After more than two years of intense fighting, the conflict in Syria has claimed over 100,000 lives and has injured another 575,000. An estimated 6.5 million people are displaced within Syria, while an additional 2.2 million have fled to neighbouring countries. While a political solution may emerge, most actors acknowledge that the crisis will remain protracted.

Countries within the region have responded generously, opening their borders and their homes to shelter Syrian refugees. There are signs of strain, however, particularly at the municipal level. Many of the 84 percent of Syrian refugees are found within host communities in urban areas, where they are closer to livelihoods, health care and education. In 2014, municipal support in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq will be critical to help stabilize an increasingly fragile situation.

Urban infrastructure and services have also borne the brunt of the conflict. 64 percent of Syrian public hospitals are either damaged or not operating. Over 3,000 schools are damaged or destroyed. In some cities, urban water supply has been reduced by up to 90 percent. Solid waste collection and disposal services have been disrupted across the country, becoming a public health issue in the cities of Aleppo, Deir-ez-Zor, Homs, Idlib and Rural Damascus.

Within the region, 84 percent of Syrian refugees live outside camps, in rental accommodation or with host families. In Lebanon, the Government has decided against establishing camps. One million refugees – one quarter of the country’s pre-crisis population – have been absorbed into cities and large towns. In Jordan, 60 percent of the country’s 600,000 refugees live in urban areas. In Iraq, 60 percent of the refugees live in cities. Municipalities and host communities are struggling to cope with the influx. Urban infrastructure and services are strained to the breaking point. Rents are double or triple the pre-crisis rate, forcing poor Lebanese and Jordanians to find increasingly scarce alternative accommodation. While host communities have been exceedingly generous, social tensions are increasing.

What does the urban nature of the refugee crisis mean for the response? First, individual needs must be addressed through neighbourhood approaches. Assistance must target internally displaced people (IDPs)/refugees, as well as the people hosting them. Integrated approaches providing for multiple needs (shelter, WASH, community infrastructure and livelihoods) are able to address priority issues while strengthening social cohesion.

Second, wherever feasible, responses must build on existing urban systems. The most cost-effective and efficient interventions will require addressing, for example, water supply networks and waste-management systems, which are managed at the District or Municipal level.

Finally, humanitarian action in urban areas requires close coordination between relief actors, municipal authorities and line Ministries. Enabling municipal staff to play their role as “first responders,” means strengthening their information management, coordination, dispute resolution and planning capacities.

THE SYRIA CRISIS IS AN URBAN CRISIS

Whether inside Syria or in the region, the impacts of the crisis are concentrated in cities. In Syria, only three percent of the 6.5 million displaced people are in collective centres. Most live with host families, particularly around Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Hama. In some cases between 20 and 30 people may share a home designed for five.
UN-HABITAT IS RESPONDING

UN-Habitat is responding, both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. Inside Syria, UN-Habitat’s interventions focus on emergency shelter assistance, solid waste management and urban information management. UN-Habitat has teams of national experts in Homs, Aleppo, and Lattakia with plans to expand to an additional three cities in 2014.

Inside Syria, UN-Habitat is working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to broaden the range of emergency shelter solutions, which thus far have focused only on collective centres, home to only some 165,000 of the 6.5 million displaced population. This involves undertaking detailed shelter assessments that identify various solutions that strengthen coping mechanisms currently adopted by displaced Syrians and those living within damaged properties. These approaches will be piloted and scaled up with national partners.

Across the region, UN-Habitat is building strategic partnerships to bring specialized urban expertise to the humanitarian response.

In Lebanon, UN-Habitat is working closely with UNHCR, UNICEF and Unions of Municipalities (UoMs) to address critical shelter, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and infrastructure issues. In Iraq, UN-Habitat provided initial technical assistance to UNHCR in Domiz Camp, near Dohuk. Current work involves working with municipalities to provide shelter and WASH support to host families in urban areas. In Jordan, UN-Habitat has just completed a rapid assessment of the impact of the refugee crisis on housing markets and urban services and is providing urban advisory support to the regional coordination effort.

