

Global Alliance for Urban Crises

Adapting Global Crisis Response to an Urban World

The Global Alliance for Urban Crises is a global, multi-disciplinary and collaborative community of practice. It is a ‘network of networks’ working to prevent, prepare for and effectively respond to humanitarian crises in urban settings.

Context – Adapting to an Urbanising World

The humanitarian landscape is changing. Urbanization is defining our global reality and will shape our future. Displacement, conflict and natural disasters are increasingly urban phenomena. This new reality must be addressed in the ‘vision for change’ presented by the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS). It must also be addressed as we move beyond the WHS and towards implementing the broader agenda for humanity.¹

The majority of the world’s population now lives in urban areas. Rapid and often unplanned urbanization continues unabated, including in fragile settings, and is exacerbating the impacts of a range of natural and man-made disasters. Armed conflict and the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas cause death and injury amongst civilians; earthquakes inflict unique levels of devastation in cities, as do severe storms and floods. But urban areas can also offer sanctuary: the majority of internally displaced people and refugees are living in cities and towns around the world. This also generates new challenges: forced displacement is increasingly protracted, lasting an estimated 25 years on average.² Communities hosting displaced people face enormous pressures on, and competition for, scarce basic services, housing and jobs. Social tensions result.

Humanitarian agencies have traditionally responded to floods, famines and refugee movements in remote rural areas. Urbanization, and its intersection with climate change, conflict and displacement, challenges their usual ways of working. It is generating a fundamental shift in the nature, scale and impact of humanitarian crises. Towns and cities are characterized by high density and heterogeneous communities. In contrast to rural areas, urban inhabitants are more mobile and their social, political, economic and institutional environment is more complex, as is their built environment. Urban inhabitants are also reliant on a range of interconnected systems and infrastructure to support their daily lives and livelihoods, such as road networks, public transport, water, sanitation, and markets. Humanitarian actors have begun to realize that their traditional ‘comprehensive’ approach, where they are primarily responsible for the provision of most basic services (often in camps), is not appropriate in towns and cities. Humanitarians must work in support of and in collaboration with municipal authorities and ensure that local actors have a much stronger role in crisis response. They should also concentrate on restoring or bolstering existing city systems, rather than creating parallel services or providing short-term, unsustainable solutions to meet the needs of affected populations.

Urban areas may be increasingly at risk, but they also offer opportunities to work differently and to ensure crisis response provides immediate humanitarian relief while also strengthening urban

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2282agendaforhumanity.pdf>

The agenda for humanity encompasses a number of international processes, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The outcomes of the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) are also critical to achieving genuine change in the way humanitarian assistance is delivered, and risk and vulnerability reduced.

² Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>

resilience. This will require new partnerships that go beyond the humanitarian sector to include national and local authorities, development agencies and urban professionals, such as planners and engineers.

Background

The Global Alliance for Urban Crises (the Alliance) is an initiative that arose out of consultations for the WHS, during which a number of committed organisations led an urban expert group and developed a series of *Urban Recommendations* which are reflected in the Synthesis Report for the WHS. The Alliance is the vehicle through which these recommendations will be put into action. It is guided by a series of principles, also developed by the urban expert group, as laid out in the *Urban Crises Charter*. The Alliance builds on the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (IASC) 'Strategy for Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas', and the decision of the IASC Principals in April 2015 to adopt area-based approaches and surge capacity through local authorities.

The Alliance was formally launched during a Special Session at the WHS, where institutional and joint commitments will be made to operationalize the urban recommendations.

Vision

The Alliance promotes a vision of inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and towns (as laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) in which urban communities, their leaders and members have the power, capacities and resources to address the risks and reality of humanitarian crises, to mitigate crisis impacts on the most vulnerable, including the displaced, and to enable affected people to determine, with dignity, the course of their lives and their futures.

Value of the Alliance

The Global Alliance for Urban Crises reflects a **new type of collaboration** – it joins a diverse group of stakeholders who do not systematically work together. The Alliance places affected communities and municipalities at the centre of its work and encourages a supportive and collaborative approach from member states, humanitarian, development and other relevant actors during urban humanitarian crises.

Members will provide knowledge, build capacities and develop data-informed and evidence-based approaches to in order to more effectively prevent, prepare for, and respond to humanitarian crises in urban environments, ultimately contributing to longer term, recovery, development and resilience building efforts.

