

Forced Displacement in Urban Settings: A Policy Brief, with examples from Tijuana

Background document for workshop on

Migrant journeys interrupted: challenges of “permanent transience” in Tijuana

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In the past few years, Mexico has received migrants and refugees from Central America (mainly the Northern triangle – Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), Haiti, and several countries in Africa (mostly the Democratic Republic of Congo), and has experienced internal displacement of its own citizens, as well as the repatriation of Mexicans because of deportation from the US. In Tijuana alone, approximately 80 Mexicans are repatriated from the United States daily.²

Urban Forced Displacement

The movement of forced displaced people into urban settings is an increasingly important global phenomenon. At the end of 2015, globally about 60% of the world’s refugees were living in urban areas, a trend that began in 2008, when this proportion was 42%.³ The pattern of urban displacement is marked in the Latin America region, where there are no refugee camps and the forcibly displaced reside in cities, towns, and villages along their routes north. The urban and humanitarian implications of forced displacement are rarely recognized by either development or humanitarian actors. This policy brief outlines six of the main impacts of urban displacement and some ideas for the kinds of responses needed by development, humanitarian, and government actors.

Tijuana receives internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the states of Tamaulipas, Michoacán, and Guerrero, where drug-related violence and terror displaced approximately 3,000 people in 2010. Tijuana is a main destination for IDPs because of its proximity to the US. Between 2009 and 2013, asylum applications of Mexicans received by the United States increased from 2,490 (8% of all applications) to 8,569 (23%). When asylum applications are denied, IDPs seek protection in Tijuana.

Yolanda Caballero. "Tijuana, esperanza para michoacanos." El Mexicano Noticias y Clasificados de Tijuana, Mexicali y Ensenada. January 30, 2014.

¹ This policy brief is based on work conducted by the author as part of a forthcoming World Bank report, “Refugees in Middle Eastern Cities: Bringing an Urban Lens to the Forced Displacement Challenge” (expected publication in late 2017). The findings about the urban impact of refugees (particularly Syrians) in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey resonate with the experience of Mexico.

² Cesar Aníbal Palencia Chávez, Dirección Municipal de Atención al Migrante Tijuana, Interview by Mariela Medina Castellanos on February 13, 2017

³ UNHCR Global Trends 2015. p.53

The “forcibly displaced” refers to refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced (IDPs), returnees, and deportees. Like other migrants, many forcibly displaced people are seeking to move on – either to other countries or back to the country from which they returned or were deported – but they are unable or unwilling to move on for various reasons, and they become “stuck” in the towns. Over time, their numbers grow, and their presence becomes increasingly permanent.

The arrival and continuing presence of forcibly displaced people has significant implications for a town or city. An urban influx alters spatial configuration and weakens the social cohesion of urban communities by creating pressure on already strained urban services, employment, and housing. These pressures create new challenges for urban governments and threaten their capacities and legitimacy.

Larger cities are generally better able to cope with these challenges, because the displacement impact is often confined to more localized areas rather than across the entire city, and they have higher capacity than smaller towns to absorb the displaced. However, all cities and towns hosting significant numbers of displaced face challenges in delivering basic services, providing jobs, and promoting social cohesion for both the displaced and the host communities.

Key Messages:

- 1. Urban displacement has uneven and spatially differentiated impacts on a specific town or city. A mapping of where the displaced settle within the urban setting is an important tool in understanding and responding to displacement.*
- 2. The displaced generally live amongst – and share the problems of – the urban poor, but their needs and capacities are different. In developing a response, it is important to understand these differences and how capacities can be strengthened.*
- 3. The impact of a mass influx on urban markets (housing, employment), services (sanitation, schools, health) and infrastructure (transportation, water) creates tensions that undermine social cohesion and adds to the fiscal burden on local governments.*
- 4. In developing local responses to urban displacement, urban governments will need to focus on interim solutions and engage with multiple local actors as well as the displaced themselves.*

Cities at the center of the displacement challenge

Traditionally, host governments have given the responsibility for refugees to humanitarian agencies that provide their basic needs (food, water, shelter, health care, and education), usually in camps. However, when the displaced move to cities, this conventional humanitarian approach is no longer effective. In cities, the displaced become part of the urban fabric: they compete for housing and jobs, use transportation, water and sanitation systems, send their children to local schools. This additional pressure on services, housing, and employment exacerbates social tensions, particularly in poor host communities. In most cities, the displaced tend to live in low-income areas or informal settlements, where the locals are not any better off than the new arrivals – and everyone faces increasing rents and greater competition for jobs.

