**Planning for Refugees in Cities**

Urban planners and scholars know well that we are living in an urban age where increasing numbers of people are living in cities. This is equally true for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other forced migrants who seek safe shelter from violence and other catastrophic events. Worldwide, it is estimated that a record 68.5 million people have been forcibly displaced[[1]](#footnote-1), with developing countries being affected the most by this large scale movement of people. It should perhaps be obvious, but refugees are not a homogenous group, they differ by class, economic means, and the social networks they command. Yet, the enduring image of refugees tends to be that of helpless victims languishing in refugee camps for years. While many refugees have been put in camps, especially due to concerns over national security, geopolitics and increasing professionalization of humanitarian relief , refugees have also historically gravitated towards cities. Cities such as Delhi, Kolkata, Karachi, Beirut have been reshaped through the mass influx of refugees. Yet, while cities have always hosted refugees, they have either been ignored, or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the main UN agency responsible for protecting refugees has viewed their claims with suspicion, focusing instead on refugee camps (Landau, 2014). Only since 2009 has the UNHCR acknowledged that the majority of refugees live in cities and have sought to protect them in those urban locations creating, what I argue are humanitarian cities.

The urbanization of refugees brings its own challenges. Host governments are often keen to discourage urban refugees over concerns for national and societal security (Fabos & Kibreab, 2007). This translates into marginalization of refugees particularly from poorer, less powerful backgrounds. Many refugees who form part of mass displacements of people come from poorer, more vulnerable backgrounds. They often move into informal neighborhoods in cities in the Global South where they live amongst the urban poor. Here they share in the poor housing conditions and limited infrastructure. On the other hand they can access healthcare, education, and jobs which are elements often scarce in camps (Campbell, 2006; Jacobsen, 2006). Refugees are often self-sufficient and can in fact contribute significantly to the economy. However, their legal status as refugees marks them as being separate from the local populace and hence subject to restrictive policies around work and mobility and arbitrary harassment by the police and the local residents (Coddington, 2018; Fabos & Kibreab, 2007; Sanyal, 2018).

To illustrate these points further, I look at Syrian refugees in Lebanon and examine some of the issues around planning for refugee populations and implications for the future. Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, with estimates suggesting more than one million Syrian refugees alongside a local population of approximately 4 million. In some municipalities refugees outnumber local residents. Such large numbers of refugees since the start of the Syrian war have put enormous pressure on infrastructure, services, and goodwill in the country. NGOs attempting to support the refugees have often exacerbated tensions. It is important also to note that the discussion of refugees is contentious due to the country’s history of hosting Palestinian refugees for over six decades. As a result of that history the government refused to have refugee camps for Syrians, fearing that they would become permanent as well. In addition, Lebanon does not view Syrians as refugees but as displaced persons or de-facto refugees- terms that carry no legal protection (Sanyal, 2017). Furthermore, the government has imposed a series of policies to limit the entry and residency of Syrians. These mostly include stricter border control, expensive residency renewal fees and other bureaucratic controls that make it too burdensome for Syrian refugees to legally remain within Lebanon. As a result of these intersecting issues, a considerable number of refugees have been unable to pay the residency fees and have gone underground. As with urban refugees in other parts of the world, they are often subject to harassment and punitive measures by the local authorities and residents.

Despite this, refugees have attempted to make lives for themselves in Lebanon. They rent private accommodation in formal and informal settlements in urban and rural areas. In rural areas many live in informal tented settlements on private agricultural land (Fawaz, Saghiyeh, & Nammour, 2014; Sanyal, 2017). What we see in the country in the face of having a no-camp policy, is the emergence of a privatized system of hosting refugees. In other words private landlords provide land and housing for refugees to live in. This is both flexible and limiting. On the one hand, having local communities host refugees and benefit from their presence is a positive issue. Refugees have much to offer by way of goods and services, can revitalize local economies and make use of unused/underused spaces. On the other hand, private agreements between landlords and refugees also mean that the latter have less stability and protection in their everyday lives. Landlords for example can evict refugees as they see fit or impose costs and sanctions on them.

In order to support refugees, humanitarian NGOs have provided relief in a variety of ways. At the start of the crisis, they provided emergency supplies including blankets, winterization kits and so forth to Syrian refugees. However as the displacement became more protracted the local populations became more hostile because hosting refugees was becoming difficult, and NGOs were ignoring the needs of local populations who were often as deprived as refugees had been. The government of Lebanon also began working with UNHCR and other NGOs to come up with a strategy to shift from an emergency mode to a stabilization mode. The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) published in 2016 offered a blueprint for how to support host communities and refugees. But already in many parts of the country, INGOs often with their local partners were trying to find ways in which to incentivize and support local populations to host refugees. The interventions varied by scale. These included providing funding to landlords to complete or improve unfinished houses in exchange for hosting refugees for a period of time (6 months to a year) either rent free or for reduced rent. Others intervened at a neighborhood level, providing services, upgrading infrastructure such as water, sanitation, improving communal areas and attempting to improve community relations and addressing issues such as gender based violence. Experiments that have taken place within the context of Lebanon have then been taken up by other agencies and circulated to other countries such as Turkey[[2]](#footnote-2).

