

Introduction

It is a widely cited fact that we are living in a predominately urban world. Around the middle of 2008, over half of the global human population was living in cities for the first time in history. The implications of this shift are wide-ranging and have significance for all kinds of actors, not least those that are involved in the delivery of international humanitarian assistance. This concept note sets out the broad issues involved in meeting the 'urban challenge' and a rationale for addressing these issues in the 27th ALNAP Meeting.

A Rapidly Urbanising and Vulnerable World

There are well over a billion people now living in poverty in urban slums, facing new kinds of vulnerabilities as a result. A 2003 volume by Mark Pelling of Kings College argued that urban areas in developing countries are facing dramatically escalating risks. This is well illustrated by three examples drawn from the 2010 Red Cross World Disasters Report¹:

- In Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, almost 30 percent of the 14 million people live in slums along the water's edge, exposing them to severe flood risks. Moreover, the Stanford-based earthquake disaster risk index lists Dhaka as one of the 20 cities in the world most vulnerable to earthquakes.²
- Mumbai in India is the fourth largest city in the world with 20 million people, of whom some 6.7 million are slum dwellers (WHO). Mumbai is one of the top 10 most vulnerable cities in terms of floods, storms and earthquakes and is the most vulnerable city in the world in terms of total population exposed to coastal flood hazard. Moreover, it also lies on an earthquake fault-line. Like many of Asia's coastal mega-cities, most of Mumbai is less than a metre above sea-level. With the city accounting for almost 40 percent of India's tax revenue, UN-HABITAT notes that any serious catastrophe here could have drastic economic consequences for the entire country³.
- Forty percent of the land area of Jakarta, Indonesia is below sea-level. As a result, its 10 million inhabitants are at risk of flash floods, particularly along the 13 river systems which pass through the city. Jakarta also has a moderate risk of earthquakes due to the country's location along the Indo-Asia subduction zone. The high population density, averaging 14,000 people per square kilometre, a significant portion of whom are slum-dwellers, increases the potential of a disaster to cause serious harm.

1. www.wifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/world-disasters-report/

2. www.geotecnica.unina.it/filipposan/old/1.2.pdf

3. www.unhabitat.org/documents/media_centre/APMC/Mumbais%20quest%20for%20world%20citystatus.pdf

Adapting International Humanitarian Response

These examples give some indication of the diversity of factors contributing to urban vulnerability which might trigger potential future crises. The difficulties of delivering food, water and sanitation, shelter, livelihoods programmes and other aid efforts in urban environments are significant – and the events in Haiti of January 2010 vividly illustrated the challenges faced by international agencies.

A recent DEC report focusing on urban contexts suggests⁴ that there is a need for agencies to “learn ‘new rules of the game’ in urban post disaster response. Issues of complexity, range of actors, space, the importance of commerce and trade, services, infrastructure and sheer concentrations of people require a consideration of how to operate compared to rural contexts.” Many of the findings of this study correspond closely to those set out in a 2009 ALNAP Lessons Paper⁵.

One of the high-level lessons noted by Care International Chief Executive Helen Gayle was that international agencies have failed to ‘co-evolve’ with urbanisation as quickly as it has happened⁶. In a world likely to face at least three to five urban ‘mega-disasters’ in the next decade, this lack of strategic and operational adaptation is a serious and growing gap. While this challenge has obvious technical dimensions, it is also institutional and political in nature. Perhaps the most significant challenge is the need to collaborate better with national and local actors – a longstanding failure of past international humanitarian efforts. As an IIED report notes:

“Perhaps the biggest challenge for humanitarian actors – and also a major opportunity – is to develop ways of working with the existing institutional framework of municipal and civil society organisations which exists in most towns and cities in the developing world.”

What is clear is that any effort to adapt humanitarian response to an urbanizing world cannot be approached in a piecemeal fashion. Strategies will need to be collaborative in nature and take into account efforts across the whole disaster cycle: from preparedness, risk reduction, response mobilisation, planning, needs assessments, targeting, monitoring and evaluation. Perhaps most importantly, the humanitarian response ‘toolbox’ may need to be radically rethought in ways that will prove challenging for operational agencies and donors alike.

Rationale for the 27th ALNAP Meeting

Against this background, the 27th ALNAP Meeting presents a timely and appropriate platform for discussing these vital issues. ALNAP meetings are now widely acknowledged as a vital platform for the full range of international agencies to come together to set new shared agendas for reflection and action. In recent years, themes have included media relations, impact assessments, innovations and most recently collaboration with national actors. These meetings have been influential, giving shape to numerous new initiatives, re-shaping strategic directions and bringing key issues into shared focus.

4. www.dec.org.uk/download/856/DEC-Haiti-urban-study.pdf
5. www.alnap.org/pool/files/alnap-prevention-lessons-urban.pdf
6. www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthID=63&ReportID=74021

The proposed meeting will seek to build on ALNAP's unique convening power and its previous work on urban disasters and collaboration with national structures. The aims of the meeting would be to bring together leading experts to identify the scale and scope of this growing global challenge, and to develop system-wide, group and agency-specific strategies for adapting operational response. For the meeting to be effective, it will be vital to bring together a range of perspectives from across international and national organisations and networks.

Key areas of focus might include:

- How to best assess risks and prepare for future urban disasters?
- How to build relevant strategic and operational partnerships ahead of urban disasters?
- How to adapt existing international response mechanisms and processes to be more relevant to urban contexts? In particular, how to ensure effective planning, monitoring and evaluation, and how to ensure accountability to affected populations?
- What kinds of operational innovations are needed and how can these be identified, tested and taken to scale?
- How to best take this agenda forward as a system-wide effort? What are the metrics of progress for the sector as a whole?