



PRESENT AND ENGAGED

HOW THE ICRC RESPONDS TO ARMED CONFLICT
AND VIOLENCE IN CITIES

A family returns to their home in Sloviansk in the Donetsk region of Ukraine. The fighting in 2014 had damaged their home and displaced them for three months. It was repaired with materials provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

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The reality of urban violence affects people even in spaces once considered to be safe, such as this school in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, which was damaged by gunfire.



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FOREWORD

“I saw my city die.” That’s how Sami, a 27-year-old musician, described the devastation inflicted on Aleppo during the armed conflict in Syria.

Cities are fragile in the face of war. Images from Mariupol, Mosul, and other cities wracked by urban warfare remain etched in our collective consciousness. People killed, wounded and displaced – out of work and out of school. Their homes and the critical infrastructure on which they depend damaged or destroyed. Food supply chains disrupted, and people’s safety threatened by explosive remnants of war.

Whether in Ukraine, Iraq, Libya or beyond, the effects of urban armed conflict are being felt by some 50 million people across the world. And an estimated 1.5 *billion* people live in fragile urban settings where chronic armed violence plagues daily life. These figures, already staggering, will only increase with increased urbanization.

The ICRC, with the other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent (Movement), has been investing in strengthening its urban response capabilities, including: deepening its dialogue with political authorities and weapons bearers on their legal obligations to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure; making essential services, such as water and electricity, more resilient; and helping people to better cope with urban displacement and the impact of mines and explosive remnants of war. We have been learning from our front line experience, from our evidenced-based research, and from the considerable efforts of the wider humanitarian sector in this area.

This policy paper takes stock of what we have learnt to strengthen our distinct approaches to urban humanitarian action. While intended primarily for humanitarian actors, the paper is not a prescriptive how-to guide. Rather, it provides a conceptual framework and recommendations that the ICRC will strive to implement in its action and that I encourage other humanitarian actors to consider in theirs.

Importantly, humanitarian action cannot shift the burden of responsibility for reducing human suffering away from states and other duty bearers: parties to conflict are obligated to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure in line with international humanitarian law (IHL). However, the ICRC and other humanitarian actors can strive to better address the scale and scope of the cumulative impacts of armed conflict and other violence in an urbanizing world. We can do this by: developing a sound understanding of people’s needs and dependence on urban sub-systems, working across technical silos, and partnering purposefully with local authorities, communities, and other stakeholders. If we can do that, then we will better meet people’s basic needs amidst conflict and other violence and have helped to build truly resilient cities in the process.

Mirjana Spoljaric
ICRC President

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Millions of lives throughout the world are affected by urban warfare and urban violence. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, as the world continues to urbanize and cities remain theatres of armed conflict and other situations of violence.

The ICRC continues to bear witness to the cumulative impact of war and violence on cities. Besides causing injuries and death, they also damage or destroy homes and critical infrastructure, limiting or completely cutting off people's access to water, power, communication, sanitation, and health services. Places previously safe – like schools – are contaminated with mines and unexploded and abandoned ordnance, and become hazardous. Families are forced to flee, sometimes repeatedly: this results not only in the loss of livelihoods, homes, and social networks, but can also lead to society-wide deficits in qualified staff and education. All this, and the persistence of uncertain security conditions, can cause lasting psychological damage. And recovery and reconstruction can take decades, impeding sustainable development.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS PAPER

This paper takes stock of the ICRC's experience in responding to the impact of war and violence in cities and recommends areas for humanitarian actors to focus on when seeking to improve their own responses. It builds on almost a decade's worth of publications on different aspects of the ICRC's urban response – notably in the Middle East – and on a review of the pertinent literature and over 60 interviews with ICRC staff involved in urban response in six different countries. The paper also draws on urban-good-practice initiatives elsewhere in the Movement and in the broader humanitarian sector.

The first part of the paper conceptualizes urban settings for the purposes of humanitarian action. The second part presents lessons from the ICRC's responses to the consequences of urban warfare and urban violence in Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Libya, the Philippines, and Ukraine. The paper concludes with a call to improve humanitarian responses to urban warfare and violence by focusing on three areas. The ICRC's own action will continue to be guided by this focus.

THE SPECIFIC CHARACTER OF URBAN SETTINGS

A city can be conceptualized as a complex system of sub-systems representing the main interconnected areas of urban life: community, the economy, governance, and services. People are, of course, at the heart of this system in which innumerable interactions take place and create interdependency. In exchange for the opportunities a city affords, its inhabitants forego a degree of self-reliance: they depend for survival on goods and services – including water, sanitation, food, and health care – provided by the state or third parties. This makes them vulnerable to any disruption of the system they rely on. This vulnerability, together with population density and the interdependency of urban sub-systems, means that war and violence in cities tend to have particularly severe humanitarian consequences.

For this reason – because the humanitarian stakes are higher – putting into practice the lessons and recommendations outlined below is particularly important. These lessons are not necessarily new – and largely apply to humanitarian action in non-urban settings as well – but the ICRC's experience suggests that more needs to be done to provide effective humanitarian responses in urban environments affected by armed conflict and/or armed violence.

LESSONS FROM THE ICRC'S URBAN EXPERIENCE

The legal frameworks applicable to situations of 'urban warfare' and 'urban violence' are not the same. IHL provides a critical framework of responsibility to address the root causes of human suffering in situations of armed conflict, not of urban violence. There are also important differences between some of the short and long-term consequences of these situations. However, a number of imperatives concerning effective humanitarian action in urban areas are applicable to both urban warfare and urban violence.

Five key lessons emerged from the ICRC's response to the consequences of urban warfare and violence in Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Libya, the Philippines, and Ukraine.

Humanitarian responses must:

- **take into account the distinct nature of the humanitarian needs in cities.** While the direct consequences of urban warfare may be felt across all urban sub-systems – for example, the destruction of neighbourhoods or even of the built environment of entire cities – both urban warfare and violence affect people's ability to earn a living; obtain goods and services essential for their survival and well-being; and move freely in search of professional, educational, and other opportunities. In short, they rend the fabric of city life. The *cumulative* impact of urban warfare and urban violence on people is the most severe and the most difficult challenge to overcome.
- **support individuals *and* the urban systems they depend on.** This means combining a human understanding of people's experiences with a technical understanding of urban sub-systems and how they break down, in order to prevent system collapse and support individuals' and households' resilience.
- **combine short- and long-term approaches.** This means developing a long-term vision while also maintaining the capacity to provide emergency response.
- **be purposefully multidisciplinary.** This goes beyond mere coordination. It means *incorporating* sector-specific expertise into a holistic response that takes on the root causes of humanitarian challenges.
- **enable and mobilize other actors** in urban settings where the complexity of the environment and the sheer numbers of people affected exceed humanitarian actors' roles and capacities. This means working closely with local authorities, the private sector, and other partners.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Humanitarian actors cannot respond to all the consequences of urban warfare and urban violence by themselves, and humanitarian action in no way relieves states and other duty bearers of their responsibility to reduce human suffering. However, humanitarian actors can and must do better – working *with* the city, not just *in* the city – by:

- **investing in understanding** people's experience of urban warfare and violence, as well as the functioning of the urban systems on which they depend, and by reflecting this understanding in operational responses and dialogue with duty bearers.
- **breaking silos** and working with people and systems, through humanitarian action that employs different kinds of expertise intentionally and adopts different ways of working, in both the short- and the long-term, and at both the individual and the system level.
- **partnering purposefully** to maximize impact, particularly with local authorities and the private sector at city level.

This area of Marawi, a city in the Philippines, was worst affected by the fighting in 2017.



INTRODUCTION

In the city centre, you could hear the sound of bombing, air strikes. Our neighbours were worried about their children ... Many people left, but some stayed even though it wasn't safe. [Eventually], my family and I could not handle it anymore and decided to leave the house. When we went to the bank, often there was no money. Even daily essentials in the supermarket were really expensive. Access to food and basic services became increasingly difficult over time. [When we returned to the house after being displaced for six months], we found that it had been looted. It is a really bad feeling to return and find that your personal belongings have been stolen or damaged; you just feel your privacy has been violated.

This is how one ICRC staff member remembered the armed conflict in the Libyan city of Tripoli between 2019 and 2020. Such experiences, common among the ICRC staff interviewed for this paper, are daily realities for the estimated 50 million people affected by urban warfare today, and for the estimated 1.5 billion people living amidst what the World Bank calls “fragility, violence, and conflict”, where chronic violence is entrenched in pockets of many towns and cities.¹ As the world continues to urbanize – two-thirds of the world’s population, some 6.3 billion people, are predicted to live in towns or cities by 2050 – so too will armed conflict and violence.²

¹ ICRC, [Waging war in cities: A deadly choice](#), 2020; The World Bank Group, [The ABCs of IDA](#), 2013; Vice Video, [The Rise of Brazil’s Biggest Prison Gang: Dogs of War](#), 2021; Voz das Comunidades [Voice of Communities], [O som da Guerra](#) [The sound of war], 2017; The Guardian, [Battle for Mosul](#), 2017; National Geographic Documentary Films, [The Cave](#), 2019.

² For example, UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) reported that 68% of the world population is projected to live in urban areas by 2050; UNDESA, [World Urbanization Prospects: the 2018 Revision](#), 2019.

