Number 69 June 2017

Humanitarian Exchange

Special feature

The humanitarian consequences of violence in Central America

HPN Humanitarian Practice Network
Managed by Humanitarian Policy Group
ODI

Humanitarian Exchange

Number 69 June 2017

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The Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policymakers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or the Overseas Development Institute.

Cover photo: A family of Honduran refugees arrives at La Tecnica, Guatemala, on the Mexican border.
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Commissioned and published by **the Humanitarian Practice Network at ODI**

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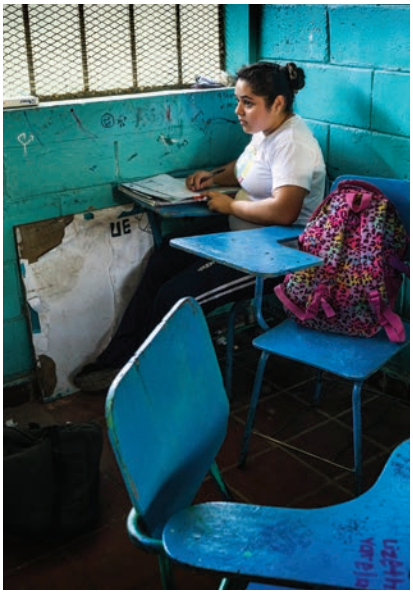
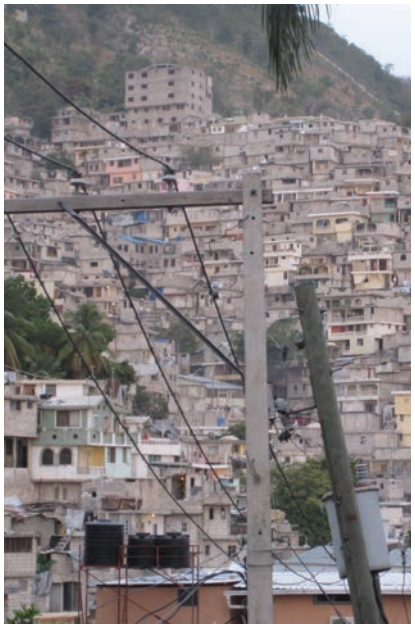
Editorial





Editorial photos:
Left: San Pedro Sula, Rivera Hernandez neighbourhood, one of the most dangerous in Honduras.
© European Union/ECHO/Aragon 2016

Top: Families of missing migrants painted their experiences on a collective mural to highlight their need.
© Delmer Membreno/ICRC

Middle: A Honduran migrant in Puebla, Ciudad Serdan.
© ICRC/Brenda Islas

Bottom right: Hillside settlements in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.
© Michael Hooper

Over the last decade organised criminal violence in Central America has resulted in some of the highest homicide rates in the world. This violence has also generated a marked upsurge in forced displacement within countries, across the region and northwards into the United States and Mexico, creating what Jan Egeland, in his lead article for this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange*, calls a crisis of protection on a scale unprecedented for areas not at war. Yet as Wendy Cue and Vicente Raimundo Núñez-Flores point out, there is a reluctance among governments and assistance providers to acknowledge and frame responses to the humanitarian dimensions of this crisis. Reinforcing this point in his article on El Salvador, Noah Bullock adds that the main challenge for humanitarian actors lies in identifying and assisting people in hiding without putting them or assistance providers in more danger.

David James Cantor and Malte Plewa analyse the dynamics of organised criminal violence and caution against underestimating the practical and conceptual challenges in responding to it, while Sabrina Stein and Colin Walch explore the nexus between humanitarian action and development in addressing the consequences of violence. Robert Muggah argues for flexible, adaptable and localised violence prevention and emergency response programmes in conjunction with civic authorities and community partners. Giovanni Bassu outlines the need for official recognition of forced internal displacement and the adoption of laws and policies in line with the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Marc Bosch and Elena Estrada discuss the strategies Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is using in Mexico to address the negative impact of forced migration on the wellbeing of refugees and migrants. Finally, in their article on armed violence and missing persons, Olivier Dubois and Rocío Maldonado de la Fuente discuss the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s experience in the region.

Articles in the Practice and Policy Notes section reflect on power, roles and ownership in humanitarian shelter assistance, focusing on the concept of 'self-recovery', and humanitarian standards in urban, post-disaster contexts, with reference to a study of Sphere shelter standards in Haiti.

As always, we welcome any comments or feedback, which can be sent to **hpn@odi.org.uk** or to the **HPN Coordinator, 203 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8NJ**.

San Pedro Sula, Rivera Hernandez neighbourhood. Some students stop attending school because of threats from criminal gangs.

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The humanitarian consequences of violence in Central America

Central America: at the tipping point

Jan Egeland

In visiting Central America over the past 30 years, I am consistently surprised at the region's striking contrasts. The deadly violence and injustice that plague it sit side by side with a rich tradition of solidarity and a vibrant civil society. The displacement caused by organised crime contrasts starkly with noble regional initiatives designed to protect communities. The Cartagena Declaration in 1984 laid the foundations for common efforts to protect the region's displaced communities. In 2014, the Brazil Action Plan intensified these efforts. As Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), I encouraged states meeting in Brazil to adopt a plan to better respond to new challenges throughout the region. Unfortunately, the need to build common solutions today is as pertinent as it was in 1984.

On the brink

Endemic violence and crime has significantly compounded humanitarian needs in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Close to 3 million people rely on humanitarian assistance in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – nearly 10% of the total population.[1] These three countries are on the brink of a humanitarian disaster, with the situation likely to deteriorate in coming months. We are faced with the real possibility that 2017 will see the Northern Triangle become one of the ten most serious humanitarian crises in the world.[2] Extortion, threats, kidnapping, rape, homicide and forced recruitment of minors are part of everyday life. Widespread violence has led to a crisis of protection on a scale unprecedented for areas not at war.

The impact of the violence on people's lives is devastating. El Salvador and Honduras have some of the highest homicide rates in the world – higher even than countries in armed conflict. In Guatemala, over 90 murders a week were reported in 2015. Young people are worst affected, with boys and girls as young as eight forced into drug-trafficking, collecting extortion payments and surveillance. In Honduras, the NRC found that, in areas where criminal gangs were present, boys and girls had become parents in one in every five households, and in eight out of ten cases girls received no support from the father of their child. One in four teenage girls had become pregnant at least once.[3] Where is the protection for these innocent girls and boys? Along with their childhoods, children and young people are also being robbed of an education. They are forced to move schools or abandon their education completely because of the violence. Direct threats by criminal gangs have caused schools to close. In Honduras, one child per family is out of school in areas most affected by violence. Without adequate education, attention and protection, children are easy prey for criminal gangs.

Unheeded warnings and public distrust

Despite stark warnings, governments in the region have been unable to prevent displacement or systematically respond to the immediate needs of families forced to flee their homes. Despite nascent public policies there are no legal frameworks that specifically promote protection and assistance for displaced people. High levels of distrust, especially of police forces and the army, mean that families generally do not look to institutional protection when they need help. The very institutions set up to protect them have failed them.

With few options, many flee the region completely. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that at least 400,000 migrants try to reach the United States from Central America or Mexico every year.[4] This movement of people is closely linked to widespread violence. The global annual number of asylum-seekers from the Northern Triangle increased five-fold between 2012 and 2015, reaching 110,000 by 2015. To avoid detection, families are forced to pay smugglers, corrupt officials and kidnappers, and are using more dangerous, risky and isolated routes through Mexico. We are also seeing a substantial increase in migration by unaccompanied minors: according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), 35,000 fled to the US from Mexico in 2015 – nine times the number reported four years before.[5] Meanwhile, mass deportations from the US and Mexico continue unabated: the two countries deported 241,000 Central Americans

1 ACAPS, *Crisis Overview 2016: Humanitarian Trends and Risks for 2017*, 30 November 2016.

2 *Ibid.*

3 See W radio, 'Study warns that 640,000 young people neither work nor study in Honduras', 20 October 2016, http://www.wradio.com.co/noticias/internacional/estudio-alerta-que-640000-jovenes-ni-traba- jan-ni-estudian-en-honduras/20161020/nota/3279984.aspw.

4 IOM, http://oim.org.mx/hechos-y-cifras-2.

5 International Crisis Group, 'Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration', 28 July 2016.

between October 2014 and September 2015.[6] US President Donald Trump's proposed wall on the border with Mexico will only deepen the looming crisis ahead.

A three-step solution

Three concrete steps must be taken now to better protect communities in the Northern Triangle, and prevent El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras from joining the list of the world's ten worst crises. First, the governments of these three countries must restore their citizens' trust in state institutions. People must believe that their governments can and will protect them. There should be no reason to choose to flee. Simultaneously, governments must rapidly advance plans to set up and strengthen legal frameworks to protect displaced people. In the meantime, the humanitarian response in these communities must be urgently improved. Second, consensus must be reached at the regional level on how to address displacement, including strengthening the common understanding achieved in the 2014 Brazil Action Plan and the more recent San Jose Declaration. Good practices and tools, along with standards for protection, can no longer be postponed. Third, the human and financial resources to deal with this crisis must be significantly increased. The international community has a concrete role to play, but must act now, before the situation deteriorates further. International cooperation is vital to promote lasting solutions and stop the cycle of violence in the region.

Bottom-up approach

My experience has shown that, time and again, processes that build from bottom to top work best. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras must each address the complex regional situation based on their own realities and experience. The countries of the Northern Triangle must improve their protection regimes and identify common humanitarian solutions associated with mixed migratory flows, including migrants, refugees, stateless people and other vulnerable groups. To build a safe and secure future for the next generation in the Northern Triangle, the governments of the region must set up a coordinated response to a shared responsibility. The solution is regional, and borders must remain open. There is a window of opportunity now to act and make a real difference, but it will not remain open for long.

Jan Egeland is Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council.

6 *Ibid.*

According to need? Humanitarian responses to violence in Central America

Wendy Cue and Vicente Raimundo Núñez-Flores

> *The homicidal brutality in Central America has spawned a humanitarian disaster … Families have taken the journey anyway, not because they are determined to flout [US] immigration laws – but because they want not to be murdered.*
>
> *New York Times* editorial, 16 January 2016

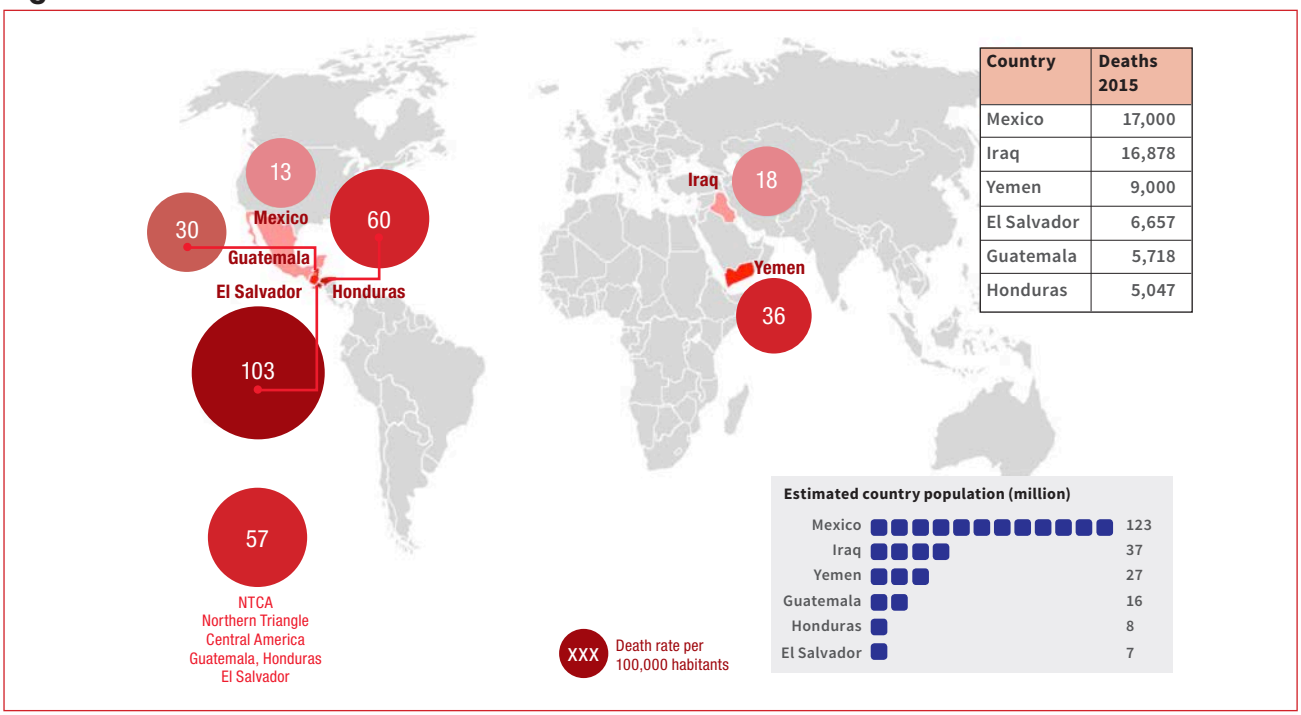
In the past five years, organised violence in Central America has increased in intensity, volume and geographical spread. What a decade ago were mostly isolated events that could be attributed to identifiable causes is now a pervasive crisis that threatens the stability and viability of communities and the region as a whole. The epicentre of this violence is located in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, often referred to as the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA). These three countries have the highest homicide rates per capita in the world, resulting in the deaths of 17,400 people in 2015. Homicide rates are eight times higher than the global average, and several times higher than those registered in many conflicts.[1] Forced displacement of entire communities, sexual violence against women and girls, widespread child recruitment, lack of access to life-saving medical care and basic education, attacks on the medical mission: these and other known consequences of war are found here as well. Given the urgent relief needs of this growing humanitarian crisis, an ad hoc, developmental response is no longer appropriate, sufficient or effective.

