

“Urban disasters, conflict and violence: implications for humanitarian work”

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Thanks for the opportunity to participate in today’s discussions with World Vision staff on Post-Disaster Urban Recovery. I want to begin by noting a few general trends and then focus my remarks on the intersection between violence and disasters and the implications of this for urban disaster recovery.

1. We live in an urban world. Over half of the world’s population now lives in urban areas – a percentage that is expected to increase in the coming years. As more people live in cities, more urban residents will be affected by natural hazards. Moreover, the frequency and severity of natural disasters is increasing.
2. Not only will more people live in cities, but they will live in areas more prone to natural hazards. Globally two-thirds of the world’s cities with populations over five million are at least partially located in coastal zones¹ – areas susceptible to coastal flooding and to the effects of climate change-induced sea level rise. Poorer people moving into cities are also likely to live in poor neighborhoods located on marginal land in urban areas. Currently, more than 1 billion persons, or about 14 percent of the world’s population live in slums – a figure which is also likely to increase.²
3. Although a lot of attention is focused on the world’s megacities, in fact only 4 percent of the world’s population currently lives in megacities and most of the world’s urban growth is expected in cities with populations now under 5 million.

These trends have consequences for humanitarian actors who have developed more expertise at responding to emergencies in rural areas. In some respects working in cities is easier than working in rural areas. Communications and transportation are generally more developed in urban than in rural areas. The physical concentration of populations is greater so the logistics of delivery of assistance are often easier. Services and human resources are usually available. For example, while a hospital may suffer damage in a disaster, most cities have hospitals and trained medical staff. Because of the concentration of both media and political power in cities, there is also more attention and generally more political will to address communities affected by natural hazards in urban than in rural areas.

But at the same time, as experience in Haiti has taught us, an urban environment is often more complex than a rural one and brings its own set of challenges. In particular it is more difficult to identify beneficiaries within a large urban needy population. Directing efforts toward displaced persons, for example, may lead people to move to displacement sites in order to receive assistance. Questions around shelter/housing are as much about legal tenure and preventing

¹ The Government Office for Science (London), *Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change, Final Project Report*, 2011.

² UN Habitat, *State of the World’s Cities 2006/07*, 2006, p. 5. Note that UN Habitat defines a slum household “as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area who lack one or more of the following conditions: durable housing, sufficient living area, access to improved water and to sanitation, and secure tenure.” p. 21.

evictions as about architectural design and construction. Responsibly working in longer-term recovery and reconstruction means working within an overall urban planning framework which itself may be weak or subject to intense political pressures. Finally, issues around the always-difficult boundary between humanitarian and development action are more complicated in urban areas – an issue I'll return to later.

What does this mean for humanitarian actors, such as World Vision, responding to natural disasters in urban settings?

A need to develop new expertise, policies, and relationships. In order to respond effectively to humanitarian needs for shelter, legal expertise is needed to advise on how to deal with sticky issues of land tenure, the rights of renters and squatters to housing, and evictions. In order to develop responsible recovery/reconstruction plans, expertise in urban planning is needed. Providing technical advice to governments on basic issues of urban planning such as waste disposal systems or disaster risk reduction may be as beneficial (or more beneficial) to recovery efforts than construction of 100 or 1000 homes.

In addition to technical expertise, I think it would be helpful for humanitarian organizations to think through some of the difficult issues and decide in advance how their organizations will respond to questions such as: what will our role be in providing essential services that the state should provide but is unable to do so as the result of a natural hazard? Trucking in water may be accepted humanitarian work, but what about rebuilding a neighborhood's sewer system? What will be the organization's policy on working with the urban poor who may not have been directly affected by the natural disaster? For example, will health services be available to all in need? What will the organization's role be in providing individual legal assistance on housing, land and property issues? In working for reform of land tenure systems that complicate recovery areas? These are difficult issues and it would be helpful for organizations to think through them before a natural disaster occurs. As advocates of international disaster relief law³ (IDRL) emphasize, the chaos of the immediate aftermath of a disaster is not the best time to be thinking about far-reaching policies. Of course, different contexts require different and flexible responses, but it is likely that many of these issues will surface in more than one disaster.

