Applying camp management methods to urban displacement in Afghanistan

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Applying key elements of the traditional camp management approach can enhance communication, community participation and coordination in out-of-camp urban contexts.

Camp management, as a standalone sector, was born out of the need to assign responsibility for ensuring a coordinated, cross-sectoral, community-based approach at the level of a single camp. However, it is estimated that a majority of displaced people now live outside formal camps, with many residing in urban areas – either among the host community or in self-settled collective sites within or on the outskirts of cities and towns.[1] Humanitarian and development actors are grappling with how to adapt to the urbanisation challenge in general but the shift to out-of-camp urban displacement presents a particular challenge to agencies working within the camp management sector.

The experience and methods of camp management, however, have the potential to help address some of the core challenges of responding to urban out-of-camp displacement. This was a key finding of a desk review conducted by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster in 2014, which found that CCCM's community-centred methodologies and tools – particularly those pertaining to communication, community engagement and coordination – were of considerable use in responding to the needs of displaced people living outside camps.[2]

Some agencies have begun to pilot approaches that draw on the skill set of camp management to respond to the challenges of urban displacement. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) was one of the first agencies to develop such approaches, including in Afghanistan where it targeted urban neighbourhoods in and around the eastern cities of Jalalabad, Asadabad and Mihtarlam.

The intervention was prompted primarily by the return in 2016–17 of more than one million Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Many of these returnees had spent their entire lives in Pakistan and as such had little or no knowledge of their native lands, and most could not return to their areas of origin due to insecurity or a dearth of livelihoods opportunities and services. In the absence of reception camps, large numbers of families settled in or on the outskirts of towns and cities in the hope of accessing assistance, jobs and services. Returnees rented rooms or stayed with extended family in over-crowded shelters or installed makeshift shelters on private land. The displacement landscape was further complicated by new

and protracted internal displacement, as well as by profound under-development among host communities which added to rural-to-urban migration movements.

Similar needs, different context

NRC in Afghanistan decided to apply its camp management methods to an urban out-of-camp setting using an area-based approach – that is, focusing on a defined geographical urban area in lieu of a camp. The camp management approach addresses needs that are just as pertinent in out-of-camp settings: access to information and feedback mechanisms; structures for community participation and self-management; and coordination between multiple stakeholders to ensure efficient and effective service delivery. In fact, these needs are often even more pertinent in the urban environment, as illustrated by the Afghanistan example.

NRC found that access to **information** about humanitarian services was significantly lacking: 79% of displaced women and 52% of displaced men could not name any humanitarian service provider. This was the result of a limited presence of humanitarian field staff (especially female), with offices located far from the areas in which vulnerable people were living, and with little visibility or community sensitisation about the agencies working in the area. Moreover, displaced persons faced complex and opaque procedures for accessing humanitarian assistance: 68% were unaware of how organisations chose whom to help and 90% did not know how to make a complaint, raise a question or give feedback about services. By comparison, in most formal camp environments, humanitarian agencies have a daily or permanent presence in the camps with clearly identifiable staff, and their offices or community spaces are located within or close to the camp. Moreover, assistance packages are generally distributed to the entire camp population, and thus the inhabitants need not take proactive steps to register for assistance.

Second, in terms of **community engagement** in out-of-camp contexts, humanitarian responders typically relied on the community's existing but unrepresentative male community leaders to obtain information about needs and to identify and select recipients of assistance; displaced people, particularly women and the most vulnerable, are often excluded from any representation. By contrast, in the formal camp environment the camp management agency is mandated to ensure the establishment of and support to mechanisms for representative community governance. Since no single agency formally has this mandate in an out-of-camp context, it can lead to a lack of, or incoherent, approach to community engagement. This risks reinforcing harmful power structures and can undermine attempts to deliver an accountable and principled humanitarian response.

Finally, in terms of **coordination**, lack of information about the location and needs of the displaced population, particularly the most vulnerable, was a significant challenge in the context of responses to Afghan returnees. Displacement tracking was limited, since it was based on the intended final destinations of returnees which were recorded at their point of entry but not consistently followed up. This led to most humanitarian agencies relying on local host community elders to locate returnee and internally displaced households – a process that was undermined by exploitation and corruption. Coordination efforts were further hampered by a lack of service mapping and inadequate local-level coordination among a plethora of stakeholders with varying mandates and interests.

Although operating in urban neighbourhoods rather than formal camps, the out-of-camp approach retained its focus on developing structures and mechanisms to ensure communication with communities, community participation and engagement, and support to coordination. There were three inter-linking components: community outreach teams, community centres and neighbourhood committees. The community outreach teams collected information on needs, disseminated information on services, undertook referrals and facilitated localised coordination; they also established, trained

Neighbourhood committee members participate in a meeting to identify community challenges, organised by NRC in Jalalabad. *Why are their faces pixellated? See www.fmreview.org/photo-policy.*

and supported neighbourhood committees to do the same. The community centres, meanwhile, provided an accessible location where community members (displaced and non-displaced) could access information and referrals, and where coordination and community meetings could take place.

