importantly, the uncertain legal status of refugees and IDPs, and associated lack of rights, often distinguishes them from other vulnerable groups, for example by limiting their access to formal work or to basic services. In Lebanon, for instance, complex refugee registration procedures both prevent and disincentivise refugees' accessing health-care services.⁶ Furthermore, such lack of rights can render people vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, to cause significant detriment to physical, social, and emotional wellbeing.

Moreover, the rapid influx of newcomers in cities may deepen exposure to risk and vulnerabilities for existing groups by adding to existing pressures on poorly functioning infrastructures and services. For instance, in Lebanon, Syrian refugees have increased the urban population by over a quarter,⁷ exacerbating existing shortages of affordable housing caused by failed urban planning and a dysfunctional housing market.⁸ As rents have quickly risen, relatively low-cost housing in urban informal settlements increasingly attracts the poorest refugee, migrant, and host groups. Yet, government authorities at local or national level often consider these areas illegal to refrain from providing essential infrastructures and services, including for waste, sanitation, housing, and electricity.⁹ Moreover, displacement of sizeable groups to cities typically creates greater competition for scarce jobs, driving down remuneration levels. They may experience resentment from poor locals who believe that foreigners are 'stealing their jobs', such as the well-documented case of lethal violence towards Somali trading communities in South African cities

some years ago. Recognising that humanitarian and aid interventions can increase inequalities and cause social tension, urban programming is now shifting focus from targeting displaced groups to supporting all vulnerable populations, including host groups.¹⁰

Complex cities, fractured governance

Cities can be understood as complex and dynamic systems. The agglomeration of people, enterprises, and organisations enables the matching of jobs and people; facilitates transactions; accelerates the spread of information and learning about (inter)national markets; and aids the provision of shared facilities such as hospitals. Cities attract new people, but high population density, crowding, congestion, and pollution repel others. The interplay between these forces affects the ways in which different people are located across urban space. More so, as processes of urban growth and urbanisation shift over time, different sets of actors accrue the benefits and burdens of living in cities.¹¹ Attention to these processes will support humanitarian/development practitioners to understand who bears the cost and who benefits from displacement and responses to it.

Another factor driving complexity in cities, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings, concerns the fragmentation of urban governance. Government mandates for service provision may be distinct for otherwise contiguous built-up environments located in urban and peri-urban areas. Multiple urban actors vie to exercise authority over people, affecting key aspects of their lives, such as access to land for housing, employment opportunities, and safety nets. These actors include governments, but can also involve political parties, faith-based organisations, humanitarian agencies, private landlords, militias, gangs, and others. For example, burial societies in Sierra Leone or religious bodies in Bangladesh provide loans and other forms of support during crises, whereas peri-urban landowners in Jordan provide access to farm labour and temporary shelter for Syrian refugees, albeit on idiosyncratic and often exploitative terms. In urban Lebanon, Palestinian Committees or Hezbollah mediate with local authorities and utility companies to provide services in informal settlements under its aegis, overcoming obstructions posed by municipal and national policy and laws.¹² Despite their importance, such actors are often overlooked or poorly understood by humanitarian actors, whose 'localisation agenda' narrowly focuses on municipalities and the formal private sector.

People living within the same city can thus be subject to distinct and territorially specific forms of formal and informal governance. Urban planning in Beirut offers a clear example. Whereas government planners have neglected some areas (historic Palestinian refugee ‘camps’), and left other areas to private corporations delivering quality technical planning (Solidère in downtown), the religious-political movement Hezbollah effectively rebuilt the Southern suburbs devastated by aerial bombardments.¹³ Consequently, humanitarian and development interventions dealing with and operating through such mediators, by choice or for lack of it, should carefully consider how these may affect vulnerable populations, in sometimes unanticipated ways. With few of such engagements documented, practitioners could usefully start documenting and sharing experiences and ultimately develop guidelines on how to ethically and effectively engage such actors.

