Community spaces help.
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The emerging importance of the settlements approach

Charles A Setchell
Team Lead for Shelter and Settlements,
United States Agency for International Development,
Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance[1]

Mega-city. Metropolis. City. Town. Municipality. District. Neighbourhood. Village. Hamlet. Refugee camp.

There are many names for human settlements, with this small sample highlighting differences in size and scale. Some settlements could be characterized as urban, peri-urban, suburban or rural. We could provide, for example, additional detail to suggest levels of poverty or tenure status, with names like 'slums' or 'informal settlements' coming to mind. We could also add many more names in languages other than English, further reflecting the richness, diversity and complexity of settlements across the globe.

What these designations have in common is that they signify the places where people live – where our species lives. They are the places where the great impediments to development (such as climate change, poverty and poor governance) and humanitarian crises (including displacement, conflict and disasters) of our time are manifested. The sum of these people-based spaces represents the forum of human existence. Thus, they are far more than areas on a map, but rather reflect the interaction of dynamic social, cultural, economic, political and environmental features in space and time.

With settlements established as the forum or platform for human existence and interaction, this chapter discusses a settlements approach (SA), aimed at guiding humanitarian action in settlements, the relationship of the SA to current practice in the form of the cluster approach, barriers to adopting an SA, and how the SA can serve as a conceptual and operational bridge to close the historically dysfunctional gap between humanitarian response and development activities, the latest iteration being the 'humanitarian–development nexus'.[2]

The settlements approach

Although the SA is a relatively recent concept for the humanitarian sector, the SA itself is not new; development agencies have been involved

in settlements-based efforts for decades. One benchmark was the 1976 conference on human settlements held in Vancouver, Canada, commonly referred to as 'Habitat I'.[3] The conference focused world attention on the growing urbanization of the planet, and introduced settlements planning and management – integrated, comprehensive, coordinated action in the places where people live – as an important planetary endeavour to create and sustain human settlements. The conference also ushered into existence the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (known today as UN-Habitat) as the UN agency specifically mandated to find answers to the problems resulting from massive urban growth, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. So, for at least 40 years, 'human settlements', 'settlements', and 'settlements planning' have been commonly used terms and activities of the international development sector.

Although the humanitarian sector has also been undertaking settlements-based activities for decades,[4] it is only with recent, large-scale urban disasters and crises (especially the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, and the long-standing urban-based conflict in Syria) that it has sought to embrace a means of understanding and responding to humanitarian needs in settlements, particularly amid the dynamics and complexity of urban spaces. This effort reflects perhaps the sector's first explicit recognition of a spatial framework or context to humanitarian action.

Housing is essential in any settlement, a critical resource for renter and squatter households, and for many perhaps their most valuable asset, with investment in housing repair and construction an important means of stimulating the economy and promoting overall development. Shelter, the humanitarian counterpart to housing, is critical to survival, generating other benefits such as health and protection. As important as shelter is, however, it doesn't exist in a vacuum. To emphasize and reinforce the centrality of settlements to humanitarian action, donors such as USAID/OFDA have promoted the mathematical-sounding phrase S > 4W + R, meaning shelter is more than four walls and a roof.[5] This phrase has been used widely in training, outreach and programming activities, to emphasize that the *setting* of a shelter (that is, settlements) is at least as important as the shelter itself, for the simple but vital reason that shelter and housing do not exist in a vacuum. USAID/OFDA has found that this not only results in new understandings about the multi-faceted character of settlements, particularly in densely populated, diverse and complex urban spaces, but also enables the identification of new resources, new opportunities and new options to assist those in need of shelter. Emphasizing both context and process, the SA:

- features integrated and coordinated multi-cluster programming in socially defined spaces, reflecting the multi-faceted character of context (that is, settlements)

- is opportunistic with regard to livelihood promotion and disaster risk reduction

- recognizes gender, environment and social relations

- is transitional, by linking relief and recovery concerns

- is accountable to local populations and governing structures.

