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Tackling urban vulnerability

An operational framework for aid organisations

Wamsler, Christine

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Humanitarian Practice Network

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Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399

HPN e-mail: hpn@odi.org.uk
HPN website: www.odi-hpn.org

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By 2007, more than half the world's population will be living in cities; as urbanisation gathers pace, this proportion will only grow. For humanitarian actors, urbanisation will increasingly shape old and new vulnerabilities and risks, and will increasingly define disasters in the future. Chronic poverty and lack of basic infrastructure – including in core humanitarian areas such as water and sanitation – often characterise how people live in urban settlements. This should not be perceived only as a developmental challenge. There is a role for humanitarian actors in responding to the needs of vulnerable and excluded urban populations. Humanitarian action in urban contexts is the feature of this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange*.

Over the last 50 years, Africa has consistently had the highest rate of urban growth. However, as the article on AURAN highlights, there is a critical need for governments, civil society and international actors to recognise and address urban risks and vulnerabilities. Focusing on Nairobi, another article illustrates how refugees are often doubly displaced: forced to flee their countries due to conflict, and then denied legal status and excluded from social support services in host countries. The article explores how humanitarian agencies can work with communities living outside official camps in Nairobi to support their own livelihood strategies, and stresses the importance of host governments creating enabling policy environments.

The devastating impact of natural disasters on cities has been graphically illus-



©Reuters/Mian Khurshed, courtesy www.alertnet.org

trated in recent years by the Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the earthquake in Pakistan. Contributors to this edition of *Humanitarian Exchange* explore issues relating to natural disasters in urban contexts, with articles on responding to Tropical Storm Jean in Haiti, the relationship between climate change and disaster risk in urban environments, and the effectiveness of cash programming in response to the earthquake in Bam, Iran.

The citizens of cities are likewise the victims of war and political crises. This facet of urban vulnerability is also covered here, with an article exploring the lessons humanitarian actors should draw from the significant crisis caused by military operations conducted by American and Iraqi troops against Fallujah in April and November 2004.

Finally, this edition of *Humanitarian Exchange* also includes a range of general policy and practice articles, beginning with a piece by IRC on what mortality surveys in the DRC tell us about the human costs of war. Other articles focus on sexual exploitation and food distribution in Burundi, drought programming in Kenya, lessons from a consortium approach to relief in Sudan, and the role of Japanese NGOs in Afghanistan. We hope you enjoy this edition of *Humanitarian Exchange*, and we welcome your feedback.

Tackling urban vulnerability: an operational framework for aid organisations

Christine Wamsler, Lund University

With increasing urbanisation, cities in the developing world are growing both in population and area. At least a billion people worldwide live in slums.¹ They are forced to accept dangerous and inhuman living conditions, in which any natural event is likely to become a disaster. Poor access to land, overcrowding and low-quality housing – related to a complex system of socio-political, institutional and economic processes – lie at the heart of urban disaster risk. Nevertheless, international aid organisations accord low priority to both urban issues and disaster risk reduction (RR). While the need to integrate RR within the work of aid organisations is generally acknowledged, little has been done to identify how this could be achieved. Related operational tools are urgently required.

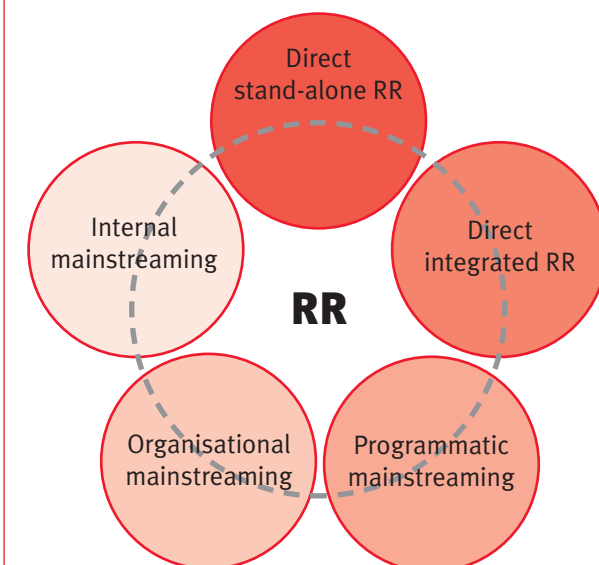
In February 2006, an operational framework for integrating RR into the work of aid organisations was published as a joint paper by the Benfield Hazard Research Centre in the UK and the Department of Housing Development and Management at Lund University in Sweden. Based on three years of research, the framework aims to support aid organisations with concrete tools and guidelines to:

- evaluate the relevance of integrating RR within their organisation;
- identify and prioritise the different options for integrating RR;
- formulate activities for the selected option(s);
- evaluate possibilities for financing these activities; and
- define an implementation strategy.

