

# The Urban Dilemma in Civil-Military Humanitarian Coordination

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The humanitarian sector faces new challenges and opportunities due to urbanization, new manifestations of violence and their accompanying protection mandates and a growing number of stakeholders. Militaries coordinating in humanitarian response must also adapt to this new environment.

The trend that cannot be ignored or reversed and will clearly define the environment for future humanitarian activities and thus, military coordination, is that of urbanization. Military operations in support of humanitarian missions will increasingly take place in cities. Rapid urbanization means that the urban population will grow to over 66% by 2050 while the rural population shrinks<sup>1</sup>. At present, 3 million people move to cities every week<sup>2</sup>. These urban centers also concentrate risks and hazards to crisis compounding the likelihood of urban based crisis and response. Humanitarian crises also drive displacement into cities as the portion of refugees now living in urban areas is over 59% and growing<sup>3</sup>. As such, the ground in which militaries engaged in supporting humanitarian missions is shifting into increasingly complex environments with a multitude of challenges.

Conflict induced humanitarian crises that trigger military coordination make urban crises even more likely. Power is still reliant on territorial control and cities represent the most valuable territory in modern states. Cities may become the central battleground as both seats of power and conflict over power. As violence is no longer the monopoly of the state and their militaries (bound by international humanitarian law), the growing number and variety of actors (unbound by international humanitarian law) in urban crises that can influence security will make missions more complex.

Most importantly, urban crises involve a wider variety of civil actors beyond the traditional international aid agencies, state authorities and national militaries. These new urban landscapes have a multitude of stakeholders that may need to be engaged in coordination efforts or at least addressed as a powerbroker or threat to the mission. They include local municipal authorities that now often lead and coordinate the response, community based

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. *World Urbanization Prospects 2014*: United Nations Publications, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> International Organization of Migration. *World Migration Report 2015*. IOM, 2015. Available at <https://www.iom.int/world-migration-report-2015>

<sup>3</sup> Crawford, N, J Cosgrave, S Haysom and N Walicki (2015), *Protracted displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile*, Overseas Development Institute, London.

organizations as well as local charities that may participate in a bulk of the effort on the ground, the private sector supplying a broader range of goods and services, militarized police and private security forces that have been present before the crisis and extremely violent and competing gangs with de facto territorial control. Understanding who these actors are, their role, power relations, capacity and legitimacy can be difficult and requires a deeper understanding of context. Humanitarian organizations themselves find this process challenging when arriving to an urban crisis and do not yet have industry wide formalized methods of rapidly assessing these multitude of stakeholders.

The latest trend and recommendation for humanitarian action in urban crisis, codified within the Urban Charter to be released for the upcoming World Humanitarian Summit, is to promote area-based programming (ABP). This type of humanitarian operation emphasizes a more localized and holistic approach to crisis response with a detailed understanding of the local context to drive operations that are community-based to ensure appropriateness and sustainability. This approach requires a more inclusive approach than the current cluster system allows by taking into account the wider array of civil society actors and stakeholders. Militaries supporting humanitarian missions or providing peacekeeping and security for such operations must also face this range of actors.

Additionally, the geography and density of these growing urban landscapers make them operationally challenging. Many of these rapidly growing cities are marked by large urban slums that make up over 50% of cities in some cases. At baseline urban slums prove very difficult, if not impossible, to police. They are often completely unmapped areas - difficult to traverse, marked by narrow alleys and footpaths without any formal roads, signs or lighting and remain largely unfamiliar to non-residents. Even police in many of these cities do not venture into these areas due to their unfamiliarity and gang control.

The urban violence that marks many cities is also an emerging challenge even in “non-conflict” disasters (e.g. an earthquake in San Pedro Sula, Honduras) as baseline rates of violence resemble or surpass declared wars and local capacity or willingness to address it remains weak<sup>4</sup>. The German Intelligence Agency, in their document on “Ungovernable Megacities,” asserted, “Mumbai, Mexico City and Jakarta are only partially able to carry out their original core responsibilities of protecting their population from violence and destabilization.”<sup>5</sup> Taking on a protection mission into such a scenario for the local population or the humanitarian actors themselves presents a new challenge for militaries. Safety for humanitarian staff is difficult to ensure as the situation on the ground can be fluid with information (and rumors) spreading rapidly and territorial control often in flux.

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<sup>4</sup> Wainer, Andrew. *Worse than War, El Salvador's Youth Caught in Web of Violence*. The Hill blog. August 3, 2015. Available at <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/249969-worse-than-war-el-salvadors-youth-caught-in-web-of>.

<sup>5</sup> Chirol. *Ungoverned Megacities*. ComingAnarchy.com. 3 Nov. 2007. Available at <http://cominganarchy.com/2007/11/03/ungoverned-megacities>.

Moving forward, a new model of civil-military humanitarian coordination may be required. The principles guiding this will undoubtedly require closer communication. While humanitarian communication has become more open with mapping (e.g. crisis-mappers) and information sharing platforms. Military communication systems, by their very nature, are private. A new platform may be required that allows better communication at some level between civil society actors and the military. This may be limited to higher levels with the US Agency for International Development's Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance or other international humanitarian architecture but a new platform will likely be required to share the detailed and context specific information required in urban crises and specifically area based programming. Humanitarian actors may also have to align closer to the military for the sake of security at the cost of some neutrality if hoping to reach beneficiaries in cities characterized by the type of urban violence described above. It may be that humanitarian and military actors work hand-in-hand in certain cases rather than in a supporting role. Finally, both humanitarian and military communities would be better served learning about and exploring coordination together with joint training and workshops, collaboration on research and innovating technology together. While the characteristics of new civ-mil relationships can be described, implementing a new operational framework is far off. Yet future crises will necessitate innovative approaches and evolve new patterns of civil-military cooperation on the ground that may run ahead of any pre-defined strategy. It is imperative to urgently explore new frameworks and methods for civil-military coordination to keep pace with the changing environment.