

# Urban Displacement and Growth Amidst Humanitarian Crisis

**New realities require a new strategy in Kabul.**

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**B**Y 2008, AN UNPRECEDENTED half of the world's population resided in urban areas. The current total population of 6.8 billion people is projected by the Population Reference Bureau to increase to more than 8 billion by 2025, with a majority of growth occurring in the urban centers of developing countries. While sufficiently daunting, the projections fail to capture urban growth attributable to displacement. Enduring conflict and frequent natural disasters in parts of the developing world encourage or force rural migration to urban centers at rates that accelerate and exacerbate the urbanization process. In recent years, for example, cities such as Freetown, Khartoum and Prishtina, among many others, have experienced dramatic population increases (far beyond projections) that confound efforts to promote urban recovery and development. A new approach to urban recovery that addresses humanitarian concerns and incorporates risk reduction strategies is required to address needs generated by rapid urban growth, reverse the cycle of perpetual humanitarian crisis among a largely invisible segment of urban populations, and ultimately lay the foundation necessary for successful urban development.

## An often ignored phenomenon

The manifold challenges confronting Kabul include, most predominantly, rapid growth—perhaps the fastest in the world. In the years since September 11, 2001, Kabul's population has tripled in size to approximately 4.5 mil-

lion people, with returning refugees and migrants (both those economically motivated and those forcibly displaced) constituting 80 percent of the change. In 2002, only 22 percent of Afghanistan's population lived in urban areas. The figure may have increased to as much as 35 percent by 2009, indicating unprecedented urban growth countrywide, a trend data suggest will continue for the foreseeable future.

Volatility amid continuing efforts to eradicate the insurgency, the ravages of recurrent drought and environmental degradation, limited employment opportunities, and natural disasters in communities with poor risk management and response capacities continue to erode coping mechanisms in rural areas and prompt residents to flee to Kabul and other cities. Current and future migration rates remain indeterminable and unpredictable, respectively, adding



additional challenges to urban recovery planning in the capital city.

Urban displaced populations are often difficult to count, invisible amongst significant numbers of other urban poor. Rarely do displaced households reside in designated areas, but rather with host families, in demographically diverse informal settlements, or in abandoned buildings.

The absence of mechanisms to locate displaced individuals living in the city, in part a consequence of limited humanitarian engagement in the urban

## Urban Displacement: A Burgeoning Area of Study

[http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2009/06/19/world\\_refugee\\_day.aspx](http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2009/06/19/world_refugee_day.aspx)

- Over the next two years, the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) will be studying urban displacement in partnership with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and in collaboration with the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, UN-Habitat and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).
- Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) research on urban displacement includes:
  - <http://www.unhcr.org/research/RESEARCH/4a1d33252.pdf>
  - <http://www.unhcr.org/research/RESEARCH/487b4c6c2.pdf>
- Preparations for the December 2009 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges and 'Urban Displacement,' further details of which can be found at:
  - <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/4a12a6ce2.pdf>

## USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

USAID/OFDA programs account for unique vulnerabilities, natural hazard risks, cultural context, existing social and economic systems, and the role of Kabul Municipality:

The multi-sectoral KASS project:

- Provides seismic-resistant transitional shelter and basic services and infrastructure using local labor and resources;
- By generating livelihoods, promotes recovery and local ownership of projects;
- By accounting for risks, incorporates long-term view to support development; and
- By investing in existing communities to upgrade and expand shelter and services, ensures cost-effective, timely humanitarian assistance, while building on established social and economic networks.

Capacity building in Kabul municipality:

- USAID/OFDA partners build the urban recovery management capacity of Kabul Municipality.
- Means include technical assistance, advisory services and technology transfer.
- Urban planning advisors address strategy and policy issues related to large-scale urban displacement and growth.

For additional information, please see:

- Shelter and Settlements Sector Update, Sept 2009  
[http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/humanitarian\\_assistance/disaster\\_assistance/sectors/shelter.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/sectors/shelter.html)
- Overview of the KASS Project  
[http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/humanitarian\\_assistance/disaster\\_assistance/sectors/files/kass\\_summary.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/sectors/files/kass_summary.pdf)
- Delivery of Humanitarian Shelter in Urban Areas: The Case of "KASS"  
[http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/humanitarian\\_assistance/disaster\\_assistance/sectors/files/case\\_of\\_kass.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/sectors/files/case_of_kass.pdf)

context, allows government and international actors to downplay the displacement crisis, advocate for status quo programs, and ignore a growing segment of the population, many of whom require immediate assistance after arriving in Kabul with limited or no resources. Efforts by the humanitarian community to distinguish between the urban displaced and urban poor—and, therefore, demarcate humanitarian assistance and development assistance—have generated controversy among both policy-makers and assistance providers. Two clear facts emerge as indisputable, however: humanitarian needs exist among Kabul's population, due in large part to rapid and untenable growth, and these needs are often more acute for households displaced from rural areas.

### Informal settlements become the norm

The time-warp speed at which Kabul grew in the last eight years hardly afforded government officials the luxury of foresight to effectively plan for and accommodate growth when war- and disaster-ravaged resources and infrastructure precluded even minimal responses to meet the most basic needs. Surprisingly, however, a significant majority of the population occupies what the World Bank describes as "substantial" structures, generally made from mud bricks. The government considers only 0.5 percent of the population homeless. The buildings where people live, however, form high-density, crowded settlements precariously balanced on steep hillsides and buttressing towering and dilapidated buildings in the city center. The construction of settlements kept pace with the high rate of displacement and three-fold increase in population, resulting in a four-fold increase in land devoted to urban activities. Unfortunately, continued government reliance on a 1978 master plan designed to accommodate only two million people resulted in one of the highest rates of informal housing in the world. Thus, although Kabul avoided a homelessness crisis, approximately 80 percent of the total population resides in officially unauthorized and unrecognized areas that lack adequate drainage, refuse disposal, gravelled roads, water and sanitation facilities, and safe drinking water sources.

Further, although "substantial," many structures remain vulnerable to collapse during seismic events—the latter a critical consideration in one of the world's most seismically active and vulnerable cities courtesy of the Chaman fault and low-quality building materials and practices. As a result of location and poor services, settlements are more vulnerable to other disasters as well, including floods, waterborne diseases, physical damage or loss of life caused by falling boulders in the hillsides, and landmines from earlier conflicts.

### Responding to needs

The case of Kabul clearly demonstrates the need for humanitarian and development actors to re-think urban interventions. A new strategy that addresses humanitarian needs caused by rapid urban growth and displacement in a manner that supports long-term development goals is required. As the preceding assessment illustrates, the current situation is a complex intertwinement of significant humanitarian needs and basic development needs, compounded by the effects and high-level risks associated with natural and human-generated hazards.

Given the sheer number of structures, the minimal resources in Kabul Municipality coffers, and the need to quickly address pressing humanitarian needs, improving the informal settlements remains the most viable option at present. Two questions then arise related to supporting long-term development: how to develop and service settlements in a sustainable manner while strengthening local capacity to assume ownership of urban recovery; and how to mitigate risks in order to protect progress and maintain a foundation for development. For an overview of how the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), through the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), continues to answer these questions through the Kabul Area Shelter and Settlements (KASS) Project and capacity building programs, please refer to the sidebar. **MD**

*The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the United States Agency for International Development.*