The consequences of armed conflict and other violence can be particularly severe in cities and may require a humanitarian response different from that in rural or camp-like settings – especially when the conflict or violence lasts many years.³ This combination of the urban and protracted nature of armed conflict and other violence, and their consequences, has created the impetus for increased attention in international political forums, military manuals, and urban-good-practice initiatives.⁴

Over the past decade, the ICRC, often with other components of the Movement, has been developing its thinking and its approaches with regard to responding to the humanitarian needs created by protracted urban warfare and urban violence. These approaches include dialogue with political authorities and weapon bearers in relation to their international obligations (notably, IHL) and the protection of civilians more generally, measures to ensure that essential services can continue; and dealing with urban displacement and the impact of mines and unexploded and abandoned ordnance.⁵

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

This paper takes stock of what we have learnt and of our efforts to implement adequate humanitarian responses in urban settings. It is informed by previous ICRC reports – internal and public – relevant literature, and the ICRC’s experiences in six different countries.

Part A outlines how the ICRC understands the term ‘urban’ for the purposes of humanitarian action.⁶ It also sets out the ICRC’s understanding of the terms ‘urban warfare’ and ‘urban violence’ and summarizes the bases for its work in both situations. Part B identifies three recurring and interrelated humanitarian consequences of warfare and violence that are linked to the specific character of urban settings, and extracts four other lessons on preventing and responding to such consequences, highlighting good practices and areas for

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- 3 Anthony King, *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*, 2021, p. 9; World Bank, [World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development](#), 2011; Marion Harroff-Tavel, [Violence and humanitarian action in urban areas: New challenges, new approaches](#), *International Review of the Red Cross (IRRC)*, Vol. 92, No. 878, 2010; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), [Human Development Report 2020](#), 2020; UNDP, [The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene: Briefing Note for Countries on the 2020 Human Development Report: Yemen](#), 2020; ICRC, [Explosive weapons with wide area effects: A deadly choice in populated areas](#), 2022, p. 18.
- 4 Including: Government of Ireland, [Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilian Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the use of Explosive Populated Areas \(Final Rev\)](#), 2022; UN Security Council 2573, 2021; Modern War Institute at West Point, [Why Urban Warfare is the Hardest Type of Warfare](#), 2022; Anthony King, *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*, 2021; ICRC, [Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander’s Handbook](#), 2021; Overseas Development Institute, [Urban humanitarian response](#), 2019; [Global Alliance for Urban Crises](#); [Global Disaster Preparedness Center Platform](#); ALNAP, [Stepping back: Understanding cities and their systems](#), 2016; [International Institute for Environment and Development – Urban Platform](#).
- 5 Including: ICRC, [Explosive Weapons With Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas](#), 2022; ICRC, [Urban Warfare: An Age-Old Problem In Need of New Solutions](#), 2021; ICRC, [Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander’s Handbook](#), 2021; ICRC, World Bank and UNICEF, [Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa](#), 2021; ICRC, [A Decade of Loss: Syria’s Youth After Ten Years of Crisis](#), 2021; ICRC, [Waging war in cities: A deadly choice](#), 2020; ICRC and International Institute of Humanitarian Law, 43rd San Remo Roundtable on “New Dimensions and Challenges of Urban Warfare”, 2020; ICRC, [International humanitarian law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts](#), 2019, pp. 7–18; ICRC, [Weapon Contamination in Urban Settings: ICRC Response](#), 2019; ICRC, [Urban violence in Latin America: What is it? What is the ICRC doing about the problem?](#) 2019; ICRC, [Displaced in cities: Experiencing and responding to urban displacement outside camps](#), 2020; ICRC, [Safer Access to Public Essential Services Report](#), 2022; ICRC, [I saw my city die: Voices from the front lines of urban conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen](#), 2020; ICRC, [War in Cities](#), 2017; ICRC, [Urban violence and the ICRC’s humanitarian response](#), 2016; ICRC, [Armed violence and the New Urban Agenda: Recommendations for Habitat III](#), 2016; ICRC, [Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People](#), 2015; ICRC, [The ICRC’s role in situations of violence below the threshold of armed conflict](#), 2014; Marion Harroff-Tavel, [Violence and humanitarian action in urban areas: New challenges, new approaches](#), *IRRC*, Vol. 92, No. 878, June 2010.
- 6 The terms ‘urban setting’ and ‘city’ are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to a complex, densely built, and populated area that has an influence over a larger area. Both terms include urban settings of various sizes and their outskirts, in contrast to ‘rural settings’.

improvement. Part C offers three recommendations based on these lessons, for use in operational and policy discussions *among* humanitarian actors, and *between* humanitarian actors, development actors, donors, local authorities, and other stakeholders, on how to do better in reducing human suffering amidst urban warfare and urban violence.

Humanitarian action in no way relieves states and other duty bearers of their responsibility to fulfil their obligations to reduce human suffering. The ICRC and other humanitarian actors can, however, improve their response to the cumulative impact of urban warfare and urban violence on people's lives and livelihoods. They can do this by developing a sound understanding of people's needs and dependence on urban sub-systems; working across technical silos; and partnering purposefully with local authorities, communities, and other stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on both primary and secondary data. It draws on a number of different sources: publications on different aspects of urban warfare and urban violence, including the conduct of hostilities, urban displacement, and resilient essential services; a review of the literature on the pertinent debates, theories, and practices in the humanitarian sector and in the wider field of urban studies; and virtual interviews with over 60 ICRC staff from countries – Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Libya, the Philippines, and Ukraine⁷ – that represent a wide range of urban settings, conflict/violence dynamics, and humanitarian challenges. It pays less attention to Middle Eastern cities, as the impact on them of urban warfare and urban violence have been given detailed treatment elsewhere, including by the ICRC.⁸ However, lessons learnt from the ICRC's experiences in the Middle East are incorporated into this paper's analytical framework and findings. COVID-19 restrictions prevented on-site interviews with communities and local authorities; many of the ICRC staff interviewed were themselves part of the communities directly affected by conflict or other violence.

⁷ All interviews in Ukraine took place before February 2022.

⁸ See footnote 5.



The aftermath of fighting in the Libyan city of Sirte.

PART A

UNDERSTANDING THE TERM 'URBAN'

Realities of city life play havoc with neat divisions. Elegant models of urban life and sharp opposition deployed in their construction may give a lot of intellectual satisfaction to the theory builders, but little practical guidance to the urban planner and even less support to the urban dwellers struggling with challenges of city living.

Zygmunt Bauman, sociologist⁹

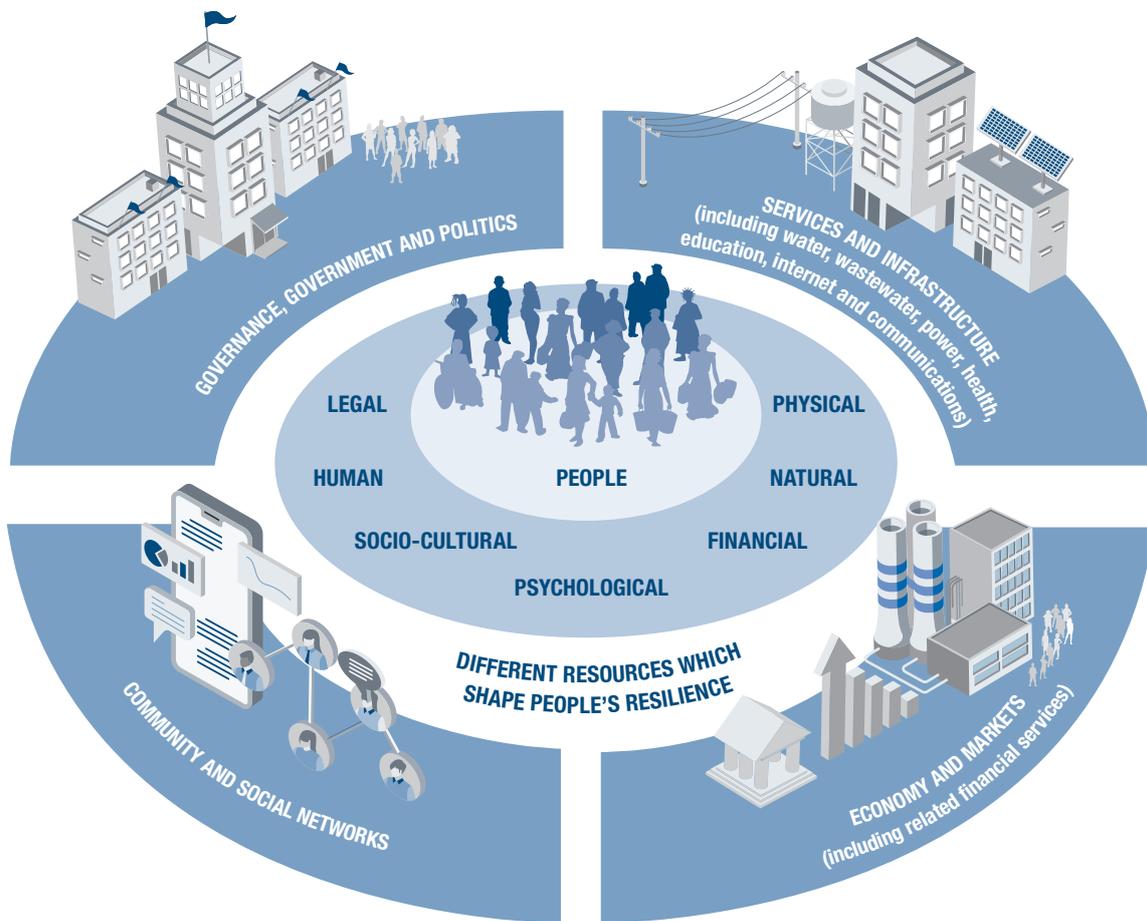
Urban settings throughout the world differ in significant ways from one another: population (ranging from a few thousand to millions); governance models; administrative divisions; topography; and levels of development.¹⁰ But they also have characteristics in common, and these must be taken into account in order to understand why people live in cities, the consequences of conflict and other violence for cities, and how humanitarian action could respond more effectively to these consequences. This section outlines the ICRC's understanding of the terms 'urban settings', 'urban warfare', and 'urban violence', and explains the bases for its work in these situations.

