



DeCID Thematic Brief N° 2

Children and Urban Displacement

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Co-designing social infrastructure with children affected by displacement (DeCID).

The DeCID project aims to develop a new approach for the participatory design of social infrastructure for children in urban areas affected by displacement.

In partnership with humanitarian actors, local communities, municipalities and academics, the DeCID team will develop a practical toolkit to support those involved in the co-design. DeCID is a project led by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit (UCL) and CatalyticAction, and funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund.

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Photo cover: children playing in Telyani informal tented settlement in Bar Elias, Lebanon. By CatalyticAction

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KEY POINTS

- The number of displaced people around the world is at a record high as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, disasters, and human rights violations.
- Almost 15.9 million (61%) of all refugees were in protracted situations¹ at the end of 2018. Of this number, 5.8 million were in a situation lasting 20 years or more.
- In 2018, the proportion of the refugee population based in urban settings was estimated to be at 61%.
- 32.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) reside in large, medium and small cities, making up 80% of global cases.
- In urban areas, displaced people often end up living with the urban poor, who are also socially and economically marginalised, in peripheral slums.
- On a global scale, nearly 31 million children had been forcibly displaced by 2017. This number includes 13 million refugee children, representing approximately 52% of the world's refugee population in 2017, up from 41% in 2009. It also includes an estimated 17 million children displaced by violence and conflict within their own countries, and approximately 936,000 asylum-seeking children.
- In different contexts of displacement, children constitute a large proportion of the total displaced population.

On a global scale, nearly 31 million children had been forcibly displaced by 2017



INTRODUCTION

The global phenomenon of displacement continues to be on the rise and is taking on a “forced” and “protracted” nature. It has also become predominantly “urban”, which presents particular challenges for displaced persons’ access to services, including children. Displaced children are especially vulnerable in such contexts, putting their health, education, and security at risk.


This thematic brief sets out the broad context of displacement, with a specific focus on urban areas. It further reflects on the service provision and access to services of displaced persons and children, and on what has been done at the global level to respond to challenges of displacement in urban settings. **▀**

¹ A situation where 25,000 or more refugees of the same nationality have been in exile for more than 5 years in a given country.

CONTEXT OF DISPLACEMENT: “FORCED” AND “PROTRACTED” NATURE

By the end of 2018, almost 70.8 million people were displaced globally as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. Among them are 41.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 25.9 million refugees, and 3.5 million asylum seekers. More than two-thirds of refugees come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia (UNHCR, 2019a).

The majority of displaced people move to neighbouring countries. 80% of refugees, for example, have settled in countries neighbouring their countries of origin. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this percentage includes both refugees and migrants from Venezuela (UNHCR, 2019a).

Largely, the most common drivers of these forced displacement crises have been political, resulting from state fragility, weak governance, and corruption, and have been highly linked to protracted displacement. Data from 1978–2014 suggests that less than one in 40 refugee crises are resolved within three years (Crawford *et al.*, 2015) – most crises last for decades. The UNHCR indicates that almost 15.9 million (61%) of all refugees were in protracted situations at the end of 2018, and of this number, 5.8 million were in a situation lasting 20 years or more (UNHCR, 2019a). Displacement among IDPs also lasts years. It was found that, in two-thirds of countries monitored for conflict-induced displacement in 2014, at least 50% of IDPs had been displaced for more than three years (Crawford *et al.*, 2015). 

DISPLACEMENT TO URBAN AREAS

Where and why displaced people settle in urban areas

Globally, displaced people are increasingly living in urban areas. The proportion of the refugee population that is urban-based was estimated at 61% in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019a). 32.2 million IDPs (80% of the global caseload) reside in large, medium and small cities (Muggah and Abdenur, 2018). The largest urban refugee population (96%) is reported to be in Turkey where the vast majority of refugees were found to be living in urban or peri-urban areas (UNHCR, 2019b). The refugee population in urban areas has different demographic characteristics than in rural areas. A UNHCR report revealed that, among the adult population, there was a higher proportion of men in urban refugee communities (58%) than in rural refugee communities (47%) (UNHCR, 2019a).

