Border towns: humanitarian assistance in peri-urban areas

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Over the last decade, NGO practitioners, policy-makers and scholars have been encouraging humanitarian agencies to recognise the importance of including local authorities and integrating urban infrastructure into humanitarian programming when intervening in crisis-affected settings. Donor investments and scholarly literature have focused on enhancing what we know about responses to urban crises. With the increasing focus on urban areas, the humanitarian sector must develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding and analysis of the urban context: its infrastructure, services and systems, segregation and fragmentation, informal and community-based networks and the broader relationship between transient humanitarian actors and the population at large.[1]

This article looks at some of the consequences of the increasing urbanisation of humanitarian response, with a focus on border regions neighbouring Syria. Towns in these areas retain a rural character despite rapid growth, accelerated by the arrival of large numbers of refugees, and rural livelihoods are still at the centre of their economies. We argue that humanitarians should not approach areas such as these in the same way as they might much larger cities. These settings cannot be fully categorised as 'urban', but nor are they rural; rather, they are undergoing a complex spatial transition along a continuum between the two. Humanitarian actors must take this into account when designing interventions.

The limits of 'systems thinking'

Systems-thinking[2] – an approach suggested recently by ALNAP – advocates a template that deconstructs the urban setting into 'linkages, interconnections and interrelationships between different parts of a system, recognising the potential to arrive at new and different insights than can be gained by looking at each component part individually'.[3] Systems-thinking has increased the humanitarian community's understanding of urban complexity and the links between basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare and education at different scales. Humanitarian practice must also reckon with territories that do not fully fit the category of urban. Disputed, socially and economically diverse and subject to rapid change, border territories exemplify such environments.

Border towns hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees in the Middle East, such as Halba in northern Lebanon, Kilis in southern Turkey and ar-Ramtha in north-west Jordan, function as an interface between the rural and the urban. They are marked by the constant movement of family members between towns and rural areas, with livelihoods and networks that cut across the rural and urban space. These towns are

1 L. Landau et al., *Becoming Urban Humanitarians: Engaging Local Government to Protect Displaced People*, The Urban Institute, 2016.

2 P. Sitko, 'Humanitarian Response Is Getting a Major Urban Overhaul', *Citiscope*, 30 May 2017, http://citiscope.org/commentary/2017/05/humanitarian-response-getting-major-urban-overhaul.

3 L. Campbell, *Stepping Back: Understanding Cities and Their Systems*, ALNAP Working Paper (London: ALNAP, 2016).

socially and economically heterogeneous. Peri-urban areas are a mosaic of agricultural and urban ecosystems, and affected by the material and energy flows urban and rural areas demand. They are socially and economically hetero-geneous and subject to rapid change. Small farmers, informal settlers, industrial entrepreneurs and urban middle class commuters may all coexist in the same territory, but with different and often competing interests, practices and perceptions.[4] A lack of systematic planning has meant that these towns have grown organically, with a proliferation of unauthorised and unregulated housing and limited infrastructure development.[5]

Examples from Syria's neighbourhood

It is perhaps not surprising that, while people move to cities, they often continue with rural livelihood and survival strategies, such as cultivating vegetables and fruit in the streets, as is currently happening in Syria.[6] Likewise, some urban refugee newcomers still work in surrounding fields to earn a living, as most of the job opportunities in these small border economies are in agriculture. Given constrained urban markets and local labour economies, livelihood programming around Syria's borders has also centred on rural activities.

The traditionally short-term timeframes of humanitarian action are unlikely to have a sustained impact in addressing urban change and preserving local rural capital, and close collaboration with long-term development actors and urban authorities is therefore necessary. Similarly, striking the right balance between urban and rural approaches requires longer timeframes. For instance, in Halba – capital of Akkar governorate in northern Lebanon, the country's poorest region – humanitarian livelihood programmes began to focus on enhancing urban livelihoods in 2014, three years after the start of the Syrian refugee crisis. City cleaning projects run by the Danish Refugee Council and the International Rescue Committee employ vulnerable citizens and migrants and contribute to improving the urban environment. However, the temporary character of refugee labour reflects the limits of short-term urban improvement work. Collaboration between urban authorities, service providers and humanitarian agencies needs to be long-term if humanitarian action is to support the creation of well-functioning public infrastructure (e.g. waste management, access to water). Supposedly 'urban' Syrian refugees interviewed in Halba in the winter of 2017[7]

affirmed that rural livelihood programmes were better able to provide them with sustainable income than urban livelihood programmes. While a large proportion of urban livelihood projects focus on making refugees employable in hairdressing and beauty salons or food groceries, Lebanese law allows them to work only in construction, gardening, cleaning and agriculture.