People live in cities mainly to have access to opportunities in such areas as employment and education, and to culture.¹¹ A city's basic function is to serve as a hub to enable such human interaction.¹² However, in exchange for the opportunities a city affords, its inhabitants sacrifice their self-reliance to a significant degree: dependence for their daily survival on goods and services provided by state authorities or third parties makes them vulnerable to supply disruptions. This is sometimes called the 'urban paradox'.¹³ By contrast, people in rural environments may be more self-sufficient and may have direct access to essentials such as water, food (through agriculture), and wood (for fuel and housing). As an ICRC staff member in Donetsk, in Ukraine, said, "In an urban environment, people can't rely on their vegetable garden [to survive]." They also need markets, and a source of income to buy the goods and services available there.

This is what distinguishes cities from other potential sites of war and violence: population density and size; diverse social dynamics and multi-layered governance; and their inhabitants' dependence on interconnected sub-systems providing goods and services, including food, water, sanitation, electricity, health care, education, financial services, internet connectivity and other means of communication, public safety, transport, and roads. And events outside an urban setting can affect what happens inside it, and vice versa (e.g. disruption of the supply chains that deliver food to urban markets from rural farms).¹⁴

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- 9 Zygmunt Bauman in Edward Robbins, "Rethinking public space: a new lexicon for design" (2008), cited in Nabeel Hamdi, *The Placemaker's Guide to Building Community*, p. 33. Edward Robbins is Professor of Urbanism in the Institute of Urbanism, The Oslo School of Architecture and Design.
- 10 UN Statistical Commission, *Degrees of Urbanization*. See also Luis M.A. Bettencourt, *The Kind of Problem a City Is*, 2013; Ray Hutchison, *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*, 2010, pp. 930–939; Deljana Iossifova, Christopher N.H. Doll and Alexandros Gasparatos (eds), *Defining the Urban: Interdisciplinary and Professional Perspectives*, 2018.
- 11 Luis M.A. Bettencourt, *The Kind of Problem a City Is*, 2013.
- 12 Allen J. Scott and Michael Storper, "The nature of cities: The scope and limits of urban theory", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2015, pp. 1–15; ICRC, [It was the best of times; it was the worst of times: A tale of two cities in the aftermath of conflict](#), 2022.
- 13 Deljana Iossifova, Christopher N.H. Doll and Alexandros Gasparatos (eds), *Defining the Urban: Interdisciplinary and Professional Perspectives*, 2018.
- 14 Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen, *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance*, 2020; Overseas Development Institute, [Urban humanitarian response](#), 2019, pp. 11–12, 18; ICRC, [Life in a war-torn city: Residents of Aleppo tell their story](#), 2016.

The following diagram provides a simplified and people-centred representation of a city for the purposes of humanitarian action.¹⁵



The outer circle represents key areas of urban life – or urban sub-systems – which may be formal and/or informal, private and/or public: ‘community’, ‘economy’, ‘governance’, and ‘services’. The inner circle represents the people at the centre of urban life: active agents using all the means at their disposal to survive and thrive, and without whom a city would not exist. Their means and capabilities influence people’s ability to cope with, adapt to, and recover from shocks, including armed conflict and other violence; these means and capabilities vary from one person to another, and they change over time.¹⁶

¹⁵ This diagram is adapted from the sustainable livelihoods frameworks by Sheilah Meikle, Tamsin Ramasut, and Julian Walker, “Sustainable urban livelihoods: Concepts and implications for policy”, Working Paper No. 112, University College London and the ICRC’s Economic Security Unit, 2001. See ICRC, *Economic Security Brief on Systems* (2 December 2019), p.4.

¹⁶ For the ICRC, “resilience” is the ability of individuals, communities, institutions and systems to anticipate, absorb, adapt and respond to, and/or recover from shocks and stressors created by conflict/violence and crises/emergencies, without compromising their long-term prospects. Resilience is an ability, not an operational goal. To paraphrase Ramalingam, the goal is not to make people or systems ‘well-adapted’; it is to ensure they have the means to ‘adapt well’ to such shocks and stressors. See Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, 2013, p. 326.

The four areas of life form a complex system that is dense, diverse, and dynamic: the interconnectedness of the sub-systems, and of the people developing and using them, create interdependency. Hence, rather than examining the people and sub-systems in isolation from one another, the 'city' must be approached holistically.¹⁷

The term 'urban warfare' refers to hostilities in an urban setting (which can take many forms, including ground troop/force manoeuvres and fighting, indirect fire, aerial bombardment, and/or asymmetric warfare), and other military operations affecting an urban setting (such as a siege or some other form of encirclement, or damage to infrastructure in the countryside that affects delivery of services in an urban setting). Its effects continue to be felt after active hostilities have ended or between conflict spikes or cycles within a wider context of armed conflict where IHL still applies.¹⁸ The term 'urban violence' refers to situations of collective violence committed by one or more groups of people in an urban setting that are not part of an armed conflict nor alone reach the threshold of armed conflict, but which may have significant humanitarian consequences.¹⁹ In some cases, such violence takes place alongside or within a situation of armed conflict, or is a legacy of armed conflict or a precursor to it.

In both situations, international human rights law applies. In situations of urban warfare, IHL provides a critical framework of responsibility to address the root causes of human suffering caused by an armed conflict. It also provides the ICRC with the clearest mandate to respond to situations of urban warfare and their humanitarian consequences.

The ICRC also has a long history of responding to situations of urban violence, based not only on the significant humanitarian consequences they cause "in a vicious cycle of violence and underdevelopment that is often linked to protracted conflict",²⁰ but also on its recognized role in "internal strife" and right of humanitarian initiative.²¹

Some parallels can be drawn between 'urban warfare' and 'urban violence' – both cause immense human suffering and severely affect the functioning of societies – but there are also important distinctions between these situations and their short- and long-term consequences. The lessons offered in this paper are drawn from the ICRC's experiences in both kinds of situation.

17 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961; Herbert A. Simon, "The architecture of complexity", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 106, No. 6, 1962, pp. 467–482; David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, 2013, p. 238; ALNAP, [What is missing? Adding context to the urban response toolbox](#), 2018; Overseas Development Institute, [Urban humanitarian response](#), 2019; ALNAP, [Stepping back: Understanding cities and their systems](#), 2016.

18 This is how the ICRC describes what it calls the "episodic" character of protracted armed conflict (urban or otherwise): "Many long-term conflicts – both multiple and singular – involve periods of differing conflict *intensity* over time and space. The intensity of conflict is not usually constant but is often seasonal, or it *spikes* in more intense episodes. This *episodic* character is another feature of protracted conflicts and means that relative peace can last for months at a time, or exist across large parts of a conflicted territory, while violence rages in specific and frequently changing 'hot spots'." See ICRC, [Protracted conflict and humanitarian action \(icrc.org\)](#) 2019, p. 10.

19 ICRC, [The International Committee of the Red Cross's \(ICRC's\) role in situations of violence below the threshold of armed conflict](#), *IRRC*, Vol. 96, No. 893, February 2014; ICRC, *Internal conflicts or other situations of violence – what is the difference for victims?* 2012; See also: World Health Organization (WHO), [World report on violence and health](#), 2002.

20 ICRC, [ICRC Institutional Strategy 2019–2024](#), 2020, p. 2.

21 Recognized by states in the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Arts 5.2.d and 5.3) and reaffirmed by the Movement in its [Movement Coordination for Collective Impact Agreement](#) adopted at its Council of Delegates in June 2022.



A displaced family in the city of San Pedro Sula in Honduras. Most people displaced by armed violence in San Pedro Sula are displaced within the city itself. ICRC, [Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps](#), 2020, p. 23.

PART B

LESSONS FROM THE ICRC'S RESPONSES TO THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF URBAN WARFARE AND URBAN VIOLENCE

Buildings damaged by shelling
in Sloviansk, in the Donetsk region
of Ukraine, in July 2014.



This section offers five lessons in responding to the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare and urban violence, based on existing literature and the ICRC's extensive experience across the world; it also draws on interviews with ICRC staff in six countries: Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Libya, the Philippines, and Ukraine.²²

These lessons – and recommendations based on them in the next section – are not new and may apply to humanitarian action in non-urban settings as well, but interviews with ICRC staff revealed that they are often not easy to put into practice. Doing so, however, is particularly important in urban settings, because of the number of people affected by urban warfare and urban violence, and also because of the interconnectedness of the sub-systems on which people depend and which are disrupted by warfare and violence.

I. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE DISTINCT CHARACTER OF THE HUMANITARIAN NEEDS IN CITIES

The sound of warfare is constant. Buildings are struck, and shrapnel flies everywhere. This is the situation every person in the city faces.

