Humanitarian Interventions in Situations of Urban Violence

This document shares emerging thoughts from the Urban Response Community of Practice on the topic of urban violence. It includes questions raised during a webinar and subsequent discussions on the topic.
What are the challenges of a context not covered by international law?

- State prestige means resistance to a humanitarian presence may be high
- Criminal gangs are poorly motivated to uphold humanitarian principles
- Domestic laws may present differences over detention and use of force
- Non-recognised belligerent actors make engagement difficult
- International actors have less ability to negotiate in ‘domestic’ issues

How can we respect core humanitarian principles in urban contexts?

- Principles such as neutrality and impartiality should remain...

How does urban violence increase the risks of poor targeting?

- Such contexts often blur the line between victim and perpetrator
- Assessments can also suffer from limited access to communities
- As well as inadequately responses, poor targeting also risks compromising neutrality

... they are still the best approach to gaining the confidence of, and negotiating with, the actors that control the access to communities.
What are the effective ‘entry points’ and how can we directly engage with armed actors?

Organisations such as World Vision start by providing visible, uncontroversial assistance for the community.

Through greater local involvement in assessing needs, greater access and direct contact may be awarded.

All actors will likely have a selfish interest in both their communities and infrastructure.

Acceptance ultimately needs to depend on offering something of interest.

In urban settings, all the issues of humanitarian aid and service delivery are intertwined locally.

With limited time and space for access in contexts such as Mogadishu, area coordination could replace the compartmentalised, sector-based cluster system.

Joint needs assessments and provision can help to mitigate the risks of inadequate targeting.

Should we reorganise along geographical, rather than sectoral, lines?
Is it the responsibility of humanitarian actors to address urban violence?

The current system is failing the majority of victims of violence because such cases lack a succinct ‘disaster’ or ‘war’ to precede it.

Urban violence therefore presents a problem for defining humanitarianism, as it includes so many longer-term issues.

There is an ‘analysis gap’ of such situations, since they fail to be identified as a humanitarian crisis despite displaying all the effects.

How does such violence manifest itself in different places?

How do we bridge these different mandates to include non-traditional contexts such as urban violence?

To answer this we need to consider: how can we monitor and evaluate such interactions?

What are the big questions that still need to be answered?