

# ARMED VIOLENCE AND THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

## THE ICRC'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HABITAT III



Tens of millions of the world's most vulnerable people live in increasingly unsafe and impoverished conditions because of armed conflicts and violence that dominate the cities, towns and informal settlements in which they live. This insecurity has forced huge numbers of people to flee their homes, resulting in millions of urban internally displaced people (IDPs).

The experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, in hundreds of urban areas across the world, shows that sustainable urban development is seriously hindered by armed conflict and chronic urban violence. The corrosive impact of violence on the Sustainable Development Goals puts millions of people at risk of being "left behind" in dangerous and neglected urban areas. Vital urban infrastructure, basic services and economic assets are degraded, destroyed or rendered inaccessible by armed conflict and chronic urban violence.

The ICRC welcomes the efforts of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Member States and civil society organizations to ensure that the consultation process leading up to Habitat III was analytically rigorous, inclusive and extensive. But, as it agrees new policies to ensure safe and resilient cities, Habitat III must also pay more attention to the design and implementation of measures which reduce the impact of armed conflict and other forms of violence on urban development. In many parts of the world, violence is the main driver of development reversals in cities.

### THREE KEY MESSAGES FOR HABITAT III

This paper summarizes a number of policies that we think States must take into consideration while shaping the New Urban Agenda.

The ICRC recommends that Habitat III include policies that:

1. support resilient urban services during armed conflict;
2. increase respect for international humanitarian law during urban warfare; and
3. assist governments to work with people affected by chronic urban violence.

## **TWENTY YEARS ON FROM HABITAT II**

The final outcome document of the Habitat II summit in Istanbul in 1996 acknowledged the dire consequences of armed conflicts. It also made specific reference to the role of the ICRC and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in humanitarian response.

Now, 20 years on, violence causes even greater suffering in towns and cities. Frequent violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) during urban warfare result in immediate harm to civilians and lead to long-term deterioration of essential urban services and infrastructure. In some cities gripped by chronic urban violence, where IHL does not apply, the situation, in humanitarian terms, can be desperate.

## **THE ICRC'S STRONG URBAN FOCUS**

The ICRC's activities and expertise in urban operations have grown since Habitat II in line with rising humanitarian needs in cities. We work in 80 countries and have large-scale operations in such cities as Aleppo, Donetsk, Ramadi and Goma. In Syria, for example, we are maintaining essential water, waste-management and energy infrastructure and services for 15.8 million people.

The ICRC's strong urban focus means we are following the Habitat III process closely and share many of the concerns set out in the Issue Papers and Policy Papers, and in the Zero Draft Outcome Document, especially those relating to people's safety and their access to urban services and infrastructure which are resistant to shocks. Designing and maintaining resilient urban infrastructure is vitally important for guaranteeing the delivery of essential services in all circumstances.

## 1. SUPPORT RESILIENT URBAN SERVICES DURING ARMED CONFLICT

Armed conflicts are increasingly being fought in urban areas. These urban areas have become much larger and more densely populated because of significant inward migration to cities in the last 20 years. This means that civilians in towns and cities are at greater risk of displacement, injury or death as a consequence of armed conflict. The ICRC has unfortunately become all too familiar – in cities such as Gaza, Homs, Mogadishu and Aden – with the severe humanitarian consequences of urban warfare: direct harm to civilians, long-term damage to essential infrastructure and protracted and repeated urban displacement.

We welcome the strategic importance placed on urban services and infrastructure by the various Policy Papers prepared during the run-up to Habitat III – particularly Policy Paper 9 – and the recognition that equitable and affordable access to basic physical and social infrastructure is key to the Zero Draft Outcome Document’s first ‘guiding principle’: “Leave no one behind”.

The ICRC is also firmly convinced of the Zero Draft’s view that social and economic development, and the general well-being of people, are dependent on equitable access to reliable urban services. During armed conflict, these services are critical for preserving people’s dignity and ensuring their means of survival. We have learnt from our long experience in urban settings that supporting these services is one of the best ways to fulfil our humanitarian mission to prevent suffering and to protect and assist people affected by armed conflict.



Infrastructure damaged by bombings in Abassan (Gaza, 2014)

### RECOGNIZE THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN CITIES AND THE CUMULATIVE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF PROTRACTED URBAN CONFLICT ON PEOPLE AND SERVICES

People in urban areas rely on an intricate network of essential services. The growing sophistication of urban infrastructure and services like electricity, water, sewerage, waste disposal and health care are more dependent than ever on complex logistics and specialist personnel. The scale and interconnectedness of services and infrastructure is such that the disruption of one essential service during conflict can have major reverberating effects.

The ICRC knows from experience that protracted armed conflicts can, over time, have a seriously damaging cumulative impact on urban services, leading to long-term deterioration in their capacity, performance and effectiveness, with potentially severe consequences for people’s dignity, health, livelihoods and education.