ICRC staff member in Mariupol, a city in Ukraine²³

There are important differences in the scale and scope of humanitarian consequences, and in the legal frameworks that can provide protection. However, there are also similarities in the way people experience the cumulative and interconnected impact of urban warfare and urban violence, and that has to do with the specific character of urban settings.²⁴

Hostilities in urban settings – sometimes mere hours, days, or weeks in duration; sometimes longer or protracted – have a dramatic and well-documented direct impact on all urban sub-systems, often owing to the use of explosive weapons with a wide impact area, which can devastate homes and the critical infrastructure required to provide essential services, with reverberating effects across urban sub-systems (including sudden and large-scale displacement, disruption of essential services, the presence of unexploded and abandoned ordnance, and the necessity of retrieving dead bodies from the rubble).²⁵ Situations of urban warfare – such as Benghazi and Tripoli in Libya from 2014 to 2017 and in 2019 respectively, Marawi in the Philippines in 2017, and Ukraine from 2014 to 2021 – are characterized by variable periods of active urban hostilities when a principal military aim was to seize or defend a given area. Entire neighbourhoods in Marawi and Benghazi

²² See footnotes 4 and 5. All interviews concerning Ukraine took place before February 2022.

²³ ICRC, [Ukraine: ICRC calls for urgent solution to save lives and prevent worst-case scenario in Mariupol](#), 2022. Here, the head of an ICRC sub-delegation recalls the intensity of urban warfare in the city of Mariupol during February and March 2022. All interviews for this paper – including with ICRC staff in Mariupol – were conducted before February 2022, and were based on the previous eight years of armed conflict.

²⁴ “Protection” refers to those activities that aim to ensure that authorities and other actors fulfil their obligations – under IHL and other relevant bodies of law or norms – and respect the rights of individuals, in order to preserve the safety, physical integrity and dignity of those affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence. For further information, please see: ICRC, [ICRC Protection Policy](#), 2008. See also: Overseas Development Institute, [Independent Review of the Implementation of the IASC Protection Policy](#), 2022.

²⁵ See, for example, ICRC, [Explosive Weapons with Wide Area Effects: A Deadly Choice in Populated Areas](#), 2022.

An evacuation centre outside Marawi, a city in the Philippines. Such temporary centres are often unequipped to accommodate a sudden influx of people. They often lack basic necessities like drinking water and toilets.



were reduced to rubble or rendered uninhabitable at the end of active hostilities by, for instance, extensive damage to water and wastewater systems and a significant degree of weapon contamination.²⁶ And large numbers of people were killed: in Marawi, some 1,200 people in 2017.²⁷



Inhabitants of Donetsk, in Ukraine, gathered in basements to escape shelling in 2014; they had neither water nor electricity.

By contrast, situations of urban violence in Brazil, Colombia, or Honduras are characterized by chronic and localized armed violence, where the objective of territorial control is often linked to illicit trade and other criminal activities and/or to state law-enforcement operations to control such activities.²⁸ Such violence can, however, be intense and lead to significant loss of life. In 2018, in Brazil, “violent territoriality”, involving rival armed groups or armed groups and police and security forces, took the form of more than 80 armed confrontations lasting two hours or more.²⁹ In 2017, in the Brazilian state of Rio de Janeiro, armed violence linked to police intervention killed 1,127 people.³⁰

During active hostilities and violence in cities, the scope for humanitarian action tends to be limited, as insecurity restricts humanitarian access.

26 “Weapon contamination” is the term used by the Movement to describe the risks and consequences associated with the presence of mines, explosive remnants of war (unexploded and abandoned ordnance), and with chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear hazards.

27 Amnesty International, [Philippines: “Battle of Marawi” leaves trail of death and destruction](#), 2017.

28 Numerous armed conflicts – classified as such – are in progress in Colombia, but the two Colombian cities discussed in this paper – Buenaventura and Medellín – are affected primarily by urban violence.

29 Antonio Sampaio, *Illicit Order: The Military Logic of Organized Crime and Urban Security in Rio de Janeiro*, 2019, p. 8. See also: Keith Krause, “From armed conflict to political violence: Mapping and explaining conflict trends”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 145 Issue 4, Fall 2016, pp. 113–126.

30 Statista, [Number of deaths caused by police intervention in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 2003 to 2021](#), 2022.

Beyond such kinds of direct impact, the ICRC's experience shows three interrelated sets of consequences that originate in the specific character of a city as a complex system. Despite important differences between them, both situations of protracted urban warfare and urban violence can have some consequences in common:

- disruption of livelihoods, and economic production and exchange
- disruption of access to essential services, including that caused by damage, destruction, deterioration, and/or misuse of related infrastructure
- movement restrictions and/or displacement.

While this list is by no means exhaustive, it does set out the key consequences with a distinctly urban character, since access to livelihoods and services, and being able to move around freely, are preconditions for participation in urban life.³¹



Displaced families living temporarily in a school in the city of Buenaventura in Colombia.

The 2017 hostilities in the city of Marawi, which is in the Philippine province of Lanao del Sur, forced many people to abandon their livelihoods and their homes, and take refuge in hastily constructed government-run temporary shelters elsewhere in the province. Displaced to an unfamiliar physical environment, and with much of their savings looted or depleted, they were no longer able to pay their dues to the Marawi City Water District, a private provider that needed this money to pay staff, maintain infrastructure, and buy consumables in order to continue provision of safe water. Water District staff were among those displaced, and water infrastructure – including the main pumping station – was extensively damaged in the fighting. As part of its emergency response with the Philippine Red Cross, the ICRC trucked water from the main pumping station to the transitional shelters, but it was insufficient to meet the needs of displaced people. This massive upheaval also severely undermined people's mental health and their sense of themselves: many remained in temporary shelters for months, in a state of limbo, not knowing when or if it would be safe to return to Marawi, reconstruction of the city having become a politically delicate issue. Over 100,000 civilians displaced in 2017 are still in transitional shelters.³²

31 ICRC, [International humanitarian law and the challenges of contemporary armed conflicts 2019](#), pp. 7–15; ICRC, [Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Displacement Outside Camps](#), 2020; ICRC, [I saw my city die: Voices from the front lines of urban conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen](#), 2020; ICRC, [Urban violence and the ICRC's humanitarian response](#), 2016; ICRC, [Urban Services During Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People](#), 2015; ICRC, [Urban warfare: An age-old problem in need of new solutions](#), 2021; ICRC, [Remember the millions of people living in urban violence](#), 2016.

32 ICRC, [War in Cities: Marawi, the Philippines](#), 2022.



An unexploded artillery shell
in the kitchen of a house
in Libya.

In the coastal city of Buenaventura in Colombia, armed groups – using fear, extortion, and armed violence to enforce invisible borders that were liable to change regularly and without notice – limited people's ability to travel to work and to school, or to obtain health care and other essential services. Local authorities and service providers were unable or unwilling to extend water services to certain areas, and were sometimes unable even to carry out routine maintenance on the existing network because they had no access to it. This resulted in diminished service provision and loss of revenue for the service provider – which also meant a shortage of funds to ensure proper operation and maintenance. The constant threat of violence – violent punishment for crossing borders, which could be swift and include the alleged offender's family as well – created a climate of fear.

These examples, reflective of the ICRC's broader experience, suggest that some of the underlying problems people face may be similar, even if their causes and scale differ: damage to infrastructure vs restricted access to it; displacement outside the city vs movement restrictions within it; loss of livelihoods vs inability to pursue them. Conflict and/or other violence deprive people of access to the essential services, transport options, and livelihood opportunities required to preserve their health and well-being, earn a living, pay rent, buy food and other necessities, and build a better life.³³ The examples also confirm the ICRC's experience that such a cumulative impact – the accumulation of various kinds of direct and indirect impact – is of the most destructive kind and the most difficult to overcome.³⁴ “The effects of the violence do not happen at all at once,” reflected an ICRC staff member working in the area of armed violence. “They build over time, drop by drop. This means that it might take some time to grasp the scale of the consequences and provide assistance and protection.” Finally, the examples above confirm that these interconnected consequences may affect particular groups disproportionately or in particular ways. For example, during hostilities in Sloviansk, Donetsk, and Avdiivka, in Ukraine, between 2014 and 2021, elderly people living in multi-storeyed apartment buildings whose water and electricity were cut off were often unable to haul water up the stairs or to find generators or other means to heat their homes in winter. Nor could they travel – sometimes across front lines – to obtain their pensions and pay for water, electricity, food, medicines, and other essentials, whose prices had been driven up by supply shortages.

This is not to suggest that all situations require the same response. The scale of displacement and/or infrastructure destruction, local governance and response capacities, and security risks such as weapon contamination are among the variables that may demand responses to urban warfare and urban violence that are different from each other. Moreover, the legal frameworks applicable in different situations – IHL, human rights law, and domestic law – entail different requirements.³⁵ It is, however, important to recognize that the impact of urban warfare and urban violence on people's lives is complex. Therefore, focusing on gaining a better understanding of people and their urban environment – their participation in and dependence on urban systems – should underpin all efforts to strengthen humanitarian action in cities, regardless of whether they are affected by armed conflict or armed violence, or by both.

