CITIES OF REFUGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Bringing an Urban Lens to the Forced Displacement Challenge
This policy note aims to advance our understanding of urban forced displacement, induced by conflict, by looking at the issue from the perspective of receiving towns and cities. It explores why we need a different approach to addressing urban forced displacement; how to “think differently” about urban forced displacement along the humanitarian-development assistance spectrum; what we can learn from existing urbanization and other relevant experiences to inform humanitarian and development responses; and what “thinking differently” means for local, national, and international development actors. The primary audiences of the note are development and humanitarian practitioners as well as policy makers who are increasingly confronted with the urban dimensions of protracted forced displacement.
Key Messages

**Forced displacement is among the most pressing challenges in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region.**

The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide continues to increase, particularly in MENA, where waves of unrest and conflict have driven a huge increase in displacement. In 2016, there were an estimated 65.6 million people forcibly displaced around the world, of which about one quarter were living in countries across the MENA region. For each refugee displaced in MENA, there are almost five internally displaced people (IDPs).

**Contrary to common belief, most of the forcibly displaced live outside of camps.**

When thinking of the displaced and providing food, shelter and services, stand-alone camps run by humanitarian agencies are the most common image. However, only a minority of forcibly displaced people actually live in camps. Today, most of the displaced are in towns and cities, where provision of services, shelter and livelihoods are already well established. This pattern is particularly evident in the already highly urbanized MENA region, where an estimated 80-90 percent of displaced live in towns and cities—significantly above the global average of 60 percent.

**Solutions for displacement must target host towns and cities.**

The shift in displacement from camps to towns and cities means changing the paradigm for how humanitarian and development agencies work with displaced populations. Instead of providing stand-alone solutions to displaced people in camps or rural areas, the challenge is to support host communities to scale up existing services, shelter and jobs to meet the needs of both the original residents and the displaced. In towns and cities, targeted assistance to the displaced should be complemented with place-based development approaches that build on existing governance structures and service delivery mechanisms to promote the welfare of all residents, regardless of origin. Approaches that target assistance only for the displaced may heighten social tensions between displaced and host communities and do not help host communities cope with the new needs arising from rapid population growth.

**Recommendations for international agencies**

The main recommendation for international agencies is to integrate humanitarian and development approaches in towns and cities hosting displaced populations from the beginning. Important elements include:

- Develop integrated humanitarian and development approaches to forced displacement in cities
- Promote the integration of civil society in the development response architecture
- Work increasingly through national and local government systems to deliver aid and services
- Mobilize concessional finance to scale up response capabilities in affected countries and cities
- Improve the evidence base for better development policy decision making and programming
Recommendations for local governments

Local governments are at the forefront of the response to urban displacement. Priority interventions for local and municipal governments include:

▲ Scale up and expand basic services and infrastructure based on a development, not emergency, approach
▲ Leverage delivery modalities of service delivery to increase confidence and build trust between communities and local authorities as a basis for social cohesion
▲ Leverage support from national and international actors to address capacity and financing gaps
▲ Enhance capacity and resilience to better prepare for and respond to displacement challenges
▲ Promote local economic development and private sector participation for shared growth

Recommendations for national governments

National governments also play a critical role. Priority interventions for central governments include:

▲ Adhere to policy standards related to refugees and internally displaced, as applicable and with reference to international commitments entered into by the respective countries
▲ Implement coherent national policies in areas outside the direct control of local and municipal governments, specifically in the areas of labor markets, land and housing markets, education and health
▲ Implement coherent national refugee and IDP policies, including alternatives to camps, as the main response focus
▲ Support building social cohesion between displaced and host communities as sine qua non for medium-term sustainability
▲ Support policies to enable a transition from humanitarian first-response approaches to medium-term development approaches
▲ Mobilize financing so that local governments can meet increased financing needs

Policy dialogue needs to be sensitive to the political dynamics around forced displacement

Governments from both origin and host countries are at the center of the crisis. Their decisions affect the scale and destination of population movements, as well as the impacts and solutions in the short, medium, and long terms. External development partners can support the adoption and implementation of sound responses, but the primary role rests with national and local authorities. Mitigating the impact of forced displacement on host communities (whether in camp or urban settings) is not a strictly technical agenda. Political considerations often drive the host authorities’ response, and need to be taken into account when supporting governmental efforts. A development approach should expand the focus from reducing the vulnerabilities of the forcibly displaced to also mitigating impacts on host communities. This holistic approach of supporting the community as a whole can also reshape the political dialogue around forced displacement.