One important characteristic of settlements, reflected in the list at the opening of this chapter, is scale. Neighbourhoods typically serve as a means of understanding, defining and subdividing urban places according to various social, economic and physical features. These features, in turn, often serve as the basis of administrative and political recognition in larger jurisdictions. Neighbourhoods provide their residents with an identity and foothold in the larger urban arena, thereby offering some measure of security, safety and familiarity in an often chaotic urban world. Neighbourhoods become even more valuable

to their residents in the wake of humanitarian crises and naturally triggered disasters, precisely because of these social and economic features.[6]

As a conceptual and operational means of meeting the humanitarian needs of affected populations in urban spaces, a neighbourhood approach (NA) essentially scales the SA to the intimate socio-economically defined spaces of urban neighbourhoods, involving affected populations, local officials, the private sector and others in establishing a decision-making and settlements planning process to respond to multi-cluster needs. This is based on the notion that the short-term recovery of neighbourhoods can be best achieved by adopting a longer-term view of configuring and reconfiguring land to best accommodate shelter and related services, reduce disaster risk, provide livelihoods, forge social connections and strengthen the health and security of affected populations.

Recent USAID/OFDA urban disaster risk reduction projects serve as examples of the utility of the NA in risk-prone cities of Latin America. In Guatemala and Honduras in particular, results have been so promising that national governments have embraced the NA as national policy for both post-disaster response and urban slum upgrading activities. While meeting short-term humanitarian needs, this approach can also pave the way for follow-on recovery. That is to say, neighbourhoods can also serve as platforms for recovery. When linked together, neighbourhoods become the units of analysis in city-wide response and recovery efforts.[7]

The rationale for a settlements approach

The SA is not only a means of promoting integrated and coordinated multi-sector programming in socially defined spaces; it also improves understanding of context, and informs activities intended to respond to needs in context. In establishing a process of engagement and action with affected populations, new information and understanding about settlements are generated, new opportunities arise, new options are created, and new resources identified and mobilized. Further, establishing this process of decision making and planning facilitates discussions that meld short-term response with longer-term recovery concerns, thus providing the strategic and operational bridge over the elusive relief–development gap. This is also known as the relief–development continuum, the response-to-recovery gap and, more recently, via the Grand Bargain (see Chapter 7), the humanitarian–development nexus.[8] Given the need to create a nexus that will close several gaps, it is incumbent upon humanitarian agencies to create and support a process capable of providing not only urgently needed humanitarian assistance, but that also fosters a longer-term development process sensitive to crisis and disaster issues. Thus, in establishing a process that is also developmental, the SA ceases to be relegated to 'best practice', and becomes a much-needed transformative practice.

Relationship to the cluster approach

The cluster approach (CA), established by the humanitarian sector in 2005 as a pillar of the Humanitarian Reform Agenda (further discussed in Chapter 11), created the organizational architecture to coordinate and mobilize resources to respond to needs, based on a division of labour defined by 'clusters' of activities, including health, nutrition, logistics, water/sanitation/hygiene (WASH), protection, shelter and others.[9] But the CA lacks a spatial framework to promote – if not compel – coordination, with the result being a tendency for clusters to work in isolation, in a silo-like manner, with greater emphasis on programmes than on the settlements where those programmes interact with other cluster activities. The presence of several humanitarian organizations working on different cluster activities in the same settlements has often led to uncoordinated efforts, gaps in coverage, and confusion and frustration among affected

populations, who do not know who is providing what. Numerous examples of this have occurred in recent years, from the large-scale (pre-cluster) Kosovo conflict response in 1999–2000 until at least the 2016–17 Hurricane Matthew response effort in Haiti.

The SA, with its focus on multi-cluster programming in a spatial framework, gives structure to cluster interaction, thereby complementing the CA in the very places where people live. As well as improving coordination, the SA enables affected populations to make humanitarian organizations accountable for their work. This should help avoid the 'white vehicle' syndrome that is a common complaint of many affected populations, whereby numerous organizations, each with its own fleet of vehicles, hurriedly move in and out of settlements, suggesting uncoordinated action and poor service provision.

Although an Early Recovery Cluster (ERC) has been a feature of the CA since its genesis,[10] the ERC has rarely generated a programmatic benefit commensurate with other clusters, undermining efforts to forge a link between humanitarian and development agencies. Again, by establishing a process of decision making and planning that melds short-term response with longer-term recovery concerns, the SA can complement the CA by ensuring that humanitarian and development organizations can work together to resolve those concerns. In so doing, the SA can complement the CA from the macro to the micro, reflecting the scale of settlements noted at the outset of this chapter, and the aggregation of settlements into national and sub-national settlements systems.