Violence and conflict: defining the problem

The violence currently devastating Central America involves multiple actors competing with each other to establish a sort of tribal control over resources or territory, relying heavily on the use of armed threats, extortion and retaliation against communities. It is not, however, at a level of intensity that would qualify as an armed conflict in terms of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Some call this 'non-conventional violence'. Political, security and judicial institutions have been corrupted and have lost legitimacy, and paramilitary security forces have also been engaged in violence as part of the heavy-handed tactics governments have used against organised crime. Local organised armed groups known as *maras*, either assisting foreign drug cartels or operating independently, have attained such a position of power and influence that, in many areas, national authorities are unable

1 According to Insight Crime, in 2015 the number of violent deaths in Yemen was some 36 per 100,000 inhabitants. In El Salvador the figure was 103 per 100,000, in Honduras 60 per 100,000 and in Guatemala 30 per 100,000. Rates of violent death above ten per 100,000 are considered an epidemic.

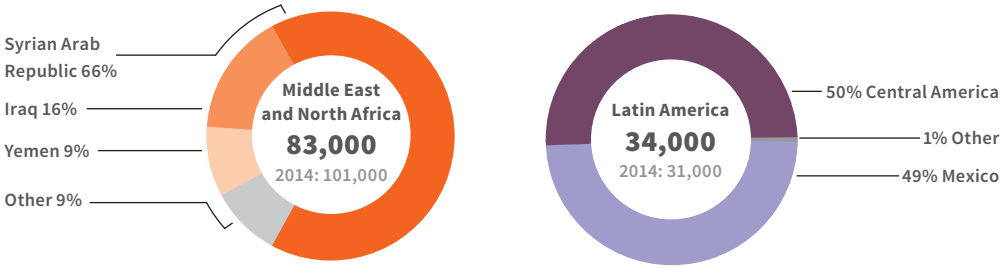
Figure 1 Violence around the world



Country	Deaths 2015
Mexico	17,000
Iraq	16,878
Yemen	9,000
El Salvador	6,657
Guatemala	5,718
Honduras	5,047

Sources: Death rates 2015: National Institute of Statistics and Geography Mexico (INEGI), National Institute of Forensic Science Guatemala, Violence Observatory at Honduras' National Autonomous University (UNAH), El Salvador's Institute of Legal Medicine (ILM), and UN (Yemen and Iraq).

Figure 2 Global conflict fatalities, 2015



Source: OECD States of Fragility 2016 *Understanding Violence* Highlights Report

to provide security, enforce the rule of law, assure governance or regulate access to basic services.

The scale and nature of the violence in Central America is generating significant humanitarian needs. This has necessitated the increasing engagement of key humanitarian actors, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO)/Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has made addressing the humanitarian consequences of the violence in Central America an operational priority, and in 2014 published a policy document defining its role in situations of violence outside of armed conflict.

Needs: symptoms of a growing humanitarian crisis

An estimated 714,500 people across Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have been internally displaced. Despite the fact that one in three would qualify for international protection, less than a quarter of those registered as displaced receive assistance, and only Honduras has taken steps to incorporate the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement into national legislation.[2] There has also been a 25% increase in the number of asylum applications qualifying for refugee status since 2011.

Basic services, in particular health and education, are virtually non-existent in areas affected by violence. In urban areas of El Salvador, between a third and a half of the population do not have access to health services because gangs control movement across their territory. Health workers and other staff have also been directly targeted. Schools are being used as recruiting centres for armed gangs, with students and staff under relentless threat. In El Salvador, up to 39,000 students

2 UNHCR, *Women on the Run: First-hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico*, October 2015.

Children in Honduras grow up in war-like conditions, witnessing extreme violence on a daily basis.

© ECHO/Antonio Aragon

dropped out of the public school system due to violence in 2015, and in 2016 nine teachers and 71 students were killed.

A humanitarian concern?

Despite the scale of the violence and its devastating impact on Central American society, many question whether this is a humanitarian crisis at all. Sceptics often cite issues of mandate, capacity and the definition of needs when questioning whether humanitarians should be involved.

Do humanitarian actors have a mandate to respond in what has consistently been labelled a crime and narcotics crisis better left to the security forces? There is ample precedent for humanitarians providing relief in situations similar to what is happening in Central America, including ICRC and MSF programmes in Cité Soleil, Haiti, from 2004 to 2006, and Save the Children's work in Cali, Medellin and Buenaventura in Colombia from 2010 to 2014. Humanitarian actors justifiably consider that, regardless of the cause, when there is a sufficient volume of unmet humanitarian needs and their assistance has clear added value, they are morally justified in acting. Given that large areas of these countries are effectively outside of government control, it is clear that the provision of humanitarian assistance, delivered by neutral and impartial actors, proportionate in scale and appropriate to the needs of the affected population, is urgent, relevant and should be delivered.

As middle-income countries, sceptics ask: shouldn't the responsible authorities have the capacity to address needs? Regardless of whether the capacity (and political will) exists, documented humanitarian needs in virtually all sectors are unmet. Governments tend to focus on the security aspects of the problem, and respond with police measures rather than assistance. The fiscal crisis in El Salvador has led the government to recognise the need for assistance and ask for humanitarian funding from the UN to augment support to victims of violence, including the internally displaced, victims of sexual violence and children at risk of forced recruitment. Honduras, having recognised the need for protection and assistance to internally displaced people, has requested humanitarian assistance with the stated aim of increasing institutional budgets for social protection.

Are the needs humanitarian needs? Although these are officially post-conflict countries, the humanitarian consequences of shocking levels of violence differ little, if at all, from armed conflicts. When, for instance, relief actors in crises like Yemen or Iraq seek to measure humanitarian need, they focus on indicators such as the number of people killed or injured, the volume of displacement and the forced recruitment of children, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and the need for protection and psychological support. These indicators are all present in the Northern Triangle. The victims of non-conventional violence are no less entitled to receive humanitarian assistance than the people of Iraq, Syria or Yemen.

Responding to needs

Much of the current response in the Northern Triangle is framed around a development approach that seeks to end needs (prevent violence, reform the justice system, create employment) rather than providing life-saving protection and assistance. There is no doubt that development programmes are of critical importance in addressing the root causes of violence in Central America. However, this should not be at the expense of reducing or overlooking the role of a principled, needs-based humanitarian approach. The nature and scale of unmet needs for people and communities affected by violence is so critical, and the relief being offered so limited, that essential life-saving humanitarian action should be provided now. This is a largely forgotten crisis.

In many low-intensity conflicts, the capacity of national actors to provide systematic and needs-based humanitarian assistance is imperfect. This applies equally to the situation in Central America. Regional and national policies tend to focus on the security dimension, national actors are sometimes themselves responsible for violence and the authorities lack the resources and technical capacity to provide adequate assistance. Neutral and impartial humanitarian actors are therefore critical in effectively meeting humanitarian needs.

Over the past two years, an increasing number of humanitarian actors have begun implementing projects to meet the needs of victims. Even limited humanitarian funding can make a difference. In one example, a small European Commission Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) grant to UNHCR in 2014 documented forced displacement in Honduras, leveraging awareness among Honduran authorities to recognise displacement and to incorporate the Guiding Principles on the human rights of IDPs into national legislation. Other projects have provided emergency health services, protection against the recruitment of children into gangs and against sexual abuse, legal services for asylum-seekers, psychosocial support to victims and negotiation of humanitarian access.

In responding to non-conventional violence, relief actors have had to improve information-gathering and analysis to enable appropriate and effective assistance. This includes defining success indicators and better data collection and information-sharing at national and regional levels. Campaigns and analysis to raise awareness and expand the response have sought to generate a common understanding of needs, challenges and opportunities. The Norwegian Refugee Council has campaigned on children affected by violence with the European parliament, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Organization of American States (OAS) have published studies on the links between food insecurity, violence and displacement and UNHCR has produced thematic studies on displaced women and children. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) now includes information on violence in humanitarian overviews and is tracking related indicators. While these projects demonstrate that it is possible and necessary to apply a humanitarian lens to the situation in Central America, more remains to be done to ensure that real-time data and analysis are available to humanitarian decision-makers.

Humanitarians are often asked to produce robust evidence of need where lives are at risk and the consequences of insufficient action can be deadly. The situation now in Central America calls for a response in accordance with the level of need.

Wendy Cue is Head of the OCHA Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean. **Vicente Raimundo Núñez-Flores** is Head of the Regional Office for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, ECHO. The views in this article are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the official positions of their agencies.

Towards a response: addressing forced displacement by violence in El Salvador

Noah Bullock

In the last two years 11,936 people have been murdered in El Salvador, a country with a population of 6.5 million; an estimated 550,000 left the country because of violence in 2016 alone. Based on violent death rates and displacement, El Salvador, and its neighbours in Central America's Northern Triangle, Guatemala and Honduras, should sit at the top of the list of global humanitarian hotspots. Yet the humanitarian consequences of extreme violence, human rights violations and internal and external displacement in the sub-region remain almost invisible to most of the rest of the world. So-called 'non-conventional violence' lacks the compelling imagery of war-damaged infrastructure, siege-imposed scarcity, large concentrations of displaced people and immediately visible and quantifiable humanitarian needs.

The scars of today's violence are visible, not in bombed-out buildings, but rather in the formidable security architecture, where barbed wire crowns nearly every wall and armed men stand watch over commercial premises and middle-class streets. The displaced prefer hiding in secrecy to camps, fleeing and fearing, to varying degrees, both criminals and the state. Amnesty International's Secretary-General, Salil Shetty, accurately described the security and humanitarian

situation in the sub-region as 'virtual war zones where lives seem to be expendable and millions live in constant terror at what gang members or public security forces can do to them or their loved ones. These millions are now the protagonists in one of the world's least visible refugee crises'.[1]

The problem of political will

Recent reports reflect the important role of violence in driving internal and external displacement in El Salvador.[2] Yet despite the data, the Salvadoran government emphasises the multiple causes of migration and questions the existence of internal displacement by violence. There is no official strategy to assist victims of displacement, and the government made no commitments at the UN High Level Round Table on Forced Displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America, held in July 2016 in Costa Rica. The victim assistance programmes that have been central to transitional peace processes regionally occupy at best a peripheral place in government security and development policy, and the term 'forced displacement' is entirely absent. The Plan Alliance for Prosperity (PAP), the regional development strategy between the three governments in the Northern Triangle and the Inter-American Development Bank, does not have a strong protection component and fails to articulate a clear strategy to address the specific protection needs of people displaced by violence.

The Citizen Security Council, convened by the government in 2014, included specific measures under the 'Plan El Salvador Seguro' to strengthen national coordination for victim assistance and improve infrastructure in hospitals and shelters. The first sign of implementation came three years later, when the Minister for Justice and Security, Mauricio Ramírez Landaverde, announced in January a plan to establish local victim assistance offices (Oficinas Locales de Atención a Víctimas (OLAV)) in key locations across the country.[3] However, with the exception of the OLAV, security policy has focused almost entirely on a strategy of increasing militarisation of public security and repressive legal reforms to combat criminal groups, known as 'extraordinary measures'. As part of this, the Salvadoran legislature reformed the penal code in April 2016 to criminalise the act of forcing others to leave their places of residence. This reform, known as Limitación Ilegal a la Libertad de Circulación (LILIC), also criminalises the use of violence or threats to restrict freedom of movement. The National Civilian Police (PNC) received 81 cases classified as LILIC involving 141 people between the enactment of the law in April and November 2016.[4] The establishment of LILIC can be seen as a recognition of forced displacement as a crime, but without a corresponding recognition of the responsibility to protect and assist the victims. Victims of violence and displacement also face stigmatisation and discrimination for perceived association with criminal organisations. In the polarising and bellicose narrative of the 'war on gangs', victims are regularly associated with 'the enemy' by public officials, rather than recognised as citizens with a right to protection. This discourse not only detracts from building a national response, but also corrodes public opinion towards victims and undermines solidarity with people in need of assistance.

The capacity gap and mandate problem

A report by the Civil Society Observatory on Forced Displacement in 2016 includes a review of the national legislative and policy framework to identify existing constitutional legal norms and mandates relevant for the protection of victims of forced displacement by violence.[5] There is no specialised legislation or specific protection programme for the victims of internal displacement by violence. The constitution is, however, consistent with international standards in recognising that the state has the primary duty for protecting citizens, which would apply broadly to citizens in situations of displacement by violence.[6] National legislation has evolved recently to establish specialised institutions for the protection of vulnerable groups including women and children against violence and discrimination. These institutions are designed to address more traditional criminal and domestic violence, and have limited capacities to comprehensively address the needs of people forcibly displaced by violence. Closing this gap is complicated by the precarious financial situation of the Salvadoran government, which came to the brink of insolvency in 2016. In this context there are neither the resources nor a clear mandate that would encourage or oblige public administrators to take on the task of coordinating a humanitarian response to assist potentially hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

As such, the state response to displacement has been limited to the good faith efforts of individual public servants who, motivated by the many victims that come knocking on their doors, endeavour to assist on a case-by-case basis. This has created an opening for civil society organisations (CSOs) to develop partnerships with state institutions such as the

1 'Central America Turns Its Back on Hundreds of Thousands Fleeing "War-like" Violence', Amnesty International, 14 October 2016.