Applying a spatial lens to urban vulnerabilities

The rapid influx of displaced groups does not affect all cities in an equal manner. Some evidence suggests that ‘although in absolute terms more people will be affected in the large and mega-cities, it is in fact medium- and small-sized cities in the developing world which are more predisposed to [humanitarian] crises’.¹⁴ Compared to larger cities, smaller cities such as Tripoli in Lebanon and Mafraq in Jordan are less likely to have the administrative capacity to govern, experience of working with humanitarian actors, budgetary resources, and existing infrastructures (roads, water, sanitation, and energy) needed to manage the impact of an influx on urban systems.¹⁵

Informal settlements and peri-urban areas

In conditions of protracted displacement, the urban poor and refugees/IDPs often share the same living conditions. For instance, in Lebanon, informal settlements and Palestinian ‘camps’ integrated in the city fabric host significant and growing numbers of Syrians, but also poor Lebanese and other foreign migrant groups. Informal settlements may be located on government as well as on privately owned land, typically violating property ownership rights, and suffering from a lack of services.¹⁶ Their inhabitants are exposed to high and similar types of environmental risks, including aspects of substandard housing with lack of natural light and ventilation, inadequate sanitation and hazardous electrical wiring. Shared risks may include settlements being located in disaster-prone areas. Such risks can

even involve resettlement sites. In Chennai, India, for example, local authorities have built resettlement tenements for IDPs on inland marsh areas, increasing flood risk across the urban area.¹⁷ Moreover, many displaced groups end up living in peri-urban areas, where accommodation can be cheaper. This was observed in the case of Iraqi refugees in Damascus, Syria;¹⁸ for Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan;¹⁹ for Congolese and Burundian refugees in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania;²⁰ for Somali, Congolese, and South Sudanese displaced groups in Kampala, Uganda;²¹ and for IDPs in Baidoa, Somalia.²² The influx of these groups is accompanied by gradual rural-to-urban transitions of lives and livelihoods.

Collective features such as confessional denomination, ethnicity, or race may also intersect with personal identities to create particular vulnerabilities. Thus, Betts *et al.*²³ suggest that in Lebanon, Sunni Syrian refugees may be hosted in a more welcoming manner in areas under the control of Sunni groups than those controlled by other denominational groups.

Area-based approaches are now an important mode of response to urban crises. They work by defining an urban area, rather than a sector or target group, as the main entry point for humanitarian and developmental intervention.²⁴ Examples include UN-Habitat’s detailed city profiles for Tyre²⁵ and Tripoli.²⁶ While offering a potentially equitable approach by covering vulnerable groups that live in close proximity, not all displaced groups do so. People may be dispersed across broad urban areas, living in various forms of rented, hosted, and shared accommodation. Dispersal can also be a tactic of displaced groups aiming to reduce vulnerability. For instance, urban IDPs in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Turkey opt for ‘invisibility’ for security reasons and for fear of harassment, detention, or eviction.²⁷ However, they may also be rendered invisible when they are forced to move again within the city by the actions of city authorities or property owners. Invisibility may not only make it difficult for national and international systems of protection to detect, but also to identify and support the most vulnerable.

Adopting an alternative lens: targeting public, work, and home spaces

Whereas peri-urban areas and informal settlements are significant localities where vulnerabilities for displaced groups are concentrated, other urban spaces can provide complementary insights. Next, the relevance of public, work, and home spaces are considered.

Public space

In cities under pressure from substantial population influxes, public spaces such as market places, streets, and parks are vital for social relations. Such shared spaces are important sites for fostering peaceful social relations through everyday interactions, and must be considered in urban planning. Development investments in the quality and accessibility of public areas may enhance safe spaces to potentially provide important outlets for people confined to highly crowded housing.

A growing number of organisations recognise that urban communities are closely tied into the cash economy and market services. For instance, the UN World Food Programme is using cash transfer programmes for urban humanitarian crises. And, anticipating market-based responses to emergencies, NGOs such as Oxfam have undertaken pre-crisis market system mapping and analysis in urban Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe.²⁸ By keeping markets functioning during and in the aftermath of crises, such efforts potentially support the resilience of urban dwellers and cities.

Work space

Most IDPs and refugees need to work for survival, but their options are typically constrained. Host governments are often reluctant to allow them access to formal jobs. Consequently, many work in the informal sector and under informal employment conditions, with curtailed or missing social security provision, or outside of protective labour regulations. Work places such as construction sites therefore become spaces where people are exposed to low pay and elevated levels of risk, because of long working hours and hazardous conditions, and with limited protective arrangements and protective working gear. Work-related injury and disability can hence constitute an important additional layer of vulnerability for displaced populations.

In some cases, work and home spaces become blurred. Thus, Hunt *et al.* note that the gig economy in Jordan presents opportunities and challenges for Syrian refugee women.²⁹ This type of home-based work allows flexibility and is socially and culturally appropriate, but it also makes home workers invisible to policymakers and may be isolating. Such a situation conflates unpaid care duties and paid work in the same space, and may perpetuate restrictive social and cultural norms.

