

The Urban Snapshots series examines critical urban issues relevant to the Syria crisis and explores response options and approaches.

Next Issue: **Urban Governance Challenge**

SHELTER NEEDS IN SYRIA

HOUSING IN SYRIA BEFORE THE WAR

Prior to the conflict, Syria was experiencing rapid development and urbanization with **56% of the 21.5 million population living in urban areas**. Attraction to jobs and services in cities became a natural pull factor for a rural population excluded from the benefits of national development policies. The construction sector also played a significant role, generating more than 130,000 homes, 800,000 jobs and contributing 6% to national GDP in 2010. However, complex urban planning regulations and procedures were ineffective in controlling rapid growth and led to an estimated 40% of the urban population establishing themselves in informal or un-licensed settlements in urban and peri-urban areas.

THE DYNAMICS OF PEOPLE AND WAR

The war in Syria has lasted for over two years and there are no hopeful signs of an early solution. Many cities have become battlegrounds, spreading fear, insecurity and in some cases, major destruction to the built environment. Estimates of the destruction and the damage are still far from precise, as they are based on aerial imagery without detailed ground verification. However, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of families will require new houses to replace those damaged and destroyed.

The conflict has forced the closure of many public and private enterprises, resulting in a sharp increase in poverty. More than 5.65 million people have been forced to abandon their homes and communities, resulting in an estimated 4.25 million Internally Displaced Persons, while the balance have fled to neighbouring countries.



Supplementary tents in a Collective Shelter in Tartous. © UN-Habitat



Children in a Collective Shelter that has been adopted for 2,000 people in an Islamic Centre in Homs. © UN-Habitat

As areas of conflict are redefined and 'front-lines' shift, it is possible for some families to return home, though this is more common in rural areas. Urban displacements follow a different pattern with families typically moving from one safe urban area to another depending on threat levels and availability of shelter.

Displaced families usually seek to find protection close to home, and only if this solution proves impossible do they move to other cities, well within government or opposition controlled areas (not in marginally controlled areas). If these options are not available, and if the family has the financial means, then the decision to move abroad becomes the likely outcome. Though, by means do all families have options and there remains a number of urban poor who lack the social networks and economic resources to move and are trapped within the battle zone, at ever increasing risk of becoming casualties in this conflict.

SHELTER MODALITIES

Collective shelters are the main 'formal' response, established in public or private buildings and are increasing in number. Presently over 800 collective shelters have been officially registered with the Ministry of Local Administration (MoLA), sheltering around 174,000 IDPs. These tend to be heavily overcrowded with insufficient services. They vary in size from 20 to 3,000 people, but still only accommodate 4.1% of Syrian IDPs. The most vulnerable IDP population, without access to collective shelters, establish makeshift shelters on vacant lots and in vacant buildings which usually lack access to basic services.

The overwhelming majority of IDPs are hosted with families and friends. The well-known Syrian hospitality is one of the main 'humanitarian' support modalities for those in need. However, this situation inevitably creates a severe strain as the hosting period becomes prolonged, leading to overcrowding, additional intra/inter-family tensions and additional costs. It is evident that this hospitality has limits in scale and time, which pushes even more IDPs towards collective shelters or to other ad-hoc alternatives.



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40%

The estimated percentage of urban population living in informal or un-licensed settlements in urban and peri-urban areas.



The conflict has increasingly converted cities into active battlegrounds, spreading fear and insecurity and in the worst cases, destruction of the built environment.

The rental markets in many locations are also becoming heavily distorted. Those with the ability to pay rent are outstripping the numbers of properties available for rent, and this supply-side shortage is resulting in rental hikes of up to 300%, along with negligible security of tenure. Rents are being paid from savings and in the absence of new incomes, the sustainability of these arrangements is fragile.

Increasingly, families in need of shelter protection are occupying empty, unfinished or abandoned private buildings, most of which are without water, sanitary installations, windows or doors.

SHELTER RESPONSES

After food supply, the largest single component of the overall humanitarian response is the distribution of essential non-food items to assist IDPs with basic necessities. This support helps people to cope with their most pressing needs in almost all shelter modalities. The 'collective shelters' are the principal formal response to house the most vulnerable IDPs. Several UN agencies and a small number of International NGOs are being assigned responsibility for rehabilitation and adaptation of collective shelters for IDPs by MoLA. The support capacity and available funding for this activity is still insufficient to address the increasing demands of over 800 public and private registered 'collective shelters'. Some agencies have experimented with rental support for families with no incomes and depleted savings to avoid them being forced into 'collective shelters'. This practice remains complex and controversial and discussions are underway to explore alternative modalities.

The Ministry of Local Administration has reported that to date, 5 Billion Syrian Pounds (USD 38 Million) has been provided to families, through three cash compensation schemes, to



Empty unfinished apartment building that has been informally occupied by IDPs in Tartous. © UN-Habitat



Urban Homs, communities hosting IDPs. © UN-Habitat

repair conflict damaged homes. The programme primarily targets returnees and people who did not relocate during the conflict. The option of providing shelter tools and material kits to support home repair and adaptation for host family homes is also being considered.

The government has recently launched a proposal to start building minimum standard pre-fab shelters with services (bathroom and kitchen) as an option for IDPs. This could later serve as temporary accommodation during the rehabilitation and reconstruction phase, and in the longer term could potentially be used as a permanent housing solutions for low-income families.

CHALLENGES

The lack of reliable, detailed numerical data, qualitative information on living conditions, and shelter and housing analysis, is the most significant challenge to developing a coherent shelter strategy. The upcoming National Joint Humanitarian Assessment and UN-Habitat's Shelter Needs Assessment will provide important insights and a far higher level of clarity than currently exists. The Shelter Working Group, that includes Government, International NGOs and UN agencies, is presently exploring alternative shelter support models. A catalogue of actionable proposals that are applicable to a range of shelter coping mechanisms will be developed.

It is necessary to undertake in depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of how and where different modalities can be most cost effective in providing dignified shelter solutions to the most vulnerable families. There is no one-type-fits-all solution, different cities and housing types provide different scenarios. While it is clear that many IDPs live in formal areas in 'reasonable' conditions, it is equally clear that the situation of many people in informal settlements is problematic and an increasing challenge for the authorities and the international community.

With no end in sight to the conflict, it is evident that shelter and housing issues will take a long time to solve. A broad range of creative, well-funded solutions, targeting both immediate and longer term needs is required.

300%

The rent level increases due to supply-side shortages caused by IDP demand



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