

Urban Snapshots 1 - June 2013

The Urban Snapshots series examines critical urban issues relevant to the Syria crisis and explores response options and approaches. Next Issue: Shelter

AN URBAN CRISIS

The armed conflict in Syria has now lasted for two years and many observers believe it is doomed to continue as a protracted conflict with no end in sight. The theatre of this conflict is predominantly urban and the urban warfare leaves cities divided, most notably Aleppo, the largest city in the country with a pre-war population of almost 3 million people. The battles for such cities have resulted in the breakdown of entire urban systems, destroying homes, collapsing public services and decimating urban economies.

Before the conflict, Syria had a population of approximately 21 million people with roughly a 50/50 population distribution in urban and rural areas. According to the most recently published Humanitarian Needs Overview, almost 5.7 million Syrians, including 185,000 Palestinian refugees settled in that country, have been forced to abandon their homes. An estimated **4.25 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs)**, staying with host families, renting, occupying empty buildings and public facilities, organizing makeshift solutions and some 165,000 persons are living in 730 communal shelters in cities, greatly increasing the urban population. This can be a highly mobile population, moving from one location to another depending on the geographic direction and spread of the fighting. It is not uncommon to find IDP families that have been forced to move as many as five times. A further 1.5 million people have fled as refugees to neighbouring countries.

URBAN SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE FAILING

While absolute numbers are not yet available, there is strong evidence that many neighborhoods and **cities are experiencing dramatic growth**, due to the influx of IDPs, with areas in the city doubling the original population numbers. Public infrastructure services are slowly collapsing under this additional human pressure and the problem is exacerbated by conflict-induced damage caused by all sides in this conflict. Water, sewerage, solid waste collection and energy deficiencies are all becoming life-threatening hazards for the affected population.



Conflict lines cut off access.



Conflict halts progress in the cities as cranes stand idle. © UN-Habitat

An estimated 93,000 people have been killed in the conflict in the last two years and now there is a growing risk of health hazard related casualties. The cities are most vulnerable with collapsing sewerage and waste management systems which are magnifying the risks of infectious disease spread. **Rotting waste lying in some city streets** is expected to become a critical issue in the summer months, particularly affecting the vulnerable living in temporary insanitary urban areas.

AN URBAN SERVICES STRATEGY

The current conflict in Syria is contributing to the near collapse of urban systems. Some 6.8 million Syrians are in need including 4.25 million that are internally displaced.

The capacities of urban services are strained to their limit, resulting in life threatening conditions for vulnerable populations.

Humanitarian assistance needs to be implemented in a way that strengthens existing capacities, resources and networks.

A comprehensive, integrated urban approach can address essential emergency needs:

- People; reducing the loss of life
- Infrastructure; provision of basic needs
- Livelihoods; recovering economic assets

STATISTICS

- 4.25 million IDPs, in host communities
- 37% of public health and 25% of educational facilities non-functional
- Urban water supply reduced by up to 90%
- Waste collection systems not coping with demand
- 3.1 million living in poverty, of these 1.5 million in extreme poverty

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5.7 MILLION

The approximate number of Syrians who have been forced to abandon their homes.



New and unfinished apartment buildings used to house IDPs. © UN-Habitat

SHELTER OPTIONS FOR THE DISPLACED

Finding adequate shelter remains the biggest challenge for most displaced families. Shelter needs are being met through a range of temporary measures: squatting in rudimentary tent structures on vacant land, collective shelters, occupying empty public and private buildings (photo above) including schools and health facilities, sheltering with host families and renting where apartments and cash are available. Other **families continue to live in their own damaged homes and are desperate for support with repairs.**

There is also clear evidence that IDPs are moving back to their homes once the fighting moves away to other areas. However the homes have sustained varying degrees of damage and looting. This dynamic further complicates the on-going picture of IDPs and refugees emerging, while simultaneously there are additional and different needs of returnees. The scale of this on-going 'return' is still unclear and shelter assessments are in the planning stages, though restricted by the current security context.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

The armed conflict has caused considerable destruction of economic infrastructure. Mobile industries have fled across borders, companies are closing every day, public sector workers are losing their jobs, unemployment has reached alarming levels above 45%, **rising inflation is forcing people to deplete limited savings** and the service economy is shutting down. The Syrian pound has devalued by 70% since the conflict began two years ago impacting on prices, savings and the macro economy. Market facilities are either destroyed or abandoned and credit mechanisms for small businesses have ceased to function. The food supply chain from producers to consumers is disrupted and farmers are losing their capacity to farm and transport their limited produce to urban markets; limited supply means rampant inflation. It is evident that urban IDPs have fewer coping strategies than rural IDPs, who generally have more experience of coping with the uncertainties of living off the land.

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RESPONSES

The International Humanitarian response is providing basic life-saving relief and is slowly scaling up support for the rehabilitation of basic urban services, including generators for water pumping facilities, waste collection, rehabilitation of educational and health facilities, and more recently cash for work support. More analysis and understanding of the on-going return process is needed in order to quantify the demand in urban areas. There has been a push to raise awareness and increase vocational training in several sectors to enable the population to better cope with the current challenges.

In opposition-controlled areas, responses are more limited. As a response to the collapse of local government structures and services, some new local governance structures have emerged to provide coordination and management of urban services, with external support from international non-governmental organizations and cash support from donors. However, these local governance structures are often staffed by inexperienced personnel who come under pressure from a multitude of informal local 'political' leaders. The government has enabled the United Nations agencies to provide basic support to the population across the conflict lines, but this is mostly limited to supply of relief goods.



Early signs of 'returnees'. Homes damaged, but not destroyed. © UN-Habitat

Host communities receiving large numbers of IDPs carry additional burden as they share their meager resources with the IDPs, while also suffering the direct and indirect impacts of the conflict. These families would greatly benefit from a prioritized, strategic approach that works with local communities and empowers people to engage in activities focused on strengthening their coping capacities and improving living conditions. Where possible, vocational training should be offered to target resources towards developing local capacity in the rehabilitation and delivery of essential basic urban services.

A more **comprehensive and integrated urban response** from the relief organizations, through area-based approaches at neighborhood levels, can provide practical actions to build on the communities' own resources, social capital, capacities and networks in order to address their essential and immediate needs during this time of crisis.



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UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

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