Urban settings pose particular constraints that affect obtaining up-to-date and representative data on displaced people. These constraints can be logistical (such as resource constraints and security risks for data collection), political (such as bringing stakeholders together), or technical (such as deciding on methodologies for data collection) (Weihmayer, Lundkvist-Houndoumadi and Kivelä, 2019). According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), more reliable, timely and accessible

data is essential for understanding how displacement affects displaced persons, and for putting in place related policies and programmes. It was found that age-disaggregated data on displaced persons remains incomplete, with 20% of countries with data on conflict-related IDPs disaggregating the data by age and only around 56% of refugee data including information on age. For displaced children, data gaps are even larger with lack of information on “age and sex; where they come from, where they are going and why they move; whether they move with their families or alone, [...], what their vulnerabilities are, what they need, and how migration and asylum policies affect them” (UNICEF *et al.*, 2018).

Urban areas offer prospects of employment, but also provide security that may not be found in rural or camp settings.

For displaced individuals, urban areas offer prospects of employment, but also provide security that may not be found in rural or camp settings (IDMC, 2018). These areas also provide access to informal labour opportunities and to essential services that might be unavailable elsewhere, and facilitate the ability of displaced persons to connect to dense social networks. In addition, the availability of humanitarian assistance in certain settings might also be considered by displaced people when deciding to move to (or within) a city.

In urban areas, displaced people often end up living in peripheral slums with the urban poor, who are also socially and economically marginalised (ICRC, 2018). In these settings, the living conditions are generally poor, with substandard shelters, overcrowding, and limited access to water, sanitation, and urban services. The levels of poverty among displaced people are also high.

The migration of Venezuelans, due to reasons related to insecurity and violence, food shortages, lack of access to services, and loss of income, is recorded as the largest in the recent history of Latin America and the Caribbean. Currently, there are over 4.8 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela around the world, including more than 3.9 million in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As a result of the Venezuela migration crisis, an estimated 1.1 million children, including children uprooted from Venezuela, returnees, and those living in host and transit communities, needed protection and access to basic services across Latin America and the Caribbean in 2019.

Spotlight on... Venezuelans in neighbouring countries

Sources: Response for Venezuelans (2019) Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela: January - December 2019; UNHCR (2019) Venezuela situation; Response for Venezuelans (2020) Coordination platform for refugees and migrants of Venezuela; UNICEF (2019) Venezuela migrant crisis.


Service provision and access to services for displaced persons in urban areas

Levels of service provision to displaced persons vary considerably across urban areas. They depend on many factors that are related, but are not limited, to the “size of the city, the number of displaced and their proportion to total urban populations, as well as their profile, the infrastructure of a city and its governance capacity” (UNHCR, 2018).

In humanitarian crises, and given that displaced people often settle in poor urban slums and, in many cases, in neighbouring countries alongside their host communities, the capacities of first responders might be generally insufficient to absorb large influxes of people. These first responders are frequently national and municipal authorities, along with civil society. While national authorities confer refugee status and pass domestic legislation regulating their rights, municipalities manage services and security, such as health and social welfare.

To address the needs of displaced persons in urban areas, a range of other stakeholders have responded by coordinating multi-stakeholder approaches with national and local actors. These stakeholders mainly include international organisations, such as UNHCR, the World Bank, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, UN-Habitat, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as non-governmental and other civil society organisations.

Although it depends on the context, these organisations have tailored their programmes to specific urban contexts to ensure the access of displaced persons to a range of services related to basic needs, child and social protection, health, and education, etc. They have also been working at improving the capacities of public services. For example, in Uganda’s capital Kampala, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) engaged in a partnership with Kampala Capital City Authority to strategise for the inclusion of displaced populations in city plans and goals. In other situations, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, efforts to address displacement in urban areas were integrated into plans at regional levels. The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, co-led by UNHCR and UNDP, and in collaboration with the national government in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan, brought together over 270 partners (UN agencies, NGOs, etc.) to provide coordinated responses to Syrian refugees. For the more recent Venezuelan crisis, the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan was also put in place by UNHCR and IOM to form a coordinated roadmap for action to respond to the humanitarian needs of the refugees and migrants from Venezuela.

