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## WHAT PRACTICES ARE USED TO IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AFFECTED BY URBAN HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES?

### About this evidence brief

This brief provides an overview of *What practices are used to identify and prioritize vulnerable populations affected by urban humanitarian emergencies?*, a systematic review published by the Humanitarian Evidence Programme in January 2017 and carried out by a team from Stanford University, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Norwegian Refugee Council and University of New South Wales. It summarizes key findings in response to the research question identified, indicates the country contexts from which evidence is drawn, outlines the methodology, highlights research gaps and provides references to the original literature.

This brief aims to assist policy makers, practitioners and researchers in assessing the available evidence in this field. It does not provide advice on which interventions or approaches are more or less appropriate in any given context. The varied and varying nature of crisis, vulnerability, goals of humanitarian programming, local conditions and quality of available data make the evidence highly contextual. *The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Oxfam, Feinstein or the UK government.*

### Objectives of this systematic review

The systematic review represents the first ever attempt to systematically search, sort and synthesize existing evidence on targeting the most vulnerable in urban humanitarian crises in low and middle-income countries. Specifically, the research aims to consolidate findings on the tools, methods and metrics used to identify and prioritize vulnerable people, households and communities in humanitarian emergencies, including those displaced within and to urban areas.

### About the systematic review

The protocol, full systematic review and executive summary on which this evidence brief is based are available from [Feinstein International Center](#), [Oxfam Policy & Practice](#) and [UK government](#) websites. Citation:

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### About the Humanitarian Evidence Programme

The Humanitarian Evidence Programme is a partnership between Oxfam GB and the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University. It is funded by the United Kingdom (UK) government's Department for International Development (DFID) through the Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence Programme.

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**Figure 1: Summary of review findings. Source: The research team**

Identification practice type	Number of studies*	Quality of study†	Sectors/themes	Locations
<p><b>Targeting by displacement status</b></p> <p>Evidence calls into question the practice of using internally displaced person (IDP)/refugee versus host population as a targeting delineation in humanitarian programming in urban contexts, where there may be significant underlying vulnerability and poverty among resident populations.</p>	6	High: 1 Medium: 2 Low: 3	Food security Nutrition WASH	Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Mogadishu, Somalia; Nairobi, Kenya; Peshawar, Pakistan; urban south-central Somalia
<p><b>Categorical targeting</b></p> <p>Evidence shows that, while targeting by category of person using demographics such as gender or age can be useful, it must be context specific. Defining vulnerable groups by demographic identifier must ensure that those classified are truly the most in need of a humanitarian intervention.</p>	4	High: 1 Medium: 1 Low: 2	Food security	Urban Burkina Faso; Damascus, Syria; Darfur, Sudan
<p><b>Using pre-existing data</b></p> <p>Use of pre-existing administrative data must consider that it will often be imperfect in its representativeness, how it was collected and how up to date it may be. Given rapidly changing urban environments and disruptions caused by the crisis itself, pre-existing administrative data should be used with caution, bearing in mind the need to determine the supplementary secondary data needed for identifying vulnerable populations.</p>	3	High: - Medium: 2 Low: 1	Food security Livelihoods	Bam, Iran; Darfur, urban Syria
<p><b>Locally-derived tools</b></p> <p>Many reports stress the importance of local insight to the process of informing vulnerability assessments whether developing a brand new context-specific scale or adding locally relevant indicators to a pre-existing tool. Evidence from both gender-based violence and food security assessments supports developing entirely new scales or adapting scales with local data.</p>	3	High: 3 Medium: - Low: -	Food security Gender-based violence	Accra, Ghana; Mocoa, Colombia; Nairobi
<p><b>Self-targeting</b></p> <p>Evidence indicates that the self-targeting method is expensive and difficult to maintain long-term or to transition to local authorities. Self-targeting through a physical centre is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable who wish to remain hidden.</p>	2	High: - Medium: 1 Low: 1		Damascus, Mogadishu
<p><b>Community-based targeting</b></p> <p>Evidence reveals some success in identifying the most vulnerable through community-based targeting, which leverages local knowledge and contextual understanding – critical to urban response. The evidence also shows that to avoid bias, a nuanced understanding of the community, motivating factors for participation and local power dynamics is required.</p>	2	High: 1 Medium: - Low: 1	Food security, WASH, livelihoods	Gaza, Occupied Palestinian Territory; Nairobi, Port-au-Prince, Haiti; urban south-central Somalia
<p><b>Sampling frame</b></p> <p>Evidence indicates that the density and heterogeneity of cities necessitates larger sample sizes, more clusters or smaller geographic units during data collection to ensure pockets of vulnerability and diversity are captured to inform targeting.</p>	1	High: 1 Medium: - Low: -	-	Grozny (Chechnya)

