

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE  
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## **Initial Strategy Paper**

# **Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas**

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## **I Introduction**

This Initial Strategy Paper on “Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas” (MHCUA) is the culmination of an intensive 6-month inter-agency process by the IASC Task Force on MHCUA comprising 26 UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement lead by UN-HABITAT.

The Paper defines a comprehensive set of rapid urbanization and humanitarian thematic challenges in urban areas that are relevant to humanitarian actors and includes a set of 4 main recommendations and 10 proposed actions.

The Paper is based on numerous focused consultations and Task Force member responses to a preliminary questionnaire on organizational challenges, experiences and gaps in delivering humanitarian assistance in urban areas. It also draws on extensive submissions by Task Force members and exchanges during the 6 Task Force meetings held since April 2009.

## **II Summary of findings of the assessment of the humanitarian challenges in urban areas**

### **2.1 Rapid urbanization**

With more than 3 billion people now living in urban areas - over half of the world’s population - it is without dispute that rapid, poorly managed or uncontrolled urbanization and inadequate governance in the cities and towns of the fast-urbanizing developing world are a contributing factor or root cause of humanitarian crises. Over 1 billion people across the world are already living in urban slums where many are exposed to urban hazards and associated vulnerabilities. Alongside these, other groups such as refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees and stateless persons, also share densely populated and poorly-serviced communities, making them more vulnerable to the impact of disasters, complex emergencies and humanitarian crises. As the most vulnerable, these groups are disproportionately affected by natural and man-made crises.

The most salient findings regarding rapid urbanization that are of relevance to IASC members are that:

1. Although no country is safe from hazards, the potential for urban-based humanitarian crises is far greater in developing countries than in developed nations. The identification and

mapping of hotspots or urban areas with higher levels of vulnerability to natural or man-made disasters is an important potential tool to strengthen capacity to anticipate humanitarian crises.

2. Disasters, drought or conflict often trigger large scale or sudden displacement of vulnerable rural populations to cities and towns. During or after conflict, internally displaced populations often congregate in cities and towns. They not only place extra demands on urban services and resources, but may also contribute to the overall susceptibility of urban areas to crises. Competition between communities over limited resources may become a source of tension or even conflict. In urban areas, humanitarian actors are also faced with the challenge of differentiating their relief and recovery support from longer term development of urban services.
3. The increasing stress on the urban environment, including demand for land, housing, water and sanitation, solid waste management, and growing slums and various other aspects of urban life, provoke or contribute to some “chronic” or “slow-onset” emergencies.
4. Despite the complex vulnerability of towns and cities to humanitarian crises, urban areas are often better resourced to respond than rural areas. For example, in some situations local governance structures may be stronger, populations can be more easily reached, human resources are more readily available, and recovery plans can be more quickly mobilised in comparison with rural areas. However, even though urban areas might offer a higher level of services and resources to work with, they are still usually inadequate to meet the basic demands of the populations in need.
5. Small and medium-sized cities are both less prepared and more disposed to humanitarian crises. This is because they have more limited human, governance and financial resources, and more limited investment in infrastructure and urban services. In many countries, they also have more limited capacities to work with humanitarian actors and other international agencies.
6. Disasters differentially impact the urban poor and displaced not because of the disaster event *per se*, but because of vulnerability which is exacerbated by the inadequate capacity of governments, in many countries, to protect these urban residents, through improved water supply and drainage, better flood protection, the provision of safe land for housing. Those residing in slums, including refugees and displaced persons, who are often the poorest and most vulnerable of the poor, find housing in hazardous locations such as low-lying areas and landfill sites that are particularly vulnerable or in sub-standard housing and in crowded and unsanitary environments.
7. Fast urbanizing countries in the developing world lack effective multi-hazard preparedness and mitigation capacity and practices and are often characterized by poor governance and lack of empowerment of governmental and civil society actors. These deficits compound vulnerabilities of urban populations.
8. The affected and vulnerable populations are not homogenous and vulnerabilities vary among different groups. Available data suggest that there is a pattern of gender differentiation in humanitarian crisis in urban areas in that exposure to risk, risk perception, preparedness, response, physical and psychological impact, recovery and reconstruction vary for women and men. In addition to gender, age and disability may also affect vulnerability to and impact of humanitarian crises. Effective targeting of the most vulnerable is undermined by unreliable or unavailable data and lack of sex and age disaggregated data.