Home space

The home is a critical space for achieving or failing to achieve wellbeing. In the context of protracted urban

displacement, home-making 'represents the process through which people try to gain control over their lives'.³⁰ Refugees, however, may also feel trapped at home due to feeling unsafe on the streets, for instance due to lack of documentation. The unaffordability of decent quality housing and resultant overcrowding can generate particularly gendered vulnerabilities. For many Syrian Sunni female refugees, historically the home is a private space. Displacement demands that they share these spaces with non-family members, which impinges on their privacy and forces them to remain covered. This is exacerbated by an inability to leave the house. One third of Syrian refugee households in Jordan are now thought to be headed by women – the lack of male family members to accompany women in public means that many women stay at home for months at a time.³¹ Hence, these groups are not only doubly disadvantaged, but they may also be overlooked because humanitarian and aid interventions are typically not recognising domestic spaces as locations where vulnerabilities can be pronounced.

Accordingly, this brief survey suggests that if urban protracted displacement is looked at in relation to public, work, and home spaces, different risks and gendered vulnerabilities may emerge than when spaces are defined in terms of streets, neighbourhoods, settlements, and cities.

Exploring temporal dimensions of urban vulnerabilities

Having outlined the ways in which urban vulnerabilities and risks can have particular spatial dimensions, this paper now considers how these may also have temporal aspects. Though the literature on this topic is sparse, broadly speaking, time and its passing relate to everyday city life and economy, environmental conditions, electoral processes, institutional practices, and people's individual and social lives. Several but not all of these patterns may take the shape of cycles, of diurnal, seasonal, annual, and other duration, repeating at regular intervals. In other instances, they involve sudden shocks and one-off crisis events.

Protracted displacement itself has important temporal features. The initial shock of displacement creates 'radical uncertainty', characterised by extreme unpredictability and a severe lack of reliable information due to the speed with which events unfold.³² As displacement endures, predictability increases about

the present but a huge sense of unpredictability remains about the future. Even in the seemingly chronic situation of protracted displacement, an expectation of temporariness may remain because individuals, governments, and donors are often unwilling to accept the new reality.³³ Accordingly, host governments are often unwilling to deal with stressors for refugees and IDPs because they see their presence as short term.

Built environment professionals typically consider that environmental risk exposure changes over time, having specific frequencies and likelihoods of occurrence. For example, informal settlements located in low-lying delta and riverine areas are subject to tidal or monsoonal flooding and associated health risks. In Delhi, diseases such as cholera also typically occur during particular periods of the year. Similarly, the health risks of poorly wired and openly exposed electricity lines, including in Lebanese and Jordanian cities, are exacerbated during the rainy season.

Economic activity in sectors important to displaced groups, such as agriculture, construction, or tourism, often have significant seasonal features. For example, in peri-urban areas, land preparation and harvesting are labour intensive, and highly seasonal jobs. Similarly, the availability of affordable agricultural produce may affect households' seasonal exposure to food insecurity. In this respect, the income loss and associated vulnerability during the 'lean season' may be exacerbated by actions of local authorities. For instance, several Lebanese municipalities close their towns for Syrian refugee workers during the non-tourist season.

Urban service provisioning can have significant temporal elements. For instance, electricity or water provision in informal settlements may occur only at certain times of the day. In the case of drinking water, water standpoints may run for a couple of hours, requiring people to queue for several hours. The opportunity costs of queuing may be important: people assigned this role (often women) could have used the waiting time to work for income.

The calendar of social life matters too. Annual festivities such as Eid al-Fitr or Christmas are important social events that generate wellbeing. However, they may also be associated with shame and indignity, for instance where impoverishment entails an inability to perform desirable social roles, such as inviting people to one's home for a festive celebration or to reciprocate gifts.

Temporality plays an important part in the functioning of hosting states. Electoral cycles may be associated with upswings in public discourses agitating against displaced groups. Temporalities also pertain to various institutional and policy procedures that IDPs and refugees face; for instance, those that put a time limit on temporary legal residence or asylum seeker status, or that determine the office hours of a birth registration centre.

Additionally, significant diurnal patterns can be observed. During fieldwork in inner-city areas of Beirut, inhabitants remarked to the authors that social tensions between refugee and host communities often gave rise to aggression and violence at certain times of the day – in particular, when workers returned en masse from their shifts at the end of the day. Literature on informal settlements often associate the night with crime, and with groups such as women being more vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence, particularly in the absence of street lighting.