2 Official data register insecurity as the second leading cause of migration. See International Organization for Migration, *El Salvador: Cifras Oficiales de Retornos, February 2017.*

3 Ezequiel Barrera, 'GOES Dice que este año si atendera a victimas de violencia', *Prensa Grafica*, 6 January 2017.

4 Mesa de Sociedad Civil Contra El Desplazamiento Forzado Por Violencia y Crimen Organizada en El Salvador, 'Desplazamiento Interno por Violencia y Crimen Organizado: Informe 2016', 2016.

5 'Desplazamiento Interno por Violencia y Crimen Organizado: Informe 2016', Mesa de Sociedad Civil Contra El Desplazamiento Forzado Por Violencia y Crimen Organizada en El Salvador, 2016.

6 Article 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador states: 'Everyone has the right to life, physical and moral integrity, liberty, security, work, property and possession and to be protected in the conservation and defense of the same'.

A Salvadoran family living in a displaced community.

© Global Eyes Media/Jeff Hammond

public defender's office (PGR), the human rights ombudsman (PDDH) and Instituto Salvadoreno para el Desarrollo de la Mujer (ISDEMU) to improve victim assistance. CSOs have lent their expertise to assess existing institutional capacities and procedures, and have provided technical support to improve institutional responses to displacement. CSOs and state institutions have also created referral networks and have had positive experiences using joint case management as a learning and capacity-building exercise.

Displacement patterns

Data gathered over the past two years by the Civil Society Observatory has provided a clearer picture of the profile of victims, their persecutors and the humanitarian consequences they face. Displacement in El Salvador has two interconnected triggers: generalised violence and threats and acts of violence directed at an individual or family. Although cases of the latter seem clear-cut and demonstrate a more imminent threat, the former is a no less serious or valid trigger. For example, one family decided to abandon their home when gangs sprinkled the crushed teeth of their recently disappeared neighbours on the street in front of their house in retaliation for someone in the neighbourhood speaking to the police. A more common example is for families to send their children away when they reach puberty in order to prevent harassment and abuse by the security forces, entanglement with gangs or, in the case of girls, sexual abuse or slavery by gangs.

It is common in case documentation for victims to report multiple types of violence as contributing factors to displacement. Threats may be made directly against a victim, but often involve entire families. When faced with threats, families prioritise protection according to the needs and vulnerabilities of individual members. For example, mothers have reported separating their adolescent boys from the family because young males raise suspicion among gangs and the security forces. If a child has a parent abroad the family may decide to hire a smuggler to reunite that child with the parent while remaining relatives seek protection through family networks in the country. In general, internally displaced people (IDPs) don't want to be found and counted, and families and individuals often move without informing neighbours or even close relatives where they are. People do not find refuge in camps or in relocation but by hiding, a behaviour CSOs call 'confinement'.

The challenge of access

The principal operational challenge for humanitarians in the NTCA is to identify and assist victims who, for security reasons, have restricted mobility or are in confinement, without increasing the risk to victims or assistance providers. Most cases documented by the Observatory did not report their situation

to the authorities for fear of reprisals, fear of corruption in state institutions and lack of confidence in the state's capacity to assist them. To overcome this barrier, it is necessary to determine in each case a safety zone where both victims and service providers can engage in relative security. Safety zones can range from a safe house to more open models of support provided by host families or communities. A third option for families enjoying a degree of mobility and facing lower levels of persecution is to establish a temporary safe zone and security regimen that allows for victims to meet with providers while maintaining anonymity. More work is needed to develop shelter and safe zone options that allow families to receive specialised assistance and transition quickly through emergency protection assistance to durable solutions. Experience has shown that combining psychosocial assistance with other humanitarian and legal help is essential in making a transition successful.

Conclusion

The government's failure to recognise forced displacement and the absence of a central focus on victim assistance in national security and development policy is contributing to the destabilisation of communities most affected by violence. Discrimination against victims because of perceived or real associations with criminal groups will only further polarise the country and potentially increase levels of violence. All actors involved should commit to a principled humanitarian response that guarantees non-discrimination in the provision of protection and humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarians should also work with development actors to build community-based protection options to assist families in the emergency phases of displacement, and to build durable solutions in both host countries and countries of origin. Recognising the important role that widespread impunity for serious crimes and human rights violations plays in driving internal and external displacement, humanitarians should work with human rights actors to assist victims in accessing justice. Interdisciplinary coordination with human rights and development actors can help to resolve displacement-related problems and lend greater viability to durable solution options.

Regional governments should work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and local and international humanitarian organisations to strengthen regional international protection options under the regional refugee protection framework of the Brazil Plan of Action and build referral systems within countries party to the C-4 border control agreement (Convenio Centroamericano de Libre Movilidad) to relocate victims with special protection needs.

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Forced displacement and violent crime: a humanitarian crisis in Central America?

David James Cantor and Malte Plewa

The idea that conflicts generate humanitarian and refugee crises is uncontroversial. In Latin America, though, it is increasingly evident that such situations can also arise from other situations of violence. Even in relatively prosperous middle-income countries such as Colombia and Mexico, changing modus operandi among organised criminal groups are producing new patterns of forced displacement, albeit often hidden from public view.[1] Nowhere is this situation more critical than in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, the three countries that make up the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA).

NTCA violence: as deadly as conflict?

Over the last decade Central America has held the dubious distinction of recording some of the highest homicide rates of any part of the world.[2] This violence has been particularly acute in the NTCA. Despite the fact that neither El Salvador nor Honduras is formally at war, recent rates of violent deaths in these two countries in certain years appear to be second only to Syria.[3] Alongside this spate of killings, which disproportionately affect young men, the countries of the NTCA also display a panoply of other forms of violence, including assaults, extortion and sexual violence. The violence currently gripping the NTCA countries is not only as deadly as contemporary armed conflicts, but more deadly than many conflicts currently taking place across the globe.[4]

1 D. J. Cantor and N. Rodríguez Serna (eds), *Los nuevos desplazados: crimen y desplazamiento en América Latina*, ILAS, 2015.

2 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data*, 10 April 2014. This, the most recent comparative study available, uses national data up to 2012.

3 GDAVD, *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2015*, p. 58. 2015 homicide levels in El Salvador are not included in the GDAVD analysis but would place the country second, assuming that rates in Syria and elsewhere remained constant.

4 D. J. Cantor, 'As Deadly as Armed Conflict? Gang Violence and Forced Displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America', *Agenda Internacional*, 23 (34), 2016.

San Salvador, Cojutepeque Penal Center. Detainees in their cell.

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Violence as a strategy of power

The upsurge of violence in the NTCA is anything but 'random' criminality.[5] Rather, it closely reflects patterns of control and confrontation by organised armed actors. As in many other contexts in the Americas, state security forces and the multiplicity of private security companies each play particular roles in producing this violence. However, one prominent feature of the NTCA is the instrumental use of violence by powerful organised criminal groups.

Urban areas (and some semi-rural and rural areas) in all three of the NTCA countries are home to a huge number of street gangs,[6] with complex and shifting relationships of collaboration and confrontation. Many local gangs are affiliated through larger identity-based structures such as Barrio-18 (B-18) and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS). Each local gang operates with a large degree of autonomy, using violence to control a 'core' territory, impose its will on local inhabitants and carry out extortion – the gangs' lifeblood – especially of businesses in its 'extended' zones of operation. In principle, local B-18 or MS gangs also answer to a prison-based council that provides leadership at the national level, including arranging truces with the government and other powerful actors. Gang disputes in the NTCA are increasingly over control of local drug markets in urban localities.

In parallel, the cross-border smuggling routes that run through the countries of the NTCA are used by a range of groups involved in drug-trafficking. The resources available to the larger groups mean that they wield considerable social and political influence. They are also well-organised, heavily-armed and disciplined. In poor communities, working for these groups represents a scarce source of income, and they can be generous in the provision of material support. Compared to urban gang zones, the populations of these regions often seem to be less exposed to generalised predatory practices

5 Unless otherwise indicated, the analysis in this section and the following is drawn from D. J. Cantor, 'The New Wave: Forced Displacement Caused by Organized Crime in Central America and Mexico', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 33:3, 2014.

6 In 2015, the Salvadorian Minister of Defence alluded to an unsubstantiated figure of 60,000 gang members, in a country with a combined police force and army of 50,000. See T. Molina, 'Pandilleros de El Salvador superan en número a efectivos de seguridad', *Panam*, 23 October 2015.

like extortion, with violence targeted more towards specific individuals who pose a threat to these groups or are an obstacle to the realisation of some definite end.

Displacement as a product of violence

Instrumental violence by armed actors is a primary factor in displacement. Generally, forced displacement in the NTCA seems to be urban-to-urban, furtive and *gota-a-gota* (person-by-person). Movement patterns are diverse, reflecting differences in the specific causes of displacement. For instance, being labelled a 'traitor' or enemy by a street gang is usually tantamount to a death sentence, such that the person concerned has little option but to flee, usually to another urban area. Drug-trafficking groups take the same approach, producing a pattern of rural–urban movement as individuals and families considered enemies by one or other drug-trafficking group flee rural areas of the NTCA, or are forced to sell land in zones strategic for cross-border smuggling. In some cases, a small fortune is offered for the land, and in others the offer is risible – yet any refusal to sell is met by the threat of violence.

Other grounds for displacement in urban areas include more diffuse fears about the wider climate of insecurity created by gang violence. Even if no direct threat exists, individual families may move to another urban area for fear that their children will attract the attention of the local gang, or simply out of frustration with increasing levels of crime and violence. Finally, a distinct form of displacement results from violence produced by the shifting patterns of cooperation and competition between street gangs in the NTCA. These disputes often produce a general increase in insecurity or a hardening of gang attitudes towards the population, such that extortion quotas are raised or those who do not pay are killed immediately.

Upsurge in displacement: a crisis moment?

Migration flows northwards from the countries of the NTCA are hardly new. Nor, sadly, are the dangers that such migrants face en route. However, it is evident that violence and insecurity in these countries are now an important motivation for movement among a significant proportion of migrants.[7] In parallel, over the past five years asylum applications lodged by NTCA citizens have been rising at an alarming rate.[8] The fact that a steadily growing percentage of asylum claimants are recognised as eligible for international protection suggests an increasingly important refugee component within the flow of people from these countries.

Preliminary data also suggests high levels of internal displacement in the NTCA countries, despite the fact that they are not 'at war'. In 2014, a Honduran government study determined that approximately 4% of the population of the 20 municipalities surveyed identified themselves as internally displaced, with 7.5% of those reporting having been displaced twice, and 2% three times.[9] An academic survey in El Salvador, also in 2014, reported that some 4.6% of respondents had been forcibly displaced that year alone (approximately 275,000 people, if scaled up to the national population).[10] Such rates of internal displacement are on a par with those in active war zones. Against this background, the NTCA countries are only now starting to recognise and respond to the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and in-country protection options are limited, both for IDPs and for NTCA citizens deported from Mexico and the United States and who end up as IDPs.

Responding to the humanitarian situation

The current upsurge of violence in the countries of the NTCA is not merely an expression of common criminality. Rather, violence is being used instrumentally by armed and organised actors to pursue their own diverse social and political projects. Its impact is considerable, not least in terms of the scale and diverse patterns of forced displacement that it produces.

Thus far, the NTCA states have focused on attempting to address the security-related implications of organised crime. Yet the special vulnerability of NTCA refugees and IDPs, and their compelling protection needs, call for a more robust recognition of the humanitarian consequences of the violence. It is encouraging that some governments, international organisations and NGOs are beginning to take these challenges seriously. The 2016 San Jose Action Statement,[11] which maps out a set of regional responses to the displacement crisis in the NTCA, is one roadmap for action in this area. Whether initiatives such as this will be bolstered or weakened by the new US administration remains to be seen.

In the meantime, we should be careful not to underestimate the practical and conceptual challenges responding to forced displacement in the NTCA poses, including:

- questions about the links between migration and displacement flows;

7 See, for example, UNHCR, *Children on the Run: Unaccompanied Children Leaving Central America and Mexico and the Need for International Protection*, 13 March 2014.

8 UNHCR, *Call to Action: Protection Needs in the Northern Triangle of Central America*, August 2016.

9 Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS), *Characterisation of Internal Displacement in Honduras*, November 2015.

10 IUDOP, 'Evaluación del país a finales de 2014', *Boletín de prensa*, 5, December 2014.

11 UNHCR and Organization of American States (OAS), *San Jose Action Statement: 'Call to Action: Protection Needs in the Northern Triangle of Central America'.*

- the complex circular movement patterns of NTCA citizens across the region;
- the political sensitivities surrounding the topic of displacement in the NTCA;
- reluctance to recognise crime as a cause of displacement;
- complications in humanitarian access and interlocution with gangs;
- nascent donor interest in such 'new' forms of displacement; and
- shrinking humanitarian space globally for refugee protection.