9. Conflict and other forms of armed violence in urban areas carried out by armed groups, gangs, drug cartels or crime syndicates, generate insecurity. This can work to limit humanitarian space in some cases, as well as contribute to indirect mortality and morbidity due to disrupted food supply and malnutrition, destroyed livelihoods, injuries, and collapse of or lack of access to health systems and infrastructure. Conflict in cities, urban violence and social unrest might stretch the capacities of already under-resourced judiciary and penal systems to act in a timely and effective manner and with due respect for legal norms, including addressing the varying impacts on men and women.
10. Economic crisis and the rising fuel and food prices have also emerged as new challenges for urban areas, with severe impacts on cities hosting large population affected by natural disasters and political instability.

## **2.2 Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas**

The Task Force identified the following types of humanitarian challenges in urban areas:

### **1. Identifying and collaborating with urban institutions, authorities and partners**

Collaboration with urban authorities and partners constitutes one of the most significant challenges for humanitarian agencies. Identifying and collaborating with urban interlocutors, decision makers or partners is a complex but necessary activity for various organizations operating in the urban context. These include, for instance, local governments, service-providing agencies, line departments of national and provincial governments, urban councils and technical departments, faith-based groups and community based organizations, police departments, and in cases of disasters, entities especially designated to address the crisis and coordinate relief and reconstruction.

Developing effective partnerships with several layers of hierarchical government institutions can be highly complex and often overly bureaucratic. Slow decision-making procedures can cause operational delays. In countries with complex emergencies, which are also affected by natural disasters, operating procedures and line responsibilities are often realigned or duplicated. The proliferation of actors, sometimes duplicating efforts, or the fragmentation of responsibilities among government institutions in such situations is detrimental to effective collaboration with humanitarian agencies on protection, relief, return planning and implementation.

Overcoming various “governance gaps” in places with weak or nonexistent local governments or with authorities implicated politically is another key challenge. Senior staff of municipal administrations or urban authorities may have been affected by natural disasters or fled armed conflict or been implicated in urban violence. Supplies, registers, documents, maps and office equipment may have been destroyed, making it a challenge for the remaining administrators to plan and implement assistance programmes.

Collaborating with weak government institutions in complex emergencies, and sometimes also in natural disasters, without compromising humanitarian principles, is another challenge agencies have faced in the recent past. Addressing issues of corruption and land grabs, during or after disasters may compromise the entire operation of agencies and organizations.

The capacity and effectiveness of local authorities and institutions vary greatly from country to country and within a given country. In general, small and medium-sized cities are less prepared but more disposed to humanitarian crises because they have more limited human, governance and financial resources, and more limited investment in infrastructure and urban services than larger cities.

While the co-existence of these multiple institutions makes the urban environment operationally complex for humanitarian actors, it also offers a broad, and often more experienced, resource base for dealing with crises, particularly in larger cities. Possessing technical expertise and defined local leadership roles, these interlocutors are, and must continue to be, the lead actors for responding to crisis and managing urban risk reduction activities, contingency and recovery planning including in cooperation with humanitarian agencies.

The co-existence of multiple urban institutions along with numerous national faith-based organizations, community based organizations and NGOs poses another challenge. As many of these organizations are operating with a development orientation, it is difficult to harness their strengths and local knowledge without an assessment of capacities.

## **2. Inter-agency coordination in an urban context**

There exist a number of urban networks, which normally are less associated with government and humanitarian operations. These include the private sector, academia and other civil society organizations. As these often have knowledge, experiences and expertise on disaster management and risk reduction, efforts should be made to coordinate with these actors in urban areas and exploit their capacities to participate in humanitarian assistance, risk reduction and early recovery operations. Some Humanitarian Country Teams are currently setting up national committees or stakeholder groups to address urban challenges in collaboration with national and local government institutions.

## **3. Identification and targeting beneficiaries**

Some humanitarian organizations find it challenging to define the target communities in urban areas, as these are often fragmented, highly mobile and sometimes inaccessible. Displacement in or to urban areas compounds the difficulty of identifying the most vulnerable. These groups are often scattered in urban areas among host families or communities and may wish to remain unidentified for a range of reasons, including fear of discrimination, harassment, detention and forced eviction. Profiling, registering, documenting and tracking the affected population that are displaced and non displaced become essential to identify target groups dispersed within the urban population and work with them to meet their protection and material needs. Planning and implementing relief programmes and operations is partly based on registration data. Without purposeful community outreach efforts, it is very difficult to obtain this data, particularly in inaccessible and ill-served slums. Innovative tools to inform disaster victims and displaced persons of the need and procedure for registration include telephone messaging and internet, in addition to more traditional means such as resort to local media and community organizations.

