

B.5 Urban settings

By Jim Kennedy



Mattresses are hung out to dry after being soaked with rain during the night. This unfinished, multi-storey building in Duhok city, Kurdistan, provides limited, temporary shelter for refugees. Photo: Wan Sophonpanich.

Dynamic populations

Whether people are displaced or non-displaced as a result of a disaster or conflict is one of the fundamental ways in which humanitarian actors have sought to frame methods of Shelter response for disaster-affected populations. In the Sphere Project and many other key sectoral guidelines, the main categories of settlement typologies cascade down from this initial division, and continued displacement can be an indicator of vulnerability, and a key to understanding how far from durable shelter a disaster-affected household might be.

Many of the settlement typology names were created with urban populations in mind: 'apartment tenant' in the list of non-displaced options, could after all only occur in settlements large enough to have multi-unit housing. The full list of settlement typologies then form the foundation for the continuing development within the shelter sector of appropriate support responses: being able to use this terminology with regards to disaster-affected populations has been instrumental in discussions in recent years about a variety of support methods described in the case studies of this book, including rental support, upgrading for unfinished houses, and support for host families.

However, these useful terms are also easy to use poorly. Too often, humanitarian organisations assess households or communities as being displaced, but then assume that those households will move no further – unless as a direct result of the humanitarians' own programming. A brief review of twenty assessment tools commonly used by the

Shelter sector shows that the majority of them do not have any questions regarding intentions for future movement, or for the future shelter intentions of the households being interviewed.

In reality, affected populations are not static. Not all households will just choose just one form of post-disaster shelter solution, staying in that shelter until a more durable solution is arrived at. Furthermore, not all of the reasons for moving from one shelter location to another are driven by shelter considerations such as upgrading of the shelter – access to livelihoods or access to education may be decisive factors.

Other considerations in post-disaster urban responses might include:

Changes in patterns of displacement

What have been the patterns of movement, migration or displacement within the city before the disaster, and how have they changed since the disaster, and why? Were people moving around a lot beforehand? Who was moving around the most? Was this forced movement, or was it due to livelihoods choices, and how have these movement patterns changed since the disaster?

There may have been many households who were not living in single, stable housing situations even before the emergency, and there may have been many households which were not living as constant, cohesive single units all

under one roof before the emergency. The emergency, and any subsequent movement of people, was placed upon an already fluid – rather than static – situation.

Seasonal and long-term trends in population movements

What were either the patterns of seasonal migration between city and countryside before the disaster, or the general trends of urbanisation – and how have those been affected by the disaster, and the disaster response?

Micro-displacement

To what degree is there ‘micro-displacement’ within neighbourhoods? Or, is there the presence of the phenomenon seen in Port-au-Prince after the 2010 earthquake, of people sleeping in camps, but taking the risk of being caught in an aftershock by going back to damaged homes to go to the toilet or bathroom, rather than using those provided in the camp? In this book, case study A.17 from Nigeria gives an example of people choosing to voluntarily live in poor-quality shelter for a year so that they could better calculate household budgets, in order to decide on what type of upgrade to undertake.

Fragmented displacement

And, what about when the displacement is not undertaken by the whole household together, but actually results in the splitting up of the household, across a number of locations at once? Not all households which then split up, keep on being split up in the same way for the entire duration of the period until a durable solution is arrived at, as different household members come and go at different times.

Being ‘displaced or non-displaced’ may - at the same time – be different according to different sectors of humanitarian response: a household may have moved away from their old house (so, ‘displaced’ according to Shelter categorisation), but the children may still be close enough to continue to attend their old school (so, ‘non-displaced’ according to an emergency Education categorisation, perhaps).

Breaking down the concept of displacement

It has taken the Shelter sector quite a while to realise that in some ways, the concept of ‘Shelter’ was too big a catch-all to be useful in all instances, and that it needed to be unpicked into more nuanced sub-definitions, in order to facilitate thinking about how to usefully respond.

There will continue to be a real value in trying to do a constructive unpicking for the word ‘displacement’ in urban areas. Humanitarian or development actors have limited access to – and probably lack capacity to analyse

– community profiles that would allow adaption to more tailored shelter options.

Work continues within the Shelter sector in order to further develop the palette of implementation methods available, but, as ever, there have been times that the Shelter sector might be accused of not having used the already-available tools intelligently enough – particularly when it comes to urban situations. There have been times when we haven’t used the existing conceptual tools in a way which is nuanced enough to provide the flexibility and capacity to give support to households who are part of a dynamic shelter process.

Examples in this book of where a flexible approach has been adopted include in Fiji (A.7), where following the principles of ‘transitional’ shelter, “temporary” moveable shelters can be taken by beneficiaries to new plot, or in Kurdistan (A.9), where some of the materials purchasable by vouchers could be used as portable investments by the beneficiaries.