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**Research Report**

## Alternatives to refugee camps: Cities need international support for receiving forcibly displaced people

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# SWP Comment

NO. 49 DECEMBER 2019

## Alternatives to Refugee Camps

Cities Need International Support for Receiving Forcibly Displaced People

*Nadine Biehler and David Kipp*

**More and more people are forcibly displaced for longer and longer. An increasingly large number of them find refuge in cities instead of camps. Although this offers opportunities for local integration, it places a heavy burden on city administrations and rarely corresponds to the wishes of host governments, who usually prefer forcibly displaced people to stay in camps outside cities. Even humanitarian organisations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are often overwhelmed by urban refugee situations. In view of this, at the first Global Refugee Forum in Geneva on 17–18 December 2019, the German government should work to ensure that good practices for supporting affected cities are adapted and that new approaches are created.**

As of late 2018, 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced. Their numbers have been rising for years. For the vast majority of them, there are no durable solutions in sight, and situations of forced displacement are lasting longer and longer. As humanitarian needs increase, the resources available are increasingly insufficient to meet them. Moreover, the willingness of donor countries to provide funds is declining. UNHCR, for example, had received less than half of the required funding by late 2019. This also puts pressure on the practice of hosting forcibly displaced people in camps. For decades it was customary to provide humanitarian aid in this way. Accommodation in camps facilitated the logistical and organisational care of people, as well as the coordination of the aid organisations involved. There is no doubt that camps will

still need to be used in emergencies to meet the immediate needs of large numbers of people relatively quickly and in an orderly manner. However, since they cause high costs for the international donor community in the long term, and lack future prospects for their inhabitants, camps do not offer a sustainable solution.

The fact that camps nevertheless continue to be set up is mainly due to the interest of the receiving countries to keep refugees and internally displaced persons in one place and to limit their freedom of movement. Behind this is often the wish to prevent them from competing with the local population for jobs, housing or natural resources such as land and water. Risks such as the spread of violent conflicts (e.g. as a result of the presence of armed combatants) are also supposed to be reduced by



placing refugees in camps. History shows, however, that there are few guarantees of the hoped-for effect. In the 1980s, for example, armed Afghan fighters used “refugee villages” in Pakistan as the base for their operations. Recent research also points to the fact that accommodation in camps can itself cause local conflicts.

## Refugees Prefer Cities

Many host countries have a strong interest in hosting refugees and internally displaced persons in camps managed by themselves or by international organisations. Worldwide, however, the proportion of forcibly displaced people living in camps has been decreasing. It is estimated that only 30 per cent of the 20 million refugees worldwide still live in camps, though we only have information on the accommodation of about half of them. Nevertheless, the majority of refugees are now likely to find refuge in urban areas and their immediate surroundings — over 60 percent according to UNHCR expert estimates. Of the 40 million people who have been displaced in their own country, up to 80 percent live in urban areas.

Forcibly displaced people prefer (big) cities partly because their anonymity promises more protection against persecution and easier access to diaspora networks, and also because they hope for jobs and better education or health care. Their freedom of movement is also less restricted than in fenced camps with controlled access. In cities, the desire of many forcibly displaced people for more rights and more freedom is more likely to be realised.

## Cities as Actors in Refugee Crises

The fact that more and more displaced people are drawn to cities conforms to a broader trend of urbanisation. By 2050, 6.7 billion (68 percent) of the world’s population will live in cities; the current figure is 4.2 billion (55 percent). According to fore-

casts by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), this development is driven almost exclusively by the growth of cities in emerging and developing countries — which are also the main host countries for the 70 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Affected city administrations in developing countries are therefore doubly challenged: by general urbanisation and by situations of forced displacement presenting immediate emergencies as well as longer-term issues including integration. Even where integration is not desired or not possible, it is urban structures that provide public goods and basic services. In developing countries in particular, however, this places further demands on the already scarce resources of cities, and usually exceeds their human and financial capacities. They therefore need international support.

## Challenges for International Aid

Those responsible for international humanitarian aid and development cooperation (DC) have recognised this challenge, but still find it difficult to adapt to urban contexts. It was only in 2009 that UNHCR drew up a corresponding guideline, and it abandoned its preference for camps with the “Policy on Alternatives to Camps” in 2014. Nevertheless, UNHCR lacks instruments to systematically support cities when receiving refugees.