Getting to grips with these challenges now is imperative, and not just for the sake of displaced people in the NTCA. In a world where internal armed conflict is increasingly marked by organised criminality, and organised criminality is closely linked to other situations of violence, humanitarian practitioners are required ever more frequently to address displacement crises provoked by these 'new' dynamics of violence. Insights from research and humanitarian action in the NTCA thus offer a first step towards responding to these new global displacement challenges.

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Non-conventional violence in Central America and Mexico: the case for an integrated humanitarian and development approach

Sabrina Stein and Colin Walch

Recent international processes have highlighted the need to break down the silos separating humanitarian action and development assistance. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, adopted in March 2015, established a framework to build resilience through risk-informed development. Later in 2015, UN member states approved the Sustainable Development Goals, a global agenda unique in that it recognises that, to end poverty, policies cannot focus only on economic development, but also need to address a diversity of issues including education, health, human security, governance, rule of law and accountability. Within the UN system, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations and the Advisory Group of Experts Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture highlighted the importance of prevention-focused work. Similarly, the Secretary-General's report for the World Humanitarian Summit, *One Humanity*, *Shared Responsibility*, emphasised prevention-focused humanitarian work. These processes testify to the need to step away from the distinct pillars that have characterised the work of the international community, and move towards a more coordinated approach.

This article examines the humanitarian impact of high levels of non-conventional violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) and Mexico, and explores the nexus between the humanitarian and development agendas as a way to address the far-reaching implications of this violence, from protection to prevention. We focus on specific areas where the synthesis of humanitarian and development agendas would be key, building on the strengths and expertise that each of these sets of actors brings, to help produce more sustainable successes and provide longer-term benefits for local communities.

Common goals

Humanitarian and development actors, while fundamentally working on different time scales, have people's well-being at the core of their work. In the case of the NTCA and Mexico, many of the root causes of violence lie in structural and institutional shortcomings that require a development focus, including weak and uneven state institutions, high levels of corruption and social exclusion, restricted access to public services and socio-economic insecurity. At the same time, the impacts of such high levels of violence have immediate and time-sensitive humanitarian implications (including for protection, shelter, emergency healthcare, education and psychosocial support). Coordinating short-, medium- and long-term responses allows for immediate emergency assistance while also ensuring that interventions can have medium- and long-term, sustained positive effects.

The World Bank ranks El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras as lower-middle-income economies, and Mexico is considered an upper-middle-income country. In contrast to countries affected by civil war and fragility, such as South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico and the NTCA countries should in theory have the resources and capabilities to provide the necessary services to their people. In practice, however, humanitarian actors in the region have provided protection, shelter and health services in areas where the state is unable or unwilling to do so. Coordination with development actors allows the humanitarian response to transform projects into sustainable, long-term interventions by identifying weaknesses in the provision of services by the state and linking up with development programmes that focus

on strengthening institutions to fill those gaps. As an example, humanitarian actors in Honduras established an irrigation pilot programme in 2008 to help tackle food insecurity that was later reproduced and funded by the government in 2015, with the support of development actors in other municipalities.

Focus on prevention and protection

Prevention and protection should be at the centre of the humanitarian and development agenda. The humanitarian system is in essence reactive to sudden crises, even if many of these 'crises' are to some extent predictable. In the NTCA and Mexico, violent groups do not emerge in communities overnight, and confrontations between violent groups are frequently the result of identifiable triggers. Sustained violence usually takes place in contested territories between gangs or cliques. Humanitarian actors with experience negotiating with non-state armed groups in conflict contexts can identify key interlocutors and promote truces to reduce violence in high-risk areas. Similarly, development actors can work with the government to promote sustainable, long-term violence reduction programmes. Programmes that promote the socio-economic integration of groups at risk of violence, and which support conflict-resolution initiatives, community mobilisation and public education, have succeeded in reducing violence at the local level. These types of programmes have been particularly effective in reducing homicide rates in local communities in cities such as San Pedro Sula in Honduras and Ciudad Juarez in Mexico. These violence-reduction activities did not fall into either the humanitarian or the development camp of the international aid architecture. Instead, they relied on the best of both approaches. Similarly, high-level truces that involve leaders of violent groups, such as the one facilitated by the government in El Salvador in 2012, have much to gain from the know-how of humanitarian actors. Although efforts such as these have reduced homicides in the short term, for them to be sustainable and have longer-term impact they must be accompanied by development policies that target the root causes of violence.

Violence reduction in the long term requires systemic changes that go beyond security and humanitarian sticking plasters by focusing more strongly on rule of law, good governance and economic and human development. To accomplish this, institutions need to be stronger, as well as more transparent and accountable. Sustainable Development Goal 16 is tailor-made to address these issues and should be a common reference point and tool for both the humanitarian and development communities. Violence reduction efforts will therefore require the political will to push for top-down reforms and inclusive solutions that integrate the experiences of local communities that have been victimised by violent groups. Development actors are strategically placed to support these efforts, as they have access to the national and local government officials who design and implement violence reduction programmes. At the same time, strong ties with local communities give development actors channels to promote community-focused violence reduction programmes that incorporate the insights of the people concerned.

A Honduran migrant in Puebla, Ciudad Serdan, Mexico.

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Maintain access

Access to vulnerable and at-risk populations in the NTCA and Mexico is often restricted by illegal armed and criminal groups in control of certain territories or communities, requiring humanitarian actors to negotiate with these groups. This requires a deep understanding of the situation on the ground, the nature of the group and its relationship with the local community. While humanitarian actors have the expertise and know-how to negotiate this kind of access, development counterparts are likely to have a clearer understanding of the reality on the ground, the key factors driving the violence and the necessary relationships with state actors and local community partners to facilitate these negotiations.

Access should not be limited to a one-time intervention that takes care of a specific problem, but should instead simultaneously promote capacity-building at the local level. With this in mind, coordination between humanitarian and development actors allows for more time and resources for a post-emergency response plan that focuses on the root causes and not just the symptoms of the emergency. For example, interventions that provide emergency health services should be combined with training to enable local community actors to provide some of these services in the absence of a humanitarian presence. Similarly, the provision of healthcare services for victims of gender-based violence can also offer an opportunity to train local organisations on identifying risks and providing protection. Such initiatives

could in the long term encourage government officials to enact laws and regulations addressing the issue. Such was the case in Honduras, where a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) programme working with victims of sexual violence led to the creation of a sexual violence protocol by the government.

Build resilience

Closer collaboration between humanitarian and development actors can pave the way for interventions that promote risk reduction and make communities less vulnerable to shocks. By focusing on strengthening informal and formal institutions at the local level, humanitarian and development actors can enhance the coping capacity of communities, making them less reliant on external assistance, and help strengthen state institutions to provide for their needs. With the necessary support, the strong networks of local civil society organisations in these countries could become the primary providers of services when state institutions are unable or unwilling to provide them themselves. Humanitarian and development actors can also support locally driven resilience efforts and engage with them in a more direct way, for example through cash transfers. In the field of disaster risk reduction, community-led initiatives in partnership with humanitarian and government actors have been shown to save lives and money.

While the root causes of the alarming levels of violence in the NTCA and Mexico will require decades of institutional strengthening, the consequences of this violence are immediate and urgent. Humanitarian aid is needed now, but to be able to address the root causes of endemic violence closer collaboration between humanitarian and development agendas is essential. The international community should encourage short-, medium- and long-term strategies to enable humanitarian and development actors to address in concert the immediate implications of violence and its causes. Resilient approaches go beyond the humanitarian/development divide and improve the ability of local communities, government and international actors to prevent, respond to and recover from crises.

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A humanitarian response to Central America's fragile cities

Robert Muggah

The world's fast-growing cities and slums are routinely gripped by multiple and overlapping forms of organised violence. War-torn cities such as Aleppo, Gaza and Mosul are especially badly affected, with entire neighbourhoods reduced to ruins. In other places the physical devastation may not be so obvious. In cities such as Acapulco, San Salvador and San Pedro Sula criminal and extrajudicial violence has reached epidemic levels – even if the buildings are unscathed.

Not all urban centres are equally violent. North American cities have registered a 40% decline in homicidal violence since the 1990s. By way of contrast, a rash of cities in Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean have seen rates of homicide rise over the same period.[1] Indeed, 47 of the 50 most murderous cities in the world in 2016 are in the Americas.[2] Some of the region's most fragile cities are at war in all but name. The acceleration in violence in Latin American cities is occurring despite general improvements in literacy, health and poverty reduction.[3]

1 Robert Muggah and Ilona Szabó de Carvalho, 'Curing Latin America's Homicide Epidemic', *Foreign Affairs*, March 2017.

2 'World´s Most Dangerous Cities', *The Economist*, 31 March 2017.

3 Robert Muggah, 'Latin America's Poverty Is Down, but Violence Is Up. Why?', *Americas Quarterly*, 20 October 2017.

The sheer intensity and organisation of violence in Latin American cities is forcing a rethink about the legal and conceptual distinctions between armed conflict and so-called 'other situations of violence'. While there are no longer traditional international or non-international armed conflicts under way in the region, some types of cartel, gang-related, paramilitary and military-led activities are generating war-like conditions. The fusion of political and criminal violence in some parts of the region is potentially a harbinger of what's to come elsewhere, including in Africa and Asia.

Fragile cities

The countries and cities of the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – have some of the world's highest rates of violent deaths. El Salvador leads the pack and its capital, San Salvador, tops the world's rankings. The city's homicide rate is roughly 137 per 100,000, almost 20 times the global average. Honduras and Guatemala are not far behind, with murder rates exceeding those of Afghanistan or Syria. Homicidal violence is of course just the tip of the iceberg. Cities across the sub-region also suffer from high levels of inequality, unemployment and disaster risk.

The violence in Central America is propelled by a volatile combination of transnational gangs, drug-trafficking and weak

Table 1 The world's deadliest cities in 2016

City	Absolute homicides	Homicide rate/100,000
San Salvador (El Salvador)	432	136.7
Acapulco de Juarez (Mexico)	918	108.1
San Pedro Sula (Honduras)	789	104.3
Soyapango (El Salvador)	220	91.1
Chilpancingo de los Bravo (Mexico)	234	88.1
Distrito Central (Honduras)	971	79.9
Maraba (Brazil)	201	76.7
Grande Sao Luís (Brazil)	800	74.5
Guatemala (Guatemala)	704	70.8
Ananindeua (Brazil)	352	69.6
Choloma (Honduras)	220	65.5
Serra (Brazil)	314	64.7
Caruaru (Brazil)	225	64.0
Viamao (Brazil)	156	61.9
Cape Town (South Africa)	2,469	61.5
Belem (Brazil)	876	60.9
Victoria (Mexico)	216	60.5
Mossoro (Brazil)	171	59.3
St Louis (United States)	188	59.3
Aparecida de Goainia (Brazil)	307	58.8
Caucaia (Brazil)	208	58.8
Aracaju (Brazil)	370	58.5
Santa Ana (El Salvador)	136	55.4
Imperatriz (Brazil)	138	54.5
Manaus (Brazil)	1,118	54.3

Source: homicide.igarape.org.br.

law enforcement. Rival factions like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (M18) run extortion rackets and assassins for hire, and recruit heavily from poorer neighbourhoods and shanty-towns throughout the region. There are an estimated 70,000 hardcore gang members across Central America, but no one knows for certain.[4] El Salvador's Justice Ministry estimates that as many as 600,000 Salvadorians out of a population of 6.3 million are involved in the gang business. Regardless of their absolute numbers, the region's gangs have franchised across South, Central and North America. Most gangs are involved in extortion, protection rackets and drug transhipment and retail.

With some exceptions, Central American governments have pursued 'iron fist' – or *mano dura* – approaches to putting down the gangs, and to crime prevention more generally. This involves the deployment of police and in some cases repressive military actions. El Salvador mounted its first *mano dura* campaign in 2003, with Honduras and Guatemala quickly following suit. Local politicians have advocated harsh prison sentences for children as young as 12, and dispatched the military to hunt down anyone with incriminating tattoos. Mass incarceration also formed part of the strategy.

The US government has provided extensive military, policing and development assistance to all three countries. The Central American Regional Security Initiative, launched in 2008, combines a range of law and order measures with strategies designed to prevent and reduce urban violence. The programme has directed nearly $1 billion towards fighting the gangs, with mixed results over recent years.[5] In 2012, the US government declared MS-13 an 'international criminal organization', resulting in the militarisation of US assistance. Ceasefires and truces attempted across the region in recent years have generated considerable controversy.[6]

Desperados

Prolonged urban violence in the Northern Triangle has had massive humanitarian consequences, including a displacement crisis. Displaced people, or desperados as they are often called in the region, are fleeing their homes in record numbers. Some seek refugee status, but most are simply trying to find safer ground, by whatever means possible. Since 2010, the United States and Mexico have apprehended over a million people making the perilous trek from the Northern Triangle to the US.[7] This is in addition to the estimated 11.7m 'unauthorised immigrants' who have already crossed over illegally into the US in pursuit of a better life.[8]

A considerable number of those fleeing from the Northern Triangle are minors. US immigration authorities intercepted 68,000 children in 2014, and nearly 40,000 in 2015. By September 2016, another 54,000 unaccompanied children were apprehended. Many of them were interned in dozens of shelters along the US–Mexico border. The massive surge in what the US authorities refer to as 'unaccompanied alien children' was characterised by the previous White

4 Dennis Rodgers and Robert Muggah, 'Gangs as Non-State Armed Groups: The Central American Case', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30 (2), 2009.