Humanitarian organizations have traditionally worked in partnership with a range of other actors and have sought to strengthen humanitarian coordination in different ways. While these partnerships and coordination mechanisms are far from perfect, working in urban areas may mean a need for new and different kinds of partnerships. At least in some rural areas, it is possible to work with traditional leaders to identify vulnerable groups or to consult on programs. In urban areas, this may not be possible in part because of the mobility of urban populations. A religious leader in a slum, for example, may not have a handle on who are the most vulnerable members of a community. Humanitarian organizations will likely need to work with different levels of governmental authority, but

³ See for example: IFRC, *Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance*, 2007 (30IC/07/R4 annex), available at: www.ifrc.org.

also with a broader range of civil society organizations. Maybe a humanitarian organization doesn't need to hire a team of lawyers to help in land tenure questions but can partner with a lawyers' association or university law school to provide assistance.

Now let me turn to violence in cities. I want to focus my remarks on two kinds of violence – interpersonal violence and violence carried out by gangs. I'll make a few general comments on each and then talk about the relationship of this violence to disasters and to humanitarian actors. And then, in the concluding section, I want to come back to the larger questions facing humanitarian organizations in how to deal with urban areas as “permanent humanitarian crises.”

It has been traditional in the humanitarian community to draw a fairly sharp distinction between responding to natural disasters and to conflict situations. Response to natural disasters has had a more technocratic and less political character than conflicts. Rather than negotiating humanitarian space with conflicting parties, responding to natural disasters often focuses on logistics, at least in the initial response phase (for example, dealing with rubble in Haiti or helicopter deliveries to remote Pakistani communities after the 2005 earthquake.) Generalizations are risky, but in comparison with complex emergencies, there seems to be more emphasis in sudden-onset disasters on the speed of rapid response. An earthquake happens in a few minutes while conflicts usually develop over months. Contrast, for example, humanitarian response to a cyclone with response to the Syrian crisis today.

But particularly in an urban context, exposure to disaster risk and to violence is more closely interrelated than is often assumed⁴ and humanitarian response is often affected by violence and conflict.

Interpersonal violence

While there has been considerable and growing interest in addressing sexual and gender-based violence within the humanitarian world, I don't think we've devoted enough attention to interpersonal violence in the aftermath of natural disasters. This month, the Canadian Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are launching a new study, *Predictable, Preventable: Best Practices for Addressing Interpersonal and Self-Directed Violence During and After Disasters*.⁵ The study cites many cases where interpersonal violence has increased after disasters. For example, it cites a report showing that 60 percent of Haitian women and girls interviewed after the earthquake said they feared sexual violence against them or members of their household, with 70 percent of respondents fearing sexual violence more now than before the earthquake.⁶ Similarly, increased violence against women and girls has been

⁴ Raimond Duijsens, “Humanitarian challenges of urbanization” in ICRC, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 92, Number 878, June 2010, p. 356

⁵ The report will be available on the Canadian Red Cross' and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies websites in English, French, Spanish and Creole. See: www.redcross.ca/ or www.ifrc.org. The *Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters* also identify the need to protect people from interpersonal violence, for example from sexual and gender-based violence insecurity in temporary shelters. http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2011/0106_operational_guidelines_nd.aspx

⁶ Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011, *Sexual Violence in Haiti's IDP Camps: Results of a household survey*, cited by Canadian Red Cross, op cit. Note, however, that Robert Muggah conducted household surveys

reported in situations as diverse as shelters after Hurricane Noel in the Dominican Republic and in Christchurch, New Zealand following the devastating earthquake there just a year ago.⁷ Similarly, a 2006 survey conducted by the International Medical Corps in the trailer camps housing people displaced by Hurricane Katrina found alarmingly high rates of gender-based violence. “In the 274 days following the disaster, the rate of women experiencing beatings by a spouse was 3.2 per cent – more than triple the US annual rate.”⁸

Why does interpersonal violence increase after disasters? In part it seems to be related to displacement. This is not a new observation. As the 2007 *World Disaster Report* stated: “Disaster after disaster produces irrefutable evidence that with displacement – be it as a result of natural hazards or conflict – the risk of physical abuse to women and girls rises substantially.”⁹ It seems that violence is particularly acute in temporary shelters (although it may be that this violence is simply more visible than when it occurs within the home). Disasters put a strain on community support and local protection systems. There may be a culture of impunity after a disaster as law enforcement and judicial systems are weakened. The relief effort itself may trigger competition and conflict within families and communities. And of course there are usually pre-existing patterns of violence within the society which are simply intensified in the aftermath of a disaster.¹⁰

The Canadian study suggests a number of actions that can be taken and describes some good practices which have been used to prevent interpersonal violence, including violence-prevention education during the disaster risk reduction phase, prioritizing the prevention of violence during the response phase, rapid response to cases of violence, enhanced data collection, and support for community-based social support systems. The study also makes recommendations about acting to prevent violence during long-term recovery and development.¹¹