Outcomes: what worked?

Some encouraging results emerged. First, the approach provided an accessible platform for information provision. More than 57% of neighbourhood residents had come into contact with at least one of the components of the project – whether community outreach teams, community centres and/or neighbourhood committees – and 82% of these said their access to information had improved.

Most people (88%) coming to the community centres came for information – indicating how significant this need was – and visitors particularly appreciated the centres as a source of information that did not rely on local community leaders (whom they often did not trust) and which allowed them face-to-face access to agencies. The neighbourhood committees were also of value in reaching out to displaced community members, with more people (and particularly more women) aware of them than of the community centres. Moreover, neighbourhood committees – which comprised both displaced and host community members – also provided a way for communities to participate in identifying needs and implementing solutions; more than 50% of them solved one or more of the problems they had identified, including those pertaining to water supply, education, infrastructure and health facilities.

In terms of coordination, the approach was able to match eligible vulnerable beneficiaries with available services and protection, and to leverage additional service provision for individuals and communities that might otherwise have been left behind. This was done through local-level coordination meetings involving neighbourhood committees and a range of local organisations, authorities, informal community leaders and non-governmental organisations. The regular presence of community outreach teams in targeted neighbourhoods as well as at community centres also provided an entry point for community members to access service providers and vice versa. Eighty per cent of service providers engaged through the project reported that it gave them improved knowledge of humanitarian needs, and 62% felt it improved their access to populations in need, while 40% specifically mentioned that the engagement helped them to target assistance more appropriately and to avoid duplication. Moreover, the approach was able to link neighbourhood committees with proposed development initiatives to ensure displaced community members were included in the planning and implementation of these projects.

Challenges to be addressed, lessons to be learned

Many of the key challenges and lessons learned from implementation of the approach in Afghanistan are applicable to other urban out-of-camp contexts. Three of these are highlighted here.

First, there was a lack of clarity in the humanitarian architecture with regard to coordination of the out-of-camp displacement response; this led to multiple agencies operating with overlapping responsibilities and unclear mandates, and to disjointed humanitarian assistance procedures. This made it extremely challenging for NRC to provide clear and helpful information to community members, to ensure the recognition and legitimacy of the neighbourhood committees, and to hold duty bearers to account. Such responsibilities are much more straightforward to implement in a formal camp, where the mandate of a camp management agency is clearer and more widely recognised.

Second, implementation of the approach in Afghanistan demonstrated that for area-based approaches to be successful, they require a narrow geographical remit, which poses a challenge for scalability. Initially, the community centres had catchment populations of tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of people. As this proved too large for a community-focused area-based approach, the mobile outreach and community engagement elements of the approach had to be concentrated on smaller neighbourhoods within the wider catchment areas. Each community centre could then function as a central hub for coordination within and between multiple neighbourhoods in the vicinity. However, the community outreach teams were stretched across a large number of neighbourhoods and could not ensure a consistent quality of response. Moreover, some vulnerable neighbourhoods remained unassisted, thereby contributing to inequalities between neighbourhoods.

Third, the Afghanistan experience illustrated the challenge of engaging with local and national authorities.

The complex power dynamics between and within the different authorities, as well as their occasional interference in humanitarian response efforts, made it difficult to collaborate meaningfully with them, and all but impossible to establish a structured approach in which their role in (or even ownership of) local coordination mechanisms would be institutionalised and sustainable. Engaging with authorities requires humanitarian staff to have specific expertise and a certain degree of status or seniority.[3] It also requires a wider consensus among humanitarian and development actors over how to coordinate and collaborate with local and national authorities in urban environments.

The adaptation of the camp management approach to urban out-of-camp contexts is a work in progress, but experience from Afghanistan shows that its practical methods for enhancing two-way communication, structured community participation and localised multi-sectoral coordination could provide the key to addressing some of the most pressing challenges of displacement in towns and cities.

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1. Reliable data on the proportion of out-of-camp or urban displaced are not currently available. Sources tend to cite a figure of between 60% and 80%. For example, in its 2018 *Global Trends* report, UNHCR cites a figure of 60% but this only represents those whose location is known: bit.ly/UNHCR-Global-Trends-2018 Meanwhile, IDMC in its 2019 *Global Report on Internal Displacement* cites 60% to 80% but notes the lack of strong evidence to support this figure: bit.ly/IDMC-GRID-2019-urban For more information, please contact the author.

2. Global CCCM Cluster (2014) *Desk Review: Urban Displacement & Outside of Camp* bit.ly/CCCM-DeskReview-2014

3. For more on the competencies of staff working in urban environments see Ely A et al (2019) *Urban Competency Framework*, Global Alliance for Urban Crises bit.ly/Urban-Competency-2019

4. NRC's out-of-camp project in Afghanistan was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, IOM and the US Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.