5 See Vanderbilt University's Impact Evaluation of USAID's Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi-study.php.

6 Robert Muggah, Ami Carpenter and Topher McDougal, 'The Inconvenient Truth about Gang Truces in the Americas', *InSight Crime*, 5 December 2013.

7 Rodrigo Dominguez Villegas and Victoria Rietig, *Migrants Deported from the United States and Mexico to the Northern Triangle: A Statistical and Socioeconomic Profile*, Migration Policy Institute, September 2015.

8 See US Customs and Border Protection at https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016.

House administration as a 'humanitarian situation', and with good reason – there has been a sharp increase in under-12s crossing the border in recent years. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has also documented significant increases in asylum applications across the region from people fleeing violence in the Northern Triangle. In 2014, President Barack Obama asked the US Congress for $3.7bn to deal with the crisis, including $1.8bn to care for the children, $995m to detain and deport them and another $822m to shore up law enforcement capacities in Central America.[9] These resources did little to stem the flow, and the situation has since deteriorated.

The displacement crisis shows no sign of abating, and may in fact worsen. In 2017, US President Donald Trump authorised controversial new immigration guidelines calling for parents of unaccompanied minors to be prosecuted for 'human smuggling'. The guidelines also encourage border officials to become more conservative in determining who has 'credible fear' in order to gain asylum in the United States.[10]

While seldom discussed in Washington, Central America's displacement catastrophe was at least partially manufactured in the United States. Between 2013 and 2015, the US authorised more than 300,000 deportations of immigrants with criminal records to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador alone.[11] Only Mexico received more deportations over this period (over 550,000). The escalation of deportations from the US has coincided with a massive upsurge in criminal violence. The US-led deportations are putting considerable pressure on Central America's already dilapidated criminal justice and penal systems. Instead of rehabilitating and reintegrating convicted felons, the region's over-crowded prisons now incubate vast criminal networks. Locals refer to them as 'crime colleges', since penitentiaries and jails are frequently run by veteran gang members. As a result, gangs effectively orchestrate their criminal activities across Central America from within the prison walls.

Humanitarian response

Although simmering for years, the sheer dimensions of the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Central America are only gradually coming to light. Aid agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and World Vision sounded the alarm early.[12] Faith-based groups are also providing food and shelter, but levels of assistance from governments and non-governmental organisations in Mexico and the US are far below what is needed. It is obvious that stop-gap solutions, whether in the US and Mexico or in the Northern Triangle itself, are inadequate. A more thorough engagement with the causes and humanitarian consequences of urban violence is urgently required.

While most attention on Central America has focused on the US side of the border, some humanitarian agencies have launched interventions in the region proper. For more than half a decade, the ICRC has been quietly testing new programmes to protect civilians and facilitate better access to basic services in San Salvador, Tegucigalpa in Honduras and Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, as well as Rio de Janeiro and Medellin. MSF has also initiated violence prevention and mental health-related activities and projects to address at-risk youth, including women and girls, in inner-city neighbourhoods across Central America. International donors are also becoming more seized of the issue. In 2014 the European Union Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) expanded its work on urban violence and disasters in the region.

The decision whether and how to deploy humanitarian assistance to fragile and violence-affected cities in Central America is not straightforward.[13] Many agencies and donors are struggling with how best to negotiate with municipal authorities and communities and engage productively with complex and interconnected urban infrastructures. Most directors of humanitarian organisations first ask very basic questions, including in relation to the extent of their own competencies in cities under fire. What is the organisation's added value? Will it make a real difference on the ground? Is it safe for staff? What are the legal implications?

Humanitarian agencies that have elected to run violence prevention and emergency response programmes in the Northern Triangle tend to be guided by a set of basic principles. These include being clear on the aims of the intervention, being flexible and ready to adapt, adopting highly localised interventions in partnership with civic authorities, developing strong community partnerships, planning for the long term (while also having an exit strategy) and doing no intentional harm.[14] Agencies are taking advantage of lessons learned in war zones, but also adjusting and adapting them to the distinct settings of the Northern Triangle.

Many of the priorities of humanitarian agencies remain the same in war and non-war zones. The focus continues to be on

9 The White House, 8 July 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/08/letter-president-regarding-emergency-supplemental-appropriations-request.

10 Homeland Security, *Executive Orders on Protecting the Homeland*, February 2017, https://www.dhs.gov/executive-orders-protecting-homeland.

11 Clare Ribando Seelke, *Gangs in Central America*, Congressional Research Service, 29 August 2016.

12 Raphael Dallaire Ferland, 'The New Urban Agenda Recognizes the Humanitarian Impact of Urban Warfare', *Humanitarian Law and Policy, Special Issue*, August 2016.

13 This is the focus of a four year assessment (2011–15) by the Humanitarian Action in Situations Other Than War (HASOW) project at https://igarape.org.br/en/issues/safer-cities/hasow.

14 Elena Lucchi, *Humanitarian Interventions in Situations of Urban Violence*, ALNAP Lessons Learned Paper, 2014.

protecting civilians and civilian assets, mitigating the effects of violence on urban populations and enabling or strengthening protective factors that limit exposure to violence. This includes investing in early childhood programmes, school-based activities, initiatives for single female-headed households, projects targeting at-risk adolescents, psycho-social support services and urban improvement schemes.

Another key goal is to supplement – rather than replace – services such as water provision, waste management and health and education. Aid agencies such as the ICRC and MSF have found it imperative to work with government institutions, rather than around them, with an emphasis more on coordination than implementation.[15] Although there is more sensitivity today to the importance of building local capacity and ownership, working with national partners and avoiding the distortion of domestic markets is difficult. For aid agencies used to rapidly delivering aid, setting up logistics systems and working around (reluctant or interfering) state agencies, habits take time to change.

An additional critical lesson emerging from the field is the importance of high-quality data collection and real-time mapping of rapidly changing conditions on the ground. Access to a wide range of high-resolution information on beneficiary populations, service delivery systems and existing organisations and actors is critical. Even in data-scarce environments there are opportunities to harvest and analyse information, including using new technologies. Humanitarian agencies are strongly advised to build this capacity in-house.

Finally, aid organisations have typically started small, built to scale and then handed over their pilots to government or local non-governmental counterparts. Notwithstanding the temptation to undertake large-scale programmes in fragile cities, relief organisations are proceeding with caution. There are meaningful ways to scale up city-based interventions, but only if these are properly aligned with formal and informal delivery providers, with stable resourcing and political investment. To be effective, aid agencies need to keep an open mind, take risks and invest heavily in partnerships from the start.

15 ICRC, 'War in Cities', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 901, 2016.

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Strengthening state and regional responses to Central America's forced displacement crisis

Giovanni Bassu

Between 2011 and 2016, 161,742 citizens from the Northern Triangle of Central American (NTCA) applied for asylum. These numbers are continuing to rise, with a 53% increase in asylum applications from NTCA citizens between 2015 and the first half of 2016. Whilst the majority look to go to the United States, many are also choosing Mexico, or heading south to Panama, where rates have doubled in the past year, and Costa Rica, which has seen a threefold increase in asylum applications. In 2014, the plight of tens of thousands of women and children from the NTCA arriving at the US–Mexican border, many unaccompanied, overwhelmed local border patrols and prompted then President Barack Obama to declare an 'urgent humanitarian situation'.

There are a number of causes of this human flight, but the levels of violence that the region is experiencing is clearly one of them. There have been over 150,000 homicides in the three NTCA countries combined since 2006, an average of 50 per 100,000 people. This is ten times higher than the US homicide rate, and five times the threshold for an epidemic (10 per 100,000) established by the World Health Organisation.

A humanitarian crisis

Gangs and other violent non-state actors have a strong territorial presence in all three NTCA countries. In El Salvador, for instance, 247 of the country's 262 municipalities have a significant gang presence, and 70% of businesses are subject to extortion.[1] Gangs exercise a high level of control over the communities in which they operate: anyone disobeying their orders, or showing any affiliation, perceived or actual, with a rival gang or group, is dealt with harshly, often resulting in serious injury or death. Entire families are targeted. Access to basic public services is circumscribed by invisible borders between rival gangs, forcing many into life-threatening situations simply to reach their clinic or school.

Young boys are eyed early on for recruitment into the local gang, whilst young girls are recruited as the 'girlfriends' of gang members. The use of schools as recruiting grounds forces many children to drop out of education. In Honduras, drop-out rates reached over 10% in 2016. Resisting recruitment means defying the gang's authority, with consequences for the whole family. Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities are also extremely vulnerable and subjected to routine discrimination and persecution.

1 Óscar Martínez, Efren Lemus, Carlos Martínez and Deborah Sontag, 'La mafia de pobres que desangra El Salvador', *El Faro*, 20 November 2016.

Official border point from Guatemala to Mexico. Guatemala is a gateway for refugees fleeing Central America and heading north to the United States.
© UNCHR/Tito Herrera

Forced displacement

Violence forces people from their homes as they look for a safe place to hide whilst things cool down. Often, however, fleeing internally is not enough, as non-state actors operate nationally, and can easily track their victims down. As a result, many are forced to leave their countries and seek protection abroad. Growing acceptance of the genuine protection needs of people fleeing the NTCA is reflected in increasing recognition rates for asylum-seekers, up by 41% to 31,900 between 2014 and 2015. This supports UNHCR's view that victims of gang violence fall under the purview of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.[2]

Refugees face serious dangers along the route. Given the difficulties involved in leaving safely, many have to use smugglers, who charge significant sums. Part of wider transnational criminal networks, smugglers provide 'protection' against kidnapping, but those who refuse to pay for such protection can end up kidnap victims themselves, or disappear en route. Even when people do pay, they can be sold to other traffickers and made to pay for their onward journey in different ways. Women are at constant threat of sexual exploitation and abuse, including being sold into prostitution.

When they eventually arrive in their country of asylum refugees find systems severely overstretched. Individuals in need of protection are left for months and even years in legal limbo, often without access to work or in administrative detention as they await a decision on their asylum application. Many lack access to representation during complex legal processes, and can face arbitrary and expedited removal proceedings. The result is that many actual or would-be asylum seekers are deported. Once deportees arrive back in their country of origin, they cannot return to their homes due to the persecution and violence that caused them to flee in the first place, and so become internally displaced once again. They effectively become locked into a perpetual cycle of displacement. Friends and family may not even know that they are back, since making contact risks them being identified and killed.

Deportation and *refoulement*

Annual rates of return from the United States and Mexico to NTCA countries have increased by 82% over the past five years. In 2015 alone, 234,561 people were deported. Whilst not all of these people tried to access the asylum system in Mexico or the United States, or have international protection needs, a significant proportion do.[3] According to official figures in El Salvador, 30% of the children and 26% of the adults returned from Mexico in 2016 reported leaving the country because of insecurity; in total, between 2012 and 2016 more than 20,300 deportees cited insecurity as their main reason for leaving the country.

International law is clear on the prohibition of *refoulement*, which can be broadly understood as the return of a refugee or asylum-seeker to a territory where his or her life or freedom would be threatened.[4] This applies to people in need of international protection irrespective of whether they have formally applied for asylum or not, especially if their intention to do so has been thwarted because they have not been given the information they need to access the asylum procedure. It also applies to people facing practical or other barriers to entry to the asylum system, some of which are clearly present in the region.

Strengthening state responses

Whilst the long-term solution to forced displacement caused by violence lies in investment and socio-economic development in the NTCA, a number of urgent measures are needed to prevent and mitigate its humanitarian consequences. Since the primary responsibility for providing protection rests with states, it is essential to strengthen the state response, both

2 'Guidance Note on Refugee Claims Relating to Victims of Organized Gangs'.

3 UNHCR, 'Women on the Run', http://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5630f24c6/women-run.html; UNHCR, 'Children on the Run', http://www.unhcr.org/children-on-the-run.html.

4 Art. 33(1) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that 'No contracting state shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'. The more expansive definition in the Cartagena Declaration refers to 'serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order'.

to the crimes being committed, and to the victims of those crimes.

Official recognition of forced internal displacement resulting from violence is a necessary first step, as is adopting consequent laws and policies in line with the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Honduras has now officially recognised the phenomenon and its scale; the country created an Inter-institutional Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence in 2013, and conducted an extensive profiling exercise in 2014 to understand the scale of displacement and its dynamics. The study found an estimated population size of 41,000 IDP households, amounting to 174,000 individuals. The Commission, with UNHCR's support, is working on a comprehensive IDP law, and is proposing a series of public policies to prevent displacement and protect the displaced.

Whilst El Salvador does not recognise internal displacement per se, and no official numbers exist on its scale, a government study is under way, with UNHCR support. In the meantime, El Salvador has enacted a number of public policies under the framework of the 'Plan El Salvador Seguro' aimed at increasing citizen security. Some measures are specifically designed to support and assist victims of violence, including people forced to flee their homes. An amendment to the Penal Code on 'Illegal limits to freedom of movement', which criminalises conduct causing internal displacement, while still not calling it as such, is a step in the right direction, and a key priority now is implementation and enforcement.