These are all good suggestions which should be incorporated into humanitarian response to disasters. But there is also a broader question which is more difficult for humanitarians to respond to. Humanitarian organizations obviously have a responsibility to prevent violence occurring as a result of their actions (for example, developing systems for distribution of relief items that don't put beneficiaries at risk) or in areas under their control (for example, in managing temporary shelters). But to what extent are they responsible for addressing long-term, pre-existing patterns of violence in the society? This is another issue which the earthquake response in Haiti brought to the fore. I remember talking with a staff member of a humanitarian

before and after the earthquake and found reports of lower fears of crime and personal insecurity after the earthquake. <http://www.slideshare.net/CivMilCoE/robert-muggah>

⁷ Reports indicated that domestic violence increased by 50 percent following the February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hcNpdX8QyMn9dkq1dIKU1kq9GFSA?docId=CNG.6009b45dafd3ffa1601b90a867dbe4be.dfl>

⁸ Cited by IFRC, *World Disaster Report 2007, Focus on Discrimination*, 2007,

<http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/pubs/disasters/wdr2007/WDR2007-English.pdf>, p. 123. Also see William E. Thornton, Lydia Voigt, “Disaster Rape: Vulnerability of Women to Sexual Assaults During Hurricane Katrina,” *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, volume 13 issue 2, 2007.

⁹ Klynman Y, Kouppari, N. and Mukhier M. (eds.), *World Disasters Report 2007: Focus on discrimination*. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2007.

¹⁰ Canadian Red Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ Canadian Red Cross, *op. cit.* p. 16.

organization working in Haiti about efforts of his organization to address sexual violence after the earthquake. “It’s endemic in Haitian society,” he said. “Levels of SGBV were very high before the earthquake, they’ll be very high after the emergency is over. We can’t be expected to address all of Haiti’s problems as humanitarian organizations.”¹² While it’s true that humanitarian organizations cannot be expected to deal with all of Haiti’s problems, they can be expected to provide safety and protection in all the work that they do.

Much of the focus of interpersonal violence is on sexual and gender-based violence which remains appallingly widespread. But interpersonal violence takes other forms which have received less attention, such as child abuse, violence against the elderly, and self-directed violence. Globally, some 4200 people a day die from violence, of whom 2,300 die from suicide, 1,500 from interpersonal violence, and 400 from collective violence (such as war.)¹³ Although the few research studies examining the relationship between natural disasters and suicide have not found a direct relationship,¹⁴ there seems to be a clear relationship between natural disasters and mental stress.¹⁵

Interpersonal violence is often seen as a ‘domestic’ or private matter while armed conflict is seen as a public issue requiring a different sort of response by humanitarian actors. In fact, they are linked as evidenced by the relationship between urban/gang violence and domestic violence.

Urban violence, gang violence, and humanitarian action

While the great wars and revolutions of the twentieth century were rural, peasant-based wars, the conflicts of this century are urban in nature.¹⁶ Within the humanitarian community, there is growing interest in the phenomenon of urban violence, particularly gang violence, as the casualties from these conflicts increase.¹⁷ For example, the level of violent deaths in Central America now, largely due to gangs, is higher than during the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s. Almost 40,000 drug-related deaths have been reported in Mexico in the last five years¹⁸ – a number far higher than those dying in conflicts, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, or the occupied Palestinian territories where humanitarian actors have traditionally operated.

¹² Interview with author, 2011.

¹³ Butchart, A. Brown, D. Wilson, A. and Mikton, C. *Preventing violence and reducing its impact: how development agencies can help*, 2008. Cited by Canadian Red Cross study, footnote i.

¹⁴ Etienne G. Krug et al., “Retraction: Suicide after Natural Disasters,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1999; 340:148-149, <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM199901143400213>. But note that the researchers did find a relationship between more than one disaster and suicide.

¹⁵ M. Rezaeian, “Epidemiology of suicide after natural disasters: a review of the literature and a methodological framework for future studies,” *American Journal for Disaster Medicine*, 2008 Jan-Feb;3(1):52-6, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18450280>

¹⁶ ICRC, “Interview with Dennis Rodgers,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, Volume 92, Number 878, June 2010, p. 314.

¹⁷ See, for example, the *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 92, no. 878, June 2010 for a collection of articles reflecting on the experience and approach of humanitarian actors, particularly the ICRC, in responding to urban violence.