Although the operational framework was developed for development aid organisations, its underlying ideas and concepts also apply to organisations working in relief. The framework can be used within a variety of cultural and geographic contexts, and it is relevant to all types of natural hazard and disaster. In addition, it offers more detailed guidance for aid organisations engaging in social housing and settlement development planning by providing sector-specific reference activities.

To validate the framework, questionnaires were distributed to operational staff and programme managers in different aid organisations, and three workshops were held (in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Sweden). The workshop participants, who were drawn from aid organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, carried out practical exercises to apply the operational framework. They were then asked to evaluate whether the tool was comprehensible, comprehensive/complete, relevant and applicable/useful. On average, the rating for all four

Figure 1: Strategies for implementing risk reduction



aspects ranged between four and five (on a scale of one to five, five being the best). Finally, ways to surmount potential financial, political and institutional barriers to the implementation of the tool were discussed.

**at least a billion people
worldwide live in slums**

The framework is currently being tested in practice in Central America by FUSAI (Salvadoran Integral Assistance Foundation) and UN-HABITAT-ROLAC (UN Human Settlement Programme, Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean), and in El Salvador and the Philippines by PLAN INTERNATIONAL.

Five complementary strategies for integrating risk reduction

The operational framework provides five complementary strategies for integrating RR within aid organisations (see Figure 1). The five strategies are:

a) *Direct stand-alone RR*: This is the implementation of specific RR projects that are explicitly and directly aimed at reducing disaster risk through prevention, mitigation and/or preparedness. These stand-alone interventions are distinct, and they are implemented separately from other existing project work carried out by implementing organisations. The objective is explicitly to reduce disaster risk, for

¹ UN-HABITAT, *The Challenge of Slums* (London: Earthscan, 2003).

instance through establishing early-warning systems or institutional structures for risk reduction (e.g. specialised RR committees) and physical disaster mitigation (e.g. embankments to reduce flooding).

b) *Direct integrated RR*: This is the implementation of specific RR activities alongside, and as part of, other project work. The focus is still on direct and explicit RR through prevention, mitigation and/or preparedness, but with the difference that the work is carried out in conjunction with, and linked to, other project components. An example of this strategy would be the establishment of a local RR committee within the framework of a self-help housing project carried out by a social housing organisation.

c) *Programmatic mainstreaming*:² This is the modification of sector-specific project work in such a way as to reduce the likelihood of increasing vulnerability, and to maximise the project's potential to reduce risks. The focus is on the aid organisation's 'normal' project work, but in a way that takes into account the changing context created by the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters. In other words, the objective of programmatic mainstreaming is to ensure that ongoing work is relevant to the challenges presented by natural disasters. However, in contrast to the two strategies described above, the project's objectives do not focus on RR as such. An example of such a strategy could be a settlement upgrading project which adjusted its loan/credit system to the needs of vulnerable households living in a disaster-prone area.

d) *Organisational mainstreaming*: This is the modification of organisational management, policy and working structures for project implementation in order to back up and sustain project work in RR (direct and/or indirect), and to further institutionalise RR. If integrating RR in project work is to become a standard part of what an organisation does, then organisational systems and procedures need to be adjusted. The objective is to ensure that the implementing organisation is organised, managed and structured to guarantee the sustainable integration of RR within project work.

e) *Internal mainstreaming*: This is the modification of an aid organisation's functioning and internal policies in order to reduce its own vulnerability to impacts created by disasters. The focus is on the occurrence of disasters and their effect on organisations themselves, including staff and head and field offices. The objective is to ensure that the organisation can continue to operate effectively in the event of a disaster. In practice, internal mainstreaming has two elements: i) direct RR activities for staff and the physical aspects of the organisation's offices, including setting up emergency plans and retrofitting; and ii) modifying how the organisation is managed internally, for example in terms of personnel planning and budgeting.

What follows is a hypothetical example of how an aid organisation – a Mexican social housing organisation

called UNAGI – might be triggered to apply these five strategies to its work: In response to the increased funding for RR being offered by international donors, UNAGI employs a new staff member with expertise in RR, and designs and implements a pilot RR project. The project aims to raise community awareness about disaster risk through the distribution of leaflets and the establishment of local RR committees. Thus, UNAGI becomes engaged in the *stand-alone direct RR strategy*.

With the experience gained from the pilot project, UNAGI then starts to include RR activities in its ongoing housing projects. For instance, it begins to raise risk awareness alongside its community training for self-help housing. Thus, it becomes involved in the *direct integrated RR strategy*.

One year later, UNAGI's managers decide that all projects should take greater account of disasters, and should seek to maximise their positive effects on reducing risks. Accordingly, UNAGI carries out research analysing the links between its social housing activities and disaster risk. In one project area, it finds that basing housing credits on income capacity makes it impossible for the people most vulnerable to disasters to qualify for UNAGI projects. Without doing any direct RR work, UNAGI responds to this finding by offering partial housing subsidies and smaller credits for physical mitigation measures in existing houses. In another area, community research provides evidence that beneficiaries are vulnerable to disasters due to their dependency on informal vegetable trading, and that past housing projects had increased their socio-economic vulnerabilities by resettling them far from their income activities. It is also discovered that these housing projects used roof tiles that were not durable, and were very expensive. Acting on these findings, UNAGI sets up a local material production workshop for concrete roofing tiles, to provide a more disaster-resistant and cheaper construction material. At the same time, the workshop allows some households to diversify away from vegetable trading. In both project areas, advice on disaster-resistant construction techniques is also provided. In this way, UNAGI becomes involved in the *programmatic mainstreaming of RR*.