Finding durable solutions for displaced in urban settings is also a major challenge. Many, particularly those living in protracted situations, prefer not to return, but opt instead to integrate locally often without having the necessary skills and qualifications to find employment. Others may remain in urban areas not because of the desire to integrate but rather because of difficult safety and material conditions back home. Can such displacement be considered as a solution?

## **4. Adjusting organizational tools, procedures and capacities to urban requirements**

There are a host of policies, practices and tools for development and humanitarian work in rural areas, but are these readily transferable to urban settings? There is a need to adapt existing or develop new policies and tools at agency and inter-agency levels that are adapted to urban contexts and needs. Some agencies and INGOs have started reorienting or developing new procedures, such as the current ongoing revision of the Sphere Standards. Among the current initiatives are for

instance, the efforts of NRC/IDMC and Shelter Centre together with OCHA and NGOs to develop guidelines on shelter provision to affected population in urban areas. Similarly, WFP has undertaken a review of food targeting practices in urban areas.

The majority of agencies and organizations have indicated that most of their staff would benefit from training in more timely and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance in urban areas. At the moment many organizations are responding on a case-by-case basis, whereas urban-based interventions need to be systematized and institutionalized.

## **5. Linkages between humanitarian response and risk reduction in urban areas**

Disaster risk is sharply increased by rapid urbanisation. Eight out of the world's ten most populous cities are located in areas at high risk of earthquakes, and six are located on coastal areas that are prone to cyclones, sea level rise or tsunamis. A billion people live in unstable and overcrowded slums. Women and youth are considered to be at a greater risk and highly vulnerable during a crises.

Because of their primary role in disaster preparedness and response, humanitarian actors are especially well placed to alleviate urban vulnerability through contributing to risk information and risk assessment and advocating for enhanced preparedness in tackling vulnerability in urban areas. In responding to disasters in urban areas, humanitarian actors can promote prevention by including in their response as many elements as possible that can assist in avoiding the recurrence of similar disasters. This approach bridging development cooperation and humanitarian work and constitutes a vital contribution to meeting humanitarian challenges in urban areas. However, urban communities are typically exposed to risk from a variety of hazards and humanitarian actors need also to translate and link knowledge of a full-range of hazards into disaster and risk management to ensure greater effectiveness and cost efficiency.

A concern for humanitarian actors in urban areas includes the need to attract donor support for addressing risk as well as needs on a multi-annual basis. Humanitarian actors should seek to include measures aimed at decreasing urban vulnerability within existing or future National Platforms for Disaster Risk Reduction.

## **6. Linking humanitarian assistance to recovery and sustainability**

Providing humanitarian assistance in urban areas differs from rural situations as it takes place in environments with more established regulations, codes and procedures. These need to be taken into account to promote durability and sustainability of interventions and to minimize future urban vulnerabilities, such as in the case of water and sanitation activities.

## **7. Urban shelter challenges**

Lack of enforcement of building regulations specifically in low-cost urban activities increases people's exposure to earthquakes and other natural disasters. Rapidly growing and under-serviced urban areas, notably unregulated urban slums and other high risk urban areas, makes the affected population vulnerable and at risk of disease outbreaks, fires, landslides, earthquakes, flooding, violence and xenophobia. Lack of affordable low-cost shelter options in regulated zones makes the above areas the only alternative for displaced persons, refugees and returnees leading to significant shelter overcrowding and vulnerability.

The challenge for the humanitarian community is to identify the vulnerable in these areas and direct programmes to reduce risks and vulnerability. As many organizations apply different indicators to

determine vulnerability, reaching consensus among actors is essential to achieve concerted action and synergies.

After disasters, government and municipal authorities need to reconcile possible conflicting interests of private and public sectors, and may propose to relocate affected populations to newly built areas which, if located far from livelihood options and market places, undermine their capacity to recover. Humanitarian organizations must work with the urban authorities to ensure that sites for relocation include adequate urban services to avoid creating new vulnerabilities and that this relocation option remains voluntary for the affected groups. Organizations should make sure that the assistance provided will reinforce existing public services rather than creating parallel systems, even though some of the public services may be weak or even dysfunctional.

