

Humanitarianism at the heart of tomorrow's urban challenges

Emmanuel Matteudi • Professeur des universités en urbanisme, Université Aix-Marseille

The urban clinical picture is disquieting, but not hopeless. Emmanuel Matteudi, in his analysis of the world's urban explosion, appropriately reminds us that humanitarianism, lying at the heart of the challenges facing tomorrow's cities, will not be able to act alone.

According to the United Nations, 55% of the world's population is now living in an urban area¹. Even if this percentage is questionable², the fact remains that urban areas are expanding at a phenomenal rate, and that the world's population is and will increasingly be subjected to greater urban crowding. The consequences are a cause of major concern. Cities will be especially impacted by global warming, giving way to heavy migrant flows, rising sea levels, and the formation of a spiralling number of natural disasters and urban heat islands. It is projected that exposure and vulnerability to all – and even new – types of crisis will continue to escalate.

Should we not, as a matter of urgency, and in an attempt to prevent tomorrow's cities from ending up as the waste receptacles of the world's misdeeds, re-examine the approaches and practices of humanitarian aid professionals in urban settings? In answer to this disquieting question, let us first review the major features of impending changes driven by the explosive rate of urbanisation in many countries. We will then characterise and discuss the meaning of development and the provision of humanitarian aid, and examine how they are similar and dissimilar, especially in urban settings. Finally, we must take a fresh look at how humanitarian workers, urban planners, and developers can work alongside the members of a country's civil society and its decision-makers.

The urban sprawl and the increase of risks, disasters, and vulnerabilities

Urban sprawl has been extending across the planet at an unprecedented rate, mainly in the southern hemisphere. At the start of the industrial revolution, it was a sign of steady, positive development in Europe, North America, and Japan. But since the mid-twentieth century, unrestricted urban growth has been shifting and expanding to the developing countries of Asia and Africa. It is proliferating so relentlessly that the United Nations has developed scenarios predicting that there will most likely be over 6,7 billion city dwellers in 2050, compared with 4,2 billion today, with 90% of those additional 2,5 billion city dwellers concentrated in Asia and Africa.

It is crucial that we understand how this explosive growth is characterised, particularly in developing countries, for us to grasp not only the problems affecting our planet's future, but also

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects", May 2018.

² Every country has its own method of counting urban residents.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

the position and role of developmental and humanitarian aid in these evolving conditions. This warrants a general overview of the situation.

First, we notice the vast expansion of high-density urban areas. To illustrate, 50% of today's urban residents live in cities that have a population of less than 500,000, but one in eight urban residents live in megacities of more than ten million inhabitants. By 2030, ten megacities will be added to the existing thirty-three, mainly in countries in the southern hemisphere, with ever more densely populated urban spaces (rising from twenty-five to thirty-six million people for Delhi, seventeen to twenty-seven million for Dhaka, and eighteen to twenty-four million for Cairo). Sprawling cities, particularly in countries impacted by a population explosion, hold enormous potential for development, yet also face the risk of creating new forms of exclusion and causing increased exposure to natural hazards.

This urban growth is bound to endure, partly uncontrollably. Although estimates from qualified experts vary widely³, we note that UN-Habitat's latest "*Slum Almanac 2015-2016*"⁴ – probably the most optimistic in its projections – points to a downward trend in the overall *percentage* of slumdwellers (falling from 46% to 30% between 1990 and the present time). However, it also states that, in view of today's rampant population explosion, the actual *number* of people living in slums will rise. That is to say, it is expected that there will be 1,4 billion slumdwellers in 2020, compared with 881 million in 2014, reaching 2 billion in 2050. This situation, the progress of which is difficult to stop, points to how the creation of cities must be designed by taking into consideration their impoverished population, and the inherent risks that have been aggravated by the total lack of urban planning and building regulations.