Finally, in Guatemala an academic study on internal displacement is being finalised, which will help gauge the scale of the phenomenon and provide important inputs to develop policies.

Responding to immediate protection needs

Institutional strengthening and legislative work is a slow process and cannot bring protection in the short term to the increasing number of people who need it. As such, it is vitally important to build civil society networks that can provide immediate and consistent assistance and protection. This involves supporting networks of safe houses, providing relief items and opening channels of safe evacuation when necessary. Organisations such as UNHCR are supporting such mechanisms, in close coordination with civil society groups in these countries.

For people who have decided to leave through their own means, it is equally important to ensure that they have a safe and dignified journey. Networks of civil society, together with international organisations such as UNHCR, have set up a number of interconnected 'migrant houses' offering a 'safe space' to sleep and rest along the way, and providing services such as legal advice and psychosocial support. Through such means, refugees and other vulnerable people are informed on safe routes, how to access asylum systems and their rights.

Another essential component is strengthening asylum systems in the region. UNHCR is, by mandate, leading efforts to ensure that states have a fair and effective asylum procedure from the moment asylum-seekers and refugees cross a border. This includes informing the relevant authorities in countries of asylum of the situation in the NTCA and the protection needs of people fleeing these countries, as well as guidance on how to assess claims made by victims of organised gangs.

Strengthening asylum systems should minimise cases of *refoulement*, but in the meantime it is imperative to ensure that effective identification mechanisms exist in reception centres for deportees in countries of origin. Again, this is primarily a state responsibility, but at this stage it must be complemented by civil society support to ensure that, once identified, individuals with protection needs are provided with an effective response. One such response, which UNHCR has been working with, is to negotiate the readmission of a (limited) number of cases to the countries of asylum they were deported from.

The importance of regional cooperation

If we are to find solutions to current humanitarian challenges, countries of origin, transit and asylum must work together. It was in this spirit that governments in the region came together in Costa Rica in July 2016. Building on the approach and commitments made in the 2014 Brazil Plan of Action, they adopted the San Jose Action Statement, aimed at strengthening the protection of people fleeing violence in the NTCA. Together with representatives of international organisations, civil society and academia, governments pledged to prevent and address the root causes of the violence, enhance asylum and protection responses and promote regional cooperation.

Such a coordinated, comprehensive regional approach foreshadows the UN General Assembly's New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants adopted in September 2016, and ticks many of the boxes of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) contained in Annex 1 of the Declaration. The CRRF seeks to tackle large-scale displacement crises in a whole of society, multi-stakeholder approach, bridging the gap between short-term humanitarian and long-term development responses through multi-year integrated programming. A follow-up meeting to the San Jose Action Statement is planned for this year and will be an important opportunity to review the progress made so far, and build on and operationalise the commitments made in San Jose, and bring them fully in line with the New York Declaration.

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Forced to flee: the humanitarian crisis on America's doorstep

Marc Bosch Bonacasa and Elena Estrada Cocina

Over the past decade, some 150,000 people have been killed in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), making the region the most violent in the world outside a war zone. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 6,650 intentional homicides were reported in El Salvador in 2015 (a staggering 103 per 100,000 inhabitants). In Honduras there were 8,035 intentional homicides (57 per 100,000) and in Guatemala 4,778 (30 per 100,000). Alongside high homicide rates, forced disappearances, kidnappings, threats, forced recruitment into armed groups, extortion and sexual violence are a daily burden for thousands living in areas controlled by criminal gangs. Poverty, violence or a combination of the two have seen more than 300,000 people from the NTCA flee north to Mexico. In a survey by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) carried out in Mexico in September 2015,[1] nearly 40% of respondents from the NTCA cited direct attacks, threats, extortion or attempted forced recruitment as reasons for fleeing their countries. A third gave more than one violence-related reason for fleeing.

Other findings of the survey regarding the situation in their countries of origin illustrate what it means to live under permanent threat:

- One-third (32.5%) of the population from the NTCA entering Mexico have been exposed to physical violence perpetrated by a non-family member (mainly members of organised crime groups) in the two years prior to their flight.
- Half of the people (48.4%) from the NTCA entering Mexico received a direct threat from a non-family member. Almost 80% of victims said that the threat had seriously affected their social and professional activities.
- Some 45% of Hondurans and 56% of Salvadorans entering Mexico lost a family member to violence in the two years before they left. Just under a third knows someone who has been kidnapped, and 17% someone who has disappeared.
- Almost three-quarters of Hondurans and 70% of Salvadorians regularly heard gunshots in their neighbourhood, and 75% and 79% respectively had seen a murder or a corpse in the previous two years.
- In one in ten migrant families, someone had committed suicide in the two years before the family had left, and in one in 20 someone had attempted suicide.

1 The Victimization Assessment Tool (VAT) Survey was conducted with 467 migrants and refugees during September 2015 in the *albergues* in Tonosique, Ixtepec, Huehuetoca, Bojay and San Luis Potosi where MSF was providing health and mental care at the time. Of the sample, 88% of people interviewed were male and 12% female; 4.7% were minors, 59% of them unaccompanied. Regarding country of origin, 67.6% were from Honduras, 15.7% from El Salvador, 10.5% from Guatemala and 6.2% from other nationalities.

The MSF survey also revealed that almost 70% of refugees and migrants from the NTCA had been subjected to violence in Mexico while in transit to the United States. Almost half of our sample reported having been hit, 40% had been pushed, grabbed or throttled and 7% shot at. One in ten respondents reported being kidnapped and repeatedly beaten, in some cases over a protracted period. Sex in exchange for shelter, protection or for money was mentioned by a significant number of both men and women: of the 429 migrants and refugees who answered questions related to sexual violence, 31% of women and 17% of men said that they had been sexually abused during their transit through Mexico.

MSF's response

MSF has been running projects in Mexico treating people from the NTCA fleeing violence since 2012. Between 2012 and the end of December 2016, MSF teams carried out 28,020 medical consultations and 5,573 mental health consultations. Another 46,491 individuals attended psychosocial activities organised by our teams. Our objective is to provide assistance to a mobile population in a constantly evolving context, based on the following principles of action:

1. Wide geographical coverage. Several locations along the migration route have been covered by our teams since the programme began: Ixtepec and Arriaga (Oaxaca); Tenosique (Tabasco); Bojay (Hidalgo); Tierra Blanca (Veracruz); Lecheria/Tultitlan, Apaxco and Huehuetoca (Mexico State); Mexico City; San Luis Potosi and Celaya (Guanajuato). Locations have been adapted based on the changing dynamics of refugee flows and the presence of other humanitarian actors.
2. A customised response based on people's needs. The medical, social and psychological services provided by MSF allow for a comprehensive response that caters to the basic health needs of migrants and refugees. MSF teams comprise a doctor, a psychologist and a social worker. Including a social worker in these teams is a new approach for MSF, but is very much needed in order to ensure the right to medical assistance for those who need a referral to the health system and to refer cases for protection to other NGOs or Mexican institutions.
3. Flexible services in adapted locations. MSF has provided services in hostels (*albergues*) along the migration route, and mobile clinics have been set up near railways and train stations.
4. Specific solutions for acute cases. A rehabilitation centre in Mexico City, run by MSF in collaboration with the Scalabrinianas Mission for migrants and refugees (SMR), a faith-based NGO, provides comprehensive care for victims of torture and ill-treatment identified

A woman with her granddaughter during an MSF support session for women in the Tenosique migrant shelter.

© MSF/Marta Soszynska

and referred from the different locations where MSF is providing assistance.

5. Strengthening local capacity. MSF teams have run training programmes in psychological first aid to 888 volunteers and staff in 71 shelters and hostels. Training on protocols to ensure comprehensive care for victims of sexual violence has been provided to 1,743 volunteers and health staff in 41 shelters and 166 health facilities along the transit route.
6. Partnerships and coordination with local NGOs and faith-based organisations running hostels have been crucial in ensuring humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence. In a context of intensified controls, repression and exposure to violence, the *albergues* run by faith-based and civil society organisations constitute one of the only safe and dignified options for shelter and rest for the majority of refugees and migrants crossing Mexico.
7. Advocacy at local, state and national level to ensure that state institutions act to fill gaps in healthcare and care for victims of sexual violence. At regional level, recognition of the existence of a humanitarian crisis and the negative effects of the deterrence and detention policy currently being applied by the US and Mexican governments is a necessary first step to avoid loss of life and suffering among NTCA refugees. MSF promoted partnership/coordination models with local, state and national governmental institutions, bringing in our experience in the field and providing a reality check for policy-makers and those responsible for implementing migration and refugee policies.
8. Active monitoring of the situation in origin and reception countries, with a focus on border areas.

A quarter of the medical consultations conducted in MSF's migrant/refugee programme are related to physical injuries and trauma. General pain, contusions, bruises and fractures are the most common conditions diagnosed by our doctors as a consequence of the attacks, robberies, abuse and intimidation that migrants and refugees suffer en route, or while waiting for asylum claims to be processed. But the consequences of violence are not only physical: more than half of the migrants and refugees attended to by MSF in Mexico have symptoms associated with depression, nearly a third suffer from anxiety and 12% have post-traumatic stress (PTSD). The percentage of people affected by PTSD is well above the proportion within the general population (0.3%–6.1%) and very close to rates in populations directly affected by conflict (15.4%). Although post-traumatic stress is not the only or the most common mental health consequence of violence, it can seriously impair a person's ability to function and face the multiple challenges and risks inherent in the migration experience.

Final remarks and open challenges

The impact of forced migration on the physical and mental wellbeing of refugees and migrants, including women, minors and LGBTI individuals, calls for the allocation of resources to ensure access to healthcare and humanitarian assistance regardless of the legal status of the patient. Addressing gaps in mental health care and emergency medical care and strengthening medical and psychological care for victims of sexual violence, including access to kit PEP/HIV Post-exposure prophylaxis, is fundamental if patients are to be treated with dignity and humanity.

For years, Mexican civil society and individual solidarity, alongside a few international NGOs including MSF, has succeeded in managing an extended network of over 100 *albergues* along the migration route through Mexico, as well as providing basic humanitarian assistance and protection. However, this positive emergency response does not mean that governments can shirk their own responsibilities. Seeking asylum and protection and securing refugee status in Mexico or the United States is extremely difficult for people fleeing violence in the NTCA. In 2015, Mexico deported 98.4% of the 177,949 migrants and potential refugees from the NTCA. Only 3,423 migrants and refugees from the NTCA started the asylum recognition process in Mexico during 2015, and only 14% of asylum requests were granted. For its part, in 2015 the United States deported 21,920 Salvadorans, 33,249 Guatemalans and 20,309 Hondurans. Of the 69,920 arrivals into the US granted refugee status, none came from NTCA countries. Initial steps by the new US administration may well consolidate the tendency of states in the region to renege on their responsibilities towards refugees and migrants exposed to extreme levels of violence.

Long-standing pressure from the US authorities on Mexico to contain population inflows from Central America should not translate into massive deportations in contravention of refugees' rights. Instead, what we need is increased capacity to offer asylum at regional level, including the possibility of making a request for asylum in countries of origin and transit, and the effective implementation of regional resettlement policies for refugees fleeing violence in the NTCA. There is a hidden humanitarian crisis on America's doorstep that calls for urgent action in terms of protection and humanitarian assistance. This must be a priority for governments and societies across the region, and is definitively a priority for MSF teams on the ground.

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Armed violence and the missing in Mexico and Central America

Olivier Dubois and Rocío Maldonado de la Fuente

> *We would like to see him soon, for him to come back, we want to see him, but we don't know if he lives or not, we are not fine, we are old and we want to see him or at least to know about him, if he lives, if he is alright.*
>
> Relative of a missing migrant, Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Latin America has a long history of forced disappearances. During the last decades of the twentieth century, dictatorships in America's southern cone used forced disappearance as part of a strategy to weaken opposition to their regimes. In Argentina at least 9,000 people disappeared, and in Chile over 3,000 are still unaccounted for. A hundred thousand people disappeared during the decades-long conflict in Colombia. More recently, high levels of armed violence and organised crime in Central America and Mexico have seen thousands of disappearances. The precise number in Mexico is hotly disputed. In November 2016, the National Registry of Information for Missing or Disappeared Persons counted 29,917 people unaccounted for, but civil society organisations claim that the actual number may be higher because not all cases are reported. According to the National Civil Police (PNC), more than 25,000 people disappeared in Guatemala between 2003 and 2014.[1] The commission observed that violence and insecurity in Guatemala have 'favored the resurgence of disappearances, associated with the activities of criminal organizations'.[2] In El Salvador, the Attorney-General has said that around 23,200 people went missing between 2010 and April 2017.[3] In Honduras the figure is unclear and there is a lack of reliable information. As such, reports by human rights institutions 'merely illustrate the issue and do not measure it'.[4]

Missing persons, violence and migration

Massive migration flows related to armed violence compound the problem of missing persons. Migrants are vulnerable to

1 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) (2016), *Situation of Human Rights in Guatemala: Diversity, Inequality and Exclusion*, OEA/SER.L/V/II. Doc. 43/15.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

3 'Cifras de desaparecidos en El Salvador ya supera los 23 mil', 2017, http://www.elsalvador.com/articulo/nacional/mas-23000-desaparecidos-los-ultimos-siete-anos-144310.