During the programming of return and reintegration operations, humanitarian organizations need to work closely with recovery and development organizations to explore solutions to the shortages of shelter and community services in the return areas. This collaboration should include urban stakeholders, such as the authorities, institutions, communities, women and youth. In areas with high returns, simple changes in existing housing policies and practices, which would allow for sustainable low-cost construction, could pave the ground for rapid and durable reintegration.

## **8. Housing, land and property (HLP) rights and issues in urban areas**

Protecting the rights of IDPs and refugees through HLP restitution in urban areas is a crucial activity that should be initiated from the outset of a crisis. Safeguarding land and property records, registries and cadastral maps as early as possible in conflicts or disasters helps to assert the rights of owners and tenants and will provide the basis for addressing disputes in post-conflict and disaster situations.

The informal or illegal conditions under which the majority of the urban vulnerable occupy peri-urban land can complicate returns if their land has been occupied by secondary occupants. Without formal documentation of occupancy rights, returnees may not be able to return to the urban sites from where they were displaced. If not addressed, returns in such situations may spark new tensions or delay early recovery efforts. In cases where the root cause of conflicts is ethnic cleansing through arbitrary evictions, protection of property records should be considered a priority. Protecting property records and the rights of tenants after natural disasters is equally important. Failing to do so may also spark conflicts or impede the return of people to restart their livelihoods. Women and widows are highly vulnerable in these situations as land and property rights predominantly are linked to male family members.

In the longer term, asserting HLP rights, achieving voluntary settlements of disputes or compensation become critical, as it reduces vulnerabilities and thus dependence on outside assistance.

## **9. Protection challenges**

Protection of the affected population is a challenge both in rural and urban settings. Many challenges are similar in both settings when it comes to ensure respect for the rights of individuals and communities. However some challenges can be more acute in urban areas. Vulnerability in urban areas is higher and is determined by specific factors such as legal or social situation, registered versus un-registered/invisible population, economical and personal characteristics (gender and age, IDP, refugees, non displaced population, proximity to violent areas). Women, young girls, boys and children are at a special risk of sexual and domestic violence. The following vulnerability factors affect them in urban settings: sexual exploitation, higher risk of abuse particularly when separated from families in urban areas, women and children making up majority

of those displaced, lack of safety and privacy in accessing services due to heterogeneous nature of population in urban context, and occupation of land and forced return. Furthermore the legal and institutional support system to protect the vulnerable is often weak in crises situations and the highly vulnerable affected population may face risks if they approach the formal protection institutions in urban areas.

The protection of refugees and displaced people and the defense of their human rights is a major challenge in urban areas. Urban authorities are often unable or unwilling to respond effectively to rapid influxes and to assist the new arrivals. Refugees in particular are often confronted with xenophobia, discrimination, exploitation, hazardous employment, detention, a lack of legal status and absence of documentation. In their struggle to survive, they may become involved with prostitution, sexual abuse, criminal gangs, human smugglers and traffickers. Because of their vulnerability, refugees and displaced people who have moved to urban areas may prefer to remain 'invisible' and will not report the abuses which they experience to the police or municipal authorities.

Traditionally, the majority of refugees and displaced people in urban areas were thought to be young men who had the drive and determination to survive in the city. It has now become clear, however, that these populations are more diverse than was previously thought, and include significant numbers of women, girls, boys and elderly people, all of whom have specific needs. Such diversity must be taken into full account when planning humanitarian protection and assistance interventions.

A recent analysis of displaced people and humanitarian action in Abidjan, Khartoum and Mogadishu identified three principal challenges for IDPs in urban situations: “situational challenges, challenges related to a city as a specific geographical location, and finally challenges related to the distinctive nature of urban displacement”. The study suggests that targeting displaced people in urban areas is a highly problematic approach, as they typically live among other members of the urban poor and have similar needs. Targeting runs the risk of offering preferential treatment to displaced people, thereby increasing the potential for tension and conflict with other city dwellers. A community-based approach is therefore advocated.