In the southern Turkish border town of Kilis, UNDP is helping municipal authorities improve local service delivery in waste management and recovery. Like Halba, this area received a large influx of Syrian refugees from 2011 and, although relatively developed,[8] the town was not equipped to accommodate the additional needs created by the refugees and by the corres-ponding influx of humanitarian actors. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) livelihood programmes initially did not address the need to strengthen urban infrastructure, instead focusing largely on agricultural activities (olive-picking) in the surrounding countryside as urban job opportunities for refugees and vulnerable citizens were rare. 'I'm now concerned that our livelihood projects in the olive groves may be reduced, as most of the funding now comes from outside with the purpose of improving the city', stated one local NGO worker.[9]

Unlike both Kilis and Halba, in ar-Ramtha in north-west Jordan humanitarian support has been directed towards agriculture. While this is appropriate in a context where state and NGO support has historically favoured urban dwellers over farmers, and where a large proportion of food needs is met on international markets rather than through domestic production, urban systems are under increasing strain from the refugee influx, suggesting the need for a better balance between support for urban and rural ways of life. In rural areas, some humanitarian programmes have sought to support local businesses by arranging sales of small-scale and homemade products, or by purchasing relief items from local producers. In cities, programmes have primarily supported large-scale businesses.[10]

What are the risks of the urban shift in peri-urban settings?

While it is paramount to improve humanitarian capacities to better address off-camp populations, life outside camps needs to be considered and approached not exclusively as 'urban', but as a complex coexistence of small farmers, informal settlers, industrial entrepreneurs and urban middle-class commuters, with different livelihoods trajectories in the same space. While

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4 Few institutions can address both urban and rural activities (A. Allen and J. Davila, *Mind the Gap! Bridging the Rural–Urban Divide*, 2002, http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/38/1/DPU_allen_davila_bridging_rural_urban.pdf).

5 C. Tacoli, G. McGranahan and D. Satterthwaite, *Urbanisation, Rural–Urban Migration and Urban Poverty* (London: IIED Publications, 2015).

6 See http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/factors-driving-the-destruction-of-syria-s-natural-heritage.

7 Interviews conducted by Estella Carpi with Syrian refugees living in Halba, February and March 2017.

8 F. Yirmibesoglu et al., 'Life In Kilis with Its Traditional Urban Fabric and Houses', *Current Urban Studies*, 3, 2015.

9 Interview conducted by Estella Carpi with a local NGO practitioner working in Kilis. Gaziantep, 13 August 2017.

10 Interview with the leader of the Akkar Traders' Association, Halba, 8 March 2017; interview with an international NGO worker in Kilis. Gaziantep, 2 August 2017.

Turkish workers load bags of flour provided by the Turkish Red Crescent onto a truck bound for Syria at the border in Kilis, Turkey.

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urban areas are necessarily complex, that complexity is not necessarily captured by the 'urban' definition. Hence, efforts should not merely be focused on how humanitarian actors can better support the people they assist, but rather on designing interventions that take into consideration the functioning of rural and urban areas as systems, and the relationships between them. This demands creative management of both problems and opportunities arising from the meeting of urban and rural activities. 'Land use policies that help to enhance livelihoods and promote a better use of scarce resources and urban waste are crucial. Equally important are appropriate policies concerning basic infrastructure, training, information and improved governance'.[11] Urban programming requires a multi-scale, multi-lens approach.

There is a risk that the humanitarian system's current interest in developing urban capacity in areas affected by crisis may fade when the crisis abates and the humanitarian machinery scales down or moves on. Urban development and capacity-building should not be addressed only in the wake of refugee influxes, but rather need to become long-term objectives for development actors and local authorities. The 'urban shift' also risks being exclusive, leading to the neglect of rural livelihood programmes and inappropriate approaches to

the complex systems and spaces at the peri-urban interface. The case of ar-Ramtha – which, unlike Halba and Kilis, rather represents a 'rural shift' – even so shows how diverse ways of life that cut across rural and urban spaces can be neglected.

Care is therefore required to avoid approaching spaces outside camps in a rigid, two-fold way: either 'urban' or 'rural'. The three examples presented here highlight the importance of following trajectories[12] of urban and rural change during and after crises. In border areas, rural areas and resources are inevitably intertwined with urban spaces and resources, with direct implications for planning and for the development of humanitarian policies that reflect spatial diversity and territorial and institutional variety.

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11 Allen and Davila, *Mind the Gap!*.

12 R. Lambert and A. Allen, 'Participatory Mapping to Disrupt Unjust Urban Trajectories in Lima' in P. Imperatore and A. Pepe, *Geospatial Technology. Environmental and Social Applications* (London: InTechOpen, 2016); and V. Castano-Broto, 'Energy Landscapes and Urban Trajectories towards Sustainability', *Energy Policy*, 108, 2017.

Chandra Laxmi Tyata with her son in Bhaktapur city after the
earthquake in Nepal, 2015.

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