33 See, for example, ICRC, [I saw my city die: Voices from the front lines of urban conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen](#), 2020; ICRC, [Armed violence and the New Urban Agenda: Recommendations for Habitat III](#), 2016;

34 ICRC, World Bank and UNICEF, [Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa](#), 2021, pp. 3–4; ICRC, [A Decade of Loss: Syria's Youth After Ten Years of Crisis](#), 2021; See also: Anthony King, *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*, 2021, p. 22.

35 ICRC, [International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: Recommitting to Protection in Armed Conflict on the 70th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions](#), 2019; ICRC, [The Use of Force in Armed Conflicts: Interplay Between the Conduct of Hostilities and Law Enforcement Paradigms](#), 2020, pp. 4–13.

II. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES MUST SUPPORT INDIVIDUALS AND THE URBAN SYSTEMS THEY DEPEND ON

“Urban systems are interconnected; to isolate them from one another would be to fundamentally misunderstand the impact of urban warfare and urban violence on civilians.”

ICRC staff member in Tripoli, Libya

The ICRC’s experience shows that supporting the economy and other sub-systems, as well as individuals, is critical not only for preventing the collapse of urban systems that large numbers of people depend on, but also for responding to people’s specific and evolving needs and vulnerabilities.³⁶ This calls for combining a first-hand understanding of how to address people’s individual needs with a technical understanding of urban sub-systems and how they break down.³⁷



The Ibn Sina Hospital in the Libyan city of Sirte. When fighting destroyed many of its buildings, including the main operating theatre, patients had to be moved into the hospital’s corridors.

³⁶ ICRC, [Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People](#), 2015; ICRC, World Bank and UNICEF, [Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa](#), 2021. See also: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), [Urban Action Kit](#), 2021, p. 12.

³⁷ David Sanderson suggests using the “the principle of ‘optimal ignorance’ to avoid the notion that everything needs to be known before anything can happen”. Overseas Development Institute, [Urban humanitarian response](#), 2019, p. 136.



Personnel from the local service provider, and from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the ICRC, inspect pumps at the Al Khafseh Water Treatment Plant in the Aleppo governorate of Syria.

Over the years, the ICRC has invested heavily in its approach to working at system level to support delivery of essential services – such as water, solid-waste disposal, and electricity – as a tangible way of supporting large populations.³⁸ For instance, in Syria, it is leading an initiative (2022–2026) worth between 50 and 60 million Swiss francs to help stabilize seven critical drinking-water facilities that cover the country’s eight largest cities and are the only source of water for the 9.5 million people who live there.³⁹ Furthermore, around Donetsk and Lugansk/Luhansk in Ukraine – where aging water infrastructure criss-crossed a 400 km-long front line dividing areas controlled by the government from those that were not – the ICRC used its technical knowledge to map critical water-pumping and -filtration stations that were particularly vulnerable along the front line. It then focused its dialogue with conflict parties on the humanitarian consequences that would follow if these installations – and other critical infrastructure connected to them, such as electricity grids and gas lines – were damaged and hundreds of thousands of people living near the front line deprived of water. The ICRC reminded parties of their IHL obligations to protect such infrastructure – indispensable to the survival of the civilian population – and the staff and supplies necessary for its operation, notwithstanding the particular challenges that urban settings pose for upholding fundamental IHL rules on precaution, distinction, and proportionality.⁴⁰

A holistic approach to designing and implementing programmes entails understanding the interconnect- edness of all urban sub-systems and, potentially, providing some direct support to people themselves or mobilizing other key actors for that purpose. People’s economic security – and therefore, the economy as a

³⁸ See, for example, ICRC, *Towards More Effective Humanitarian Operations in Urban Areas of Protracted Armed Conflicts*, 2022; ICRC, World Bank and UNICEF, *Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa*, 2021; ICRC, *Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict*, 2020.

³⁹ By “stabilization” the ICRC refers to a process of stabilizing infrastructure and service delivery so that they are more unlikely to change, fail or decline any further. This programme is a long-term response to prevent the collapse of critical water infrastructure and disruption of water services.

⁴⁰ Liam Collins and John Spencer, *Understanding Urban Warfare*, 2022; Modern War Institute at West Point, *Why is urban warfare so challenging?* 2020; ICRC, *Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander’s Handbook*, 2021, pp. 9–12, 34–37.

sub-system – deserves particular attention, as access to a sustainable source of income is critical for people to meet their basic needs, and also to prioritize long-term investments – in areas such as education, housing, and employment – which can increase resilience and well-being. In a city, cash as a means of support is particularly well-suited to increasing people’s economic security because it affords people the agency to decide themselves how to meet their specific needs. It also has a ‘multiplier’ effect: people who receive cash spend at least part of it on goods and services provided by others, stimulating the economy.⁴¹ Other activities may be more appropriate or may be prerequisites to restoring economic security – such as support for businesses and vocational training, and repairs to disrupted production and supply chains.⁴²

There are, however, limitations. Activities associated with strengthening or building economic security do not address all needs, particularly at the individual level. For instance, cash cannot find a missing family member – although it may help mitigate the economic consequences of a breadwinner going missing. In addition, people may not have access to markets, or may be unable to pursue livelihoods, because of insecurity, movement restrictions, or displacement. They may also not have access to mechanisms for social protection. All these situations require customizing responses and engaging with authorities and other key stakeholders – to ensure that people’s particular needs are met, while also supporting urban sub-systems.⁴³



Participants at an ICRC workshop on the application of international human rights standards in policing.

⁴¹ While not specific to urban settings, the ICRC has long experience of cash programming in situations of armed conflict. Please see: ICRC, [Cash Transfer Programming in Armed Conflict: The ICRC’s Experience](#), 2018.

⁴² ICRC, [Cash Transfer Programming in Armed Conflict: The ICRC’s Experience](#), 2018, pp. 8, 13, 19–20, 30, 40–41; ICRC, [ICRC Activities in Iraq: Annual Report 2020](#), 2021; ICRC, [Humanitarian engagement in social protection: Implications for principled humanitarian action](#), 2021; P. Creti, *Review of Existing Approaches, Methods and Tools Used by Humanitarian Agencies to Measure Livelihoods, Food Insecurity and Vulnerability in Urban Contexts*, 2010.

⁴³ Humanitarian Policy Group, [Cash, vouchers or in-kind? Guidance on evaluating how transfers are made in emergency programming](#), Overseas Development Institute, 2015; ICRC, [Cash Transfer Programming in Armed Conflict: The ICRC’s Experience](#), 52, 62–63, 2018.

Urban resilience

The term 'resilience' has been interpreted in many different ways over the years. Whether concerning individuals or systems, the ICRC understands resilience as essentially the ability to bounce back from shocks and stressors derived from conflict, violence, and other hazards. That is, resilience is an ability rather than an operational goal ("the goal", as Ben Ramalingam suggests, "is not to be well-adapted, but [to be able] to adapt well"). The term does not mean that people or systems should become resilient to armed conflict or other violence themselves, and rather, that they become better able to cope with their consequences.

Hence, in situations of urban warfare and urban violence, building resilience means building the capacities of individuals and sub-systems to anticipate, absorb, adapt to and recover from their cumulative impact. This is especially important for people in cities, because of the 'urban paradox' mentioned in Part A: the fact that while cities may provide access to many different opportunities, they also make people vulnerable, by exposing them to disruptions in the interconnected urban sub-systems on which they depend to meet their essential needs – no matter how resilient particular individuals may be.

Resilience-building goes hand-in-hand with efforts to strengthen dialogue with parties to conflict, and other duty bearers, aimed at promoting respect for applicable law and preventing or at least mitigating human suffering.

The ICRC will continue developing its thinking and its approach to urban resilience, including as part of wider efforts by the Movement to implement a resolution on this matter adopted by its Council of Delegates in 2022.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Humanitarian Policy Group, [The relevance of 'resilience'?](#), *HPG Policy Brief*, Vol. 49, 2012; Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, 2013, p. 326; ICRC, [Towards More Effective Humanitarian Operations in Urban Areas of Protracted Armed Conflicts](#), 2022, p. 10; IFRC, [Strengthening the resilience of urban communities: Our way forward](#), 2022; IFRC, [Urban Action Kit](#), 2021; IFRC, [Building Urban Resilience: A Guide for Red Cross and Red Crescent Engagement and Contribution](#), 2017; UN-HABITAT [Resilience and Risk Reduction Platform](#); Overseas Development Institute, [Humanitarian response in urban contexts](#), 2019, pp. 66–72.

Senior workshop on international rules governing military operations, organized jointly by the ICRC and the Swiss army.



III. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES MUST COMBINE SHORT- AND LONG-TERM APPROACHES

“It was hard to combine a longer-term approach with emergency response, but we had to do it to show people they were not forgotten and to prevent systems from collapsing. For example, if your apartment’s heating system isn’t maintained and then breaks down when the temperature outside is ten degrees below zero, you may literally freeze to death.”

ICRC staff member in the city of Sloviansk in Ukraine

Supporting people, and the sub-systems they depend on, requires combining short- and long-term action. Even though the ICRC has been present in its ten largest operational contexts for over 40 years, most of them with at least some urban dimension, striking a balance between meeting short- and long-term needs remains a major challenge. This is in part because of deep-rooted ways of working, but it is also because of the funding and programme cycles around which the humanitarian sector tends to be based.⁴⁵

Shifting from an emergency-response logic to developing a long-term vision is particularly hard. As a result, longer-term activities that would help strengthen the resilience of people and systems may simply be postponed – particularly when emergencies occur repeatedly in a country and put pressure on time and resources.⁴⁶

ICRC support for water and wastewater systems in Marawi and Benghazi illustrate both the challenges and the benefits of developing such a long-term vision while also retaining an emergency response capacity. They also show how humanitarian action may contribute *de facto* to development outcomes, even while its purpose is to meet humanitarian needs.