Yet, the characteristics of urban contexts continue to provide challenges to responding to displacement in urban contexts. Some services in cities may not be accessible to refugees because they are too expensive (or the cost of transport is too high), not in close distance to where they reside, insensitive to their culture, or because no translation services are available (UNHCR, 2011). In urban areas, as opposed to camps where registration of displaced people is sometimes considered the only requirement for accessing services, identification documents are generally required for displaced people to access services. The lack of such documentation might lead to families being refused access to health care, humanitarian aid, and secure housing. 

CHILDREN AND DISPLACEMENT

Child displacement in numbers

On a global scale, nearly **31 million children had been forcibly displaced by 2017**. This number includes 13 million refugee children, representing approximately 52% of the world's refugee population in 2017, up from 41% in 2009 (UNHCR, 2017a). It also includes an estimated 17 million children displaced by violence and conflict within their own countries, and approximately 936,000 asylum-seeking children, representing nearly 42.5% and 30.1% of the total population of each category, respectively. More children have been displaced by natural disasters and other crises, yet they are not included in this total. Three-quarters of all child refugees originate from only five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia (UNICEF, 2018). These estimations are based on the latest data on global child displacement, and do not include more recent figures on children in displacement from subsequent years, such as the number of refugee and migrant children from Venezuela that has significantly increased over the last two years.

Children constitute a large proportion of the total displaced population across different contexts of displacement. In the Syrian refugee crisis, in 2017 nearly 45% of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt were under the age of 14, 53% aged between 15 and 64, and approximately 2% aged 65 years and above. No significant differences were found between the proportion of genders among refugee children across various age groups (UNHCR, 2017b).

Conditions of displaced children

The consequences of displacement on children's health, education, and security can be severe. The housing conditions in which displaced settle, commonly characterised by minimum hygienic practices and unsanitary conditions, are harmful to children's health as they increase the

Lebanon currently hosts the largest number of refugees per capita, with an estimated 1.5 million registered and unregistered Syrian refugees. The total number is based on government estimates, and does not accurately represent the exact number of refugees in the country.

Among the 914,648 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR, approximately 56% are children below the age of 18. Many of these children are experiencing difficulties in accessing public services, while others have been subject to child labour or have been vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, such as human trafficking and early marriage. Unaccompanied and separated children, married girls, girls with disabilities, and socially marginalised groups were reported to be among those most at risk. Many have also been experiencing civil documentation challenges. More than half of refugee children in Lebanon between the ages of 3-18 years remain out of school, with the highest percentage among those aged between 12 and 18 years.

Spotlight on... Syrian refugee children in Lebanon

Sources: UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP (2018) VASyR 2018: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon; UNHCR (2020) Operational portal - Refugee situations: Syria Regional Refugee Response; UN, & Government of Lebanon (2018) LCRP 2017-2020: Protection Sector chapter - 2018 update.

risk of infectious diseases. The loss of income that often accompanies displacement can force families to send their children to work rather than school. In many developing countries, internally displaced children work in the informal market, which is typically unregulated and often involves illegal activities, putting the children at risk of violence and abuse. 21% of surveyed families in urban Afghanistan had at least one working child under the age of 14. In the cities of Dhaka and Bukavu, it was reported that the need for survival has pushed some displaced girls into prostitution (UNICEF, 2019b).

In crises of displacement, children are also at an increased risk of (physical and emotional) sexual and gender-based violence and forced and child marriage (UNHCR, 2018). Marrying off children under the age of 18 is considered one coping strategy for displaced persons in need of financial support and social stability.

The physical security of displaced children can also be threatened. Boys are especially at risk of recruitment by armed groups in situations of conflict or violence-related displacement. Young displaced Iraqis and Ukrainians have been reported to have enrolled in armed groups in exchange for a salary, as no other livelihood opportunities were available (Save the Children, 2016).

