



U.S. Department of State
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)

PRM Principles for Refugee Protection in Urban Areas

Today's refugee population is increasingly urban. While it is difficult to gather reliable data, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 58 percent of refugees now reside in cities, compared to one third living in camps. This trend creates new kinds of vulnerabilities and poses new protection challenges for the humanitarian community. It also presents new opportunities to help refugees find ways to become self-reliant.

Refugee protection should be provided irrespective of location and the international community should address needs where they exist, rather than where it is easiest to address them. The U.S. government has a clear role – and responsibility – to respond to refugees in urban areas, particularly through diplomatic engagement aimed at expanding protection space.

The United States, other donor governments, UNHCR, and other key partners all have roots in camp-based responses to large-scale displacement, but have increasingly engaged in urban areas. In fact, much of the work of the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) now takes place in urban or semi-urban contexts, in countries where no formal camps exist. However, the Bureau's efforts to address the needs of urban refugees have not fully benefitted from the systematic sharing of best practices across populations and regions. To address these gaps, PRM recently established a Bureau-wide initiative to strengthen its efforts on behalf of urban refugees by drawing on best practices.

Core Principles for Engagement in Urban Areas

PRM has adopted the following core principles to guide its response to the needs of refugees in urban areas. These principles are informed by and consistent with those enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. As interventions in urban environments will vary by context and be population-specific, the following principles are meant to provide general guidance that can be adapted to a particular context to ensure flexibility in response:

1. *PRM will expand its engagement in urban areas, both in terms of humanitarian diplomacy and, with modest, targeted programming.* Through sustained and vigorous diplomacy, PRM will seek to ensure that the status and legal rights of refugees in urban areas, as outlined under international refugee law, are recognized and protected by host governments.
2. *When new displacements arise, the establishment of camps should not always be the first recourse.* At the outset of crises, PRM will work with other members of the international humanitarian community and with host governments to determine whether a non camp-based response might be most appropriate to achieve protection and assistance goals. PRM will work closely with UNHCR to develop and strengthen models of assistance as alternatives to camps.
3. *PRM recognizes that urban settlement is often part of a long-term and even durable solution.* Many urban refugees are achieving *de facto* local integration, and PRM can build on this opportunity by advocating for further progress toward this durable solution, particularly in cases of protracted displacement.
4. *PRM's response to the needs of urban refugees will focus on legal protection and access to services, with material assistance targeted to the most vulnerable.* In many cases direct assistance to the most vulnerable refugees will be required, particularly where access to existing services is unavailable or insufficient to meet basic needs. Assistance in urban areas requires sophisticated identification of the most vulnerable and better targeting of interventions to match their particular needs.
5. *An effective approach need not be resource-intensive.* With its focus on increased humanitarian diplomacy and access to existing services, a sound approach is not necessarily about more money, but about more targeted effort.
6. *Interventions should promote self-reliance.* A key objective of urban response is to promote protection through self-reliance. Access to livelihoods is essential for refugees to be able to cover the cost of meeting basic needs -- including food, shelter, health care, and education -- and to mitigate against turning to risky activities to survive.
7. *Existing local structures should be identified and built upon.* Infrastructure and services already exist in urban environments; humanitarian actors should capitalize upon local resources, advocate against discrimination in public services, and avoid the creation of parallel, refugee-specific structures.
8. *Humanitarian actors should establish new partnerships.* Humanitarian actors will need to partner with non-traditional actors, such as municipal authorities, local health officials, school boards, civil society organizations (including refugee groups), private businesses and financial institutions, and development actors.
9. *Assistance provided to urban refugees should pursue a community-based approach that benefits local communities.* Refugees are not always the most vulnerable residents of urban areas, and therefore the needs of the urban poor among whom refugees live must be taken into account.