



POLICY BRIEF

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Towards a better implementation of the UNHCR urban refugee policy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) announced an urban refugee policy in 2009 that marked a key “move forward” in its evolution, from an organization that manages the exclusion of people in camps to one that deals with legitimizing refugees’ presence within a larger context of hosting cities and national governments. The policy of 2009 ([UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas](#)) formed a radical departure from the earlier version in 1997, whereby a more assertive position on refugees’ rights in cities was put forward. The shift corresponds to the dramatic increase in the number of refugees in towns and cities in the last two decades and the need to recognize and respond to their presence.

While the policy was initially received positively and influenced the lives of millions of today’s urban refugees, its content lacks nuance and demonstrates limited urban expertise. Furthermore, its implementation faces many challenges and raises issues of non-applicability, vagueness, and lack of coherence. Most importantly, the implementation is heavily contextual and depends on the circumstances of each national and local setting and the changing geopolitical dynamics between and within countries and cities. The release of an updated version in 2014 on “Alternatives to Camps” further diluted the focus on urban refugees as it included a larger spectrum of settlements that included sustainable camps.

Nearly fifteen years after the release of the first policy in 2009, the politics within the UNHCR and beyond communicate uncertainty in dealing with a caseload of the magnitude of urban refugees. Over the past year, the UNHCR has significantly expanded its operations in response to the displacement of millions of people, particularly in urban areas, due to conflicts and natural disasters. Therefore, the impact of this policy is even more critical for those displaced by such events where the UNHCR had to expand its operations. The recent war in Ukraine has led to the dispersal of over [8 million Ukrainian refugees](#) and internally displaced in urban areas of [Poland](#), [Czechia](#), [Romania](#), [Hungary](#) and [Slovakia](#) among others. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Syria and [Turkey](#), the UNHCR is upscaling its portfolio in the cities and towns where it was already operating and expanding to others in order to assist displaced Syrian and Turkish survivors, some of whom were Syrian nationals seeking refuge in Turkey.

The complexity of the “urban” dimension and the lack of understanding of its systems of support and delivery mechanisms make the discussion of this policy even more important. This Policy Brief discusses the question of refuge in urban areas by highlighting essential parts of the policy’s content and reflecting on their implementation. Based on our analysis of the policy, we make four overarching recommendations to the UNHCR:

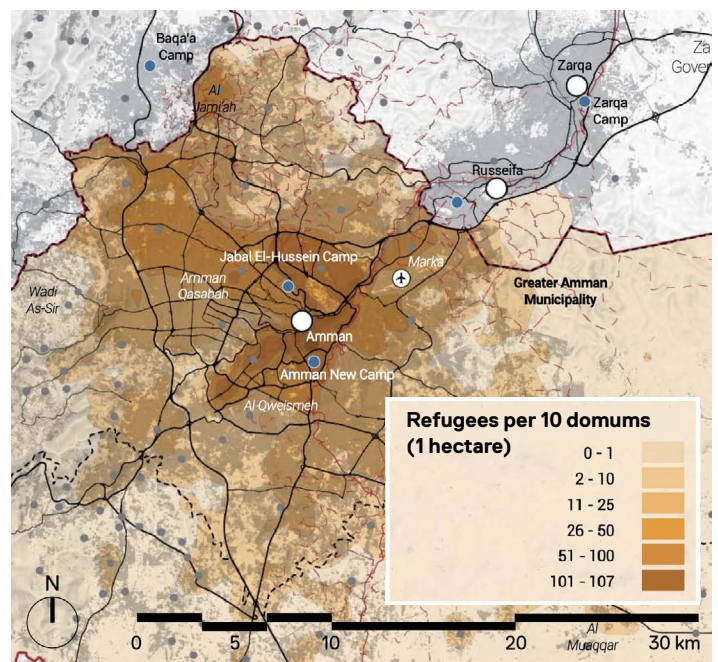
- Develop an integrated approach in urban settings by expanding partnerships and multi-tier institutional engagement with the UNHCR, the host government, line ministries, municipal authorities, NGOs, and local initiatives and structures.
- Create adaptable and relevant policy tools and instruments based on data collected on both the needs and experiences of urban refugees, and analyses of the urban area’s characteristics.
- Facilitate the integration of protection, education, health, and livelihood initiatives at the community level within a consolidated urban refugee policy to enhance their collective impact.
- Ensure the participation of refugees, local residents, and service providers in the design, formulation, and implementation of policies and plans.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization of displacement is a growing trend

Urbanization is a mega trend worldwide, with almost 55% of the world’s population living in cities (UN, 2018). Forced migration has fueled urbanization processes in many Global South cities such as: Amman, Beirut, Bogota, Karachi, and Nairobi. By the end of the 20th century, most refugees were still accommodated in camps. However, the trend of intense urbanization of displacement pushed the number of those seeking sanctuary in cities to reach around 50% of the world’s refugees in 2009 and more than 60% in 2018. The spike in urban refugees resulted from significant events and crises such as the conflict in Iraq in 2006 and the conflict in Syria, which has been ongoing since 2012. Refugees from Venezuela, Myanmar, and Afghanistan were also major contributors to the plight of urban refugees.

