

Briefing Note on UN-HABITAT's role, responsibilities and activities in the humanitarian sector

Rationale

In humanitarian situations worldwide the highest concentrations of affected populations live in urban settlements. Crises arising from economic, social and/or political strife, as well as from natural and human-made vulnerabilities, either displace urban populations, or force rural families into cities seeking, often in vain, security and potential livelihoods. Consequently, thousands of displaced persons and refugees, in addition to suffering many forms of loss, also lose their rights to housing, land and property (HLP) due to conflicts and disasters every year.

Shelter and secure tenure are the fundamental elements of what makes human settlements what they are, and the capacity to plan, manage, and administer these are the responsibility of both national, and local governments. It is during crises – both human-made and natural that this responsibility is most affected. Ironically, it is also during these times of crises – the greatest potential development gains may be realised in the shortest possible time-frame.

UN-HABITAT does not consider itself a humanitarian agency per se, but asserts its role in crises environs as one which adds value to those institutions consumed with the task(s) of saving and preserving human lives. The primary value added is by working hand in hand with humanitarian agencies leveraging short term investments in emergency services, into longer term developmental gain. This potentially shortens the term of crisis, and creates opportunities for early recovery and sustainable development.

UN-HABITAT's Role and Responsibility

Understanding that crises debilitates governments, both national and local – and the restoration of normalcy is key to recovery, UN-HABITAT engages within crises situations to provide assistance and support both to international humanitarian actors, and to government to hasten the recovery process.

Failure to act instantly and thoroughly on issues such as HLP dispute resolution often leads to renewed conflicts when people and communities return to their places of origin. This is clearly demonstrated in Southern Sudan, East Timor and other countries where insufficient or inadequate attention to land and property rights in peace agreements and return planning have led to renewed fighting and loss of lives and property. Therefore, recording and restoring HLP rights is more than simply a protection issue; it is a fundamental condition for building sustainable peace through revitalizing economic activities, promoting social cohesion and long-term stability: a humanitarian action in the longer term perspective that indeed helps preventing the stabilization of protracted humanitarian situations.

The shelter response to recent disasters has, among other things, demonstrated that efforts to provide a range of in situ, non-tent based emergency shelter options have proven effective in protecting HLP rights, providing survivors with constructive engagement, and rebuilding self confidence following disaster. For example, many people prefer to receive a "shelter kit"¹ to help them recover damaged building parts² and use them to provide their own emergency shelter from the rubble, others wish to engage in communal cleanup and reconstruction, both of which become the first steps towards recovery. Assessing and recommending alternative, culturally contextual, transitional shelter approaches are the cornerstone of UN-HABITAT's engagement in the immediate aftermath of crises.

Together with the IFRC, UNHCR and a range of NGOs, UN-HABITAT is providing series of post-disaster shelter options as alternatives to tents and plastic sheeting in for instance Peru, Pakistan, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Uganda and Sudan.

Finally, the potential for disaster risk reduction initiatives undertaken unilaterally by any government is at best slim, and often sadly only after a disaster occurs. However, the opportunity to think and act strategically, ensuring that vulnerabilities are addressed and resilience ensured during reconstruction following crises, is one of the many strengths of UN-HABITAT's early engagement in post-disaster situations.

UN-HABITAT's engagement in humanitarian bodies

Following several years of informal support to OCHA, UNHCR and others both in the field, and at a central coordination level at UNHQ in NY and through the UN-HABITAT Geneva Liaison Office, the Executive Director established 3 full time senior posts in Geneva. In support of the IASC Humanitarian Review process and the establishment of the Cluster system, the Geneva staff, backstopped by the Disaster and Post Conflict Section at HQ, engaged as Focal-Point agency for HLP in order to strengthen the preparedness for new disasters as well as the response on the ground. These activities are in support of Cluster Leads in the Emergency Shelter, Protection and Early Recovery clusters. Since December 2005, UN-HABITAT has drawn on its multidisciplinary expertise and experience from normative and operational activities to respond to disasters and emergencies in more than 18 countries. In Geneva, UN-HABITAT is now leading the group of 10 agencies with the aim to strengthen the HLP response³. In addition, the agency has been leading efforts of preparing rights based HLP tools and mechanisms for property restitution and land tenure rights in both customary and statutory systems⁴. In the Emergency Shelter and Early Recovery Clusters, both field support, and the production of a range of tools, training materials, and oversight of shelter and land-based activities are all underway.

UN-HABITAT participates in IASC weekly meetings, specific task-forces and the ongoing dialogue on thematic priorities in the areas of humanitarian reform, disaster risk mitigation and the strengthening of humanitarian country teams. This contribution is directly linked to UN-HABITAT's active engagement as a member of Executive Committee for Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA). Methodologies, pilot programmes, evaluation and assessment missions, and technical cooperation programmes and projects are underway in 29 countries worldwide.

UN-HABITAT's humanitarian field operations

In line with the increased number and complexity of emergencies, UN-HABITAT has significantly strengthened its capacity to respond swiftly and effectively to new and ongoing disasters. The agency has responded to virtually all new recent emergencies and provided projects to Flash Appeals and follow-up operations. For instance, the agency has currently more than 550 staff working on activities in Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Liberia, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Serbia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Further, UN-HABITAT has engaged extensively in joint inter-agency assessments, for instance the Darfur Joint Assessment Mission, which has resulted in a new joint programme promoting peace through recovery.

All together, UN-HABITAT, in the past decade, has been consistently operational in more than 35 countries responding to humanitarian shelter and protection needs while contributing to establishing conditions for return and reintegration, and peace and stability⁵.

¹ Though they can vary across locations according to specific needs shelter kits can often consist of a set of simple construction tools, such as hammers, crow bars, nails, corrugated iron sheets, etc.

² Such as timber, bricks, stones, which can easily be re-used

³ OCHA, UNHCR, OHCHR, UNDP, UNICEF, UNRWA, NRC/IDMC, ICRC, IOM and ProCap.

⁴ Handbook on "Housing and Property restitution for refugees and Displaced Persons – Implementing the Pinheiro Principles", issued in May 2007 by UN-HABITAT, OCHA, UNHCR, FAO, OHCHR and NRC/IDMC.

⁵ See "From Emergency Response to Sustainable Recovery, a compendium of UN-HABITAT Activities for Human Settlements in Crisis", 2007