Survival in the city
Youth, displacement and violence in urban settings

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Key messages

- Youth, displacement and violence in urban environments are treated as separate areas in humanitarian research, policy and practice. Despite being a key driver of vulnerability, urban violence and its humanitarian consequences are not well understood by the humanitarian community.
- Displaced populations, particularly displaced youth, are often particularly exposed to urban violence. However, their needs and vulnerabilities typically go unaddressed.

- Tackling the causes of violence in urban settings is a challenge that goes beyond strictly humanitarian concerns to encompass long-term development efforts. While humanitarian action is an important element of the response to urban violence it is inherently limited, and a complementary approach involving development strategies and programmes is required to tackle the root causes of this violence.

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Humanitarian research and policy has been largely silent on the links between youth, displacement and violence in urban environments, and in practice these issues are treated as separate areas of engagement. This Policy Brief provides initial reflections on the phenomenon of urban violence, its links to urban displacement, particularly displaced youth, and the implications for humanitarian action. It builds on a large body of work undertaken by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) on urbanisation and urban displacement between 2009 and 2012, including DANIDA-funded research in eight urban centres in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, a DFID-funded study on urbanisation in Sudan and a study of urban refugees in Nairobi, undertaken jointly by HPG and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), in partnership with the Refugee Consortium of Kenya.[1] There is also an extensive body of academic literature on

1 Outputs of all of these research projects are available on the HPG website at http://www.odi.org.uk/work/programmes/humanitarian-policy-group/topics/details.asp?id=401&title=displacement-migration-urbanisation.

the issue of urban violence, particularly in Central and Latin America. This demonstrates that discrimination, marginalisation and high levels of poverty are key drivers of violence in cities. The same factors are also prevalent in many of the cities studied by HPG. However, there are also key differences, including the link between urban violence and the rapid influx of displaced populations.

Surviving in the city

More than half of the world's population lives in urban areas.[2] Cities and towns in Africa and Asia in particular have experienced dramatic population growth; Nairobi, for instance, has grown more than ten-fold since 1960, and Khartoum has grown eight-fold since the early 1970s. This is an ongoing trend; estimates by the UN Population Fund indicate that, by 2030, the towns and cities of the developing world will host up to 80% of the global population. As HPG's research illustrates,

2 UN Population Fund (UNFPA), *State of the World Population 2007. Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth*, 2007.

forced displacement is a key driver of urbanisation in many contexts, and young men and women represent a substantial proportion of the urban displaced.

Urban centres are magnets for young people seeking to meet their aspirations and lead a better life. Cities may also be refuges for young people forcibly displaced by conflict or violence, or who are escaping recruitment into armed militia. Many others have been born into displacement, as is the case in Khartoum, Juba and Nairobi. Their life in the city is often characterised by extreme hardship, exposure to violence and abuse and social and economic marginalisation.

Young refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are significantly more likely to take up residence in the poor, insecure and marginal areas of cities, including informal settlements, slums and shantytowns, where rents are lower and some social and familial networks may be found. These areas are typically overcrowded and polluted; basic services and infrastructure, if available at all, are usually overwhelmed by the swelling urban population, and investment by governments and municipal authorities is often inadequate. Tenure arrangements in informal areas are typically insecure, and in some contexts, such as Nairobi and Khartoum, the risk of further displacement due to forced evictions and slum demolitions is high.

Displaced youth often face particular challenges in accessing employment, because of their official status, policy obstacles that prevent them from taking up work and discrimination, or because they lack the social and family networks and the skills and education needed to secure work in the urban economy. Young refugees in Nairobi, for example, face legal and policy restrictions on their ability to work; Iraqi refugees living in Amman are also subject to restrictions on their access to employment. In Kabul, young displaced Pashtun men report that they are unable to find work because many employers associate them with the insurgency and therefore see them as a security threat. In many urban contexts, access to formal employment is highly dependent on connections to the urban elites that control public sector jobs and commercial businesses, excluding millions of urban residents from stable and remunerative employment opportunities. Many young displaced people consequently find themselves in the informal economy, where employment is precarious and exploitative, particularly for those who do not have social or family networks to protect them.

The lives of millions of young men and women living in cities are marked by squalor, social and economic exclusion and cycles of displacement that exact huge human and social costs. In many of the cities where HPG has conducted research, there was palpable frustration and a sense of despair among displaced youth stemming from their lack of economic, political and social opportunities and their inability to become self-reliant, get married and provide for their families. Displaced and non-displaced alike share many of the same frustrations, but for IDPs and refugees such feelings may be exacerbated by their displacement experience and the specific threats that they may be exposed to in the city due to their status and position as outsiders.