There are a range of factors in urban and peri urban areas that can lead to violence and have protection consequences in urban areas: the proximity with armed groups, gangs and other arms bearers within the densely populated areas of the city, stigmatization of part of the population living in areas under the control of gangs or armed groups and subsequent difficulties to access the services. When an armed conflict takes place in densely populated areas the use of heavy weaponry (artillery, air forces) often results in high numbers of civilian casualties and destruction of vital infrastructures. Due to presence of a range of urban authorities and civil society and the existence of a regulatory framework, the diverse interlocutors present an opportunity to work with these actors in delivering protection to the affected population. Urban institutional actors such as urban planning authorities, police, statistics departments, community organizations, justice departments and other sector-specific actors at the policy and operational level in national and local government (health, education, social welfare) are an important resource base for enhanced protection.

## **10. Gender Based Violence**

Sexual and other forms of gender-based violence are rampant in urban areas and increasingly reported in situations of complex emergencies. Women and girls, in particular may be at a higher risk for SGBV perpetuated by family members, intimate partners, strangers, armed groups and security personnel. While in an urban settings there may be stronger prevention and response capacity and infrastructure (health, police, psychosocial, legal etc) this is rarely adequate. Another

key issue is the nature of heterogeneous population in urban areas making privacy and safety a key concern for women and young girls. Most of those who experience SGBV do not report due to fear, shame or stigma, expulsion and in many situations even basic health services are not available to rape survivors, despite this being a component of an internationally agreed minimum set of services for reproductive health (MISP). Men exposed to SGBV have a range of social consequences as this has been a strategy to recruit young men to gangs, drug cartels and other illicit activities. Men are also less likely to seek any service, health, psychosocial or legal if they have been victimized.

## **11. Violence and Security**

Urban environments present a challenge due to increased violence which can exacerbate or be a source of a humanitarian crisis. There are a range of situations of violence in urban areas, and may be caused by: riots, community clashes, gang warfare, crime syndicates, excessive use of force in high dense populated areas, armed conflict, and spill over of the humanitarian consequences of the armed conflict taking place outside the city. In urban areas, violence hampers the mobility of the affected population and those of humanitarian aid workers. In most of these cases, the impact of violence is concentrated in urban areas making the population highly vulnerable, whereas in cases of chronic violence, access and delivery of services is highly impeded on a daily basis. Violence can lead to the destruction of basic infrastructure in cities, impede the delivery of relief items and assistance such as food assistance, medical and health services, and limit options for engagement with counterparts and stakeholders in urban settings. Some flee because of an armed conflict or other situation of violence taking place within the city and some people from rural areas, also in search of security, take shelter in the city. Inhabitants of cities can also be forced to move within the city because of other events such as forced evictions and earthquakes. Damages to basic, life-saving infrastructure and services, such as hospitals and water purification plants can require a high level of technical skills to repair in the aftermath of civil disorder or fighting. Another key issue is the differential gendered impact of violence in urban areas on women, girls, boys and men. Sexual violence in urban areas is rampant due to the characteristics of the city itself such as size, scale, heterogeneous mix of population, and high risk areas.

## **12. Health challenges in urban areas**

The rapid growth of urban populations challenges health authorities in many countries to provide adequate health care services. Overcrowding, poor living conditions, lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities in urban settings can contribute to health emergencies including outbreaks of communicable diseases. Health systems in many urban settings do not have the capacity or resources to cope with the needs of the population and cannot provide adequate life saving services including treatment of injuries, sexual and reproductive health services, or respond to other physical and mental health requirements. These needs may increase as a result of humanitarian emergency at the same time as health systems may be further weakened or disrupted including as a result of increased demand for services, disruption of supplies and access, or destruction of infrastructure.

Another challenge is to meet the necessary safety standards of urban health facilities to ensure that in an emergency health service delivery can be sustained without an additional risk to staff and others in the affected population. During an emergency, especially in the case of natural disasters, the risk of having massive disruption of the health infrastructure is higher in urban areas because of the concentration of hospitals/health centers, with a greater impact than on dispersed populations. For instance, in Mexico in 1984, a substantial part of the hospital infrastructure was destroyed. This poses challenges to preparedness in terms of safe hospitals/health dimensions. Looking at vulnerability and structural weaknesses is an important preparedness measure.

Any urban preparedness, mitigation or response activities in the health sector must be undertaken in coordination with central and local health authorities to avoid parallel structures during and after emergencies and to strengthen existing health systems and support their recovery and reconstruction whenever possible in a sustainable manner.

