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Humanitarian response to urban crises: Literature review of area-based approaches

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Abstract

Over the last five years, there has been increasing awareness amongst policy makers and practitioners that effective humanitarian responses may need to intervene at a scale that is larger than household or individual shelter provision when working in urban environments. Area-based, settlement or neighbourhood approaches have been presented as examples of alternative intervention strategies in urban areas that address this question of scale.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an initial, rapid review of the available literature in order to define 'area-based' approaches; explore why they are being adopted; assess their positive and negative effects; and investigate how they can be improved. The analysis draws on a range of documents spanning humanitarian and developmental contexts, including both peer reviewed publications as well as a variety of 'grey literature'. The desk-based review was supplemented by interviews with experts who have been involved in implementing urban programmes in recent crises, including a facilitated workshop session at the UK Shelter Forum (April 2015). The interviews focused on identifying relevant documents, discussing key themes, and verifying the findings.

This paper proposes that, in an urban context, area-based approaches have three defining characteristics: they are geographically targeted (i), and adopt a multi-sectoral(ii), participatory approach (iii). In summary, an area-based approach:

1. 'defines an area, rather than a sector or target group, as the main entry point', and will have a strong focus on communities within a specific spatial context.¹ Interventions seek to address the problems associated with that defined area;
2. places a significant emphasis on community, local government and wider stakeholder engagement, recognising that identifying and solving problems requires not only formal inclusion, but also the active participation of all relevant stakeholders in the area;

¹ IRC, 2015. Humanitarian Action in a New Urban World. Available at: http://www.rescue-uk.org/sites/default/files/IRC_Urban_position_paper_WHS_Budapest_PRINT.pdf.

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3. responds to local problems with a multi-sector approach, typically embracing 'a range of social, economic and physical development objectives cutting across ... fields such as education, housing, transport and economic development'.²

Area-based approaches are neither 'good' nor 'bad'; their positive and negative effects depending entirely on the context in which they are conceived, their programme design, the manner of their delivery, and the appropriateness of adopting such a strategy. Area-based approaches can present opportunities to prevent the creation or reinforcement of tensions and inequalities within an area; act as a valuable catalyst for local change; present mechanisms for effectively focusing resources; prevent consultation fatigue for disaster-stricken populations; mobilise a 'bottom-up' approach; attract much needed investment; and prevent the over-stretching of mainstream programmes and services.

Likewise, when poorly conceived, badly designed, undertaken by under-resourced staff, or adopted inappropriately within a city, they can have a number of negative effects. For example they can enhance inequalities between the target area and surrounding ones; create an unnecessary distraction from the underlying problem; shift responsibility onto the wrong stakeholder and prevent action; be costly to implement and be an ineffective use of resources; take a long time; lead to a disconnect between local plans and wider city or regional plans which has long-term implications; and be difficult to monitor and evaluate, and thus demonstrate results.

Keywords: urban, area-based, recovery, humanitarian

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² Turok, I., 2004. The rationale for area-based policies: lessons from international experience. In P. Robinson, J. McCarthy, & C. Forster, eds. Heinemann, pp. 405-412.

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Author's Biography



Elizabeth Parker's work has focussed on urban resilience, disaster recovery and regeneration across a range of geographies since completing her MA in Development and Emergency practice at Oxford Brookes University. Originally trained as an architect, Elizabeth spent five years working for Arup, including on the Rockefeller Foundation funded Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN). Elizabeth has also worked as a Project Manager, delivering health care projects across Western Australia and is a member of the Australian Institute of Project Managers.



Victoria trained as an architect and has worked for organisations such as UN-Habitat and the IFRC since becoming involved in post-disaster reconstruction following the Indian Ocean tsunami. She is currently completing a PhD at University College London, in partnership with Habitat for Humanity Great Britain, where her research focuses on decision-making by the Philippine government and humanitarian organisations following typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. Victoria also writes and lectures on disaster recovery, resilience and participatory approaches to design.