Violence in urban settings

The harsh reality of urban life is driving some young people to engage in violence. In urban settings violence can take many forms and can give rise to acute protection threats, including suicidal behaviour and substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, rape, gang violence, xenophobic or hate crimes and general petty crime.[3] In the slums of Nairobi, for example, violence is pervasive and can affect anyone, anywhere, at any time, but young men and women, particularly those who have been displaced, are often at greater risk because they do not have access to the social and familial support networks that may offer some form of protection.

Violence was highlighted as a major concern by respondents in all of HPG's studies on urbanisation and urban displacement. Violence was manifested in different forms in different cities – conflict-related, political, sexual, domestic, ethnic and criminal – and varied in intensity and prevalence. HPG's research also found that, in many contexts, the causes and forms of violence overlapped and changed over time; young males appeared to be most directly affected by urban violence, and often made up the majority of perpetrators.

In Juba, Khartoum and Nairobi, violence was frequently associated with youth gangs. Gang violence has been a key feature of urbanisation in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Young displaced people may be particularly prone to recruitment into gangs and organised crime groups; this is the case, for example, in Colombia.[4] In these settings, the violence used by gangs to control their 'turf' has transformed entire neighbourhoods into 'no-go zones' well beyond the control of state law enforcement agencies and the reach of humanitarian agencies. However, in

3 Issue on 'Urban Violence', *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 92, no. 878, June 2010.
4 R. Hill et al., 'IDP Livelihoods and Personal Security: Case Studies from Colombia and Sudan', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2006.

the cities where HPG conducted research, gang-related violence was perceived as a more recent phenomenon; although there were some common features in the factors driving gang violence in Latin America, in terms of rapid urbanisation and social and economic inequalities and marginalisation, there are also important differences. The most notable is the level of violence perpetrated by gangs in Khartoum and Juba, which is significantly lower than in the Americas.

In the contexts where HPG conducted research there was a clear link between a lack of employment opportunities for young men, particularly displaced male youth, and their engagement in crime, often fuelled by alcohol and drug abuse. In the words of one young man in Yei, 'if the government could help us with jobs and loans to set up businesses, we would be busy and there would be no more thefts'. As noted by many respondents in HPG's research in Juba, Nairobi and Khartoum, gang membership offers a quick way of getting hold of money, which can be particularly attractive to displaced youth with little or no access to legitimate livelihoods. Young people also join gangs in search of a sense of identity, often expressed through clothing and language, as well as security, friendship and social inclusion.[5] These factors were particularly relevant to young displaced people. In Juba, for example, respondents indicated that, for many young male IDPs, street gangs offered camaraderie and support, providing an important alternative to traditional family or clan networks in their areas of origin.

In Damascus, Amman and Yei forced displacement, social inequalities and a lack of opportunity are prevalent, yet gang violence is largely absent and young displaced people are not necessarily at higher risk of involvement in criminal activities than their counterparts in the host community. Evidently, there is insufficient understanding of the structural and proximate factors, including those directly linked to displacement, which increase the exposure of young people to gangs and gang violence.[6] This is an area that warrants further research.

Policy and operational implications for humanitarian action

Urban violence poses a major protection threat to displaced and other urban poor populations in the short term, and has implications for the

5 See for example C. Moser and C. McIlwaine, 'Latin American Urban Violence as a Development Concern: Towards a Framework for Violence Reduction', *World Development*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2006.
6 See World Bank, *Conflict, Security, and Development. World Development Report 2011*.

success of recovery and development efforts in the long term. As such, it is vital that national and international actors recognise, understand and mobilise resources to mount appropriate responses to such violence.[7] The humanitarian consequences arising from urban violence include loss of life, injuries, physical and mental trauma and loss of livelihoods. Clearly, a more effective humanitarian response to these issues is needed. The longer-term effects of urban violence also call for a long-term development approach. Gang-related violence, for example, can undermine the economic and social development of communities, deterring commercial investment, stigmatising neighbourhoods, eroding social cohesion and reducing already limited employment and educational opportunities for young people.[8] Violence begets violence, and can be transmitted from parents to their offspring; its effects can be felt for generations and can trap communities in a cycle of alienation and poverty.

The negative impact of urban violence is especially pronounced in contexts where governance and social institutions are already fragile.[9] In transitional and post-conflict settings like Juba, for example, the emergence of gangs with overlapping and competing claims to power poses a serious threat to recovery, and can ultimately undermine stability and the prospects for lasting development, particularly given the formidable challenges facing the newly established municipal and state actors of South Sudan, and their weak institutional, administrative and political capacities.