Six dimensions of impact

The impact of urban displacement affects towns, households, and communities in at least six ways:

1. Urban spatial patterns change in unplanned, haphazard ways

An urban influx can double or triple city population growth rates in months or weeks. Where the displaced settle – whether in clusters or spread throughout the city, and whether in predominantly low-

In Tijuana, as the number of displaced has grown, shelters have become full, and migrants and deportees settle in hazardous sites that are cheap or free. These sites are not closely monitored, and local authorities with limited resources vacillate between neglect and forced evacuations. In the 1970s, informal settlements emerged along the Tijuana River canal, which is two kilometers long and located in the center of the city near the U.S.-Mexico border. Today, the canal, known as “El Bordo,” has become an encampment where deportees and other migrants live.

["El bordo del canal del río Tijuana: Estimación y características de la población"](#), Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), 2013.

income or informal areas – will affect the changing shape and ‘footprint’ of the city. Like other urban migrants, the displaced are likely to move to informal settlements characterized by insecure land and property rights, overcrowding, severe economic constraints, crime and violence, food insecurity, environmental hazards, and forced evictions. A significant challenge for urban governments is **unplanned, haphazard growth** within or on the edges of urban municipalities that leads to sprawl, inadequate infrastructure, and informal settlements. The expanding urban footprint will require new roads, new housing, and other new or improved infrastructure linking housing, jobs, and education. The problem with rapid informal growth is that it precedes the construction of street grids and the preservation of public space.

2. Displaced households arrive depleted and struggle to catch up over time

The experience of displacement – the grueling upheaval and debilitating journey many refugees and migrants face – places the displaced at a disadvantage relative to their non-displaced neighbors. They arrive *physically and psychologically stricken*, and with *depleted financial assets* rendering them poverty-stricken but with immediate needs and expenses related to food, shelter, and health care. Over time, the displaced struggle to survive and ‘catch up’ economically and must find ways to secure income and access urban services. However, without legal documents and identification, they face barriers to accessing services or employment opportunities. In general, the forcibly displaced tend to be worse off compared to their neighbors, even in low-income neighborhoods where all are poor.

3. A mass influx of refugees can radically reshape urban markets

With a mass influx comes increased demand for housing, especially rental units, and for employment, especially in the informal sector where there is already high demand for work, poor pay, and lack of decent employment. An influx can benefit employers but create significant competition and reduced wages for locals. The segments of the labor market in which low-skilled refugees seek work, as well as the low-income housing markets where refugees seek housing, cannot absorb high numbers of new arrivals competing with locals. Most displaced households are renters, and increased demand for rental

housing pushes up prices and crowds out the low-income host population, who are more likely to rent than own. For example, in Jordan rental prices rose by 25 percent between 2012 and 2013.⁴ As with livelihood opportunities, competition for decent rental properties increases tensions between refugees and their hosts. These tensions increase when humanitarian agencies disburse rental support grants only to refugees; when coupled with increased demand, these grants can inflate the housing market.

4. A mass influx places new burdens on already weak urban infrastructure

An influx puts new demands and strains on services and infrastructure, which were already weak and under-capacitated before the influx. Many displaced people have increased health needs, and their children have special education/schooling needs. The displaced resort to non-standard housing (garages, sheds) and buildings not designed for residential use such as public buildings and schools. These pressures can blow out school and health service budgets and staff capacity. Especially when a mass influx is concentrated in low-income areas, it imposes new burdens on transportation systems (roads, public transport), water and sanitation (solid waste removal), and electricity (grids illegally tapped), with serious budget implications. The impacts on **water provision** and on **solid waste management** are challenges, which become key sources of discontent on the part of the urban population.

5. Displacement can reduce social cohesion

With increased pressure on schools and health services, and competition for jobs and housing, tensions emerge, leading to xenophobia and harassment. As social cohesion is undermined, the risk of political upheaval and conflict increases. Tensions are often amplified when the displaced include diverse groups with different ethnic or sectarian affiliations, or when the displaced do not speak the local language. As social cohesion diminishes, the urban space for the displaced shrinks. Women and children stay home, and participation in urban life declines. Decreased social cohesion affects the wellbeing of everyone in the urban space, not just the displaced, and creates additional problems for urban governments.