International aid agencies have long engaged in development and upgrading work t throughout the world. There are however a few points that are particularly interesting in this case study. Firstly, these are humanitarian organizations, not development organizations and their mandate is to protect refugees, not engage in developmental work. Their understanding of urban systems and politics as such is limited as their expertise tends to lie in camp settings rather than urban ones. As a result, what we see is the emergence of unique urban experiments by humanitarian organizations that have the potential to fundamentally change the urban fabric. Secondly, these organizations – like development organizations – are at the mercy of donors, and as emergencies develop through different parts of the world, so the funding priorities continue to shift and change. Humanitarian organizations have to not only contend with these continuous changes to funding but also convince their donors that undertaking such interventions in urban areas is important, even if the results are not as visible as in refugee camps. Thirdly, humanitarian organizations also have to convince local and national governments to allow them to work in these spaces and engage in supporting both refugees and hosts. This is also contentious as refugees are set apart as outsiders and projects involving them that hint at any kind of permanent resettlement can raise alarm for host governments. Furthermore, the priorities for NGOs and those of local governments may be strikingly different and funding shifts may impact relations between the two. This means NGOs have to proceed with caution and find ways to work together authorities and communities to address complex urban issues. Perhaps more problematically, intervening in one area and not in another means that development becomes uneven and those who fall outside the intervention areas can become resentful of being left out[[3]](#footnote-3).

From a planning perspective, the urbanization of refugees is important for a number of reasons. As this piece has discussed, refugees affect the urbanization of cities and urban social relations. Paying attention to that is important as we unearth the myriad ways in which cities are shaped by different kinds of people. Having refugees in cities also draws in the different and often contradictory priorities of donors, humanitarian NGOs and local authorities. These can lead to uneven development of urban spaces which can have long standing consequences for cities. As noted by various planners, planning as a profession is driven by a focus on public interest. Operating through constant changes brought about by various actors, planning aims to enable urban change that is collectively agreed upon using a mix of means (Holman, Mossa, & Pani, 2018; Rydin, 2013). With large influxes of refugees and migrants for varying periods of time, the often tense relations between hosts and refugees, and competing practices of NGOs and donors financing urban projects, who constitutes the polity that envisions urban change and how do they make their voices heard? How do planners help develop visions for urban change, when so much of that is driven by the unpredictability of war and policies towards refugees and global and national scales? How do the mass migrations of people affect the planning and management of infrastructures and economies of places that are designed for fewer people and for different timescales? Finally, planners ought to also pay attention to the various kinds of experts and knowledge that are reshaping cities. Here humanitarian NGOs with little urban expertise are reshaping neighborhoods. They are then taking these experiments and circulating them to other parts of the world. This is not unlike what we have seen with planners and urban experts in the policy mobilities literature. What we are witnessing is perhaps the emergence of humanitarian cities, and that should be exciting and cautionary in equal measure.

**References**

Campbell, E. H. (2006). Urban Refugees in Nairobi: Problems of Protection, Mechanisms of Survival, and Possibilities for Integration. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *19*(3), 396–413. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fel011

Coddington, K. (2018). Landscapes of refugee protection. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12224

Fabos, A., & Kibreab, G. (2007). Urban Refugees: Introduction. *Refuge*, *24*(1), 3.

Fawaz, M., Saghiyeh, N., & Nammour, K. (2014). *Housing, Land and Property Issues in Lebanon: Implications of the Syrian Refugee Crisis* (p. 98). Lebanon: UN Habitat and UNHCR. Retrieved from http://unhabitat.org/housing-land-and-property-issues-in-lebanon-implications-of-the-syrian-refugee-crisis-august-2014/

Holman, N., Mossa, A., & Pani, E. (2018). Planning, value(s) and the market: An analytic for “what comes next?” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *50*(3), 608–626. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17749730

Jacobsen, K. (2006). Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *19*(3), 273–286. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fel017

Landau, L. B. (2014). Urban refugees and IDPs. In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long, & N. Sigona (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of refugee and forced migration studies* (pp. 139–150). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rydin, Y. (2013). *The future of planning*. Policy Press.

Sanyal, R. (2017). A no-camp policy: Interrogating informal settlements in Lebanon. *Geoforum*, *84*, 117–125. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.011

Sanyal, R. (2018). Managing through ad hoc measures: Syrian refugees and the politics of waiting in Lebanon. *Political Geography*, *66*, 67–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.015

1. http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example the One Neighborhood Approach by Care International. https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/201807-CAREs-One-Neighbourhood-Approach-in-Lebanon\_Summary-final.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See CARE report as above. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)