Furthermore, the accelerating pace of global warming over recent decades has had a growing impact on an ever-greater exposure to hazards, vulnerabilities, and inequalities. Forthcoming disasters include rising sea levels, which, according to estimates by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), are expected to increase between 0,29 and 0,82 meters by 2100⁵, thus devastating coastal urban areas on an unprecedented scale (a one-meter rise equals one in ten people affected across the world), and heightening the risks of cyclones and tsunamis.

Finally, there is the impact on migrations. The latest World Bank report⁶ projects that, by 2050, there will be more than 140 million internal climate migrants (due to droughts, poor harvests, and worsening storm patterns) across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there will be 250 million international climate migrants⁷ by then as well. These are the signs of a new form of mass exodus, whose ultimate destination has been and will continue to be cities.

³ To illustrate, according to the "Global Risks Report", published by the World Economic Forum in 2015, 40% of urban growth occurs today in slums accounting for an additional 30 to 50 million people every year, reaching a total of 3 billion slumdwellers in 2050 or 30% of all those who live in cities.

⁴ UN-Habitat report, "Slum Almanac 2015-2016: Tracking Improvement in the Lives of Slum Dwellers", 2016, <https://unhabitat.org/slum-almanac-2015-2016>

⁵ IPCC's 5th Assessment Report on climate change and future developments, Part 1, 2013.

⁶ Groundswell report, "Preparing for Internal Climate Migration", *World Bank Group*, p.224, 2018.

⁷ UN News, December 10, 2008.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES**Taking emergency action and anticipating: two complementary principles, too long seen as opposing**

Given these perspectives, which point to more persistent and more severe natural disasters and urban risks, are our leaders capable of anticipating and managing these trends?

In the settings of armed conflicts, droughts, and tsunamis, humanitarian workers now have more than 50 years of experience, principally in rural areas. Even if the means employed and the issues raised can vary depending on the context, there is a true expertise in saving people.

As for anticipating disasters, be they technological or environmental, many wealthy countries have private and sometimes public insurance systems as the French “Catnat funds”. They have also gathered information and devised the regulations needed for disaster planning and protection. However, this is not a sign that they have taken full measure of the risks involved, especially since, in most cases, they themselves are already bearing the brunt of urbanisation, and their citizens are not necessarily prepared for torrential rains, floods and heatwaves. Not to mention the ever-greater intensity and frequency of such disasters that require us to re-examine the means put into place to protect people. In developing countries, there are few or no urban planning regulations, and as mentioned earlier, in many cities, urban growth has spread haphazardly and continues to do so today. Urban areas settled by impoverished people in informal housing are in fact those which are also the most exposed to technological and environmental risks. A population’s “capabilities” – a term dear to Amartya Sen – are thus constrained, and this, in turn, aggravates the ill effects induced by the vicious circle of poverty, peril, and plight.

When carrying out emergency operations and their ensuing developmental issues, humanitarian workers, developers, and planners everywhere are still seen to be struggling to get along and coordinate their efforts. One reason is the time element, which is naturally very different for each category of aid. Emergency responses involve short or very short-term interventions, while development and planning extend over longer or very much longer periods. These two time frames, often hard to reconcile, are a reflection of the different concerns that actors in each field have towards people and regions in need. Next, come the interventions themselves, which, having different objectives, do not require the same expertise, in particular when assessing a situation, helping people, planning or regulating the containment of risks and dangers, or planning medium and long-term development. Finally, the funding channels used by institutional donors are not the same for these two broad categories of actors-operators, thus accounting for the separate approach that is unavoidably undertaken on the ground.

A new approach for building the city of tomorrow

Considering the current situation and future prospects, there is a pressing need for expertise and practical skills to be adapted. First, because, as we have seen time and time again, the difficult interchange between the fields of humanitarianism and development has led to negative consequences. And also, because the succession of crises and their complex underlying processes are now disrupting the smooth disaster-development continuum, thus obliging us to readjust times frames and the expertise inherent in each approach. To fill this need, we should, in our view, favour the several avenues that have been largely approved by experienced NGOs in both fields: personnel training and staff synergy on the one hand, and on the other, a paradigm shift in the way of handling disaster situations and the modes of intervention in “informal” cityscapes, i.e. slums.