Figure 1: Amman's urban refugee population (UN HABITAT 2022)

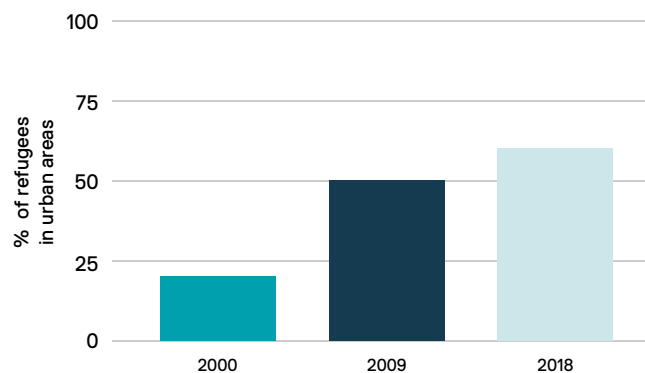


Refugees in many cases prefer cities to camps because they are better able to conceal themselves there, to work, to find accommodation, to get introduced to the hosting culture, and to seek support from multiple sources. All of this allows them to assert their own choices of “place making” (Turton, 2005). However, in some national contexts they are confined in camps at borders and don’t have the option to go to cities. For example, while Bangladesh has been hosting more than a million Rohingya refugees who fled violence and persecution in Myanmar since 2017, they are settled primarily in camps in Cox’s Bazar and restricted by police from movement out of these camps ([UNHCR Bangladesh](#)).

In the past, the demographic of urban refugee populations was different from that of rural environments, often being composed mostly of young males. However, this has changed as more refugee families, women, seniors, and children are now found in cities ([UNHCR Urban Refugees](#)). Providing protection to vulnerable groups within the urban refugee population poses significant challenges, as it requires specialized knowledge and understanding of the complex and multifaceted issues present in the local and refugee populations, and in the urban environments. The urban refugee policy is required to be flexible and adaptable to changing demographics

to remain effective and relevant. Demographic factors will affect the population’s needs, their potential for socio-economic development, and their likelihood for inclusion in programs and social activities.

Figure 2: Growth in urban refugees 2000-2018



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Figure 3: Human mobility in cities

1/5 of all migrants live in the world’s 20 largest cities



3/5 of all refugees live in urban settings



UNHCR's evolving policy and its approach to the rights of urban refugees

Having recognized that the trend of refugees' increased presence in cities was irreversible and intensifying, the UNHCR began increasing its efforts to serve urban refugees within its mandate (Guterres, 2009). The policy responded to difficulties faced by refugees when navigating urban settings, especially in developing countries. It took many internal and external changes and pressures to set the urban policy agenda.

The emergence of the agenda was influenced by a combination of factors including:

- the work of the research, evaluation, and policy unit of UNHCR backed by the leadership of the new High Commissioner Antonio Guterres,
- growing demands from field operations,
- a surge in the number of urban refugees due to significant events, and
- pressure from donors, states, and partner NGOs.

The UNHCR seeks durable solutions for refugees in their search for protection. Durable solutions include one of three main options: voluntarily repatriating refugees to their countries of origin, locally integrating refugees in their hosting countries, or resettling refugees to third countries. The UNHCR urban refugee policy is particularly relevant in the local integration of refugees in their hosting countries.

The 2009 urban refugee policy set two main objectives:

- to ensure that cities are recognized as **legitimate places** for refugees to reside and exercise the rights to which they are entitled; and
- to maximize the **protection space** available to urban refugees and the humanitarian organizations that support them.

In addition, the policy had nine guiding principles and supporting objectives that addressed:

- refugee rights
- state responsibility
- partnerships
- needs assessments
- age, gender and diversity mainstreaming
- equity
- community orientation
- interaction with refugees in urban areas
- refugee self-reliance

Although the objectives and principles of the urban refugee policy remain relevant today, there are many barriers and challenges which prevent their effective implementation.