### **13. Food assistance, security and livelihoods**

Urban food vulnerabilities are different from rural ones, in terms of food needs, availability, access, and nutrition and price levels. Urban populations are at a higher risk of food insecurity due to poor public health conditions, loss of livelihoods, income insecurity and marginalization. High food prices, food shortages and livelihood risks are key factors that impact upon the affected population's ability to buy food in urban areas, resulting in malnutrition which can be severe in food-insecure countries. Furthermore, the hazards, natural disasters, economic shocks in urban areas increase the vulnerabilities of the affected population. Moreover, both formal and informal safety nets, even when governments might have them, can be more difficult to implement because the population is highly heterogeneous and dispersed. Urban agriculture is practiced more in peri-urban areas, and can range from small kitchen gardens to whole fields in low-density urban communities. The diagnosis of urban food needs of the displaced population varies from country to country and in short and protracted emergencies. Partnering with municipal community organizations and NGOs is key to understanding the beneficiaries, their constraints and needs in urban areas. The key challenges are identifying vulnerabilities, locating populations in need and delivering food assistance. This, in turn calls for adjusting existing methodologies to the particular constraints inherent to urban settings. An emerging challenge from recent experience is when vulnerable populations are not registered with municipal governments or are dispersed. Safety net programmes are often weak in developing countries, and in places where they do exist, they are likely to miss unregistered population. A solid diagnosis to understand vulnerability in urban contexts is critical to improve the effectiveness of interventions.

### **14. Water, sanitation and hygiene**

Disasters in urban areas have a large impact both on water and sanitation and hygiene levels. High density and numbers of population using the water and sanitation services exert pressure on these services. A prominent feature of urban areas is that urban water, sanitation, hygiene and health are interlinked and poor quality water and sanitary conditions in camps and overcrowded areas lead to increased risk diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, malaria and epidemics of other serious communicable diseases due to proximity of population. The main challenges in urban setting situations are that services such as water and sanitation infrastructure are already poor and serving a large number of people. But the arrival of new population in urban areas results in extreme pressure on these services, which the local authorities had not planned for. Lastly, the affected population is dispersed in collective centres, self-settled camps or planned camps. Non-displaced populations often serve as host families for those displaced. Successful provision of water and sanitation in this context requires the coordination and building of partnerships between national, local and private sector actors for restoration and extension of services to the affected population.

### **15. Vulnerability to climate change impacts**

Beyond the existing array of urban humanitarian crises, the impact of climate change on urban environments is increasingly severe. The propensity for cities to experience disasters caused by more frequent extreme weather events, will be compounded by rising sea levels, desertification and drought driving population displacement and producing new patterns of intra- and inter- urban migration as the displaced search for new land to settle. These trends will intensify the severe pressures which many cities in low income countries are already facing. Not only will disasters of

greater intensity and impact ensue, the potential for these conditions to lead to higher levels of urban violence and conflict cannot be discounted. Recognising municipal government and administrative structures as the most important actors for urban disaster risk reduction, and in preparedness, mitigation, response and reconstruction is essential. The increasing likelihood of urban disasters and crises, as a result of the impacts of climate change, further reinforce this necessity. Whilst the first line of response must remain with national and local actors, the implications for humanitarian agencies, as supporting institutions, are equally significant. Finally, it should be recalled that the vulnerability of urban dwellers to environmental hazards and humanitarian disasters is not just inherent to the physical conditions in which they live but are socially constructed conditions deriving from socio-economic status, differential exposure to risk and preparedness, coping capacities, and recovery capabilities. Vulnerability in urban areas is differentially structured by the socio-spatial segregation in which poor people are made more vulnerable by the lack of access to suitable land for housing, inadequate planning and environmental infrastructure, lack of effective disaster preparedness and mitigation policies and practices, poor governance and lack of empowerment.

### III Strategy

This 18-month Strategy lays the foundations and the first stages for operationalising and mainstreaming the key findings of the Assessment Document and the Summary of Findings. It is structured around four Recommendations and implemented by specific actions attached to each recommendation.

The **overall aim** is provide a strategic framework which will enhance and develop the response of humanitarian actors to disasters and humanitarian crises in urban areas.

The **objectives** are to:

- map, share and consolidate existing knowledge and expertise which humanitarian actors have gained in responding to urban disasters and humanitarian crises
- achieve a deeper analytical understanding of the typologies, drivers and distribution of urban risks and vulnerabilities: this is an essential component in building expertise and capacity
- enhance and develop their capacity and expertise
- sustain the momentum and engagement of humanitarian actors in the work programme set out in the action plan.