During and immediately after active hostilities in Marawi and Benghazi, the ICRC’s emergency response, focused on individuals and households, was carried out in ways similar to ‘traditional’ humanitarian action in non-urban settings: for instance, water trucking, providing medical supplies and essential household items, looking for missing family members, retrieving human remains, and reminding conflict parties of their IHL obligations. As the conflicts became protracted, however – their impact accumulating across interconnected urban sub-systems – people’s needs and the response challenges changed too. In Marawi, the hostilities severely damaged the main water-pumping station, the same pumping station from which water was trucked to people displaced to temporary shelters outside the city. In Benghazi, ICRC staff members remember, sewage was flowing in the streets, creating real risks to public health. “Without sanitation, cities are impossible to live in; wastewater disposal is as important as clean water,” an ICRC engineer noted.

⁴⁵ ICRC, [Protracted Conflicts: The Enduring Legacy of Endless War](#), 2019; Urbanet, [Urban Settings Need New Approaches](#), 2019.

⁴⁶ ICRC, [Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps](#), 2020, p. 45.



The ICRC provided drinking water for residents of Donetsk, who were without water for several days in 2018, because of damage to water infrastructure.



Displaced people wait to receive food and clothes at an evacuation centre outside Marawi.

Meeting these needs required a long-term vision for supporting both the provision and the management of essential services. Building on existing relationships with service providers, the ICRC commissioned detailed studies and plans of the water infrastructure in Marawi, and of the wastewater infrastructure in Benghazi, as a basis for long-term support. The plans assessed the physical condition of the infrastructure and the systems' ability to provide water and wastewater-disposal services. "It took us time to shift operational logic [from emergency response] and obtain the required resources, and some saw it as a long-term luxury," an ICRC engineer recalled, "but the Marawi master plan was a game changer in terms of long-term ICRC thinking and collaboration to strengthen system resilience." The ICRC took the initiative in both instances because local authorities had neither the capacity nor the finances to do so, and development actors had, for security reasons, only a limited presence. However, these initiatives have also provided opportunities to engage local authorities and development actors and were therefore also a 'no-regrets investment' to strengthen system resilience and prepare for future conflict shocks.⁴⁷

Working with local authorities and service providers was fundamental, because of both their technical knowledge of the infrastructure and their responsibility for service provision. In both Marawi and Benghazi, the ICRC helped to refurbish the offices of service providers, to ensure decent working conditions and to enable them to provide essential services to others.⁴⁸

It was through such means that humanitarian action restored services and moved on to long-term development support.

⁴⁷ ICRC, World Bank and UNICEF, [Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa](#), 2021, pp. viii, 63.

⁴⁸ Government of the Philippines, [ICRC Turns Over Renovated Marawi City Water District Building](#), 7 September 2020.

Evacuations

The term 'evacuation' refers to the deliberate and organized movement of people away from conflict zones or hostilities, normally through designated safe routes. An evacuation in the midst of urban warfare is an extremely delicate operation, but one that can be critical in reducing civilian harm. The circumstances of an evacuation can vary considerably, for example, taking place early in the conflict or after months or years of stalemate; and/or involving armed forces working alone or in conjunction with humanitarian organizations. Evacuations should not be confused with spontaneous civilian flight from hostilities, without the involvement of parties to the conflict: under IHL, civilians must be allowed to do this at all times (even if it puts them at greater risk).

Evacuations pose complex moral and practical dilemmas for humanitarian actors. This is particularly the case when a city is under siege – where evacuations are most likely to be needed but where humanitarian access to trapped or besieged populations may be difficult. An evacuation may save lives by removing an extremely vulnerable population from imminent danger; but it may also pose serious risks to the safety of the civilians and humanitarian staff involved, and may take place in conditions under which adequately assessing the affected population's needs and prospects is very difficult. This, in turn, creates a risk of humanitarian action being instrumentalized to effectively facilitate forced displacement and contribute to the military and political goals of a particular party to conflict.

Given the stakes and the complexity of evacuations, the ICRC becomes involved in them only as a neutral intermediary and only if all relevant parties agree to the evacuation and provide assurances that it will be carried out under satisfactory conditions of security and dignity (including accommodation and supplies of food, water, medicines, and other essentials): evacuees will leave voluntarily and to a predetermined safe place far from hostilities; civilians choosing to stay behind will remain protected under IHL and have access to basic goods and services; families will not be separated and family members will not fall out of touch; any screening of evacuees will be done in compliance with IHL and other relevant laws; and, humanitarian access will be granted, particularly if parties to conflict are unable to fulfil their obligation to meet the basic needs of the civilian population. In any case, persons evacuated have a right to return voluntarily and safely to their homes or places of habitual residence as soon as the reasons for their evacuation cease to exist, while civilians choosing to stay behind remain protected under IHL and must have access to basic goods and services.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, ICRC, Geneva, 2019. pp. 24–25; ICRC, *Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander's Handbook*, 2011; ICRC, *How Does Law Protect in War?/Evacuation: Online Coursebook*, 2022; ICRC and InterAction, *Outcome Report: Trapped in Conflict: Evaluating Scenarios to Assist At-Risk Civilians*, 2015; Global Protection Cluster, *Humanitarian Evacuations in Armed Conflict*, 2015.



An ICRC staff member stands amidst the rubble in Benghazi.

IV. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES MUST BE MULTIDISCIPLINARY

“Multidisciplinarity ... is not doing another’s job technically; it’s really about thinking and acting together to address needs. When we’re in the field we can put on the glasses of other departments, so to speak.”

ICRC staff member in Libya

People caught up in urban warfare or urban violence do not compartmentalize their experiences into the sector-specific specializations around which the humanitarian sector is organized (‘protection’, ‘water and sanitation’, ‘shelter’ and so on), nor into individual urban sub-systems. Humanitarian action must therefore be purposefully multidisciplinary and, beyond coordination, incorporate various sector-specific disciplines into a holistic response to the interconnected cumulative impact of urban warfare and/or urban violence.⁵⁰ This of course applies to humanitarian action generally. However, the consequences of not adopting an integrated multidisciplinary approach are likely to be far more serious in a city, because of the number of people concentrated there, because they may have no alternative to the goods and services provided by the state or third parties, and because of the interconnectedness of urban sub-systems.

While the ICRC and other humanitarian actors have long recognized the importance of working across areas of technical expertise, the ICRC has sometimes struggled to put this operational imperative into practice. For example, ICRC support for the Tegucigalpa Teaching Hospital in Honduras was initially not multidisciplinary. It involved structural improvements and technical support to the hospital’s emergency ward; one ward within a much larger referral hospital for wounded patients as well as patients who lived in areas affected by armed violence, often with limited financial means.

However, an ICRC project manager later reflected, “supporting one ward was an illusion”, since the ward depended on the hospital’s operational structure (infrastructure, staff, supplies), which in turn depended on the broader health system and related water and electricity systems. Moreover, poor pre-hospital care and movement restrictions in areas contested by armed groups in Tegucigalpa were among the obstacles to people reaching the hospital and using its services in the first place. While the ICRC is beginning to respond more holistically by incorporating other key activities into its hospital support – such as working with local authorities and the Honduran Red Cross to more fully understand and tackle the barriers to health care, and supporting eligible patients with cash, mental-health services, and assistance in searching for missing relatives – this experience illustrates the need for a multidisciplinary approach (and engagement with urban sub-systems) even when that is not immediately apparent.

⁵⁰ Alexander Refsum Jensenius, [Disciplinarity: Intra, cross, multi, inter, trans](#), 2012; ICRC, [Urban warfare: An age-old problem in need of new solutions](#), 2021; ICRC, [Urban Violence and the ICRC’s Humanitarian Response](#), 2016; ICRC, [Armed Violence and the New Urban Agenda: Recommendations for Habitat III](#), 2016; Marion Harroff-Tavel, [Violence and humanitarian action in urban areas: New challenges, new approaches](#), *IRRC*, Vol. 92, No. 878, June 2010.



An ICRC staff member talks with a patient at the ICRC-built triage wing of the Tegucigalpa Teaching Hospital in Honduras.

An integrated multidisciplinary approach helps to identify the root causes of people’s real challenges and develop appropriate responses that can have a sustainable humanitarian impact.⁵¹ An ICRC programme in the Libyan city of Tripoli shows what that can look like in practice. The programme aimed to help restore some degree of normalcy to people’s lives by creating conditions that would enable them to make a durable return to their place of origin, after conflict in and around the city from mid-2019 to mid-2020 displaced over 100,000 families.

As families began to return home after months of living in host communities or makeshift shelters, ICRC teams conducted a multidisciplinary assessment in Qaser Bin Ghashir, a southern suburb of Tripoli with a population of around 100,000.⁵² The multidisciplinary nature of the assessment was reflected both in the composition of the teams and in the questionnaire used to guide conversations with families about their main needs and aspirations. Key problems identified included limited access to health care, water, and sanitation services; damaged homes; high rents; and lack of livelihood and educational opportunities. In the end, in-kind support – food, household items and furniture, and services (e.g. to reconnect separated families) – combined with cash provision was deemed an effective combination to help people meet their specific needs



Communities in the Granizal neighbourhood of the Colombian city of Medellín are confronted with the consequences of armed violence, particularly lack of access to water and other basic services, forced recruitment, and disappearances.