THE CHALLENGES

Legitimate access to cities is precarious

The policy aims to support urban environments as "legitimate places for refugees to enjoy their rights" (UNHCR 2009, 3). This would, in part, include registration facilities in urban centres that would help refugees get proper documentation and not be at risk of forced repatriation.

The policy proved successful in some locations where governments had previously enforced a high degree of encampment policies. This change was noticeable in Nairobi, for example, where the state had confined refugees to camps for long periods and prohibited their access to cities. With the influence of this policy, increased numbers of refugees were able to access cities and obtain necessary documentation.

However, the challenge is that access to cities is vulnerable to changing national policies and may not be sustainable.

Case study: Nairobi

In Nairobi, self-settled refugees make up only 2% of the city's population, which totals 5.5 million people. However, they represent 16% of Kenya's overall refugee population, most of who reside in camps as of April 2022 ([UNHCR Kenya](#)). These refugees originate from countries such as Somalia, Southern Sudan, Congo, and Ethiopia, and have historically faced numerous obstacles in accessing basic services, such as employment and housing. The Kenyan government's encampment policy previously prevented refugees from entering the city, and those who did faced surveillance, restricted movement, and discrimination ([Agwanda, 2022](#)). Although some refugees received "alien cards" from the government through the National Refugee Act of 2006, as they resided in Nairobi, they still experienced insecurity, corruption, and limited access to public services (Koizumi and Hoffstaedter, 2015). Neither the UNHCR nor the government took full responsibility for their protection and support (Koizumi and Hoffstaedter, 2015).

The Kenyan government recently issued the 2021 National Refugee Act (a modification of the 2006 Act) in response to the Global Compact on Refugees, which aims to allow refugees to reside in urban areas, access formal employment, and establish businesses with prospects for integration and naturalization. Despite the 2021 National Refugee Act's positive provisions, its implementation has been slow because of numerous challenges. Some local authorities have continued to prefer camps over the urban refugee program, despite the new policy. However, the positive impacts of the 2021 legislation have the potential to serve as a model for many developing world cities. The Nairobi case demonstrates how successive changes in national policies regarding urban refugees have significantly impacted the choices of refugees in urban areas and how political developments, coupled with collaborations to respond to humanitarian crises, can reduce vulnerabilities and build prospects for refugees in cities.

Some countries, like Tajikistan, continue to prevent refugees from accessing certain cities, like Dushanbe. The country hosted approximately 7,600 Afghan refugees, as of September 2022, who have access to many social services like nationals, but are restricted from living in cities ([UNHCR Tajikistan](#)).

The urban protection space is not consistent

Core to the policy objective of refugees having a legitimate presence in cities is the concept of maximizing "protection space" for them. The protection space is defined as a "conducive environment" where refugees enjoy their rights and maintain good relationships with those who live in the

urban settings in which they are accommodated. The policy aims to "expand the protection space."

The word "protection" has encompassed many meanings through UNHCR's literature and work: legal, social, physical, emotional, economic, and network/community based. The spectrum for interpretation can mislead any policy evaluation exercise as to what type of protection to focus on and how to measure the impact of the policy on it.

As protection cannot be delivered like material assistance, it is very influenced by national structures of support; local governments' attitudes and policies; reactions of the host population, civil society, and other actors; and the UNHCR's capacity.

Case study: Costa Rica

In [Costa Rica](#), the protection space was never static; it shrank or expanded subject to changing economic, social, political and security conditions as in the case of the more than 150,000 Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers in the country as of February 2022. Many are accommodated in [San Jose](#) along with refugees from Venezuela, El Salvador and other migrant populations. Despite the implementation of policies aimed at assisting refugees and the engagement of the UNHCR, they have remained somewhat isolated from local communities, hindering their integration. In San Jose, refugees are often perceived as overusing local services, which can lead to discrimination by public servants (Chaves-González and Jesús Mora 2021). Furthermore, refugees are limited to working in areas that complement the local labor market. Although the UNHCR has worked with national entities and NGOs to promote integration, more systematic work is needed to establish a durable protection space that fosters resilience and builds solidarity with the hosting community (Chaves-González and Jesús Mora 2021).

Case study: Malaysia

Over 183,000 refugees now reside in Malaysia's urban areas, with the majority (approximately 85%) coming from Myanmar and the remainder from several other countries ([UNHCR Malaysia](#)).