Concerns about urbanisation, youth and violence are not entirely new.[10] However, it is only recently that international humanitarian actors have begun to recognise the complexities of addressing humanitarian and protection needs in urban contexts, including those arising from urban violence, and there remains limited understanding, policy and practice within the humanitarian community in this regard. UNHCR's policy on refugee protection in urban areas, for example, does not explore the role of urban refugees in violence, both as victims and perpetrators.[11] The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has focused on understanding and addressing

7 R. Muggah and K. Savage, 'Urban Violence and Humanitarian Action: Engaging the Fragile City', *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, January 2012.
8 *Ibid.*
9 World Bank, *Violence in the City: Understanding and Supporting Community Responses to Urban Violence*, 2011.
10 See for example Moser and McIlwaine, 'Latin American Urban Violence' and C. Moser and J. Holland, *Urban Poverty and Violence in Jamaica* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1997).
11 *UNHCR, UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas*, 2009.

the challenges to humanitarian action in urban contexts, but this global-level inter-agency policy dialogue has not specifically considered the issue of urban violence, its drivers and its humanitarian implications.[12]

Similar gaps are evident at the operational level, where few humanitarian actors have developed strategies or programmes specifically addressing the issue of urban violence. HPG's research in Juba indicates that most humanitarian actors are unaware of the levels of violence prevalent in the city, particularly gang-related violence. Those that recognise the problem are aware of it largely because they themselves have been victims of robberies perpetrated by gangs, but have not taken any further action to assess or respond to the issue. In particular, HPG's research indicates that there is limited reflection on the needs and protection threats, including violence, facing young displaced men in particular. In a number of contexts, protection strategies developed by humanitarian actors are devised with more 'traditional' vulnerable categories (such as women and girls) in mind, rather than being informed by a comprehensive analysis of vulnerabilities and exposure to violence.

There are signs that urban violence is beginning to receive more attention in humanitarian circles. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has developed a strategy to prevent, mitigate and respond to self-directed and interpersonal violence, including urban violence. The strategy has three aims: saving lives, protecting livelihoods and strengthening recovery from disasters and crises; enabling healthy and safe living; and promoting social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace. It provides guidance for the work of National Societies engaging with urban violence through programmes such as teaching first aid, providing conflict resolution and building up self-esteem.[13] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has also engaged in situations of urban violence, for example in Port-au-Prince in Haiti and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. ICRC bases its decision to intervene on specific considerations, in particular the existence of serious humanitarian consequences as a result of organised violence, the presence of recurrent, rather than sporadic, violence, and the potential added value that ICRC can bring.[14]

In recent years there has also been growing consensus within Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) that urban areas are an appropriate focus for humanitarian work. Violence in urban settings is seen as giving rise to severe humanitarian consequences in terms of physical and mental health, and limiting access to healthcare. MSF has provided health-related services such as surgery and trauma response, mental health, care for victims of sexual violence, mother and child health and primary healthcare in several cities affected by high levels of violence, including Port-au-Prince, Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg in South Africa. Like the ICRC, MSF's decision to work in a given urban setting is dependent on the gravity of the humanitarian needs, linked to warfare, neglect, marginalisation, natural disasters and violence.[15]

Conclusion

Urban violence is having a direct impact on displaced and other vulnerable populations, and can have serious humanitarian consequences. High levels of urban violence are also a major destabilising factor undermining efforts aimed at longer-term recovery and development and supporting the transition from conflict to peace and stability. It is therefore imperative that national and international actors gain a greater awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of urban violence, its interaction with urban displacement, particularly displaced youth, and the implications for humanitarian action. Improved understanding will facilitate more appropriate humanitarian programming aimed at preventing and mitigating the risk of urban violence, including expanded access to services to promote self-reliance and the empowerment of alienated groups. Such efforts should be as inclusive as possible, engaging young men and women throughout programme assessment, design and implementation to ensure that programmes are based on an informed understanding of the drivers of urban violence, and how its humanitarian consequences can be mitigated.

Humanitarian programming alone will not be effective in reducing urban violence. A comprehensive approach is needed, which facilitates complementary humanitarian and development programming. Urban violence can only be reduced by addressing its root causes, including restoring trust in government and municipal institutions, building national capacities to uphold the rule of law and facilitating more inclusive development approaches which take into account the needs of vulnerable populations, including displaced youth.

12 Muggah and Savage, 'Urban Violence and Humanitarian Action'.
13 IFRC Strategy on Violence Prevention, Mitigation and Response 2011–2020.
14 A. Serafin, 'Urban Violence: War By Any Other Name', *Red Cross, Red Crescent Magazine*, no. 1, 2010.

15 E. Lucchi, 'Moving from the "Why" to the "How" – Reflections on Humanitarian Response in Urban Settings', forthcoming.