



United Nations

UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement



Event Report

Internal Displacement in an Increasingly Urbanized World: *Challenges and Opportunities*

April 2021

Overview

On 19 April 2021, the Secretariat of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement co-hosted a roundtable discussion involving over 40 urban and forced displacement experts from municipal governments, financial and technical partners, and academia. Organized in close coordination with co-hosts UN-Habitat, the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the roundtable was designed to help inform the Panel's understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities presented by internal displacement in urban contexts around the world.

The Panel was represented by two of its members, Ms. Paula Gaviria, and Mr. Per Heggnes. The session was also attended by the Head of the Panel Secretariat, Mr. George Okoth-Obbo. Mr. Giovanni Cassani of the Secretariat moderated the event, which was organized around two main themes:

- Theme 1: Development approaches to urban displacement—Recognizing that (protracted) urban displacement is a development issue and should not be addressed as solely a humanitarian crisis.
- Theme 2: Managing a city with displacement challenges—Bringing in approaches and technical expertise from non-crisis contexts, in support of sustainable and equitable urban development.

Prior to the event, participants received a background note with a set of propositions and discussion questions related to each of these themes and were asked to come prepared to discuss and debate.

Introduction

Following opening remarks from the Secretariat, Dr. Isis Nunez Ferrera of JIPS set the stage for the event, noting that it built on a series of six municipal-level consultations that the Secretariat and its partners had undertaken during February and March 2021. These virtual exchanges involved municipal officials in Somalia (Mogadishu), Colombia (Medellin), Burkina Faso (Kaya, Dori, Kongoussi and Tougouri), Iraq (Mosul), Ukraine (Luhansk Oblast) and Honduras (San Pedro Sula). Representatives from Mogadishu and Medellin participated in the roundtable, and the lessons from each of the consultations were included into the design and execution of the event to give voice to local authorities' views of urban internal displacement at the global level. As noted

by Dr. Nunez Ferrera, the roundtable organization also built on an official submission that the partners had previously submitted to the Secretariat, which drew on their research and programs in urban displacement contexts around the world. (See the original submission [here](#)).

Theme 1

Theme 1 was moderated by Dr. Lucy Earle, Principal Researcher in the Human Settlements Group of IIED, who began by presenting the central propositions of the roundtable: that there are unique features to urban internal displacement; that these unique features demand a fundamental rethink of how humanitarian and development programming is delivered in urban displacement contexts; and that this rethink should reconceptualize internal displacement in cities as an “accelerated version of an inevitable and widespread trend towards urbanization”.

Throughout the two-hour session, there was broad agreement with these overarching propositions and a detailed discussion of the implications that this shift in framing has for humanitarian and development actors. The following sub-topics generated particularly fruitful exchanges and insights within the context of Theme 1.

Central Role of Local Governments in Responding to Urban Displacement

Multiple participants referenced the centrality of local governments in responding to urban displacement within their jurisdictions. Municipal officials are typically the primary responders to displacement events, serving on the “front lines” of each crisis and bearing the brunt of the stresses that such population movements imply. Given their on-the-ground presence and their legitimacy as local political leaders, there was consensus that these actors should be much more fully integrated into international and national government responses to urban internal displacement. While progress has been made in this area over the past decade, various participants highlighted how programming on urban internal displacement—and international humanitarian initiatives in particular—needs to be transformed to adequately incorporate local governments’ viewpoints, plans and needs.

Potential solutions to these challenges offered during the debate included providing dedicated capacity building and technical assistance to municipal officials as part of humanitarian project design, as well as linking humanitarian programs to longer-term development and technical assistance programs (see discussion of the Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding Nexus below). It was also suggested that humanitarians and local municipal officials can both benefit from relatively simple efforts to foster mutual understanding; humanitarian actors should thus learn about existing urban management systems from municipalities, and municipalities can gain better understanding of humanitarian imperatives and principles.

IDPs and the Urban Poor

During Theme 1, there was an in-depth discussion of the linkages and overlaps between urban IDPs and urban poor within host communities. Participants spoke at length about the importance of striking a balance between recognizing that IDPs can have specific vulnerabilities and needs (e.g. protection issues, food insecurity, loss of livelihood opportunities; need for support to return to areas of origin), and the need to support the urban poor more broadly. Several complementary

lenses through which to view the issue were proposed to resolve this ostensible tradeoff. One, which particularly resonated with participants, was viewing urban displacement as a challenge that demands the promotion of effective urban citizenship. Urban IDPs are full citizens of the country and so, from a city perspective, the distinction between IDPs and urban poor is an artificial and potentially counterproductive one (such as when it fuels tensions between IDPs and host communities when one group receives benefits not available to the other). As one representative from a municipal government put it, there is a need to move away from viewing urban internal displacement as a humanitarian issue, towards seeing it as a *city issue*. To the extent that IDPs do retain particular vulnerabilities that need to be addressed, it was noted that using the lens of social inclusion and community-driven solidarity mechanism could help balance competing needs and identify mutually beneficial investments. Similarly, the representative of the World Bank described the “people-in-place framework” that it has developed to grapple with urban forced displacement. This framework advocates combining investments in the municipality benefiting residents irrespective of displacement status, with an approach that also applies individual beneficiary targeting for the displaced.

Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus

The roundtable also featured in-depth reflections on how to operationalize the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus in urban contexts, and to use this paradigm to facilitate the coordinated programming that all agreed was needed—particularly in instances of protracted displacement in urban contexts.