As the number of refugees has grown over the preceding ten years, the UNHCR has been able to expand the protection space by registering these refugees based on its urban policy. Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol and that has put refugees under continuous risk (Rahman and Mohan 2023). Refugees who possess a UN registration card are protected from arrest, detention, and refoulement and have a semblance of legal standing. With the UN Card, they have permission to work for businesses that accept these cards, though typically for lower wages (ibid).

This is especially true for stateless Rohingya refugees who can only use UN cards as identification. Recently, the Malaysian government introduced a mandatory national tracking system for individuals who are registered with the UNHCR in order to know who is in the country and who has departed, a move that is seen as having the [potential to further securitize refugees](#).

The experience of urban refugees is greatly influenced by their ethnic or other identity as it often determines the level of support and networks they can have access to. While this can be advantageous for those with large or well-organized ethnic groups in the host community, it can be detrimental for those with smaller or less established communities. The UNHCR's modalities of responding to the vulnerability of refugees in urban areas cannot be effective if they simply mirror how it treats those in camps. Urban refugees have multi-choice avenues in cities and they learn from other city dwellers as they navigate everyday life. They struggle to get protected; they must understand local settings to position themselves into socio-political and cultural structures and engage with rather complex power relations. In the megacity of Cairo, for example, the "protection space" and the mechanisms associated with it vary dramatically in different urban forms (e.g., public housing, gated settlements and informal communities) (Arous, 2013). The ways in which refugees acquire housing, find jobs and access services depend on local politics and social organization. These structures and organizations shape the provision of services that can affect refugees and local residents alike.

Refugees' access to urban services is not reliable

Refugees' access to services in urban settings is determined by local decisions on their eligibility for different types of services, the capacity of the service providers to accommodate refugees, and the quality of the services provided. While access to services is one of the critical aims of the policy, it still needs to be improved across different districts, cities and groups of refugees.

The urban refugee policy focuses on access to essential public services and material support as key, with the UNHCR advocating with the public and private sectors for this access. However, refugees' inclusion in public systems remains lagging in most global south countries because their inclusion is not seen as part of the urban development agenda of these countries. While the urban refugee policy strongly endorses engagement with national authorities to legitimize a variety of interventions, including adapted service delivery that is mainstreamed within national, local, and community-based structures, in most cases, the result is parallel systems for refugees with legitimate or quasi-legitimate services (such as for health and education.).

For example, Syrian refugees in Cairo can access the public education system but Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians cannot due to national regulations and language barriers (UNICEF). However, the great majority of refugees from all nationalities have established their own community schools because public schools are overstretched, and refugees want to have their own culturally oriented schools. The poor quality of education in public schools and their operational context, in many cases, push international organizations and the UNHCR to

establish parallel education systems for refugees that operate independently of the national system. This approach can lead to negative consequences, such as resentment among the host community, and the exclusion and marginalization of refugees.

It is important for international organizations to take a more active role in creating clearer and more consistent connections between informal and national systems in order to provide more effective and sustainable support for urban refugees.

Case Study: Housing in Nabaa

In the case of the influx of Syrian refugees to Beirut in Lebanon, an informal district called Nabaa accommodated more than three times the total number of its population before the influx of 2012-2013 reaching 26,000 persons (Dagher and Samaha 2016). The response of the informal housing sector in the Nabaa district is worth noting, as these informal channels and social networks managed to show flexibility, creativity, and adaptation. Most refugees lived in single rooms with makeshift kitchens and bathrooms shared with others (Fawaz, 2017). The quick and effective response of informal networks compared to formal national and the UNHCR structures calls for a better understanding of these mechanisms so they can be harnessed and strengthened to increase the flexibility of many existing urban systems (Fawaz, 2017). This is particularly true because the response to refugee crises in many developing world cities is still led by international organizations' response plans that, in most cases, remain detached from the national and local strategic urban development agendas.

On a broader level, the challenges of reaching and assisting urban refugees are further complicated by the fact that many refugees choose to conceal themselves in urban areas, making it difficult for organizations such as the UNHCR to identify and provide support to them. This can be due to various reasons, such as fear of persecution, or mistrust of government and local structures. As a result, the lack of access to these hidden populations hinders the ability of the UNHCR and other international organizations to understand the size, composition and needs of the refugee population in urban areas, and to provide adequate services, protection and durable solutions.