⁵¹ For the ICRC, “sustainable humanitarian impact” refers not only to life-saving but also to life-sustaining action that supports people’s ability to lead and to rebuild their lives with autonomy, agency, and dignity: that is, a situation where long-term or chronic needs and protection-related risks arising from armed conflict and chronic violence are durably reduced or prevented. For a fuller discussion of “sustainable humanitarian impact”, see Filipa Schmitz Guinote, “Q&A: The ICRC and the “humanitarian – development – peace nexus” discussion”, *IRRC*, Vol. 101, No. 912, 2019.

⁵² Qaser Bin Ghashir was prioritized because, compared to other former front-line areas, it had suffered less weapon contamination (in the form of unexploded ordnance) and property damage; and also because many families had already returned and stood to benefit from the programme in an area where other humanitarian actors were not present.

and also to revive local markets. Together with the community, the ICRC established a diverse working group to follow up cash distributions and tackle barriers to obtaining services; it also coordinated with local authorities to prevent duplication of effort. Such activities benefited nearly a million people across Libya in 2020.⁵³

This example illustrates how multidisciplinary requires developing an appreciation of the various aspects of a response, in order to ask the right questions, seize opportunities, and respond holistically. It is also linked to previous lessons in engaging communities in both –short and long–term work and on supporting systems as well as individuals. This puts the onus on humanitarian organizations' local or in–country leadership to promote a multidisciplinary approach in their teams, to enable them to respond to interconnected needs as holistically as possible.

Community engagement in cities

Engaging with communities is fundamental to humanitarian action everywhere to ensure it responds to people's real needs in a way that respects their dignity and agency. In cities affected by armed conflict or other violence, community engagement is critical in prioritizing needs where it may otherwise be difficult to know where to start. Key information about a city – such as community hubs and patterns of life – and about people's problems, priorities, and preferences may not come through in formal needs assessments. Genuine community engagement requires physical presence and deliberate investment of human resources, time, and money in order to identify the main communities in a city and engage meaningfully with them. As they too are affected by urban warfare and urban violence, urban community engagement should include local authorities and service providers, and should be combined with engagement with weapon bearers.

For example, building trust through active engagement with communities and weapon bearers provided a foundation for ICRC activities in both Marawi, in the Philippines, and Medellin, in Colombia. In the years before the battle of Marawi in 2017, the ICRC had engaged with armed groups and Muslim scholars on interpreting IHL in keeping with the tenets of Islam. Given their prominence in the communities, this helped broaden acceptance for the ICRC in the wider community, so that, when the crisis hit, the ICRC was able to quickly implement activities adapted to communities' needs and capacities. For instance, together with the Philippine Red Cross, it distributed SIM cards, and later launched a website enabling members of separated families to find each other; it also worked with social-welfare authorities to support displaced business owners. Similarly, in Medellin, it was community members who first provided the ICRC with introductions to members of armed groups – themselves part of the community – in order to broach such issues as access to water, forced recruitment, and disappearances. In addition, the Colombian Red Cross indirectly prepared the ground for the ICRC, through its presence in Medellin and complementary work with the community over many years, which strengthened acceptance for 'the Red Cross'.

By contrast, when the ICRC – after one of its delegates was killed in Sirte in 2014 – began to manage its activities in Libya semi-remotely from Tunis, contact with communities and collaboration between staff members was greatly reduced, which hampered the organization's preparedness and its protection response to subsequent escalations of the conflict. After the phased return of all remaining staff to Libya, beginning in 2019, connections with communities had to be rebuilt. Some displaced communities challenged the ICRC's assumptions about how humanitarian assistance for individuals or households would be used, when they spent cash grants on group catering, creatively pooling resources to meet collective needs.⁵⁴

⁵³ ICRC, [War in Cities: Tripoli, Libya](#), 2021.

⁵⁴ ICRC, [Being accountable to people affected by armed conflicts](#), 2018; ICRC, [We must listen and act, not impose](#), 2018; IFRC, [Guide to Community Engagement and Accountability](#), 2021; IFRC, [Framework for Community Resilience](#), 2018; ICRC, [Philippines: Marawi's missing: Red Cross website helps reunite families](#), 2017; ICRC, [The Case for Complementarity](#), launch of the report, 2019.

V. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES MUST MOBILIZE AND ENABLE OTHER ACTORS

“The key to survival in a city at war will often be a combination of individual coping mechanisms and the ability of institutions to reorganize some semblance of normal life.”⁵⁵

*François Grünewald, Director at Groupe URD
(Urgence, Réhabilitation, Développement)*

In complex, interconnected urban environments, where the scale and scope of needs exceed their roles and capacities, humanitarian actors can contribute to a sustainable humanitarian impact by acting as facilitators and working through local institutions, authorities, and the private sector – perhaps even more than through direct implementation. These may include contacts outside formal state institutions or structures, if they are most able to influence humanitarian outcomes. Yet in urban settings, local authorities generally exist, whether formal or not. They comprise and are responsible for sustaining much of the governance and other urban sub-systems on which people depend, including for the purposes of financial exchange; regulation of property rights; and provision of social services, transport, education, internet and phone connectivity, electricity, water, wastewater and solid-waste management, health care, and security. They are often also among the first responders during urban warfare and urban violence: their preparedness and response capacities depend on their responsibilities and the resources available to them. It is therefore critical for humanitarian actors to support local authorities and other relevant actors in urban settings.⁵⁶

The ICRC and other humanitarian actors readily acknowledge the importance of working with local authorities, but it can be difficult to find the right authorities to work with. “[In a] political and bureaucratic spiderweb, it’s not always easy to determine where the gaps are or who is responsible and able to address them,” said an ICRC staff member in the Brazilian city of Fortaleza. This is particularly the case at the local or city level, as opposed to the national level, where humanitarian actors – particularly international humanitarian actors – frequently look to obtain the necessary authorization to work. Moreover, even when the right authorities are identified, said an ICRC staff member working in the area of armed violence, “cities may not want to acknowledge the problem of violence as it projects a negative public image, which can result in unstructured and under-resourced responses.”

Difficulty in finding the right partners does not diminish the necessity of doing so: local authorities, including shadow authorities, can be gatekeepers to people and places. For example, whereas the ICRC’s action in Colombia is based on its physical presence and direct implementation of programmes in affected areas, often with the Colombian Red Cross, such an approach is not tenable in Rio de Janeiro and Fortaleza. There, urban populations are larger, local authorities generally better resourced, the nature of urban violence – among rival armed groups and/or between them and law enforcement forces – more intense, and the ICRC’s operational presence much smaller.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Groupe URD, *Humanitarian Aid in Urban Settings: Current Practice, Future Challenges*, 2011, p. 15.

⁵⁶ ICRC, World Bank and UNICEF, [Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa](#), 2021; ICRC, [Urban Violence and the ICRC’s Humanitarian Response](#), 2016; Urbanet, [Urban Settings Need New Approaches](#), 2019; Groupe URD, *Humanitarian Aid in Urban Settings: Current Practice, Future Challenges*, 2011; IASC, [IASC Strategy: Meeting Humanitarian Challenges in Urban Areas](#), 2010.

⁵⁷ SciELO – Brazil, [Guerra civil não-declarada? Um recorte do status da violência urbana em uma capital no Brasil](#), 2020; ICRC, [Brazil: Armed violence in the cities and the Safer Access methodology](#), 2019.



A police operation in a community affected by urban violence in Fortaleza.

The ICRC therefore pursues a city-level approach to support the relevant authorities in addressing specific humanitarian challenges associated with urban violence, namely those related to access to health care, education, and social services. It does this chiefly by working with local authorities to implement the Safer Access Framework (SAF) for Essential Services: a risk-management methodology that seeks to reduce, mitigate, and respond to the impact of urban violence on professionals and recipients of essential public services. This city-level approach was informed by direct ICRC experiences on a smaller scale in particular neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro between 2009 and 2013.⁵⁸ The objective is to maintain and expand provision of and access to essential public services, rather than having to shut them down because of urban violence. To that end, the ICRC works with authorities to improve the safety and security of teachers and health-care staff – who frequently face threats of physical violence – by helping to develop contingency and action plans, and by providing risk-awareness training and mental-health support. The SAF gives teachers and health-care staff a practical means of assessing and responding to different risks, and thus to continue doing their jobs. The SAF digital platform – which logs, for example, the nature, frequency, and location of incidents – also expands authorities' understanding of a challenge of which they are well aware but about which they have little specific information.

Working with authorities at city level to address specific humanitarian challenges, but without having a presence in communities, does have its limitations in terms of scope, acceptance by communities, and preparedness for major emergencies. It has nonetheless had tangible results in Brazil, which shows how humanitarian action can enable authorities at various levels to fulfil their responsibilities. There was a 40% drop in service-unit closures in Rio de Janeiro in the period 2017–18 alone, and over four million people have benefited from increased access to health care and education since 2017.⁵⁹ The authorities have begun to implement this approach in Fortaleza and seven other cities in Brazil, with the long-term objective of having it formally adopted nationally.