To read more about the impact of displacement on children, and how to work with children in displacement, please refer to DeCID's Thematic Brief N° 1: 'Working With Children Affected by Displacement'

Service provision and access to services for displaced children in urban areas


Given that in urban areas, access to services generally requires identification documents, the lack of documentation, which might have been lost due to displacement, or the inability to register a child might leave children with limited access to the services they require. In many contexts, children without birth certificates cannot access health services. In Uganda, for example, ration cards may be distributed only to IDPs living in camps, and not to displaced children living outside of camps in urban settings (Dolan, Refstie and Okello, 2010). Without legal documentation, families and their children might also face difficulties in accessing adequate housing, increasing their risk of evictions. Evictions do not only lead to a loss of income, but also negatively impact children who often must change schools. Ensuring the access of children to legal documentation is largely the responsibility of governments hosting children. In Colombia, the government took major administrative measures that allowed children born to Venezuelan parents in Colombia to receive Colombian nationality through the Civil Birth Registry.

Several other factors also affect children's access to services in urban areas, such as families' financial struggles, the cost of transportation to services, discrimination, and language barriers.

Different approaches have been implemented to respond to the specific needs of children in urban settings, depending on the contexts. Working in humanitarian or development contexts, within or across national borders, with children with different statuses (refugee child, internally displaced child, etc.), will determine which legal frameworks and protection coordination mechanisms are most relevant (Save the Children, 2018). Approaches also vary according to the "willingness", "abilities",

and “capacities” of governments to care and protect children (Barrett, 2019). In different contexts, these approaches rely on a broad set of actors, and include national governments, UN agencies (mainly, UNICEF and UNHCR), international NGOs (such as Save the Children, and IRC), local actors (including municipalities, civil society organisations, etc.), and the private sector.


Largely, international and local actors responding to the needs of displaced children work on four areas: providing basic services (such as education, health and nutrition, basic needs, shelter, and water, sanitation, and hygiene); providing protection; advocacy; and assessments and monitoring and evaluation activities.

Approaches to respond to the needs of displaced children might be integrated as part of response plans at the national or regional levels, or implemented through collaborative efforts between different humanitarian and development partners and national governments and local actors. For example, in Turkey, in order to address some of the socio-economic barriers that hindered the access of refugee children to school, a Conditional Cash Transfer for Education programme was implemented by UNICEF, the Turkish Red Crescent, and the Ministry of Family Labour and Social Services to assist refugee children in schools with costs such as rent, utilities and food (Inter-Agency Coordination, 2020). A further interesting initiative responding to the education needs of children and migrants took place in Johannesburg, where a number of schools hosting displaced children partnered with NGOs and the private sector to provide an afternoon bridging education program for refugee and migrant children living in the inner-city suburbs (Three2Six, 2020). When it comes to protection, UNICEF, UNHCR, and the Agency for Refugees and Returnees Affairs in Ethiopia established more than a dozen One-Stop-Centres for child survivors of violence in various refugee hosting areas. To improve protective services for children on the move in Africa, UNICEF developed the software platform Primero in humanitarian and development contexts to help manage protection-related data, with tools that facilitate case management, incident monitoring, and family tracing and reunification (UNICEF, 2019a). 

WHO AND WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES OF DISPLACEMENT IN URBAN AREAS AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL:

Recognising the need to work on adequate responses to the challenges presented by forced displacement in urban areas, different policies and humanitarian/development frameworks have been put into place by the main humanitarian and development actors at the global level:

- UNHCR’s Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas (2009), which set out key principles for UNHCR’s engagement with displaced populations in urban settings;

- UNHCR’s Policy on Alternatives to Camps (2014), which recognised that many refugees live outside camp environments, including cities;
- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), which recognised the central role that cities play in building safe, inclusive, and resilient societies and in managing displacement;
- The UN’s New Urban Agenda (2016), which presented principles for the planning, construction, development, management, and improvement of urban areas;
- UNHCR’s policy on cash-based interventions (2016), acknowledged that gender-sensitive cash-based assistance can help meet the needs and strengthen the self-reliance of displaced people in urban areas;
- The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), which recognised that children are central to migration management;
- The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and its programme of action described in UNHCR’s Global Compact on Refugees (2018). The Compact builds on UNHCR’s engagement in urban areas and identifies cities and city networks as key stakeholders in refugee responses;
- The Global Parliament of Mayors, which adopted a declaration in which mayors committed to implement the global compact on refugees in their cities. 

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