UNHCR's connections with development and employment partners are relatively weak

The UNHCR has minimal experience in urban development since this area is in the remit of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UN-Habitat. The urban refugee policy, therefore, lacks guidance in working with the private sector and civil society (Umlas, 2011). As the policy recommends

working with non-conventional actors such as municipal administrations and mayors, these relations must be systemized throughout the UNHCR's operations. However, these efforts remain driven by each local operation's contextual situation and the willingness of its staff to engage with new partners not yet included in mainstream programming and are, therefore, difficult to evaluate.

Refugee self-reliance is stressed in the policy as an essential mechanism for achieving livelihoods. However, the policy seems to focus more on partnering with higher level authorities and advocating for the removal of legal barriers to employment, rather than on other activities such as addressing mismatched skills and improving work quality in the informal sector. In practice, the policy instructions for the "promotion of self-reliance" translate into a few supports within the informal sector, and through parallel structures developed by the UNHCR's implementing partners who are not, in many cases, livelihood or development specialists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are addressed to the UNHCR for initiating the engagement of multiple actors in the implementation of the urban refugee policy:

1. The Scope of Partnerships

— **Develop an integrated approach in urban settings by expanding partnerships and multi-tier institutional engagement with the UNHCR, the host government, line ministries, municipal authorities, NGOs, and local initiatives and structures.**

The multi-sectoral and partner response plans through which the UNHCR acts in urban refugee situations, should be based on a better understanding of the urban development agenda in the host country, along with an understanding of how the various urban, refugee, emergency response, humanitarian and development systems interact. Sharing good urban practices between the UNHCR field operations and other stakeholders and partners may be helpful.

2. Policy Tools and Instruments

— **Create adaptable and relevant policy tools and instruments based on data collected on both the needs and experiences of urban refugees, and analyses of the urban area's characteristics.**

While details about the refugee population in each area form important resources for planning and programming, it is, nevertheless, important to complement refugee-centered data with urban profiles, area-based maps, and socio-spatial, socio-economic and political analyses of neighborhood characteristics. These data sources will be invaluable for the development of tools and instruments that are locally relevant and more likely to be successful.

3. Coordinated Policies

— **Facilitate the integration of protection, education, health, and livelihood initiatives at the community level within a consolidated urban refugee policy to enhance their collective impact.**

The UNHCR has a variety of policies and strategies on overlapping topics and with overlapping activities. Yet, at the operational level, each activity has its own governance, modalities of implementation, and partnerships. The urban refugee policy is very broad and includes different focal areas such as protection, education, health, and livelihoods. A coordinated, integrated approach that builds on an understanding of the connections and intersections of these focal areas and the local settings, host communities, and refugee networks within which they are implemented, will enhance their collective impact.

4. Recognizing Refugee, Resident and Provider Expertise

— **Ensure the participation of refugees, local residents, and service providers in the design, formulation, and implementation of policies and plans**

Refugees themselves make choices about where they live and undertake effective exchange and learning with the city's residents. The UNHCR can learn from refugees about the different strategies they have pursued and how they have benefited from flexibility and informality to access services. Including refugees, other city residents, and service providers in planning, policy development, and implementation will yield a more responsive and effective policy. Refugee participation in cities' systems allows meaningful three-way learning through ongoing interaction and the resilience-building processes they offer among diverse residents and service providers.

CONCLUSION

The development and implementation of the UNHCR's urban refugee policy is closely tied to the political and socioeconomic context of global displacement events. The policy has had some successes, such as providing greater legitimacy and protection to some refugees who reach towns and cities and providing some assistance to them. Some new partnerships have been made and there has been more understanding of the urban context.

Nonetheless, the policy's implementation still faces many challenges and many of the issues that urban refugees confront still persist. The policy lacks nuance for the unique context of urban areas, and its implementation is heavily dependent on national settings, cities' profiles and varying governance structures. It is not binding, even though there are tangible instruments for implementation in place that could affect the lives of millions of people.

The evaluation of the policy needs to keep up with the ongoing "trial and error" process of its implementation in each urban context, so that learnings and promising practices can be shared, adapted, and applied in other urban settings.

To fully address the needs of urban refugees, it is essential to have a better understanding of their lived experiences and to integrate their needs into urban development agendas in a coordinated and sustainable way.

Unfortunately, urban refugees do not seem to be a priority for the current leadership of the UNHCR. Its most recent [Strategic Directions report for 2017-2021](#) makes only one reference to them with no recommendations (Muggah & Abdelnour, 2018), and its Global Trends data has not updated the number of urban refugees since 2018. The inability to deliver a coherent approach to urban refugees by the UNHCR has fueled disagreements within and outside the organization, ending up in fragmented activities that have not been as effective as possible to achieve the urban refugee policy's objectives.

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