6. A mass influx challenges urban governance

Pressures on services, infrastructure, and social cohesion severely impact already cash-strapped, under-capacitated local governments and law enforcement. City governance faces a dual crisis of existing inadequate financial and technical capacity coupled with a surge in demand by a displaced population with many needs. The impact of displacement adds to the fiscal problems of urban governments – without an enhanced tax base because the displaced are often poor and working mainly in the informal sector. Municipalities face higher infrastructure maintenance costs and often must implement national policies (such as work permits) without additional budget. These fiscal challenges are compounded by threats to social cohesion and political tensions. In some areas, such as informal settlements, adequate governance is lacking or limited and in such cases, alternative governance mechanisms might emerge, such as through Community-based Organizations (CBOs).

⁴ In Jordan, refugees spend an average of 58 percent of their monthly income on rent. UNHCR. 2014. Living in the Shadows.

These impacts, and the responses needed, vary greatly across urban settings, depending on patterns of settlement by the displaced. Towns and city sub-districts where the proportion of displaced to non-displaced is high will be much more affected than those with lighter inflows.

Urban Response

The urban response to displacement is spread over many actors and institutions. The local government and municipalities play a key role, but civil society, in the form of shelters, businesses, neighborhoods, social networks, and legal support, among others, are important determinants of the response.

In Tijuana, a church "Embajadores de Jesús" was serving 225 Haitians, most of whom had decided to stay permanently. The pastor began a housing construction project called "Little Haiti" in the Alacrán Canyon near the church. Twenty-two small homes of approximately 1,200 square meters were planned, with construction materials donated by the community and the church providing the labor. The site was in a high-risk floodplain next to an illegal dumping ground with no roads. Soon after construction began, Tijuana's Civil Protection Department placed warning stickers on the structures and notified the Pastor that a feasibility study was required prior to resuming construction. The department emphasized that the city is not against the project but wants to ensure risks are assessed and managed before people start settling. In March 2017, the project was put on hold until the church obtains the required construction permits.

Ortiz Ramirez, Hecor, and Ines Garcia Ramos. "[Ayuntamiento no clausura villa haitiana, pero insiste en riesgo de la zona.](#)" Zeta Tijuana. March 20, 2017.

"[Little Haiti, The Next New Neighbourhood in Tijuana.](#)" SanDiegoRed. February 20, 2017.

Meeting the humanitarian needs of refugees is initially a priority. When displaced people first arrive in a city, their humanitarian needs take priority. The displaced often have social networks (in the form of co-national or co-ethnic anchor communities) in the towns – indeed, these networks are often the reason people decide on their destinations. Where this is the case, the newly arrived can turn to their networks for assistance. Where they lack such networks, their only support is public assistance. For the undocumented and un-networked, and for many refugees and asylum seekers, their only form of assistance comes from shelters and humanitarian services. Such services are an important component of the humanitarian response, particularly in the early phases of displacement.

Over time, urban challenges take on increasing urgency. In response to the market, services, and infrastructure impacts outlined above, municipalities need to rapidly scale up their response to meet the needs of existing residents and new arrivals. **Interim solutions**, including the provision of schools and healthcare services until new

The Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) has partnered with the National Institute of Migration (INM) and the state Labor and Social Prevision Department to enroll non-regional migrants in the Mexican healthcare system. For enrollment, migrants require only their INM regularization document along with basic personal information. As of March 2017, 132 Haitian migrants had enrolled in the Mexican health system¹. The Binational Migrant Education Program was created in 1982 by the governments of Mexico and the United States to provide education to migrant children and youth. The program requires local public schools to admit recently repatriated students at any point in the academic year so as not to interrupt their education. In Tijuana, the program has expanded to include Haitian and African migrants. As of March 2017, six Haitian children had enrolled in local public schools in Tijuana. In addition, the Tijuana Cultural Center has launched an initiative to bring workshops, classes, and expositions designed specifically for Haitian and African migrants.

Loza, Lourdes. "[Haitianos obtienen afiliación al IMSS.](#)" Frontera.info. March 16, 2017.

SEP. "[Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante.](#)" Secretaría de Educación Pública.

"[Niños migrantes haitianos toman clases en escuelas de Tijuana.](#)" Excélsior. March 15, 2017.

facilities are built, are essential. The shape of these interim solutions will vary depending on the city, but many ideas and efforts are available.