Yet, nocturnal economies may offer important lifelines to highly vulnerable undocumented groups. Many refugees are involved in night-time work, evading labour inspectors; for example, Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon,³⁴ or Karen refugees employed in Thai farms in Mae Hong Son province.³⁵ Night-time curfews are imposed on Syrian refugees in a swathe of Lebanese municipalities, affecting access to night-time work or health services. The inability to freely take an evening stroll to escape overcrowded housing conditions takes away an important pressure valve and increases social isolation. While there are hence important reasons for humanitarian and development agencies to pay attention to night-time economies and mobilities, these are often left off the radar, for reasons as simple as staff adhering to daytime working hours.

In sum, humanitarian programming can more explicitly seek to address the temporal dimensions of risk exposure and vulnerabilities of displaced groups, for instance in programme targeting criteria. Humanitarian and development agencies can also rethink how their mandates, coordination, and operating practices create temporalities. For example, humanitarian agencies often have time-limited mandates that focus on the short term. Yet, particularly where conflict is a key driver, displacement may be protracted, thus requiring a longer-term programming perspective.

LESSONS FOR ADDRESSING VULNERABILITIES IN URBAN PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT

■ A spatial focus on informal settlements and peri-urban areas is valuable

Informal settlements and peri-urban areas harbour some of the most vulnerable host, refugee, and other poor displaced groups. Humanitarian actors need to advocate with local authorities to ensure these groups obtain adequate protection, and access to basic services. Yet, significant numbers of displaced opt to stay invisible or are dispersed across large areas, and new ways will need to be identified to reduce the vulnerabilities of these groups, while keeping in mind their desire to remain invisible.

■ Looking at urban protracted displacement in relation to public, work, and home spaces reveals different risks and vulnerabilities

If urban protracted displacement is looked at in relation to public, work, and home spaces, different risks and gendered vulnerabilities are likely to emerge as opposed to when spaces are defined in terms of streets, neighbourhoods, settlements, and cities. The humanitarian/development sector contains many actors, resourced to operate at different scales. Distinct spatial lenses can offer these actors room to offer specialised, but complementary activities that address urban populations' diverse vulnerabilities.

■ Adopting a temporal lens to understand and address vulnerabilities can strengthen humanitarian and development practice

The repertoire of urban interventions by humanitarian and development actors rarely includes active consideration of the role of time in relation to people's vulnerabilities. Humanitarian and development practice can be strengthened by adopting a temporal lens to understand vulnerabilities and the means of addressing these. Such a lens could highlight the pervasive but often unrecognised roles of seasonalities and temporal cycles for urban economies, work, service provisioning, and institutional practices; and in people's individual and social lives. For instance, night-time economies and mobilities are often left off the radar despite their importance for the lives and livelihoods of displaced populations.

■ Extend the use of urban profiling toolkits to look at the temporal aspects

Existing urban profiling toolkits all use spatial lenses, to varying degrees, to analyse urban vulnerabilities, and could start paying attention to the temporal aspects of vulnerabilities in urban protracted displacement contexts.

■ Gain insight into the role that locally significant non-state actors play

Humanitarians must gain a better understanding of who benefits and who loses in enduring urban displacement, and gain a better insight into the role that locally significant non-state actors play in the processes of distribution of resources, livelihoods, and access to services. Multiple urban actors vie to exercise authority over people, affecting key aspects of their lives, and thus cannot be ignored. Delivering on the 'localisation agenda' requires a move beyond the current focus on municipalities and the formal private sector of the economy.

■ Coordinate support for vulnerable groups' immediate needs with advocacy directed towards national and city governments

Host governments are often unwilling to deal with stressors for refugees and IDPs because they see their presence as short term. This suggests that humanitarian agencies should coordinate and combine efforts to support vulnerable groups' immediate needs with advocacy directed towards national and city governments. Such advocacy would aim to build up awareness of the plight of displaced groups. It would also need to underline the important role that governments could play in delivering remedial action in collaboration with the international humanitarian community. Particularly when international displacement is driven by conflict and likely to endure, such collaborations could combine short-term relief measures with longer-term investments in cities. By showing how interventions would benefit both displaced groups and vulnerable host communities, necessary popular support may be gained and hostility to displaced groups contained.

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This **Operational Practice Paper** was written by **Dolf J.H. te Lintelo** and **Emma Soye**, and funded by EU humanitarian aid and the Humanitarian Leadership Academy.

This document covers activities implemented with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, IDS or any other institution involved. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains. Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material from the **Operational Practice Papers** in their own publication. In return, IDS requests due acknowledgement and quotes to be referenced as above.

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ISBN 978-1-78118-444-8



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