These objectives are elaborated in four Recommendations.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

**Concerned organizations should conduct internal mapping and assessments of their expertise and experience in urban areas. The Task Force will promote the exchange of the mapping and assessment exercise in order to strengthen urban-based operational expertise amongst the humanitarian organisations and other humanitarian actors**

The Task Force assessment indicates that many humanitarian organizations already have gained valuable experience in responding to urban disasters and crises. The extent of this experience is very varied and, although involvement is increasing, it tends to be on an ad hoc basis. Agencies have not yet undertaken comprehensive reviews of their sectoral experience and the strengths and

weakness of their programme design and delivery, and their operational capabilities. Lessons have to be systematically incorporated into procedures and enhancing their expertise.

Similarly, mechanisms for agencies to share their experience of responding to urban-based humanitarian crises and disasters more widely with other humanitarian actors are still very limited. Improving the ways in which this experience is communicated between actors will build up the knowledge base of responses to humanitarian crises and disasters. In this way lessons learned can be mainstreamed in order enhance system-wide expertise, capability and coordination of strategic and operational activities.

### **Implementation Action Plan:**

#### **Task Force to:**

- 1) encourage concerned agencies to undertake internal assessment and mapping of their expertise and experience in urban areas as required**
- 2) collaborate with Humanitarian Country Teams to conduct assessments of inter-agency challenges and lessons learned from country level in delivering humanitarian assistance in urban areas**
- 3) collate, analyse and synthesise the results of the assessment and mapping exercise and make available the results on the IASC Website**
- 4) take account of the other initiatives already being undertaking to assess and map current practices**
- 5) on the basis of Actions 3 and 4, to draft a workplan for how to cover capacity and knowledge gaps, identify needs for revising existing or prepare new tools and guidelines**

#### **Time line: Actions 1 & 2: 0-6 months** **Actions 2, 4, 5: 7-12 months**

Focusing on current experience in urban-based disaster/humanitarian risk assessment, assistance programme delivery and early recovery, the mapping and evaluation should:

- draw out and map practices, lessons learned, identify gaps in current practice and capabilities
- assess professional skills and capacities
- assess tools, guidelines, norms, techniques and guidelines used in current practice

Real time examples from recent disasters and conflicts could be especially valuable in enriching understanding on what needs to be improved and how.

Amongst important operational priorities for this exercise are:

- experience of engagement with local government, municipal and urban agencies, taking note also of outcomes in small/medium sized towns and cities
- experience of engagement with the private sector, media, civil society organisations
- tools and techniques used to conduct vulnerability and risk analyses, and to support preparedness and early recovery

- protection guidelines, tools and best practice for urban IDPs/refugees, urban populations at risk in urban disasters and emergencies, and humanitarian workers

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

**Humanitarian organizations should strengthen their expertise in delivering humanitarian assistance in urban areas which has taken place and will promote this through appropriate training and capacity building**

Recommendation 2 takes forward the outcomes of the mapping and evaluation exercise to provide the impetus for training and capacity building programmes which are an essential vehicle to translate and mainstream current experience and lessons learned into improvements into operational capability, to share good practice, and to enhance system-wide expertise. Although the exposure and involvement of humanitarian actors in urban-based humanitarian emergencies is rapidly increasing, and noting that training programmes are already being undertaken, the Task Force Assessment has highlighted the need to further enhance organizational and professional capacity in a number of different areas to better meet the urban challenges.

### **Implementation Action Plan:**

- 1) **Humanitarian organizations are urged to include urban requirements in their training needs assessments**
- 2) **Based on the synthesis and evaluation of existing practice and the training needs assessments, humanitarian organisations should integrate urban issues in existing training programmes and, where appropriate, develop and deliver new training programmes**
- 3) **Humanitarian organisations should ensure that training and capacity building activities, which integrate urban issues are provided for staff**

### **Time line: 0-18 months**

Some training tools and programmes already include, or could be rapidly adapted for application in urban areas and for specific sectors. However, training will vary from country to country, between different actors and will be sector specific in some cases. Training needs assessments should be used to identify gaps.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3**

**Ongoing risk mapping initiatives needs to encompass mapping of urban areas to inform institutional policies and increase preparedness**

There is a mounting recognition that delivery of humanitarian assistance in urban areas needs to be linked to other programming areas, such as understanding hazards and risks and different kinds of vulnerability. Some organizations have developed risk and population vulnerability mapping (for example IFRC, NRC, WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP, OCHA, ISDR, Shelter Centre and others), whilst other agencies, for example FAO, have developed analytical tools to assess populations at risk and needs assessments.