In Tijuana, in 2014, the Global Shapers Community started a project called Bordofarms to support deportees living in the Tijuana River canal. Vertical farms along the Tijuana River would create jobs for deportees, revitalize the area, and serve as a source of food for the city. Each farm was composed of 30 wooden planters which grew organic vegetables sold to local restaurants. The project started with 85 volunteers, a \$5,000 loan, and \$1,200 in crowdfunding. It initially employed 10 urban farmers, all Mexican deportees previously living in the canal. The project provided food, a small stipend, free psychological counseling, and assistance to find a paying job locally. At its height, the project employed 50 Mexican deportees. The hope was to expand, but after a few months the city forced Bordofarms to evacuate, arguing that the planters were located on federal land and Bordofarms did not have a permit.

Martínez, Gabriela. "[Retiran del canal a "Bordo Farms"](#)". La Jornada Baja California. March 20, 2015.
Hernández, Esther. "["Bordo Farms" puede ser desalojado por municipio.](#)" Frontera.info. May 03, 2015.

Efforts to enhance social cohesion and mitigate social tensions between communities and the displaced population will be needed, and as with interim solutions, these will need to be designed at the local level.

One way in which the burden of impact can be relieved is to **enable the displaced to contribute economically and socially**. Most displaced people can overcome their initial disadvantages if they are permitted to work, move around freely, and access services. All of this depends on whether urban (or national) policies and regulations enable or prevent the displaced from access to services, jobs, and other assistance. Lack of legal status and/or identity documents is one factor – without them, the displaced are not recognized by national and local authorities, making access to services, jobs, and other assistance more difficult. In addition, because local authorities perceive the displaced to be a temporary problem, and to have ‘outsider’ status, they often refuse to grant the displaced rights to participate in local decision making. This is also a mistake, and local solutions are needed.

Tijuana is a major hub for Mexico’s manufacturing industry, yet employers have trouble attracting and retaining workers. The Association of the Manufacturing Industry and Exports (INDEX) reports having 8,000 vacancies in the city of Tijuana alone. In November 2016, INDEX signed an agreement with the National Institute of Migration (INM) as part of the “Somos Mexicanos” program, in which manufacturing companies committed to recruiting and employing repatriated citizens. In March 2017, INDEX announced they were expanding the program to incorporate Haitian and African migrants in their recruitment and employment efforts. As of May 2017, 800 Haitian migrants were reportedly working in the manufacturing industry in Tijuana. In April 2017, INDEX organized a job fair specifically targeted at Haitian and African migrants and repatriated Mexican citizens.

Secretaría de Gobernación. "[Mensaje del subsecretario Humberto Roque Villanueva, durante la Inauguración de la Convención Nacional Index.](#)" Gob.mx. November 17, 2016.
Dominguez del Hoyo, Alejandro. "[Trabajan 800 haitianos en maquiladoras.](#)" La Voz De La Frontera. May 01, 2017.
"[Realizan feria del empleo para migrantes haitianos](#)" Tijuana. April 18, 2017.

If left alone, the market can adjust to increased housing demand, and an influx can have a positive impact. As demand for housing grows, the market responds with increased housing construction, including informal housing production and adaptive rental arrangements. For example, in Mafraq, Jordan, host families living in two units often move in together to share one unit and rent the other to a

Syrian family. New construction as well as upgrading and expanding existing properties create local jobs and demand for materials and contractor services. Humanitarian programs such as cash-based assistance or rental

support can stimulate local housing markets, which in turn have an economic multiplier effect, as construction is stimulated as well.

However, positive market impacts are more likely to benefit higher-income groups, while low-income

households continue to struggle. For example, while the supply of new housing might increase, it is unlikely that rents will go back down, and the poor will still struggle to afford housing. Therefore, it is optimal for governments to intervene to ensure that the poor are not left out of any positive outcomes and to help them access new opportunities being created.

Several Haitians have opened Haitian restaurants in downtown Tijuana, sometimes sharing space with Mexicans. One Haitian, a trained chef, says she started the restaurant to bring a piece of Haiti to her people living in Tijuana, but increasingly Mexican patrons curious about Haitian cuisine visit her establishment. The local chapter of the National Chamber of Small Business (Canacope) has been receptive to the blossoming of migrant-owned small businesses in Tijuana. It is offering counseling sessions for Haitians with legal status who wish to start a small business and is calling on the more than 3,700 members of the chamber to integrate Haitian migrants into their working groups.

["Abre el segundo restaurante haitiano en Tijuana."](#) Veraz Informa. February 23, 2017.