Over time, UNAGI realises that its various efforts in RR are not sustainable in the long term because they are not institutionalised and/or anchored within the organisation's general management and project planning cycle. It thus starts to engage in the *organisational mainstreaming of RR*. As an initial step, the organisation revises its policy to formalise its commitment to integrating RR, and develops a financial strategy to sustain this integration. In addition, risk, hazard and vulnerability assessments become routine tasks in the planning phase of all social housing projects.

Several months later, there is an earthquake in Mexico. Unexpectedly, UNAGI is affected: its head office is damaged, four staff members are severely injured and there are problems communicating with field offices. This forces the organisation to engage in the final strategy: *internal mainstreaming of RR*. A team is formed to predict

² Generally, 'mainstreaming' signifies the modification of a specific type of work (e.g. development or relief work) in order to take a new aspect/topic into account and to act indirectly upon it. Thus, mainstreaming does not mean completely changing an organisation's core functions and responsibilities; rather, it means viewing them from a different perspective, and carrying out necessary alterations as appropriate.

the likely impacts of disasters on the organisation's finances and human resources, analysing potential direct and indirect losses (e.g. costs related to damaged buildings or vehicles, reduced reputation, staff absence and sick leave). Based on this work, UNAGI acquires an organisational insurance policy and improves its working structure, installing an enhanced communications system, introducing better processes for information sharing and revising its workplace policy. In addition, the head office is retrofitted to become more disaster-resistant.

How to use the operational framework

Apart from the comprehensive explanation of the five strategies for RR integration, the operational framework provides two rapid assessment checklists which an aid organisation can use to evaluate the relevance of integrating RR into its work, and the importance of each strategy. Once the appropriate strategies are selected and prioritised, the framework provides tables for the formulation of related project activities. These include:

- a) input and process indicators to get the RR integration process started;
- b) input and process indicators in the form of benchmarks, i.e. the operational state which an organisation should seek to achieve;
- c) output indicators; and
- d) reference activities and recommendations.

In addition, guidelines are offered on how international aid organisations can support and encourage the implementation of the framework through their local partner organisations, and how national implementing organisations can sustain this work financially.

Donor support for integrating risk reduction

International donor organisations can pursue essentially three approaches in support of integrating RR. Within each of these approaches, there are three alternatives, giving a total of nine options.

Approach 1: Offering partner organisations training, technical support, links to specialists and funding for:

- a) direct RR;
- b) mainstreaming RR; or
- c) comprehensive RR integration (i.e. a) and b) combined), but leave the partner organisations to decide whether, how and to what extent to engage in RR.

Approach 2: Imposing funding conditions to enforce the implementation of:

- a) direct RR;
- b) mainstreaming RR; or
- c) the comprehensive integration of RR (i.e. a) and b) combined).

Approach 3: Offering programmes for which interested NGOs can apply, which include technical assistance and

seed grants, for the purpose of guiding and accompanying the process of:

- a) integrating direct RR;
- b) mainstreaming RR; or
- c) the comprehensive integration of RR (i.e. a) and b) combined).

To date, the first choice of international organisations seems to be 1a). This leads to unsustainable risk reduction activities: once donor funding ceases, RR activities end. International funding organisations urgently need to recognise the importance of mainstreaming, and must be willing to support it financially.

Conclusion

If aid organisations continue to accord low priority to urban issues and are reluctant to look beyond the relief and reconstruction stages after a natural disaster occurs, the urban poor – the ones most severely hit – will remain caught in a vicious cycle of repeated disasters, relief and reconstruction. The operational framework presented here provides a basis for the sustainable integration of RR within aid organisations' work. It is a significant step towards reducing the vulnerability of the urban poor, providing a comprehensive extension of existing RR frameworks and concepts. It includes and integrates direct RR and the mainstreaming of RR, differentiates between three levels of mainstreaming and tackles physical, socio-economic, environmental and institutional aspects at both project and organisational level.

Christine Wamsler (christine.wamsler@hdm.lth.se), an architect and urban planner, is a researcher in the Department of Housing Development and Management, Lund University, Sweden. She also works as a consultant for international aid organisations. The joint Benfield–Lund working paper is Christine Wamsler, *Operational Framework for Integrating Risk Reduction for Aid Organisations Working in Human Settlement Development*, BHRC–HDM Working Paper No. 14, February 2006, www.benfieldhrc.org/disaster_studies/working_papers/workingpaper14.pdf.

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