Noting the value of these tools, nevertheless, the Task Force Assessment highlighted the fact that they are not specifically urban-based, that current data bases limit capacity to map the regional distribution of urban ‘hot spots’ (countries, regions, cities, or even areas within cities) at risk of

disasters and humanitarian emergencies, that more specificity is needed on different types of disasters and crises, and that there is the need to harmonize different methodologies. In addition the time series analysis needed to assess and predict trends, which is vital to enhance early warning capability, is lacking. These deficits hold significant implications for preparedness planning as well as the operational capacity of humanitarian organisations. Better mapping would be critical to the design of more effective responses and to informing the potential entry-point, level and scope of intervention for agencies. At the same time this mapping would inform the development, revision and adaptation of existing generic and sector specific tools and approaches.

#### **Implementation Action Plan:**

- 1) Building on current experience and tools, the MHCUA Task Force will work with agencies and the IASC sub-working group on preparedness to develop mapping techniques encompassing urban areas to provide more precise analysis and global trends of cities and regions at risk (building on tools being developed and applied by IFRC, NRC, ISDR, WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP, OCHA, etc.)**

#### **Time line: 7-18 months**

The parameters for enhancing mapping techniques should include:

- devising methodologies to collate, co-ordinate and share extant urban vulnerability data collected by humanitarian actors – for example harmonizing different time series and spatial resolution levels
- identifying significant gaps in data needed to assess vulnerability
- recognition of different kinds of vulnerability – e.g disasters, violence, conflict
- developing methodologies to factor in regional and national urbanization trends, urban quality indicators (poverty, informal settlements), IDP and refugee migration into other vulnerability data/maps
- developing the capability for time series monitoring of regional and national level trends and patterns of vulnerability

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4**

**Humanitarian organizations should promote and enhance awareness and understanding of the typologies of humanitarian crises in urban settings in order to improve knowledge of urban risks, vulnerabilities, preparedness and coping mechanisms.**

Different types of disasters, humanitarian crisis and early recovery options in urban locations call for different modes of humanitarian action and different combinations of humanitarian actors. For example, the mapping of transition from chronic conditions (e.g. the impoverished health and nutritional standards endemic in many cities), to a crisis (e.g. an epidemic), and then early recovery, is poorly developed. Yet transitions have crucial implications for defining humanitarian agencies' entry and exit points. Similarly, the links between chronic poverty and crisis, between developmental and emergency conditions, need to be better understood to enhance preparedness, timely and targeted relief intervention and early recovery.

Rapid urbanisation can exacerbate urban disaster risk by increasing vulnerability of populations to hazards. Enhanced awareness of urban risk through improved risk information and assessment would improve responses among humanitarian actors.

The Task Force assessment highlighted a number of these knowledge gaps and the need for more detailed studies. Improved understanding of the intervention indicators and the typologies and scenarios of urban disasters and humanitarian crises would enable humanitarian organizations to act more rapidly and in a more effectively targeted fashion.

**Implementation Action Plan:**

- 1) The Task Force will collate, analyse and share typologies of humanitarian crises and response in urban settings in collaboration with on-going research initiatives**

**Time line: 7-18 months**

Research already being undertaken by IDMC and its partners will be taken into account in this process. Humanitarian Country Teams will be identified and encouraged to undertake and share reviews from cities where they have experience of urban emergencies and disasters.

In developing a better understanding of the structure, dynamics and impacts of disasters and humanitarian crises, particular attention should be paid to developing tools and techniques to:

- establish typologies of urban disasters and humanitarian emergencies, inter alia: natural disasters, health crises/epidemics, food security/nutrition crises, urban violence/civil disorder, conflict-displaced populations, global economic crisis, slow onset climate change, disaster-and-conflict crises occurring together
- establish typologies of disaster risk specific to urban settings in order to improve risk information and assessment
- enhance urban multi-hazard risk analysis
- develop indicators and criteria to determine vulnerability thresholds
- identify, map and profile beneficiaries

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