¹⁸ Damian Cave, “Mexico Updates Death Toll in Drug War to 47,515, but Critics Dispute the Data,” *The New York Times*, 11 January 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/12/world/americas/mexico-updates-drug-war-death-toll-but-critics-dispute-data.html>

Unlike other armed groups, gangs are not trying to take over the state, but rather are seeking to control territory for various reasons, such as economic gain, power over other gangs, and status. In some cases, gangs provide protection and other needed services to a community although extortion, exploitation and other predatory actions are often also present. Gangs are primarily urban phenomena, in part because of the concentration of population - it is simply easier to form gangs in urban settings than in diverse rural areas - but also because economic resources are concentrated in cities.¹⁹

In terms of humanitarian operations in urban areas in which gangs are present, a recent article in the ICRC Review offers the somewhat chilling observation that:

“Any work carried out by humanitarian players in a city neighborhood, or in an area within a prison, that is controlled by a gang will be subject to discussion or authorization by the gang, whether one is aware of it or not.”²⁰

The experience of ICRC – which has mounted fairly intensive operations in several cities to respond to urban/gang violence – suggests that it is important to gain acceptance from gang leaders as gangs are often organized hierarchically) and that gang leaders need to perceive some benefit from the organization’s operation. This point is also confirmed in Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF) recent book, *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed*,²¹ where, for example, MSF operations in Taliban-controlled territory were possible only when they were perceived as being in the Taliban’s interest. Providing services needed by the community is one way that humanitarian organizations may be accepted by gangs – although relief efforts which undermine the position of the gang may create risks. Similarly as with operations in areas controlled by more traditional armed groups, humanitarian organizations may have to keep a low-profile and not make public statements in order to operate in areas controlled by gang members.

What does this mean for humanitarian organizations seeking to respond to urban communities affected by a natural disaster?

Perhaps the main recommendation is good information and reliable sources of information. Understanding the dynamics of a particular city – or neighborhood – is crucial. Organizations that have experience working in the area are generally better-placed than those seeking to operate for the first time when a disaster occurs. In the aftermath of a disaster, there may be all kinds of rumors about violence directed at aid workers which are not true.²²

¹⁹ While not the typical domain of humanitarian actors, it seems that there are few positive experiences of addressing gang violence – moving people out of gangs, facilitating their integration into normal life haven’t been particularly successful. It might be easier to prevent young people from joining gangs in the first place but this hasn’t been proven.

²⁰ Olivier Bangerter, “Territorial gangs and their consequences for humanitarian players,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 92, no. 878, June 2010, p. 400

²¹ Clarie Magone Michael Neuman and Fabrice Weissman (edi.), *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

²² This was a major factor, for example, in the initial response in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina where reports of attacks on aid workers limited the ability of some disaster responders to take needed action. But many of

Larger questions raised by disasters occurring in cities

The many difficulties in humanitarian response in Haiti lead to broader questions about how the international community responds to what have been called “permanent humanitarian crises.”²³ Over the years, humanitarian organizations have developed increasingly sophisticated measures of emergencies based on accepted indicators. But in using these indicators, ‘normal’ situations in slums can be considered as humanitarian crises. For example, the baseline infant mortality rate in Manila’s slums would justify humanitarian action – if it were occurring in a situation considered a humanitarian crisis. The World Health Organization considers a global acute malnutrition rate of 10 percent of children under 5 as ‘critical’ and 15 percent as alarming. But in Djibouti’s slum areas, UNICEF has found malnutrition rates ranging from 17-25 percent of children under 5.²⁴

Researchers and observers have suggested that rather than targeting the displaced within urban areas, that humanitarian organizations should re-focus their work on the ‘urban poor’ or on the basis of vulnerability rather than focusing on groups affected by a specific disaster. But this calls into question the whole nature of humanitarian response which is to “save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies.”²⁵ It also raises the question of who defines a humanitarian emergency. This is not a new debate. In the 1980s and early 1990s, similar debates raged within the humanitarian community about whether the AIDS crisis was a ‘humanitarian emergency’ (and eligible for humanitarian funding).

Responding to disasters in urban areas raises a host of logistical and policy issues. But it also raises the most fundamental questions about the nature of humanitarian action – questions which deserve much further reflection.

these reports turned out to be untrue. See for example: Lisa Grow Sun, “Disaster Mythology and the Law,” *Cornell Law Review*, 27 June 2011. <http://legalworkshop.org/2011/06/24/disaster-mythology-and-the-law>

²³ Duijsens, *op cit.*, p. 364

²⁴ Duijsens, *op cit.*, p. 364

²⁵ This definition is from Global Humanitarian assistance but similar formulations are found in most humanitarian agencies. <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/data-guides/defining-humanitarian-aid>