Notes: \* Total sample size: 19 articles (14 grey literature, five academic). † Quality: the research team developed a quality assessment formula based on: representativeness of urban population described (whether the sample size was large enough and the composition was adequate to draw meaningful conclusions); methods used (whether they were relevant and appropriate for assessing the targeting strategy used and whether those methods could generate reliable data); justified conclusions (whether or not they follow logically from the observations or results of the study); and risk and discussion of bias. The quality assessment scale is included in Appendix C of the full report.

## Findings

- Six of the nineteen studies eligible for inclusion in the systematic review contain evidence on **targeting by displaced and host populations**. Only one study – a review of the Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC)'s programming in Goma, DRC, where many displaced people rent accommodation with less secure tenure than host populations – indicates there was more vulnerability among displaced populations than resident communities. (Bailey, 2015). Most studies argue against targeting by displacement status to identify the most vulnerable populations in urban crises. In addition to missing some of the most vulnerable groups in a city, targeting by displacement status can foster resentment, in some instances further exacerbating the vulnerability of targeted groups (Metcalf and Pavanello, 2011; Catholic Relief Services, 2015).
- Four of the included studies incorporate **categorical targeting methods** (i.e. targeting by demographic categories such as gender, age, disability and ethnicity). The outward transparency of this approach is stated as a benefit by one study because those meeting criteria for inclusion are often easily distinguishable (Fortin et al., 2015); the 2015 evaluation of NRC's urban assistance in Goma found that both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries estimated inclusion error for the categorical targeting programme to be minor (Bailey, 2015). However, nuanced analysis and contextual understanding are essential to ensure against oversight and mitigate the risk of overlooking certain types of vulnerability in particular situations.
- **Using pre-existing data** can be valuable in the design of targeting approaches – an example is following the 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran, when relief organizations were able to make use of the existing categorical vulnerability criteria defined by the local Welfare Organization and were able to rapidly begin targeting resources to people in need (Bagheri et al., 2006). However, two of the three studies referencing the use of pre-existing data underscore the importance of data verification and supplementation.
- The research team found an insufficient number of trials to be able to make more evidence-based claims about the effectiveness of **locally derived and situation-specific instruments and practices to identify and prioritize vulnerability**. However, the three studies included in this review emphasize the significance of such practice both in terms of developing new context-specific scales and adding locally relevant indicators to pre-existing tools. Evidence comes from both the

### Definitions

The review encompasses a broad definition of '**urban environments**', which may be determined by: 'administrative criteria or political boundaries (e.g. area within the jurisdiction of a municipality or town committee); a threshold population size (where the minimum for an urban settlement is typically in the region of 2,000 people, although this varies globally between 200 and 50,000); population density (typically 400 per square kilometre); economic function (e.g. where a significant majority of the population is not primarily engaged in agriculture, or where there is surplus employment); or the presence of urban characteristics (e.g. paved streets, electric lighting, sewerage)'. (UNICEF, 2012, p.10). This definition allows for the inclusion of towns and cities, as well as peri-urban settlements with non-agriculture-based economies and informal spaces that lack official recognition.

**Vulnerable populations** can make up the majority of some cities, depending on the definition and metrics used. This review aims to synthesize evidence on practices used to identify vulnerable populations and hence relies a great deal on agencies' own definitions.

We use the term '**urban humanitarian emergency or crisis**' to refer to any humanitarian action taken within an urban environment, irrespective of where the crisis originated, as long as the intervention was implemented in an urban area. Many urban populations live below Sphere minimum standards, which can result in greater vulnerability when overlapped with other **types of emergencies** (Humanitarian Coalition, 2013).

gender-based violence and food security areas of practice.