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

As for training, we can cite the case that, at present, decision-makers, urban planners and architects generally receive little or no training in anticipating and managing risks and disasters, just like humanitarian workers who lack the know-how to provide adequate developmental aid. It is clear, however, that an urban programme is not planned in the same way as a rural one if there is the likelihood of having to manage a disaster. Conversely, a humanitarian intervention has a greater reach, if its scope extends further to a development territorial project. Therefore, all aid workers must be trained, at a minimum, in the fundamentals of urban planning and in the management of risks, disasters and other issues related to urban and territorial development. Learning from each other's approaches, as well as from the involvement of elected officials and civil society, requires the gradual emergence of a shared culture and language, both essential to carry out innovative practices.

Collaborative work must be encouraged at several levels, mainly in carrying out urban diagnostics and drafting urban development plans, which currently fail to bring together the expertise of different specialists concerned (planners and developers, humanitarian workers, as well as decision-makers, and city residents themselves). This is, in our opinion, the best approach to adopt in a given situation for an overall view of the situation that is essential in planning for impending risks. Next, are the emergency operations themselves, which should require the systematic co-involvement of territorial development professionals and humanitarian workers. In addition to the expertise of humanitarian aid workers in saving lives and unscrambling chaotic situations, there are often knowledgeable developers and urban planners who are able to act quickly in the field using available and appropriate local resources.

When it comes to endorsing a paradigm shift, it seems essential, that operations – provided that they are over the long term – should not merely be circumscribed to the city block or neighbourhood level without first considering their extension to surroundings zones: the city, conurbation, outlying areas, or even the countryside. This concerns all domains: transport, housing, services, businesses, as well as governance. Conducting a pilot project or running an operation in a certain city neighbourhood, a task NGOs are qualified to carry out, is undeniably worthwhile, but can be counterproductive if the projects are not formulated in conjunction with actions taken higher up. Illustrating this idea, we can react to Bill Clinton's speech in 2010 – and its unfortunate aftermath – when he said that the Port-au-Prince disaster could be an opportunity to rethink the organisation and development of the Haitian capital.

Slums cover more than 60% of the urban fabric of developing countries. City planning regulations must therefore certainly be enacted, but it is equally important to value the capacity of resilience of slum residents by recognising their ability to organise their communities, their familiarity with the layout of the land, and their know-how. Their contribution, vital when handling a crisis, helps escape the often-calamitous effects of one-size-fits-all reconstruction programmes that give rise to everything but a city.

In view of the future urban expansion predicted in both the north and south, more than ever, humanitarian professionals are key to understanding and responding to risks, disasters, and social emergencies, so that adequate relief can be provided. Still, this must be accompanied by an acute awareness of the need to rethink how urban planning experts and decision-makers can best work together to anticipate and manage risks. We must also learn how to familiarise ourselves with different civil societies and their ability to innovate and act in response to the risks and chaos in which they have been and will be plunged. They must have their say among the present host of players.

Translated from the French by Alan Johnson

Biography • Emmanuel Matteudi

A Professor and Director of the Institute of Urban Planning and Regional Development of Aix-Marseille University, Head of the Master's programme, "Transition of Metropolises and Mediterranean Cooperation", and member of the LIEU research laboratory (*Laboratoire interdisciplinaire environnement et urbanisme*). As a specialist in matters involving poverty and inequality in developing countries, mainly in Africa, Emmanuel has been involved in research and expert counsel on behalf of central governments, local authorities, research organisations, NGOs, and UN agencies for more than twenty years. He is the author of *Le développement local en Afrique ou comment repenser la pauvreté*, a book that was awarded the francophone Turgot prize in 2013. He has just published *The Social Question in the Global World*, Cambridge Scholars Editions, 2018 co-authored with Ewa Bogalska-Martin.

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