The relationship of SA to area-based approaches

In recent years, efforts to improve humanitarian response in urban areas have resulted in the development of area-based approaches (ABAs), defined as being geographically based in a specific area, applying participatory methods of project management, and multi-sectoral in nature (see Box 13.1).[11] These efforts have emphasized coordination of humanitarian activities in a given area, and appear to be influenced, at least in part, by:

1. The '3W' (Who, What, Where) Displacement Tracking Matrices of cluster lead agencies, particularly the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

2. Clarification of operations to facilitate implementation of the so-called 'out of camp' urban policies of IOM and UNHCR.[12]

Although the SA encompasses the full range of settlements beyond the urban focus of the ABA, the area and operational coordination focus of the ABA in urban areas appears to complement the strategic and conceptual focus of the SA. This linkage is imperative, given the need for humanitarian actors to both understand settlements and improve their prospects for effective and timely programmatic results.

Hurdles to overcome

The SA is still relatively new, different, and thus risky. Many humanitarian agencies, particularly those outside the Shelter Cluster and the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, remain largely unaware of the SA. Even actors in those clusters have yet to achieve consensus on SA definitions.[13] Donors, cluster lead agencies, NGOs and others accustomed to current practice in shelter and CCCM activities may be unfamiliar with the priorities, operations and difficulties of other clusters, may have limited capacity in clusters other than Shelter and CCCM, and may find it difficult to integrate and coordinate multi-cluster activities internally. Creating teams with other agencies to augment cluster capacities, and organize and budget for these capacities, may also present real or perceived obstacles.

Finally, the Shelter Cluster in particular may have become a victim of its own success. In advocating for the adoption of the SA for some time, the Shelter Cluster is now viewed by other clusters as 'owning' the SA, as other clusters do not perceive, understand, or perhaps even welcome the relevance of the SA to their own activities.

Although the problems posed by the SA may seem daunting, *not* adopting it brings difficulties too. Funding, technical and organizational capacities are tested by the increasing frequency, intensity and duration of naturally triggered disasters and conflict-related crises. This at least suggests the need for a new approach aimed at coordination, collaboration, engagement and the cost-conscious merging of capacities and resources of humanitarian agencies, displaced populations, host country governments and economies, the private sector, the development sector, and others.

Conclusion as a prologue to improved assistance

The SA is rooted in the recognition that it is difficult to understand and respond to shelter needs in isolation from other cluster needs and from the setting of shelter: settlements – the places where people live. In reorganizing, integrating and coordinating multiple cluster activities in socially defined spaces, the SA can also establish a process linking response and longer-term recovery efforts, with significant potential for new and different results. These results can help redefine best practice, smooth the transition from response to recovery, and create the conceptual and operational bridge over the gap between humanitarian and development assistance that has existed for decades. Such results would represent more than best practice; they would be transformative, ridding the humanitarian and development sectors of the bipolar construct that divides them and undermines the response and recovery of affected populations.

The potentially transformative nature of the SA is critically important. Humanitarian needs grow ever larger and more complex, while response to those needs seems to lag further and further behind. The scale is daunting: the number of people displaced globally in 2017 was 65.6 million,[14] nearly the same population as France, with internally displaced persons accounting for 40.3 million of the total. This global displacement has generated a shelter demand for roughly 16 million living units, mostly in urban areas, posing a significant task for humanitarian and development agencies alike.

So, where to begin? In the short term at least, the typical response will continue to be an individual, less-than-multi-cluster project implemented by a single humanitarian agency. Although these seemingly isolated efforts are often criticized for being too limited, too organizationally demanding, or too expensive, they need not be so, and can generate significant benefits that can serve as templates for replication. Brazilian urbanist Jaime Lerner, for example, has long advocated for an 'urban acupuncture' that, like a pinprick, generates intense transformations in small spaces, which ripple through larger spaces to change and improve living conditions.[15] Lerner found that changes do not need to be large or expensive to be transformative. Understanding the local conditions and needs is critical to generating desired results, whether in a rural hamlet, urban neighbourhood or entire city. Adopting a settlements approach to understanding and acting in settlements, whatever their scale, increases the possibility of such transformation.

1   The views expressed here are the personal views of the author, and do not necessarily represent the official views of the United States Agency for International Development.

2   Interagency Standing Committee (2016) *The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need*. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf; InterAction (2018) *The Humanitarian and Development Nexus*. www.interaction.org/FABB2016/humanitarian-and-development-nexus.

3   UN-Habitat (2018) *History, Mandate & Role in the UN System*. https://unhabitat.org/history-mandate-role-in-the-un-system/.