- Both of the eligible studies covering **self-targeting** highlight concerns with the approach in their contexts: one documents the situation of vulnerable Iraqi refugees in Syria in 2006 (Haysom and Pavanello, 2011) and the other experiences of reaching the most vulnerable in Mogadishu (Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, 2014). The concerns are that self-targeting is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable who wish to remain hidden and it proved expensive and difficult to maintain long term or to transition to local authorities.
- The two pieces of evidence on **community-based targeting** reveal some success but also highlight the need for awareness of local power dynamics in order to avoid exclusion and bias.
- One study (Grozny, Chechnya) provides guidance on **sampling frames for surveys and focus groups** in urban areas, advising that the density and heterogeneity of cities necessitates large sample sizes, more clusters or smaller geographic units (Drysdale et al., 2000).

## Methodology

- Some 29,000 English language documents were identified through database and website searches (of think tanks, consortia working groups and partnerships, UN agencies and international bodies, government agencies, university and institution-based research programmes and operational organizations) as well as through referrals made by experts from

both the Urban Community of Practice listserv operated by ALNAP and the Urban Expert Working Group for the World Humanitarian Summit:

- 304 articles were included in a full text review
- 19 articles were eventually selected for inclusion in the review; 14 from grey literature and 5 academic articles
- of the 19 included articles, 11 were qualitative studies, 5 quantitative and 3 mixed methods.
- The search covered all urban populations that have experienced a humanitarian crisis response since 1985 in urban areas – including IDPs, refugees and residents affected by an emergency:
  - all 19 of the included studies were published after 1999; 15 of them were published after 2010 (see the full report, Figure 4.1, for included studies for evidence-based finding).
- While the research team is confident in the methodology employed and the search terms and databases included, the state of humanitarian literature – how it is produced, published, catalogued and consolidated – results in some specific limitations.
- Expanding the scope to include evidence from various other bodies of literature, such as development and poverty alleviation, as well as work on intimate partner violence or human trafficking, may have identified additional evidence of potential interest to humanitarian practitioners but this was beyond the scope of this review.

## Research gaps

- A major finding of the review is the striking lack of high quality evidence on targeting vulnerable populations in urban humanitarian emergencies. The research team's own experience of assessing the strength of the evidence in many papers revealed:
  - minimal information about methods – while some studies (particularly the academic articles) have robust methods sections, many methods sections are sparse and light on detail
  - reports do not always clearly attribute findings to the study results
  - much of the literature informing humanitarian practice does not incorporate experimental design
  - while many papers discuss the number of people enrolled or targeted by a programme, the actual size of the sample used to evaluate the targeting approach and its representativeness is not clear
  - often an observational approach is taken to evaluate targeting but the methods of

observation are not always clearly described

- descriptions of limitations and risks of bias are nearly always absent in the grey literature reports, which tend to focus more on the effectiveness of a specific intervention for pre-determined outputs, than on formally seeking to evaluate the targeting approach
- the academic papers have more direct focus on evaluating a targeting approach as the main purpose of the research and tend to compare targeting approaches to one another or to an accepted standard, or to perform validity tests; the academic literature scored higher in this review's quality rubric because it mandates a methodology section, requires presentation of data and discussion of limitations (allowing clear evaluation of validity) and has a peer review filter for publication that some grey literature does not.
- Specific areas that would benefit from better disaggregated data and focused research include:
  - war, conflict and violence – while these may be some of the most difficult situations in which to perform quality research, the dearth of evidence highlights a glaring gap in environments that require effort and funding as populations become increasingly exposed to conflict
  - age, gender and (dis)ability – future evaluations could specifically aim to investigate and report on the experience of these groups with regard to specific targeting approaches
  - urban shelter – outside the literature base on urban search and rescue, and on engineering assessments, there is a lack of evidence to guide targeting
  - user and beneficiary generated data – data obtained through crowdsourcing platforms and social media is often presented as a potentially valuable way of incorporating community perspectives and local knowledge in targeting; however, we found no evidence on these methods in our searches
  - evidence is lacking on how targeting during a humanitarian emergency can emerge from disaster risk reduction efforts, or be folded back into social protection programmes post-crisis as an exit strategy
  - absorptive capacity – urban humanitarian response that is moving towards understanding how cities, communities and households can enable the aid response will necessitate better assessments of local absorptive capacity; this includes, for example, the capacity to shelter or host IDPs, or to upgrade the existing healthcare infrastructure.

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