One key insight from this discussion was the tendency of international humanitarian actors to conflate cities *located in a crisis* with cities *in crisis*. Cities in the former category tend to have functioning—albeit strained—urban systems and thus receive IDPs because of the relatively favorable conditions they offer to displaced households. In the latter case, cities are themselves directly affected, and establishing parallel service delivery and assistance systems may be warranted over the near-term. Problematically, speakers noted a too-frequent bias within humanitarian programming that can incentivize agencies to assume all cities fall into the second category. This bias in turn justifies taking short-cuts when engaging with city officials and the existing systems they manage.

The roundtable elicited two potentially competing views on Nexus programming. The first view held that in most fragile states and complex emergencies, humanitarian and development needs are always in flux and co-exist in complicated and locally mediated ways. The transitions between humanitarian and development interventions are thus context, sector, and community specific. The other discourse around Nexus issues that seemed to emerge during the debate described the relationship as more linear in nature, implying a discrete handover point from humanitarian to development actors.

The ways in which Nexus programming and coordination issues play out in urban displacement contexts thus remains an area for continued debate. One suggestion for framing this discussion was through different “urban displacement typologies”, with different typologies requiring different Nexus approaches.

Theme 2

Theme 2 was moderated by Mr. Dyfed Aubrey, Inter-Regional Advisor at UN-Habitat, who began by stating that adequately addressing urban internal displacement requires tailored approaches and tools for urban areas, which should draw on experiences with fit-for-purpose urban land administration at scale, urban and territorial planning, and municipal finance. This includes deploying tools and competencies for urban development and governance created for *non-crisis* contexts. It also requires adequate investment in data collection on the scope and impact of urban displacement, alongside an analysis of the needs and intentions of IDPs themselves.

Challenges of urban management in a displacement crisis

A primary area of discussion during Theme 2 was related to the challenges of urban management in a displacement crisis—and concretely how to address them. A key insight was that even in crisis settings, development-oriented urban planning tools and approaches can be used, as evidenced by a growing body of experiences, such as the land administration interventions in Afghanistan presented during the roundtable.

At the same time, however, participants also noted that given the acute shocks of urban displacement in its initial phases and the (unintended) consequences of humanitarian action (e.g. distorting market systems), normal planning practices do not necessarily work. The development and dissemination of flexible, fit-for-purpose urban planning tools tailored for these situations thus becomes crucial. Unfortunately, these skill sets do not always exist within local governments or humanitarian and development agencies. Case studies and tool kits developed by organizations and groups such as UN-Habitat, JIPS, the Global Alliance for Urban Crisis and the Urban Settlements Working Group have attempted to address this.

Financing Municipal Responses

The fact that local governments often face severe financing constraints in responding to internal displacement was also addressed within Theme 2. Several contributors noted that municipalities face multiple challenges in financing their responses. For example, cities' budgets often suffer a “scissoring effect” when displacement begins to occur. In such a situation, local revenues decline, while the costs of servicing additional populations explode. Moreover, the national government transfers on which many municipalities depend are usually based on population figures, which routinely fail to include IDPs.

Proposed solutions took multiple forms. Several speakers mentioned successful efforts in stimulating municipal “own-source revenue” generation (i.e. revenues collected and directly managed by municipalities, rather than central governments) through strengthened land-based taxation systems. Such homegrown solutions are both locally owned and sustainable, and have the ability to scale.

International partner funding could also help fill cities' financing gap. Because donors are often reluctant to assist municipalities directly, several participants noted the need for more flexible financing from international partners to overcome these impediments. Importantly, funding also needs to be longer-term, because working at a pace that can meet the requirements of humanitarian

agencies, development imperatives *and* institutional pathways generally requires a much longer time span than traditional funding modalities allow for. Such longer-term financing would help better operationalize Nexus principles, which several participants noted frequently fail to deliver because of unrealistically short funding timelines.

Political Considerations

Several speakers drew attention to important political considerations that must be taken into account when approaching urban internal displacement. For example, while some municipalities proactively treat IDPs as full and equal residents, others adopt a range of responses, from wary tolerance to outright rejection. One explanation for this dynamic is that local governments frequently have difficulty dealing with mobility, importing the “logic of borders” even in cases of *internal* forced displacement. Working with national governments to revise national legal frameworks in order to overcome this dynamic was cited as a critical area of work for the international community. Similarly, as noted by a representative of one of the affected states in attendance, external actors must understand that even though displacement may engender a humanitarian crisis in a city, dealing with this crisis may not necessarily be one of the municipal leadership’s key priorities.

More broadly, the relationships between national and local governments were also highlighted as an issue that needs to be treated with attention. Projects such as increasing national financial transfers to local governments based on informal / displaced populations (as recommended earlier in the roundtable) are potentially contentious political issues. Participants recommended approaching the topic with this in mind, as opposed to treating it as a purely technical problem. It was also noted that there is often a distinct lack of clarity around the functional responsibilities between national and local governments in addressing issues of internal displacement, such as in contexts of incomplete or imperfect decentralization.

Closing Remarks

During closing remarks, Mr. Aubrey and Mr. Chris Ward (a consultant for the Secretariat) summarized key issues, points of agreement, and areas requiring additional reflection and debate amongst the urban displacement community of experts. Participants were also asked to express their interest in reviewing a forthcoming synthesis report, which will summarize the partners’ findings from the six city-level consultations and the roundtable.