4   For example, during the 1999 Kosovo response, USAID/OFDA viewed settlements as an integral factor in the comprehensive provision of shelter to displaced populations.

5   InterAction (2018) *Training: USAID/OFDA Shelter and Settlements Training Course*. www.interaction.org/training/USAID-OFDA-shelter-settlements-training-course.

6   US Agency for International Development Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (2011) *The 'Neighborhood Approach', a Means of Improving the Delivery of Humanitarian Assistance in Urban Areas*. USAID/OFDA, Washington DC. https://humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/01/USAID-OFDA%20Neighborhood%20Approach%20One-Pager%20'11%20Sept%2023.pdf.

7   Ibid.

8   See Interagency Standing Committee (2016), specifically Grand Bargain Work Stream Number Ten.

9   See for example United Nations (nd) *How Are Disaster Relief Efforts Organised? Cluster Approach and Key Actors*. United Nations, New York. https://business.un.org/en/documents/6852.

10 According to the Global Cluster for Early Recovery (GCER), 'Early Recovery (ER) is an approach that addresses recovery needs that arise during the humanitarian phase of an emergency; using humanitarian mechanisms that align with development principles. It enables people to use the benefits of humanitarian action to seize development opportunities, build resilience, and establish a sustainable process of recovery from crisis'. The GCER is chaired by the United Nations Development Program and comprises 31 UN and non-UN active global partners from the humanitarian and development sectors. Humanitarian Response (2018) *Early Recovery*. www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/clusters/early-recovery.

11 E Parker and V Maynard (2015) *Humanitarian Response to Urban Crises: A Review of Area-Based Approaches*. IIED Working Paper. International Institute for Environment and Development, London.

12 See for example United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2014) *Policy on Alternatives to Camps*. UNHCR, Geneva. www.unhcr.org/5422b8f09.html.

13 See for example Global Shelter Cluster Settlements Approaches in Urban Areas Working Group (2018) *Shelter & Settlements Definitions/Usage of Terminology* (draft). www.sheltercluster.org/settlements-approaches-urban-areas-wg/documents/settlements-terminology-paper-draftfeb2018.

14 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2017) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*. UNHCR, Geneva. www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf. Total included 22.5 million refugees and 2.8 million asylum seekers.

15 J Lerner (2016) *Urban Acupuncture: Celebrating Pinpricks of Change that Enrich City Life*. Island Press, Washington DC.

Box 13.1

Area-based approaches
Coping with urban complexity – but are agencies ready?

David Sanderson

Inaugural Judith Neilson Chair in Architecture,
University of New South Wales (Sydney)

Area-based approaches (ABAs) have gained increasing attention over the last few years, as an approach that places people and locations at the centre of post-disaster recovery efforts, mostly in urban areas. ABAs can be defined as actions that 'support people after a disaster in a specific location to transition effectively from relief to recovery; it works with existing structures and can be scaled up'.[1]

A number of organizations have backed ABAs. For example, the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) argues that 'Higher impacts are possible if activities are designed and coordinated through geographical/spatial, community-city-based and inter-sectoral approaches, which better link where people live and work, markets, basic services and availability of social safety nets'.[2] The submission by the Global Alliance for Urban Crises to the global urban conference Habitat III in October 2016 advocated the need to 'adopt area-based approaches to programming and coordination', to recognize the scale, nature and complexity of urban crises.[3] The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) argues that ABAs help improve clarity and understanding in programming, by providing a clear location and set of actors to involve.[4]

ABAs in development programmes (dealing mostly with chronic poverty) have been known broadly under various names, including integrated development programmes, slum upgrading, and sites and services projects.[5] In humanitarian situations, USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in particular has promoted the idea of a settlements approach, arguing that it is necessary to consider the wider spatial needs of 'settlement-based assistance' and a 'neighbourhood approach', which aim to work with communities in a holistic manner, rather than being led by one sectoral priority, such as shelter (see Chapter 13 for further discussion).

Recent research into how ABAs work was collated into a Guidance Note for Humanitarian Practitioners.[6] This sets out ten principles for urban ABAs, organized according to the three stages of the project management cycle: assessment and design; implementation; and monitoring, evaluation and learning (see Figure 6).

The principles are based on good practice in post-disaster recovery, and on developmental approaches for working in urban areas in low- and middle-income countries. This is because, faced with such complexity, effective urban post-disaster recovery requires the involvement of a large number of actors. For example, Principle Seven, concerning 'flexible programming: adaptive management' refers to action-planning methodology to foster neighbourhood-level decision making in slum-upgrade projects.[7] The aims include being 'problem based and opportunity driven', 'embracing serendipity', 'being non-reliant on complete information' and 'focusing on starting points, rather than end states'.