Additional details on each country are provided below.
SYRIA: URBAN INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS, SHELTER SUPPORT AND SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

Rapid City Profiles
UN-Habitat has been developing Rapid City Profiles and Urban Snapshots to understand how communities are coping with the protracted crisis and how well urban infrastructure, services and markets are functioning. These have so far been prepared for Homs, Aleppo and Latakia, and will soon be underway in Hamah and Dar’a, funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC). The profiles map various issues such as population densities per neighbourhood; levels of damage to infrastructure and services by neighbourhood; land-use types; rental prices by neighbourhood; and economic activity. They are undertaken in cooperation with municipal staff, the planning commission, engineers syndicates, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities and the private sector. Secondary data is analyzed and primary data collected through survey, observation and key informant interviews. Findings are validated with multiple stakeholders. UN-Habitat provides coordination through Geographic Information System (GIS), analytical and technical support.

So far UN-Habitat has found that:

- Urban information and analysis can be conducted by working with municipal staff, professional organisations and other sources.
- Municipal staff are eager to fulfill their responsibilities for service delivery, however, international assistance to date has been limited.
- Neighbourhood-level analysis can identify new opportunities for quick-impact projects and expand the range of response options.

Linked to the city profiling, UN-Habitat through partnership with SDC will start working with key local stakeholders in critically affected neighbourhoods to plan neighbourhood action plans to strengthen resilience. The action plans will be supported with critical interventions, cash based where possible to strengthen local, economies accompanied with technical and coordination support.

Shelter
UN-Habitat’s shelter support includes developing detailed assessments of current shelter coping mechanisms in order to identify key vulnerabilities, then preparing with UNHCR and the shelter sector a range of corresponding support options in line with priorities identified. Methodologies applicable to private complete and incomplete buildings, host communities and informal and makeshift buildings and settlements have been developed and agreed amongst stakeholders; partner trainings are underway. The assessments are about to take place in Aleppo, Homs, Rural Damascus and Latakia, and will be soon followed in Qamishly, Dar’a, Hama and Rural Homs. In addition to this, UN-Habitat is piloting emergency rehabilitation initiatives for shelter, water supply, solid waste and community infrastructure through cash based programming in Homs, and initiating an emergency shelter response programme in Aleppo, responding to the displacement of IDPs from public buildings, through identifying new shelter options and cash support. New approaches to shelter support will be documented and disseminated amongst the shelter sector.

Solid Waste
An emergency solid waste management project is planned in four neighborhoods of Aleppo to respond to severe environmental health hazards of uncollected waste, in partnership with a national NGO. A solid waste management workshop will be organized in mid February by UN-Habitat and UNICEF to bring together Governorates and municipalities to develop emergency systems for responding to solid waste problems. UN-Habitat anticipates expanding this operation into other neighbourhoods and cities in early 2014.
LEBANON - BUILDING MUNICIPAL CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO A PROTRACTED REFUGEE CRISIS

Since 2011, Lebanon has received some 1,000,000 refugees fleeing the crisis in Syria. This represents some 25 percent of the pre-crisis population of Lebanon. The Government of Lebanon has not permitted the establishment of formal camps. Consequently, this entire population has been absorbed into existing cities and towns. The rapid influx has strained already weak municipal services and has resulted in increased tension between the refugee population and the local Lebanese community.

UN-Habitat’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis builds on its 2006 experience. Then, Regional Technical Offices (RTOs) were established within Unions of Municipalities to provide technical support to housing reconstruction. The initiative was well received by municipalities and two of the three RTOs established in 2006 remain operational even today. They are financed by the Unions themselves, and provide a range of technical services to smaller municipalities within their Unions1.

For the Syria crisis, and with funding from UNHCR and UNICEF, UN-Habitat has developed an innovative model that works through RTOs to deliver shelter, water supply, sanitation and community infrastructure in an integrated manner that meets urgent needs and contributes to social stability.

UN-Habitat currently supports two RTOs in Chouf and Saida districts. Mobile teams have been established in each Union consisting of field officers who work with the municipalities and communities to identify vulnerable refugee families whose host family requires shelter assistance, and engineers who conduct rapid assessments of buildings, prepare technical documents and cost estimates, and monitor construction. A local NGO has been contracted to manage the payments for the works.

In the initial pilot project, assessments and technical documents were completed for around 750 houses within three months of the project’s start, and within six months of the start of the project, 550 homes will have been rehabilitated with financial support from UNHCR. Typically projects include sealing off buildings with windows and roofs, providing additional toilet facilities, and installing partitions for privacy. In return for the investment, owners commit to continue to host the refugee family at a below market, affordable level for an agreed period of time, between 12 and 18 months. UN-Habitat funded by UNHCR is now expanding this approach, and will train RTOs throughout South Lebanon.