4 IACHR, *Situation of Human Rights in Guatemala*.

Families of missing migrants painted their experiences on a collective mural to highlight their need.

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extortion and kidnapping, or may perish along the way and remain unaccounted for. Although there is no precise data, the NGO Mesoamerican Migrant Movement estimates that over 70,000 migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua have gone missing crossing Mexico during the past decade.[5] According to the Committee of Disappeared Migrant Families (COFAMIPRO), around 400 Honduran migrants have gone missing on their way to the United States.[6] Unidentified human remains of victims known to be migrants killed between 2010 and 2012 have been found in clandestine graves in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, and Cadereyta, Nuevo León, both in Mexico. Hundreds of mass graves have been found since. Thousands more have been placed in storage by the authorities across the region. Most are unidentified and remain so for a very long time, despite tireless inquiries by their families, highlighting the urgent need for proper forensic management and capacity and appropriate mechanisms to search and recover bodies and to obtain, process and compare information. While some forensic services in the region have begun compiling data on the unidentified bodies that reach them, this information is not always made public or centralised to give us an idea of the scale of the problem.

Clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the missing: challenges and mechanisms

Disappearances in Mexico and Central America are likely to continue for years: a substantial reduction in organised violence in the region or in risky migration flows will not happen soon. In this environment, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has had to adapt its approach to missing persons and their families. Contrary to how it operates in many armed conflicts, for example in Colombia, the lack of political and operational space and security guarantees means that the ICRC is not in a position to have a direct dialogue with those responsible for disappearances and obtain answers on the location and fate of missing persons. Unlike other countries where the ICRC operates, concerned states have institutional and financial capacity – they should not depend on humanitarian actors to respond to this crisis. Hence, the ICRC has privileged technical assistance in forensic human identification, information management, attention to families and the adoption of legal and administrative frameworks for clarifying the fate of the missing.

Finding and identifying victims cannot simply be seen as a tool for dealing with past atrocities in processes of transitional justice, as happened with the military regimes in South America. One lesson from past practice is that search mechanisms should be driven by the need for information, accountability and acknowledgement of victims, and must

5 Mesoamerican Migrant Movement, *Central American Migration*, 2016, https://movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org/2016/07/13/central-american-migration.

6 IAHCR, *Situation of Human Rights in Honduras.*

recognise families' right to know the fate of their loved ones and the circumstances of their disappearance.[7] As well as respecting victims and their families, this will help fight impunity and build accountability. Confronted with on-going disappearances, states should reinforce their immediate search capacities in order to locate victims alive, and ensure immediate access to registries, for instance of hospitals and prisons. The traceability and future identification of bodies that have been legally buried should be guaranteed. The burden of this work does not lie with the kind of special institutions created to deal with the past (truth and search commissions, for example) – instead, it falls on 'ordinary' police officers, prosecutors and state forensic services. Creating effective mechanisms to search for and locate missing persons and satisfy families' need for answers about the whereabouts of the disappeared also requires the political will of states and state institutions. Establishing such mechanisms should be done in conjunction with strategies to fight corruption, impunity and insecurity, otherwise efforts will be in vain. It requires targeted investment in investigative bodies and forensic services, and effective collaboration between the authorities and civil society. More fundamentally, the families of missing persons must be allowed the opportunity to participate in the creation of these mechanisms if they are to respond to their need to know.

While past efforts were essentially at individual state level, disappearances during migration have led to several initiatives aimed at enhancing transnational cooperation among states, and between states and NGOs representing victims. For example, the Argentine Team of Forensic Anthropology (EAAF) is establishing genetic databanks of families of missing migrants from Central America. These banks are jointly managed by families' representatives, the Central American authorities and the EAAF. The scope of initiatives such as this could be extended significantly if bureaucratic and legal obstacles were removed to allow for the systematic matching of data provided by the families with information on unidentified bodies found in Mexico and the United States.

Experience working in the region has shown that mobilising civil society actors is key to sustaining political commitment. The ICRC has been promoting and joining initiatives where victims and state actors meet, not only to discuss individual cases and grievances but also to elaborate an agenda for change. Humanitarian, human rights and development actors can all help the families of missing persons have their problems recognised and needs attended to. When planning responses to the consequences of violence in the region, humanitarian actors should consider the specific needs of families of the missing. As they are largely invisible, these families may simply be left out of assistance programmes. An education support programme targeting orphans may exclude children whose parents are 'only' disappeared. Livelihood assistance to widows may leave out the wives of people who are not accounted for. Humanitarian actors could also build on their experience of working with victims to enhance families' participation in institutional responses developed or to be developed in each concerned country.

A special mention should be made of actors managing psychosocial and mental health programmes. Psychosocial support is generally included in programmes for victims of violence in the region, and humanitarian actors should ensure that their programmes and those of state institutions recognise the specific situation of emotional ambiguity and protracted uncertainty faced by families of the missing.[8] Ignoring this situation of 'ambiguous loss'[9] and approaching families of the missing as if they were like other victims of violence may be counter-productive and could do more harm than good. The ICRC is currently supporting an initiative by the Guatemala-based NGO ECAP (Equipo de estudios communautarios y apoyo pscicososial) aimed at adapting existing recommendations on psychological support to victims of enforced disappearance to the specific situation of disappeared migrants and their families.

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7 International Committee of the Red Cross, *The Missing and Their Families: Summary of the Conclusions Arising from Events Held Prior to the International Conference of Governmental and Non-Governmental Experts, 19–21 February 2003*, 2003, https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/report/5jahr8.htm.

8 ICRC, *Accompanying the Families of Missing Persons: A Practical Handbook*, 2013, https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4110-accompanying-families-missing-persons-practical-handbook.

9 P. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

A mother of 12 and her carpenter husband rebuilt their house after Typhoon Yolanda with support from CARE Philippines and a local implementing partner.

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Practice and policy notes

Whose recovery? Power, roles and ownership in humanitarian shelter assistance

Holly Schofield and Luisa Miranda Morel

The term 'self-recovery' in the humanitarian shelter sector refers to the process whereby disaster-affected households repair, build or rebuild their shelter themselves or through local builders. However, despite its apparent acceptance and increasing use – and despite being seemingly self-explanatory – there is no agreement as to its definition, and as a process it is little understood. This article critically engages with the concept of self-recovery, drawing on CARE's experience of supporting shelter self-recovery in the Philippines and Nepal to show the steps disaster-affected communities take in order to recover, regardless of whether humanitarian shelter assistance reaches them or not.

Supporting self-recovery in recent practice

CARE Philippines responded to Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda in 2013 with extensive shelter and livelihoods programmes. Almost 16,000 families were provided with cash, materials and tools, alongside technical assistance to reconstruct their houses. The response has been praised for supporting disaster-affected communities in rebuilding their homes in ways that made them safer than before. It also allowed people more autonomy in the design of their housing, which often resulted in families expressing a real sense of pride, satisfaction and 'ownership', and left behind a legacy of learning around build-back-safer techniques. This was considered more appropriate than the alternative contractor-built 'whole-house' approach.

CARE observed that families were quick to initiate the process of self-recovery without waiting for external assistance. Using a combination of salvaged, bought and donated materials, people began reconstructing their houses and/or building makeshift temporary shelters immediately. Some of these households were subsequently excluded from the shelter repair programme on the basis that their houses had not been completely destroyed by the typhoon. Their immediate self-recovery actions may have had a negative impact on their longer-term recovery by placing them at a disadvantage in relation to other eligible households that had been unable to reconstruct immediately, and had received newer, higher-quality materials as well as technical advice.

CARE Nepal's shelter response following the 2015 earthquake also aimed to support people's autonomy in the process of reconstruction. Yet the Nepalese government played a central role in the process, initially developing new housing models and not allowing NGOs to support the reconstruction of other housing typologies. CARE's response therefore consisted mainly of the distribution of materials and tools, technical assistance and training (for local carpenters, plumbers and masons), followed by cash grants, winterisation and housing design.

Following the disaster, it was clear that, by the time the materials and cash grants reached households, they had already begun to rebuild using salvaged materials. Earthquake-affected households used the materials provided according to their immediate needs, for example sheltering goats, expanding shelters they had already built themselves from recycled and salvaged materials and insulating shelters in preparation for the approaching monsoon. Whether or not these decisions were in line with build-back-safer messages and policy is debatable, though it was evident that people were following a process of self-recovery that was unique and appropriate to them, rather than what the government or humanitarian agencies assumed to be appropriate.

In both of CARE's shelter responses support for self-recovery has been operationalised as a three-pronged approach involving material, technical and/or financial interventions. This has obvious practical benefits for donors and humanitarian organisations engaging in shelter response because of the operational clarity that it provides. However, it is based on assumptions about how disaster-affected households recover, and how much 'safer' they are as a result. Furthermore, despite presenting itself as a more desirable bottom-up alternative to top-down shelter responses, support for self-recovery is still a delivery-driven approach to humanitarian aid.

Critique of self-recovery in theory and implications for practice

The Philippines and Nepal experiences highlight two themes that run through our critique of self-recovery, both in theory and in practice. The first is that disaster-affected communities do not wait for assistance to self-recover. This suggests that a number of possible recovery pathways may exist, but these are less understood because existing documentation focuses on self-recovery after a shelter and/or livelihoods intervention has taken place.

In the past decade humanitarian organisations have rarely reached over 30% of shelter needs within the first year following major disasters, with single figures not uncommon. In the case of Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh in 2007, as little as 1% of shelter needs were met.[1] The great majority of recovery is done by households with little or no shelter assistance. This is the pathway of recovery implied by the term 'self', yet it is also the one that we know the least about, often because those who carry it out are very hard to reach or do not fall within the beneficiary selection processes used by humanitarian organisations. Current knowledge relating to self-recovery is based entirely on feedback mechanisms and data from evaluation reports relating to beneficiaries, rather than the population as a whole. Understanding self-recovery from the perspective of this missing group of disaster-affected households and communities, and then reconciling this with humanitarian objectives and standards, is a major challenge.

The second theme is the need for disaster-affected individuals, households and communities to be given the opportunity to play a more active role in their own recovery when an intervention does take place, making better use of humanitarian assistance. This signifies an inevitable shift in decision-making power (between humanitarian agencies and disaster-affected communities) that supporting self-recovery approaches will bring about, affecting the sectoral approach of responses, relationships with donors and funding characteristics.

When we analyse self-recovery, unavoidably we begin asking, recovery to what? Where and when is the line drawn, and by whom? These questions open up further ones. Can families really be said to be recovering if using salvaged and damaged materials for reconstruction leaves them more vulnerable than they were prior to the disaster? Has a family recovered once they live in a structurally 'safe' or 'safer' house, even if, several years later, they still feel a sense of insecurity and trauma? If a family has put their photographs back up on the wall, piecing the sense of home and security back together, can we say they have recovered? Which of these actions are more relevant and why? Who justifies this? These questions make the practice of self-recovery difficult to measure and concretise – a major challenge considering that indicators are central to efforts to improve programming and evolve as a sector.

The practice of recovery led by affected households is not sectoral. It follows organic pathways that integrate different elements of recovery (basic needs, shelter, health, livelihoods, protection, security, education and culture), each with different and shifting levels of significance. Some elements are prioritised over others, and this order of priorities can change rapidly according to changes in the social, economic, environmental and temporal context in which recovery takes place. In Nepal, for instance, while practitioners were distributing non-food items and providing technical training to local carpenters, people were using the tarpaulins they had been given to provide shelter for their goats, an important livelihood resource. The monsoon season was approaching and so were seasonal festivities. Both these factors became household priorities. People chose to spend a day farming their rice field instead of collecting shelter or kitchen kits.

The direction and characteristics of current and future shelter assistance, and the mechanisms that fund them, will be shaped by potential changes in decision-making power and ways of working, by the increasing push towards localisation and multi-sector and multi-disciplinary approaches. Within the shelter sector, this may imply a shift from the traditional and quantifiable 'recovery through shelter' line of action to a 'recovery with shelter' approach motivated by a shift towards sometimes subjectively valued activities that go beyond the walls of a shelter. These changes present an uncomfortable reality, as they may require activities that, by their very nature, are more difficult to measure and standardise, and are undoubtedly less palatable to donors.

Conclusion

Self-recovery is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Despite increasing interest in and support for self-recovery approaches in humanitarian shelter response, the sector still knows very little about the process from the perspective of the people actually involved in it. Although this is undoubtedly a consequence of the infancy of self-recovery approaches in practice, it also signals a need for increased engagement with disaster-affected communities to understand their lived experiences, values and priorities in recovery.

This brief discussion raises a number of questions relating to the actors, decision-making processes and power dynamics that self-recovery involves. By placing self-recovery within this broader context, we have suggested that the process is more organic and multi-sectoral than many shelter responses currently provide for or act upon. The shelter sector must be willing to learn from, and work in coordination with, other key sectors and actors in more complex ways, so that responses can be integrated into people's realistic and holistic self-recovery trajectories. This implies a redistribution of power and the transfer of ownership over the self-recovery process to the people who are actually doing the recovering, and who will inevitably continue to do so long after humanitarian agencies have moved on.