The Alliance will operate on the assumption that working in partnership and collaborating towards common outcomes breaks down silos and improves effectiveness. The Alliance will initially work towards a three-year vision to deliver a number of priority initiatives. The need for the Alliance will be periodically revisited.

Functions of the Alliance

Supported by the Secretariat, the Alliance will have the following functions:

Advocacy and Influencing:

- Work to achieve an improved understanding of, and commitment to, effective humanitarian action in urban settings.
- Advocate for and mobilize appropriate financing mechanisms and funding windows to

support such initiatives.

- Advocate for the inclusion of an urban crisis focus in other relevant communities of practice, for example those addressing the impacts of forced displacement and migration, climate change and global health risks.

Information sharing, evidence building and knowledge management

- Manage a repository of knowledge on current initiatives in agencies and organizations.
- Identify gaps in evidence, capacity, tools and approaches.
- Promote the up-take of urban specific tools and approaches to ensure stakeholders are better equipped to work effectively in towns and cities affected by crisis.

Capacities and skills

- Support members to contribute to shared goals of improved preparedness and response through their own individual or joint initiatives.
- Work to increase the availability and inclusion of urban and local government expertise in humanitarian response.

The Alliance has prioritised four key commitment areas. Partners will work jointly or collectively on specific activities to achieve results in these four areas:

- Tailor humanitarian response to the urban context by developing shared assessment and profiling tools, promoting joint analysis, and adapting coordination mechanisms.
- Develop or work with existing global, regional and national rosters to facilitate the deployment of urban leaders, managers and technical experts.
- Build the evidence base on the specific characteristics of protracted displacement in urban areas, and contribute to the design of appropriate and cost-effective responses, with particular regard to protection of vulnerable people, shelter, basic services and infrastructure.
- Ensure that initiatives focused on building urban resilience incorporate components on resilient response and recovery from crises, and that they leverage greatest impact in cities most at risk of humanitarian emergencies.

Membership

The Alliance is a multi-stakeholder initiative made up of a broad membership that includes actors not traditionally considered humanitarian responders. It includes development actors, urban professionals and local authority networks.

Membership numbers will not be capped. The Alliance will seek to build its membership, bringing in representatives from municipalities, countries and regions. The ultimate aim is to achieve a shift in mindset so as to ensure context specific and effective programming and interventions.

What is required of members and partners?

The Alliance will operate with a two-tier system of membership. In order to join the Alliance, members commit to the principles set out in the *Urban Crises Charter* (by becoming a signatory) and use them as a basis for both policy level and operational engagement.

Those who want to contribute more to the Alliance may become Partners. In addition to committing to the principles, Partners commit to the following:

- Strengthen their institutional set up, capacity and programming in order to contribute more effectively towards the goal of improved prevention, preparedness and response to urban humanitarian crises;
- Make specific commitments to work with other partners to develop new initiatives that will operationalize the urban recommendations developed for the WHS, under the four priority areas outlined above.
- Actively support the core functions of the Alliance

Commitments can be made through the online platform set up by the WHS Secretariat.

Governance

UN-Habitat and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) are currently convening members and preparing for the formal launch of the Alliance. Following the launch, it is anticipated that there will be a phased transition to the governance model outlined below. A plan for this transition will be developed and shared with Alliance members.

The Alliance will be supported by a small secretariat of two to four staff members. Certain functions of the Alliance (e.g. knowledge management) may be outsourced to Partners.

Partnership Council

A small group (six to ten partners), representing different constituencies and on a rotating basis, will meet regularly to:

- a) Monitor the effectiveness of the Alliance (measured by partnerships built, knowledge disseminated, growth in membership, etc);
- b) Decide on strategic direction and a collective work-plan for partners, including priority initiatives;
- c) Review and, where appropriate, endorse key initiatives submitted to the Partnership Council;
- d) Agree on advocacy strategy and messaging;
- e) Oversee functioning of the secretariat and fundraising to finance the secretariat and administrative costs.

During the first year, the Partnership Council will be convened on a quarterly or six-monthly basis, taking advantage of gatherings such as ECOSOC, UNGA, etc.

World Urban Forum

The Alliance will convene its members as part of the World Urban Forum (held every two years) to provide an opportunity for all members to share good practices and organize dialogues to contribute to and refine the overall priorities of the Global Alliance for Urban Crises.

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