In addition, acting as a broker or facilitator with private-sector actors can help to ensure a lasting humanitarian impact, particularly as they may be able to respond more quickly and effectively, and on the scale necessary, than overstretched local authorities. In the Colombian city of Buenaventura, for example, the ICRC acted as a neutral intermediary to facilitate entry for an energy company into areas it could no longer reach because of the presence of armed groups and, once there, to redesign the public lighting system in strategic locations within the community: at bus stops, schools, health centres, and so on. This project contributed to the return of public transportation, which in turn opened up access to employment opportunities and extended school hours, providing safe spaces for students to stay and learn after sunset. A similar approach was adopted to support the maintenance of water infrastructure: at the outset, the ICRC, acting as a neutral intermediary, accompanied water authority personnel into affected areas; the result was that in one suburb where only 40% of people had access to water, five years later, 90% did.

The Buenaventura project also provided avenues to broach issues of child recruitment and disappearances with armed groups; work with the mayor and other local authorities to strengthen their strategy on tackling urban violence and extending services to areas affected by it; connect youth with prospective employers to provide an alternative to joining armed groups and overcome the stigma of perceived association with them; and provide start-up funding to local businesses.

⁵⁸ ICRC, [Rio Project: Programmes helped reduce humanitarian impact of violence in Rio de Janeiro](#), 2016.

⁵⁹ ICRC, [Brazil: Armed violence in the cities and the Safer Access methodology](#), 2019; ICRC, [Safer access to essential public services program](#), 2021.

The ICRC played a similar role as neutral facilitator with local authorities and financial institutions in Ukraine, when a ban on bank transfers meant that water-bill payments made by people living in areas of Lugansk/Luhansk not controlled by the government could not be transferred to the water-service providers based in a government-controlled area. By drawing attention to the issue and facilitating discussions between government and non-government stakeholders, they enabled channels to pay outstanding bills and ensure continued water provision. To do all this the ICRC had to have some grasp of payment mechanisms, communities' water-consumption needs, and the operational requirements of the water-service providers and the banks; it also had to have developed, over many years, relationships of mutual trust with these stakeholders, weapon bearers, and political authorities on both sides of the front line.



A workshop on the Safer Access Framework for health workers in Sao Paulo.



This vehicle is carrying an ICRC team that is assessing the situation in the Libyan city of Sirte, after weeks of heavy fighting in 2011. The city is empty and very few civilians are coming back to inspect the damage to their homes.

Y. El Shaiw/ICRC

PART C

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From Marawi to Medellin, the devastating cumulative impact of urban warfare and urban violence is all too apparent, even if some of their consequences may manifest themselves less immediately. They cause millions of people across the world to suffer, daily. And urban settings are likely to remain theatres of armed conflict and other violence for the foreseeable future.

This paper has sought to take stock of the ICRC's experience in responding to the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare and urban violence – by drawing on publications on different aspects of the ICRC's response and by exploring its experiences in six different countries. It has also sought to build on the many urban good practices documented in the humanitarian sector – the Movement in particular – by providing an ICRC perspective focused on cities affected by armed conflict and other violence, as opposed to natural disasters and other kinds of humanitarian crisis.⁶⁰

The following recommendations are intended to help humanitarian actors improve their response by focusing on three key areas. The ICRC will continue striving to implement them in its own humanitarian action. They in no way relieve states and other duty bearers of their responsibility to prevent and mitigate the cumulative impact of war and other violence on cities. Every aspect of every recommendation may not apply to every humanitarian actor, but the hope is that they will provide food for thought in the humanitarian sector and beyond on how to mitigate human suffering amidst urban warfare and urban violence – by working *with* the city and not just *in* the city.

I. INVEST IN UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE OF URBAN WARFARE AND URBAN VIOLENCE, AND THE FUNCTIONING OF THE URBAN SYSTEMS THEY DEPEND ON

Understanding the realities of urban people's lives does not mean *simply* 'doing better context analysis'; nor does it mean seeking a complete understanding of complex urban sub-systems. Rather, it is about adapting context analysis to the specific character of urban settings by analysing how conflict and other violence impact how people live in a city, including their ability to earn a living, obtain services essential for their survival, and move about freely to take advantage of various opportunities.⁶¹ The impact in these areas and others may be particularly acute in scale, scope, and intensity in situations of urban warfare affecting entire cities.

Urban settings are specific in their population density and in that population's dependence on externally provided goods and services for survival, which makes them vulnerable to disruptions. Thinking of a city as a complex system consisting of four main interconnected sub-systems – community, the economy, governance, and services – can help adapt context analyses to the specific character of cities. Proactive engagement with people – including communities, local authorities, private-sector actors, and weapon bearers – should direct the analysis of urban sub-systems, not the other way around. This provides a foundation for urban responses, by identifying the root causes – the main systemic and interconnected factors – which influence the various challenges people face as a consequence of urban warfare and violence.⁶² In short, investing in understanding is not primarily a desktop exercise; it requires ongoing engagement with both people and the interconnected urban sub-systems they depend on.

⁶⁰ [Global Disaster Preparedness Center Platform](#).

⁶¹ ALNAP, [Stepping back: Understanding cities and their systems](#), 2016, p. 20; International Rescue Committee, [Urban Context Analysis Toolkit: Guidance Note for Humanitarian Practitioners](#), 2017.

⁶² See also [ICRC Institutional Strategy 2019–2024](#), Strategic Orientation 1.

Humanitarian actors must combine the best possible human understanding of people's experiences and circumstances with the best possible technical understanding of urban sub-systems and how they break down – particularly in situations of urban warfare, when civilians may be at most risk of physical harm and when sub-systems are at most risk of collapse. This understanding should be reflected in operational responses, and incorporated into dialogue with weapon bearers about the reverberating effects of a planned attack or law enforcement operation in complex urban environments.⁶³

II. BREAK SILOS AND WORK WITH PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

This means accelerating a trend for humanitarian action to move beyond direct delivery of humanitarian goods and services in emergencies and, in addition, employing different kinds of expertise purposefully, through a variety of working methods (including but not limited to direct delivery of goods and services), in both the short- and the long-term, and at both the individual and the system level. This is necessary because humanitarian action must align itself with people's experiences of urban warfare and urban violence, and not the other way around.

Doing so puts the onus on humanitarian organizations' local or in-country leadership – with responsibility for overall operational strategy – to identify the root causes of humanitarian challenges, actively facilitate integrated multidisciplinary practices among specialist teams, and foster a common strategy. Having expertise in different specializations is necessary, but not in itself sufficient to mount a holistic response. Supporting urban sub-systems can help humanitarian actors reach large numbers of people who depend on them, but it does not change the imperative for multidisciplinary humanitarian action to adapt to individuals' particular needs and vulnerabilities – even though the scale of the cumulative impact of urban warfare and urban violence might make this a daunting task.⁶⁴

III. PARTNER PURPOSEFULLY AND FACILITATE ACTION TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT, PARTICULARLY WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

In cities where humanitarian actors cannot cope, by themselves, with the complexity of the environment and the sheer numbers of people affected, this means finding the right partners and engaging with them early and often. Engagement with local authorities, both formal and informal, is particularly important because they are responsible for many of the rules and policies that govern the interaction between urban residents and the functioning of urban sub-systems (e.g. mayors, service providers). Enabling local authorities to fulfil their responsibilities and mandates, and fully exercise their capacities, can enhance the impact of humanitarian action and lay the foundation for long-term recovery efforts and development support.⁶⁵

Humanitarian actors should therefore identify existing local capacities and responses, and find out how well they are working and how short-term activities might fit into the authorities' long-term plan for their city. This is also where humanitarian actors can play useful roles as facilitators between communities and authorities – including weapon bearers – responsible for different aspects of civilian protection.

⁶³ ICRC, [Reducing Civilian Harm in Urban Warfare: A Commander's Handbook](#), 2021, p. 27; Mark Zeitoun and Michael Talhami, [The impact of explosive weapons on urban services: Direct and reverberating effects across space and time](#), *IRRC*, Vol. 98, No. 1, April 2016, p. 59.

⁶⁴ See also [ICRC Institutional Strategy 2019–2024](#), Strategic Orientation 2; ICRC, [Accountability to Affected People Institutional Framework](#), 2020, p. 3; ALNAP, [What's Missing? Adding context to the urban response toolbox](#), 2018, p. 123.

⁶⁵ See also [ICRC Institutional Strategy 2019–2024](#), Strategic Orientation 3.

To this end, local humanitarian actors and staff can be critical in making sense of a complex web of authorities and hierarchies, facilitating introductions, and developing relationships. For the ICRC, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are key partners, including in efforts to implement the resolutions on war in cities and urban resilience that were adopted at the Movement's Council of Delegates in 2022.⁶⁶



Marawi, two years after the end of the 2017 Battle of Marawi.

⁶⁶ IFRC, [War in Cities](#), 2022; ICRC, [Strengthening the resilience of urban communities: Our way forward](#), 2022.

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ANNEXES

The annexes, which provide an overview of the six contexts considered in this paper, are available on the ICRC's website: <https://shop.icrc.org/catalogsearch/result/?q=4666.01>.

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles. As the reference on international humanitarian law, it helps develop this body of law and works for its implementation.

People know they can rely on the ICRC to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones, including: supplying food, safe drinking water, sanitation and shelter; providing health care; and helping to reduce the danger of landmines and unexploded ordnance. It also reunites family members separated by conflict, and visits people who are detained to ensure they are treated properly. The organization works closely with communities to understand and meet their needs, using its experience and expertise to respond quickly and effectively, without taking sides.

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