The complexity of cities and the often unfamiliar necessity for humanitarian actors to cooperate with municipal administrations are partly responsible for these difficulties. Furthermore, the lack of synergy between humanitarian and development programmes means that parallel systems are often established instead of strengthening urban capacities. Mobile clinics run by aid organisations, for example, may improve health care in emergencies in the short term, but they do not work towards ensuring that the entire population receives better care on a sustainable basis. The same applies to the provision of water,

accommodation or waste collection. Moreover, forcibly displaced people are not always registered as such and are difficult to distinguish from the (poor) urban population. Humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR are often bound to provide status-based aid (e.g. for refugees) instead of needs-based aid. This also makes it more difficult to design the support measures in such a way that the (urban) host society can benefit as well. It is therefore important to offer tailor-made support to cities and to always take into account when delivering aid how the administrative capacity of cities can be strengthened and what needs each city has in the specific context. This may be time-consuming, but considering the increasing duration of situations of forced displacement, it is definitely worthwhile.

### **Proven Approaches Should be Adapted**

UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies cannot meet this challenge alone. Together with development cooperation actors, they should identify affected cities or neighbourhoods at an early stage and provide targeted support. For this, donors must on the one hand ensure that their financing guidelines allow for the support of forcibly displaced people and of the host country's urban population in equal measure. On the other, tried and tested methods and instruments must be adapted to contexts of forced displacement. Three such methods seem particularly relevant.

*First*, cash transfers in humanitarian emergencies help those affected to provide for themselves according to their need, and to regain their ability to act as well as their dignity. Aid organisations do not need expensive logistics (e.g. for buying, storing and distributing food aid), and rather than distort local markets and prices with free food, they stimulate local trade and strengthen existing structures. In situations of forced displacement, it is important to involve the poor local population in order to prevent social tensions. Furthermore, it

makes sense to complement cash transfers with medium- and long-term approaches such as microcredits, other financial services or vocational training so as to create prospects.

*Second*, area-based approaches are advantageous, since rather than a target group (e.g. internally displaced persons) or a sector (e.g. the supply of water and sanitation), it is a specific geographic area such as an urban district that is comprehensively supported with aid. Local authorities and the local population must be closely involved to ensure success and sustainability and to strengthen the local administration. This can also prevent conflicts that can arise when, for example, refugees receive humanitarian aid but the poor local population does not. Cities or districts that are more affected by refugee movements than others could thus be supported in a targeted manner. As well as accompanying information and communication campaigns, accessible local mechanisms for dispute resolution and mediation are just as important as coordination with city or national programmes.

*Third*, mayors of host cities should be given greater political and fiscal leeway. The more decentralised a country is, the more realistic it is to shift and expand competencies that promote the local integration of forcibly displaced people. But even in centralised states, the capacities of impacted municipal administrations can be built up over the long term, possibly combined with support for decentralisation processes.

### **Conclusion**

Cities are first responders in situations of forced displacement and want to provide goods such as accommodation, water or health services, out of self-interest if nothing else. For this they need international support. In order to effectively and sustainably support cities in developing countries that are affected by crises of forced displacement to receive and integrate refugees, support must crucially be orientated towards

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their needs and resources. The approaches described above have already proved their worth, but need to be adapted to each context and tested for suitability. Cash transfers, for example, are only successful where there is food to buy. If it is scarce, food supplies should be considered. As well as the actual capacities of city administrations, international aid actors should also consider the potential risks, such as a poor democratic legitimacy of city administrations, an insufficient accountability to the population, or even an active participation in violent conflicts.

Despite their importance, cities are not assigned a central role in the predominantly state-centred global policy processes, such as the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees, which was drawn up in late 2018. Cities are unlikely to be adequately represented at the first Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in December 2019. The German government should work to ensure that the multi-stakeholder and partnership approach is enforced in the future. To this end, existing transnational city networks must be integrated more systematically. These forums are often shaped by cities from industrialised states. By contrast, city administrations from developing countries, which are much more severely affected, hardly have any say. This applies particularly to administrations outside the capital cities (capitals often being the focus of attention). They should be enabled to participate in respective forums and exchange programmes through travel grants and scholarships. Despite or precisely because of their diversity, exchange and cooperation between cities from developing and industrialised countries holds great potential.

Cities affected by forced displacement should be given better advice and support to navigate the sometimes confusing jungle of networks and funding opportunities. Furthermore, they should be offered a suitable package of support measures if

required, and additional administrative experts should be made available at short notice. The decision concerning whether a new coordination office (e.g. within the framework of the new UN migration network) or rather existing structures (such as the United Cities and Local Governments, UCLG) are better suited to this purpose must be based on what best helps the cities concerned.

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