

URBAN REFUGEES – From Burden to Benefit

CARE, Stichting Vluchteling, ZOA

The notion that a refugee is a person who lives in a refugee camp in the countryside, is diminishing in relevance. Nowadays only one third of the refugees live in camps. A growing number of refugees and internally displaced persons seek refuge in cities: currently refugees in cities make up for more than 50% of the refugee population.¹

Refugees hope to find a safe haven and work opportunities while often being confronted with countless obstacles and limitations like the lack of legal protection, labor exploitation or intimidation by authorities². The lack of freedom and the limited ability to make meaningful choices while being in the camp push people out to urban areas while many others move straight to the cities to find what they need most: safety and self-reliance. Refugees and displaced populations will largely be joining the ranks of the urban poor; therefore host states as well as the international community have a responsibility in addressing the needs of both groups³.

CONSIDERATIONS

Top 3 considerations:

- 1) Though the presence of refugees is sometimes associated with negative economic effects, it is often overlooked that refugees also bring economic benefits for the city
 - a. Negative economic effects, such as the increase of consumer prices and rental prices, can be made up for by a positive contribution to the host economy, eg through labour, cash and trade.⁴
 - b. Refugees are users and in some cases creators of technology⁵.

- 2) The role of the hosting government is complicated but highly important
 - a. The challenges facing the displaced often derive from their environment, which humanitarian actors cannot control, including a lack of urban development in informal areas, poor-quality services, scarce employment opportunities and poor transport. This underscores the importance of the host state in displacement responses⁶.
 - b. Displaced populations will largely be joining the ranks of the urban poor and will more obviously be a responsibility of the host state⁷
 - c. Urban refugees face all of the problems of the urban poor in their adopted city, but also unique challenges related to their refugee status⁸:

¹ UNHCR, War's human cost, Global Trends 2013, UNHCR, 20 June 2014

² IRC UK, Paper on urban refugees for ECHO advocacy event, November 2012

³ Simone Haysom, Sanctuary in the city?, Urban displacement and vulnerability, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, 2013

⁴ IRC UK, Paper on urban refugees for ECHO advocacy event, November 2012

⁵ Alexander Betts et al, Refugee economics, Rethinking popular assumptions, Humanitarian Innovation project, University of Oxford, June 2014

⁶ Simone Haysom, Sanctuary in the city?, Urban displacement and vulnerability, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, 2013

⁷ Ibid.

- i. Lack of legal protection
 - ii. Intimidation and harassment by the authorities
 - d. When refugees are given the right to work and freedom of movement, they are capable of making a contribution to the national economy.
 - e. In many ways their presence will be relevant to other urban residents in a way that camp populations are not.⁹
 - f. Host governments may insist upon the establishment of camps for reasons of public order or security.
- 3) The presence of a refugee population in a city offers opportunities for linking humanitarian assistance to sustainable development
- a. Usage of refugee assistance to upgrade informal settlements. Use of refugee funds for benefit of both communities (compared to relatively 'wasting' money in camps)
 - b. Return to an approach of refugee assistance as a development issue
 - c. Relief and recovery actions need to build future urban resilience to avoid wasted investments
 - d. Allow urban refugees the same access to existing services in cities, rather than creating parallel services

DECLARATIONS / STATEMENTS:

- 1) Dutch NGO's commit themselves to including more displaced in urban contexts in their programming so that the number of beneficiaries we serve in urban contexts increasingly reflects the reality of the high numbers of displaced in urban contexts.¹⁰
- 2) The right to safe work and inclusion for urban refugees in the economy is central to displaced populations becoming self-sufficient and making a contribution to the cities in which they have taken refuge. Dutch NGO's commit themselves to gaining increased understanding of the situation of displaced in urban contexts. Dutch NGO's will *advocate* for the right to work and protection for displaced in urban settings.
- 3) For the displaced in protracted situations, livelihoods and protection are crucial areas for intervention, but neither has received sufficient attention in humanitarian projects.¹¹ Therefore, NGOs will increase their efforts to secure livelihoods and protection, whether community-based or area-based, thereby offering special attention for vulnerable groups, for example female headed households.

⁸ UNHCR Policy on alternatives to camps, UNHCR, July 2014

⁹ Simone Haysom, Sanctuary in the city?, Urban displacement and vulnerability, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, 2013

¹⁰ This statement deliberately leaves some room for the undersigning parties to decide as to what extent they will commit to urban planning. A more binding formulation is for example: "If in five years' time displaced in urban contexts make up for 60% of the total number of displaced, Dutch NGO's are committed to direct 60% of their assistance to urban displaced." It is not to be expected that all participants will agree to that. It depends on donor conditions and sectoral specialties of organisations. We chose for a formulation in which all commit themselves to do more with urban displaced.

¹¹ Simone Haysom, Sanctuary in the city?, Urban displacement and vulnerability, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, 2013

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT AND TO OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- Enable refugees to reside in urban areas lawfully, peacefully and without harassment, support their ability to take responsibility for their lives and for their families and communities
- A multi-actor and multi-sector approach is needed to respond to the full range of challenges facing urban displaced in protracted situations. Therefore, there needs to be good coordination between the humanitarian, development, political and human rights actors, at international, national and very local levels.
- Achieve synergies with national development planning: urban refugees offer an opportunity to overcome the humanitarian – development divide. Link funding to broaden urban development / resilience
- Donors should move funds from camps to urban areas, to reflect the changing reality.
- Engage with national authorities at all levels to ensure that legitimate security issues can be addressed effectively
- Convince developed countries to fulfil their responsibilities with regard to displaced populations