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1 C. Parrack, B. Flinn and M. Passey, 'Getting the Message Across for Safer Self-recovery in Post-disaster Shelter', *Open House International*, 39(3), 2014.

Humanitarian standards in urban, post-disaster contexts: a study of Sphere shelter standards in Haiti

Martha Pym and Michael Hooper

In the face of rapid urbanisation, population growth and increasingly intense and frequent natural disasters, vulnerability in urban areas is growing. At the same time, humanitarian organisations are increasingly acting in urban contexts. This raises questions regarding the effectiveness of humanitarian engagement in these settings. One response to broader questions around the accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian organisations has been the development of a set of minimum standards for humanitarian assistance, created as part of the Sphere Project. This article examines how humanitarian organisations have worked with these standards, particularly those relating to physical aspects of shelter, and asks what can be learnt from their implementation in urban environments.

Interviews with representatives of 14 humanitarian organisations who responded to the Haiti earthquake in 2010 reveal two opposing forces shaping adherence to Sphere standards: pressure from donor organisations, which promotes adherence, and the spatial realities of working in an urban environment, which constrains it. Interviewees reported four approaches that organisations have adopted to resolve this tension. Two – innovative technical solutions and donor education – allowed them to work in urban environments while also meeting donor demands for compliance with the standards. In contrast, the other two approaches – avoiding working in cities and creatively reinterpreting the standards – provided a way of sidestepping what were often seen as the insurmountable challenges of achieving Sphere adherence in urban areas. Based on these findings, the article proposes that any review of Sphere standards should actively incorporate feedback and lessons from organisations that are seldom included in such processes, including smaller organisations and those based in the global South with experience of urban disaster response.

A new urban context for disaster response

The rapid growth of urban settlements in disaster-prone settings, combined with the increasing frequency of natural disasters, has increased the vulnerability of urban populations. This reality has been reshaping humanitarian approaches to disaster management and response. The last ten years have seen an increase in reports and discussions regarding lessons learnt from responses to urban disasters. This is reflected in the findings of the 2010 World Disasters Report, which states that 'rapid urbanisation and population growth are combining to create enormous new challenges for the humanitarian community and are pushing us out of our comfort zone to deal with a strange new urban world'.[1]

This article questions the extent to which the Sphere standards, first published in 1998, are applicable within urban contexts. While there are a number of established codes of humanitarian practice, Sphere constitutes the most commonly used and most widely known set of standards. The standards seek to 'improve the quality of humanitarian response in situations of disaster and conflict, and to enhance the accountability of the humanitarian system to disaster affected people'.[2] Close examination of the Haiti case allows us to better understand how Sphere standards have been implemented, and whether the urban context creates barriers to adherence.

The Sphere Project and physical shelter standards

The Sphere Project is a voluntary initiative governed by a board comprising representatives of 18 humanitarian agencies.[3] The Sphere Handbook, the project's key document, comprises the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response. The impetus to introduce humanitarian standards came from two sources. The first was the proliferation of humanitarian organisations during the 1980s and 1990s and, as a consequence, the increasing diversification of approaches to humanitarian response. The second was the Rwandan crisis of 1994. The scale of displacement, intense media scrutiny and the perceived failure of the humanitarian community in Rwanda led to questions about the accountability of humanitarian actors. The 1990s has been described as humanitarianism's coming of age, and the drive towards standardisation resulted from, in part, a desire to professionalise the field and codify practice. That the standards were created through a consensus-focused process is an important feature of the project.

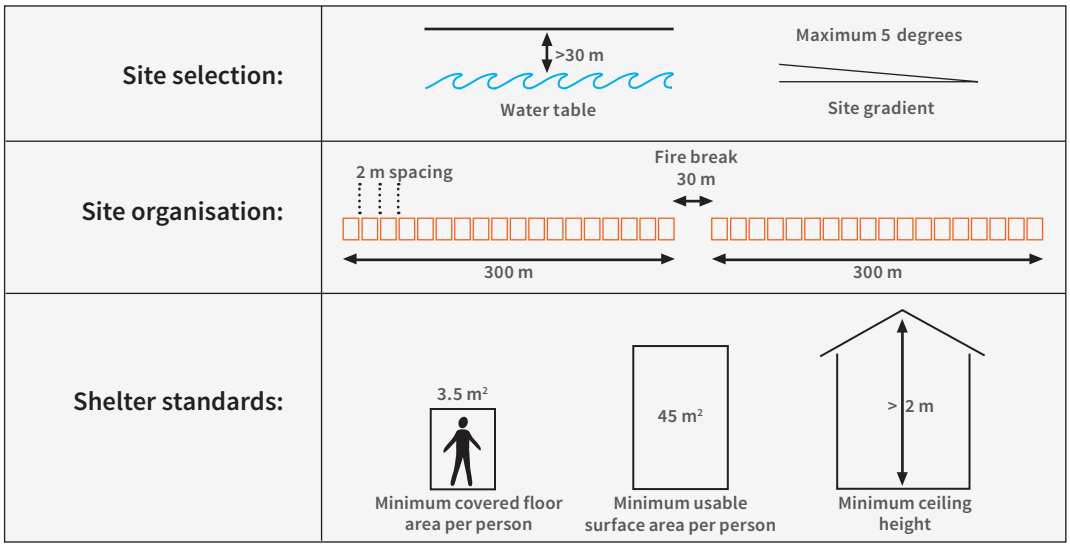
To better understand the application of the Sphere standards in urban areas, this article focuses on Sphere's physical shelter standards. Shelter is of vital importance in disaster response, providing security and protection against the elements. Sphere's physical standards for temporary planned or unplanned camps, which form part of the broader chapter on shelter, are described in detailed guidance notes. These include guidelines that the site gradient not exceed 5% and that the site's lowest point should be at least 3 metres above the water table (Figure 1). The standards also call for a minimum usable surface area of 45m^2 for each person. When communal services are provided elsewhere within the area

1 D. McClean, *World Disasters Report: Focus on Urban Risk* (Geneva: IFRC, 2010).

2 Sphere Project, *Sphere 2020: Strategic Plan 2015–2020* (Geneva: Sphere Project, 2015).

3 Sphere Project, *Sphere Handbook: What is New?* (Geneva: Sphere Project, 2012).

Figure 1 Sphere physical shelter standards



this can be reduced to 30m^2. The minimum covered floor area per person should be 3.5m^2 and the minimum ceiling height should be 2m. To prevent fire, there should be a 2m space between each structure and, for every 300m of development, a 30m firebreak.

Haiti: a case study of Sphere implementation

Haiti is one of the largest urban tests to date of existing approaches to humanitarian response. The earthquake, which struck on 12 January 2010, left 1.5 million people displaced and destroyed over 250,000 homes. The shelter response in Haiti was coordinated through the UN cluster system, which was created in 2005 to enable collaboration and information exchange between humanitarian organisations. The shelter cluster in Haiti sought to coordinate the work of organisations involved in shelter issues. However, the cluster system faced considerable challenges and often paid too little attention to the perspectives of smaller and local organisations.[4]

Haiti's proximity to the United States resulted in a massive influx of responders, including at least 980 non-governmental and civil society organisations.[5] In Haiti, 59 organisations were listed on the UN's shelter cluster website, though this number probably does not include all those involved in the sector. Despite the considerable involvement of small and local organisations in on-the-ground implementation of post-disaster response and reconstruction, most organisations listed on the shelter cluster site are large and based in the global North.

To understand how organisations responding to the 2010 earthquake acted on the Sphere standards, the authors interviewed representatives of 14 organisations presenting a cross-section of those working on post-disaster shelter issues in Port-au-Prince. Using an annual budget of $10m as a dividing line, five small and nine large organisations were interviewed. The interviewees also included three organisations based in the global South and 11 in the North. Three had been involved in Sphere standard setting and 11 had not. This breakdown is broadly reflective of the organisations listed on the shelter cluster website. Organisations meeting the above criteria were selected randomly for interviews between December 2014 and February 2015. Interviews were structured around a set of standard questions, but also allowed for open-ended answers. We have kept responses anonymous to protect interviewees from any adverse consequences arising from their remarks.

Results

Donor pressure increases the likelihood of adherence

Thirteen of the 14 interviewees, including representatives of all types of organisations, reported that donor pressure increased the likelihood that standards would be adhered to. As donors face pressure for accountability, they push this pressure downwards by requiring accountability from beneficiary organisations. This includes pressure to achieve Sphere compliance. Interviewees described how Sphere compliance was monitored in reports they were required to submit, in conversations with donors and through site visits and assessments by donors. Interviewees often mentioned the challenges this raised. Interviewees from organisations based in the global South remarked that, at some points, they were tempted to stop working with certain donors due to the pressure to comply.

4 M. Hooper, 'Priority Setting Amid the Rubble: Organisational Approaches to Post-disaster Reconstruction in Haiti', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 2014.

5 V. Ramachandran and J. Walz, *Haiti: Where Has All The Money Gone?* (Washington DC: Center for Global Development, 2012).

Hillside settlements in Port-au-Prince, Haiti

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Urban constraints make adherence to standards difficult or impossible

Nine out of the 14 interviewees said that the realities of the urban environment made Sphere adherence difficult or impossible. This was mentioned especially with regard to conditions before the earthquake and the plot sizes available after the disaster. A majority noted that pre-existing conditions often failed to satisfy Sphere standards. This feature of Port-au-Prince was exacerbated by the extensive damage caused by the earthquake, and by the influx of people into the city in its aftermath. Interviewees from smaller organisations and those based in the global South in particular highlighted what they saw as a mismatch between the standards' spatial requirements and the reality on the ground.

Resolving tensions between standards and urban realities

Interviewees described four approaches their own and other organisations had adopted to resolve the tension between donor demands for Sphere adherence and the difficulty of adhering to these standards in an urban context.

1. Avoid the city

Interviewees reported that, given organisational capacity, the reality of what could be achieved in Port-au-Prince and the expectations of many donors, some organisations exclusively targeted areas outside of the city. Interviewees argued that it was simply too difficult to operate in many urban sites. Focusing attention outside the city allowed organisations to continue to operate while satisfying demands to meet the standards.

2. Reinterpret the standards

Another approach to resolving tensions around the standards involved their creative reinterpretation. One area where such reinterpretation occurred was around family size. Initial rapid assessments in Haiti suggested that the average family size was five. However, some organisations based their calculations of personal space on a family size of four. This reinterpretation allowed these organisations to be 'Sphere compliant' while working within the constraints of the urban environment.

3. Educate donors

A widely reported response was the need for greater donor education on the urban context in which organisations were acting. It was hoped that greater understanding between organisations on the ground and donors would make demands for compliance more flexible.

4. Technical innovation

The final response involved technical innovation. Multiple interviewees described how, given the challenging urban environment and the spatial constraints they faced, the solution was to build upwards. They proposed two-storey shelters (Figure 2). This innovation worked within the physical constraints of the city while also meeting Sphere standards.

Figure 2 Two-storey shelter in Haiti

Source: Rafael Smith

However, only one organisation implemented this design solution. The others cited financial constraints and donor resistance as limiting factors. This approach connects with the need for donor education, as the higher cost of this modified design needed to be authorised and supported by donor agencies.

Conclusion

This research reveals a number of tensions around Sphere implementation in urban environments. The majority of interviewees argued that donor pressure increased the likelihood of standard adherence but that, simultaneously, working in an urban context made adherence difficult if not impossible. Managing this tension by avoiding urban contexts or reinterpreting the standards poses considerable challenges for advocates of humanitarian standards and those who hope for more successful humanitarian engagement with urban settlements. It also potentially prioritises Sphere at the expense of truly grappling with urban humanitarian needs.

Donor education and technical innovation offer greater promise for the future of Sphere and for efforts to effectively address urban disasters. While interviewees hoped to raise donors' awareness concerning the challenges of implementing Sphere's physical shelter standards, they also reported power dynamics that are likely to make such up-stream information flow difficult. This suggests that formalising feedback opportunities for voices that are often marginalised, particularly those of smaller and developing country organisations, in the Sphere process will be important in developing a robust set of future standards. Technical innovation – while showing promise – likewise reveals challenges in how to incorporate such novel approaches into the repertoire of humanitarian organisations and donors. As the lack of interest in two-storey shelters shows, such innovations may not be supported due to their cost, complexity or unorthodox nature. Again, this points to the need for more robust means of providing feedback to those driving standard setting.

One possible challenge associated with the Sphere Project's standard-setting process is that it has been consensus-driven. As the examples above suggest, true consensus concerning standards is unlikely to be achieved if it fails to take into account the perspectives of the wide array of organisations engaged in urban disaster response. To ensure the inclusion of often marginalised voices, some mechanisms for disagreement, debate and innovation appear to be necessary in revising the Sphere standards, and are likely to make the standards more robust than a consensus format would allow. While such a consensus may be achievable on paper, it is likely to leave critical voices unheard and lead to unrealistic standards that are unlikely to be achieved in urban post-disaster contexts.

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This edition of *Humanitarian Exchange* was edited by Wendy Fenton, Matthew Foley, Wendy Cue and Robert Muggah.

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Typesetting by Design To Print Solutions Limited.

ISSN: 1472-4847
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