In parallel, community infrastructure projects are identified and implemented with financial support from both UNHCR and UNICEF. Infrastructure projects are identified and prioritized jointly by the local authorities and host communities. UN-Habitat’s technical teams carry out assessments and help select projects. The projects will improve water and sewage networks, and will increase access to water. Some of the larger projects target the mains networks, which the municipalities can further expand in the future. Working with the municipalities helps identify cost-effective solutions that distribute the benefits among refugees and host communities alike. Investing in municipalities also helps strengthen the transition from emergency intervention to longer term sustainability.

1 Municipalities are legal entities in Lebanon and their numbers have mushroomed in response to the political impasse at the national level. More recently they are organizing themselves into Unions to increase their political voice and to provide economies of scale for service delivery. Today, 51 Unions represent some 800 municipalities. As the refugee crisis becomes more protracted, Unions of Municipalities are emerging as key actors in the response.
IRAQ – URBAN SHELTER AND WATER, SANITATION SUPPORT

In the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the government’s initial strategy focused on settling refugees in camps. Domiz Camp, near Dohuk, was the first, but additional camps were established in Erbil and Sulaymaniah.

Between June and August 2013 there was a surge of Syrian refugees crossing into KRG, including some 60,000 within a six week period from mid-August 2013 to end-September 2013. At the end of 2013, UNHCR estimates that some 240,000 Syrian refugees – 60 percent of the total refugee population in KRG – will be living in urban areas.

UN-Habitat has been supporting UNHCR’s refugee response throughout the process. From November 2012 to April 2013, UN-Habitat provided site planning support, including infrastructure planning for drainage, sewerage and water supply. Now, UN-Habitat’s activities focus on shelter and WASH in urban areas. Initially 200 households were targeted for shelter and WASH support in Erbil, and 100 in Sulaymaniah. The project, funded by UNHCR is now being extended to support a further 357 households, including 186 in Dohuk. UN-Habitat teams work closely with municipal authorities for beneficiary identification, review of cost estimates for rehabilitation works (Bill of Quantity) and quality control with respect to the finished works. Typical projects include roof, wall and door repairs and in some case the provision of toilets.

In addition, UN-Habitat has been supporting municipalities serving communities affected by high influx of refugees by providing basic infrastructure support. This has included strengthening municipal water supply systems that have become severely strained through providing water pumps, storage facilities and repairing network infrastructure.

Municipalities have proved to be valuable partners. Refugee populations are highly mobile, moving from place to place in search of the right combination of safety, shelter, access to services and livelihoods. Neighbourhood mukhtars (community liaison), where they exist, are aware of population movements and are often able to help identify families hosting refugees, including the most vulnerable Syrian and Iraqi households.

Collaboration with municipal staff has also demonstrated how interventions can be designed to have even greater impact. Investing, for example, in the upgrade of existing water supply systems at the neighbourhood or district level, has proved a cost-effective and efficient way to reach a greater number of beneficiaries. The benefits are also distributed more equitably between host communities and refugees, thus alleviating potential sources of tension.
JORDAN: CITIES REACHING BREAKING POINT

UN-Habitat conducted a rapid assessment of the impact of the refugee crisis on housing markets and municipal services in Jordan as a contribution to the development of the Jordan National Resilience Plan.

The study identified several important pre-crisis characteristics that should help guide the international community’s response. While housing construction is an important economic sector (representing 5 percent of Jordan’s GDP), the market has tended to produce housing for middle- and upper-income brackets. As a result, some 18 percent of Jordan’s housing stock was unoccupied prior to the crisis. Rental housing is the only affordable option for the most vulnerable Jordanian families. New regulations were recently introduced that abolish rent control and increase landlords’ ability to terminate leases.

The study’s main findings regarding the impact of the refugee crisis include:
- The supply of vacant units appears to be drying up. Those units that were free prior to the crisis have now been occupied.
- Overcrowding is increasing and sub-standard non-residential structures (e.g., garages) are being converted into rental units, overburdening also water and sanitation networks.
- Rental prices are increasing: increases of 100 to 200 percent of pre-crisis prices were noted.
- Evictions of Syrian refugees and vulnerable Jordanian families: while no global quantitative data are available, anecdotal reports suggest a rise in the eviction of tenants by landlords in search of higher rents.
- Increased tensions between Syrian refugees and Jordanians: competition for affordable housing and jobs represent the two chief sources of tension between refugees and host communities.
- Strained urban infrastructure and services: solid waste, water supply, waste water treatment, roads, schools, clinics can no longer cope with the surge in population. Guiding the location of new housing to align with infrastructure and service expansion will be critical.
- Urban sprawl. Jordanians with access to land are building housing to rent to refugees. While the supply side increase is necessary, if left unguided, this process can lead to urban sprawl and dramatically increase the cost of extending infrastructure and services.