A strong emphasis, also drawn from developmental approaches, is the critical need to be people-centred. This is embodied, for example, in Principle Four, which asks, 'whose reality counts?' – the needs of aid agencies and donors, or of affected populations?[8] Another important point, adapting this question, is to ask, 'whose disaster is it?', meaning that the strongest recovery results from working through, and strengthening, existing structures. To these ends, Principle Five, 'work with existing structures', argues that 'activities must engage with existing structures, even if these are weak (otherwise, such structures may be weakened even further)'.
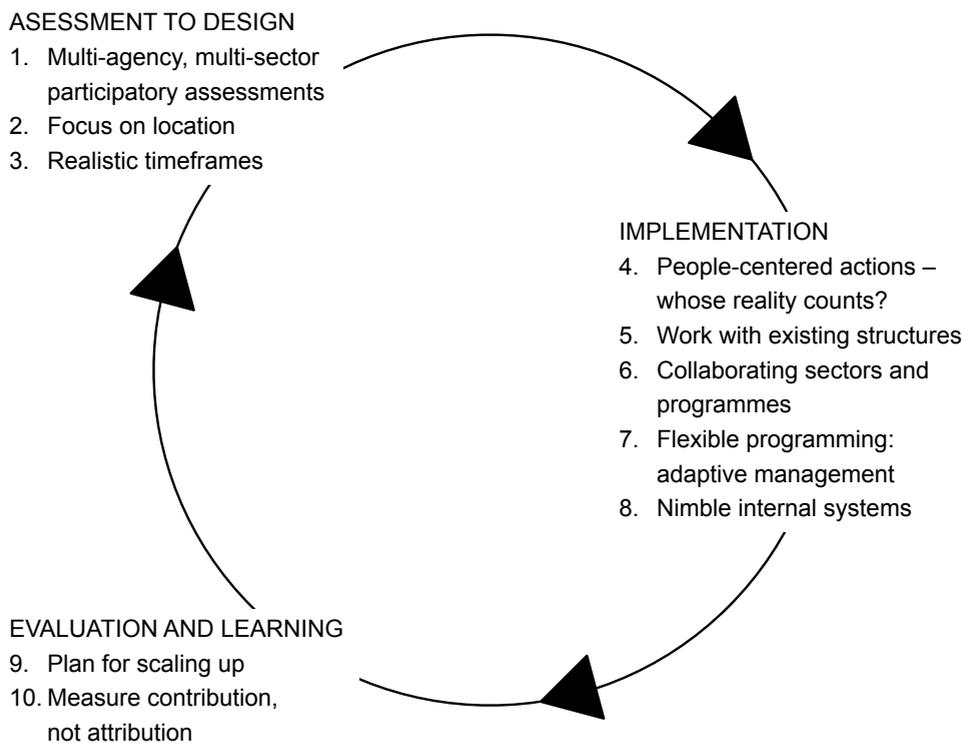
ASESSMENT TO DESIGN
1. Multi-agency, multi-sector participatory assessments
2. Focus on location
3. Realistic timeframes

IMPLEMENTATION
4. People-centered actions – whose reality counts?
5. Work with existing structures
6. Collaborating sectors and programmes
7. Flexible programming: adaptive management
8. Nimble internal systems

EVALUATION AND LEARNING
9. Plan for scaling up
10. Measure contribution, not attribution

Figure 6   **Ten principles for implementing urban ABAs.**[9]

Box 13.1 **Area-based approaches**   **121**

A common criticism of humanitarian response and recovery programming is that it creates parallel structures – for example, setting up medical services that ignore existing societal structures in an affected location, and that may undermine existing health care supply services.[10] As the guidance note recommends, the role of agencies is to support local structures and approaches, even if this takes longer and is sometimes more difficult. The Sphere Project's urban guidelines concur: 'Depending on the capacity of the local authorities, the humanitarians' role may be more about facilitation and enabling than direct service provision'.[11]

Successful ABAs may need to use more iterative and flexible tools than those traditionally employed. One of these is adaptive management, 'a programming approach that combines appropriate analysis, structured flexibility, and iterative improvements in the face of contextual and causal complexity'.[12] In a similar vein, Principle Ten recommends measuring overall contribution to change,[13] rather than individual project attribution, to overcome the obsession with short-term individual project outputs. Concerning the need for stronger collaboration, Principle Six, 'collaborating sectors and programmes', calls for – among other things – clear leadership, to ensure coordination, collaboration, and clarity of roles among agencies.

