



International Rescue Committee

Urban Refugees

The city is the new refugee camp

For most people, the word 'refugee' still conjures up images of endless rows of white tents spread out on a dusty field. But this picture no longer tells the full story of life for refugees in the 21st century. According to the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), over half of the world's refugees now live in the slums of some of the world's biggest cities such as Bangkok in Thailand, Amman in Jordan, and Nairobi in Kenya. Today, refugees fleeing conflict or persecution at home are more likely to seek refuge in towns or cities than in urban areas. Of the world's 10.5 million refugees, an estimated 6 million reside in urban areas.

Refugees move to cities seeking safety and self-reliance

Many refugees move to urban areas in the hope of finding safety, a sense of community, and economic independence. Others come to live in urban areas out of necessity—to access specialised health services that don't exist in refugee camps, or because they have been targeted for abuse, harassment, and violence in refugee camps. Many cannot return home because of conflict or insecurity and must build new lives in their adopted city. These urban refugees face distinct challenges as they struggle to build new lives in their adopted city.

Hidden yet exposed – The challenge of the city for refugees

Refugees move to urban areas in the hope of finding a sense of community, safety and economic independence. In reality, many instead find isolation, poverty and harassment. Urban refugees face all of the problems of the urban poor in their adopted city such as inadequate and overcrowded shelter, but they must also confront unique challenges related to their refugee status.



> Lack of legal protection

In most cases, urban refugees do not have legal recognition in their adopted country, making it particularly difficult to access basic services and exposing them to abuse and exploitation. For example, landlords often charge far above market rates for rent, knowing that refugees cannot complain to the authorities.

> Intimidation and harassment by the authorities

Even in countries where they do have legal recognition, urban refugees face frequent harassment by police, including beatings, intimidation, illegal detention, confiscation of documentation and demands for bribes. Women, especially, are targeted by police and other officials and suffer verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

> Labour exploitation

Many refugees are forced to look for work in the informal or shadow economy, exposing them to unfair wages and unsafe conditions.

Despite these challenges, helping urban refugees is very difficult as many do not register with UNHCR, fearing that they will be deported or sent back to refugee camps if they come forwards for help. Unlike refugees in camps, urban refugees tend to be dispersed over a large geographical area making them difficult to identify. As a result, urban refugees can be a largely 'invisible' population, despite their significant need for protection and other support.

Adapting to the shift to urban

The march of urbanisation is reshaping the world, for the first time ever more people live in towns and cities than in rural areas. According to the UN most of the expected urban growth over the next four decades will take place in developing countries, where the urban population is expected to double, from 2.6 billion in 2010 to 5.2 billion in 2050.

The last decade has already seen the humanitarian community respond to large-scale emergencies in urban settings from the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 to the large-scale displacement of Syrians many of whom are seeking refuge in towns and cities in Lebanon and Jordan. As urbanisation continues apace, displacement will increasingly become an urban issue requiring new approaches from the international community to help refugees and internally displaced people.

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A new approach to assist urban refugees

Refugees in urban areas face distinct challenges and require a very different response to meet their needs than would be provided in a refugee camp. Many of the traditional approaches used by humanitarian agencies in refugee camps are not suitable in urban areas. For example, the best way to help refugees in cities is often to support existing local authorities or local partner organisations to extend services like healthcare and education to refugees rather than to provide services directly.

Understanding the dynamics of the city

To work effectively in cities, humanitarian and development actors have to invest time and resources to understand the dynamics of the urban environment and the complex social, political and economic background before deciding how best to help refugees. Programmes to help refugees must be sensitive to the needs of the local community to avoid fuelling resentment and mistrust towards the refugee population.

Refugees can bring benefits not just burdens for the city

While refugees often require help and support they can also benefit their adopted cities. Many urban refugees bring skills and experience and can make a positive economic contribution to the city. Somali refugees in Nairobi for example have created a thriving local economy around Eastleigh, a neighbourhood on the east side of the city.



The IRC and Urban Refugees

The IRC is leading the way in finding innovative ways to support urban refugees to rebuild their lives. We are working in cities in Kenya, Burundi, DRC, Uganda, Somalia, Thailand and Haiti, assisting some of the poorest urban communities. Very often, refugees are the most vulnerable group and require specific help and assistance.

The IRC provides both programmes that address the specific needs of urban refugees as well as those aimed at improving the lives of the wider urban population.

Our Work

> Protection and legal assistance

A lack of documentation and awareness of their rights is always a major obstacle for refugee protection. The IRC provides legal assistance to refugees as well as working with local government to improve access to justice.

> Basic services

The IRC is working to build the capacity of local authorities and civil society to provide essential services such as health and education in urban areas including to urban refugees.

> Economic independence

We help refugees to build the skills they need to start their own business and saving groups to increase their economic independence. We provide skills training, and financial support to help refugees gain jobs and build businesses.

> Empowering the vulnerable

Our urban programmes tackle the power relations that allow the abuse and exploitation of the most vulnerable groups in society, particularly urban refugees. We work to increase the involvement of refugees in civil society.

> Violence against women

The IRC trains local service providers to provide care, referral and support services to survivors of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and victims of child abuse.

> Refugee monitoring

The IRC is monitoring refugee numbers and conditions in some of the biggest cities and slums. We use this information to advocate for more assistance and attention from local authorities and the international community.

> Discovering best practice

The IRC is working with UNHCR, UN Habitat and leading research centres to better understand and explore how best to work with urban refugees and identify areas for future research.

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CASE STUDY: Urban Refugees in Kenya

UNHCR estimates put refugee numbers in Nairobi, Kenya as high as 50,000, though unofficial estimates are even larger. Life in the city for these refugees is not an easy option. Refugees face barriers to employment and essential services and many live in fear of exploitation by the authorities or arbitrary arrest and demands for bribes from the police.

The IRC works primarily with Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in Nairobi. We run a Community Information and Training Centre supporting refugees through a number of initiatives ranging from English literacy and mathematics classes and with partners provide legal advice and referral systems. We plan to expand our protection work and to open another centre where we will include support to community protection committees, trainings to community members, police and government officials on refugee rights and improved referral systems on services available in the communities.



Policy Recommendations

The challenges facing urban refugees are clear. We now need real commitment from the international community to help urban refugees trying to build a new life.

- Invest in targeted programmes to improve livelihoods, ensure access to services, and provide legal assistance to make sure refugees are aware of their rights and are protected from exploitation.
- Push national authorities to allow urban refugees to access existing services in cities, rather than creating parallel delivery structures.
- Ensure that aid and development programmes in towns and cities consider the particular challenges and needs of refugees, particularly protection, livelihoods and access to essential services such as health and education.
- Invest in research to fill the gap in understanding of the problems facing the most vulnerable people living in cities so that we can intervene more effectively.
- Fund education and training of local authority staff, the police, judicial services and urban refugees themselves on refugee rights and the responsibilities of both local and national government.
- Design programmes that engage and partner with national governments, local/municipal authorities, local businesses and civil society. The experience of the IRC and other operational organisations underlines that partnerships are critical at all levels in order to be successful in urban areas.
- Press national governments to sign up to and implement the International Legal Conventions on Refugee Law and review their own legal systems to reduce the abuse of urban refugees and prosecute those who exploit urban refugees, including the police, security services and local authorities.