The report recommends:
- Rapidly increasing the supply of affordable housing options for both Syrian refugees and low-income Jordanian families. Emergency shelter responses should focus on bringing new residential units onto the market and a large scale affordable housing programme should be implemented.
- Realizing the significant role that private investors can play in increasing housing supply by creating incentives as needed to reach the lower income market.
- Strengthening government institutions to monitor changes in the housing market, including evictions, and the impact on municipal services.
- Prioritizing upgrading of basic services and infrastructure in areas where service levels cannot cope with the surge in demand.

In 2014 UN-Habitat intends to initiate an affordable housing programme as a partnership between the Jordanian government, private sector and donors, and an initial forum took place the end January 2014. UN-Habitat also plans to support urban information management and analysis through expanding its urban profiling initiative into Jordan, and through building capacities of local governments in urban information management. UN-Habitat will also support the resilience of communities and municipalities under strain through a range of community support projects.

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*Mercy Corps Jordan (2012) Analysis of Host Community-Refugee Tensions in Mafraq, Oct 2012, p. 4*
EMERGING LESSONS

- International assistance remains critical, yet should be tailored to the specific country – and city – context. This may include some combination of emergency relief, support to coping mechanisms, recovery assistance and actions targeting structural development challenges. Some cities, for example, may require a combination of water trucks, boreholes, repairs to networked systems, plus additional measures to reduce unaccounted for water (UAW).

- Emergency response options should be broadened. In shelter, water, sanitation and solid waste, there is a need to diversify options to better support the coping mechanisms of displaced people and host communities. Shifting the focus from camps to host communities, from solid waste collection to management, and from tube wells to water supply networks requires specialized urban knowledge and expertise. UN-Habitat adds significant value to the emergency operations of larger agencies.

- Local authorities need immediate support. The knowledge, experience and capacity of municipal staff are an under-utilized resource. Adapting their skills to an emergency environment is critical. Immediate priorities include information management, coordination, urban planning and dispute resolution. UN-Habitat is rapidly expanding its support to municipal authorities across the region, expanding to six municipalities inside Syria. In Lebanon, new Regional Technical Offices will be established in up to 10 additional Unions of Municipalities. In Iraq, UN-Habitat will expand from two to three Governorates in 2014 to include Dohuk.

- Importance of urban information and analysis. Much of the information available is at a national scale, which does not capture widely varying operational realities within and between cities. Investments should be made today to support municipalities to collect, manage, analyze and use information for decision-making. This in turn can improve humanitarian response through: better targeting of vulnerable populations, identification “hot spots” where urban systems are under extreme stress and “black spots” where shelter, water, education or health or other coverage is required.

- UN-Habitat has a strategic regional presence. Being operational in four countries immediately bordering Syria enables UN-Habitat to closely monitor emerging trends and conditions. Strengthening information and experience exchange will become increasingly critical in key sectors such as shelter.

UN-HABITAT PRIORITIES FOR 2014

For 2014, UN-Habitat is poised to upscale its operations inside Syria and within the region. UN-Habitat will focus on four key areas of intervention, adapted to each country context: emergency shelter; water, sanitation and solid waste; community and neighbourhood improvement grants; and urban information and coordination capacity.

Inside Syria, emergency shelter, water, sanitation and solid waste management activities will be expanded from Homs and Aleppo to include Hama, Rural Damascus, Latakia and Dar’a. Community grants for critical neighbourhood infrastructure and services will be piloted in six cities. City profiling, monitoring and coordination activities will be expanded to eight additional cities, bringing to ten the total number of cities that UN-Habitat is supporting. UN-Habitat’s programmes inside Syria are summarized in the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan.

Within the region, UN-Habitat will significantly expand its support to local authorities on shelter, water supply and solid waste management. A major emphasis will be placed on diversifying the interventions to include more sustainable options, and options that strengthen the capacity of local authorities. UN-Habitat’s projects are included in the sixth Regional Response Plan (RRP6).