In summary, ABAs respond meaningfully to the complexity of urban environments. But this responsiveness comes at a price to agencies, because ABAs are difficult. For example, following the Haiti earthquake, British Red Cross implemented the Haiti Urban Regeneration and Reconstruction Programme, comprising reconstruction of infrastructure, housing repairs and rebuilding, and livelihood interventions, including small business loans and microfinance. The final evaluation report documents some of the programming difficulties, which were 'characterised by endemic urban violence and a lack of community cohesion [… the neighbourhood] was also extremely vulnerable as a result of underlying poverty as well as the effects of the earthquake […] the social, political and economic networks of any densely populated, urban environment are incredibly complex and ceaselessly changing'.[14]

This is the urban reality in which agencies must work. The big question is: are agencies and donors willing to adapt their ways of working?

1   D Sanderson and P Sitko (2017) *Urban Area-Based Approaches in Post-Disaster Contexts*. Guidance Note for Humanitarian Practitioners. Stronger Cities Consortium. International Institute for Environment and Development, London. http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/10825IIED.pdf.

2   Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2017) *IASC Reference Group on Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas: Revised Work Plan for 2015–17*. IASC, Geneva, p. 2.

3   Global Alliance for Urban Crises (2016) *Habitat III: The New Urban Agenda: Key Messages*. GAUC, Geneva. http://urbancrises.org/sites/default/files/2016-10/HABITAT_III_NUA_Messaging_for_Alliance.pdf.

4   United States Agency for International Development (2011) *The 'Neighborhood Approach', a Means of Improving the Delivery of Humanitarian Assistance in Urban Areas*. USAID, Washington DC. www.alnap.org/resource/22783.aspx.

5   For a further discussion on this, see D Sanderson (2017) 'Implementing area-based approaches (ABAs) in urban post-disaster contexts'. *Environment and Urbanization* 29(2), pp. 349–364.

6   Sanderson and Sitko (2017). This guidance note was part of the Stronger Cities Initiative – a collaboration between the International Rescue Committee, the Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision International, and the University of New South Wales, Sydney. See International Institute for Environment and Development (2017) *Stronger Cities Initiative*. www.iied.org/stronger-cities-initiative.

7   N Hamdi and R Goethert (1997) *Action Planning for Cities: A Guide to Community Practice*. IT Publications, Rugby, UK.

8   R Chambers (1995) 'Poverty and livelihoods: Whose reality counts?' *Environment and Urbanization* 7(1), pp. 173–204.

9   Source: Sanderson and Sitko (2017).

10 C Clermont et al (2011) *Urban Disasters – Lessons from Haiti: Study of Member Agencies' Responses to the Earthquake in Port au Prince, Haiti, January 2010*. Disasters Emergency Committee, London. www.alnap.org/help-library/urban-disasters-%E2%80%93-lessons-from-haiti-study-of-member-agencies%E2%80%99-responses-to-the.

11 B Mountfield (2016) *Using the Sphere Standards in Urban Settings*. Sphere Unpacked. The Sphere Project, Geneva, p. 11. www.sphereproject.org/silo/files/using-the-sphere-standards-in-urban-settings.pdf.

12 R Chambers and B Ramalingam (2016) *Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies*. International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps. www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy_Corps_ADAPT_Adapting_aid_report_with_case_studies.7.21.16.pdf.

13 The 'contribution to change' approach is 'focused on assessing positive and negative changes to the lives of affected people and other local stakeholders, in the medium term following a disaster event'. R Few et al (2014) *Contribution to Change: An Approach to Evaluating the Role of Intervention in Disaster Recovery*. Practical Action Publishing and Oxfam GB, Rugby, UK. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/contribution-to-change-an-approach-to-evaluating-the-role-of-intervention-in-di-305537.

14 Advisem Services (2016) *British Red Cross' Haiti Urban Regeneration and Reconstruction Programme (URRP): Final Evaluation (Full)*. Advisem, Ottawa. www.alnap.org/help-library/british-red-cross-haiti-urban-regeneration-and-reconstruction-programme-urrp.

Box 13.1   **Area-based approaches**   **123**