Various factors combine to cause the inevitable deterioration of urban services in protracted conflicts: repeated damage to essential civilian infrastructure; difficulty in obtaining the necessary spare parts and consumables; the “brain drain” of skilled staff who are displaced or killed; and the obstacles to maintaining infrastructure over contested front lines. The impact on urban services is not limited to the places where the fighting is taking place: urban systems, particularly those that are already fragile, are strained to breaking point in cities that have to host large numbers of displaced people.

#### Recommendation 1

The ICRC urges Habitat III to recognize the interconnectedness of urban services and infrastructure, and the cumulative impact of protracted conflict on urban populations and services.

### FINANCE RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE THAT SECURES ‘DEVELOPMENT HOLDS’

One particular objective of our work is to minimize the cumulative impact of conflict on civilians. Our Water and Habitation unit (WatHab) has developed significant expertise and capacity in support for large-scale resilient infrastructure during armed conflict and situations of extreme fragility. About 60% of the ICRC’s infrastructure budget for 2016 is invested in urban areas, most of it to maintain water-supply networks. WatHab expertise has enabled the ICRC to maintain large-scale electricity, water, sewerage and waste disposal systems in many cities, towns and informal settlements affected by armed conflict.



ICRC team working to repair the water-supply system in the region (Southern Lebanon, 2006)

Our WatHab teams bolster the resilience of these systems to the shocks and supply shortages that make them so vulnerable during armed conflicts. By doing this, and by working with local authorities across lines of conflict, the ICRC and its partners in municipalities and public utilities have frequently been able to hold services at an effective level for large urban populations and prevent even greater suffering and development reversals.

Securing ‘development holds’ and preventing the total collapse of urban services is a major contribution to people’s lives in cities experiencing conflict. Maintenance of resilient infrastructure in the midst of conflict ensures the means of survival for many millions of people and preserves their dignity. It also makes a fundamental contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals by preventing even greater impoverishment, and dramatically reduces the costs of post-conflict development.

**READ MORE:**

*Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: a call for a better approach to assisting affected people*  
([www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/publication/p4249.htm](http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/publication/p4249.htm))

**SEE MORE:**

[youtu.be/eVCkzbZiYRw](https://youtu.be/eVCkzbZiYRw) and  
[youtu.be/yW5\\_8jc7Kxo](https://youtu.be/yW5_8jc7Kxo).

Financial support for this kind of sophisticated, large-scale infrastructure support does not fit easily into conventional categories of relief and development funding. Maintenance of such large and complex systems over the duration of a protracted conflict requires something closer to extensive, well-planned, multi-year development financing than to the short-term funding typically required for humanitarian activities.

International financial institutions and development agencies have to become more active in financing urban services, and setting up partnerships with them, during protracted conflicts and situations of extreme fragility. They must be willing to tolerate risk, and their funding has to be agile and long-term.

**Recommendation 2**

The ICRC urges Habitat III to support sustainable humanitarian responses that maintain resilient urban infrastructure and services during armed conflict, and to structure the financing for ensuring 'development holds' in conflict and situations of fragility.



Rehabilitation of a water reservoir in Nahr el Bared Palestinian camp, Tripoli (Lebanon, 2008)

J. Raich/ICRC

## 2. INCREASE RESPECT FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW DURING URBAN WARFARE



Widespread urban damage from an airstrike in Al-Hasbah neighbourhood, Sana'a (Yemen, 2015)

Some 50 million people are affected by armed conflict in urban areas. Many of them have become urban IDPs. Ensuring protection of these people, and the urban services they depend on, starts first and foremost with better respect for existing rules of international humanitarian law (IHL). Habitat III provides an opportunity to reaffirm these rules.

### **AVOID THE USE OF URBAN AREAS FOR MILITARY PURPOSES TO THE GREATEST POSSIBLE EXTENT**

IHL requires parties to armed conflicts to avoid – as much as possible – situating military objects within or near densely populated areas. This requirement is also relevant to State planning during peacetime. Urban planners should ensure that military objects are, whenever feasible, sited at a distance from populated areas to reduce the risk to civilians during any future armed conflict.

#### **Recommendation 3**

The ICRC urges Habitat III to remind States of the feasible precautionary measures that State authorities, urban planners and parties to armed conflict (including non-State armed groups) must take both during armed conflicts and in peacetime to ensure protection of civilians against the effects of attacks.

### **RECALL THE OBLIGATIONS OF PARTIES TO ARMED CONFLICTS IN URBAN WARFARE**

Urban warfare poses additional challenges for military commanders operating in accordance with IHL: they have to take into account the vulnerability of large numbers of people living in densely populated urban areas, and the intricacy and interconnectedness of essential services. The New Urban Agenda must recall the rules of IHL that regulate the conduct of hostilities to ensure better protection for civilians living in urban areas and to reduce the incidence of urban displacement. These rules include the following:

#### **THE PRINCIPLE OF DISTINCTION AND THE PROHIBITION AGAINST INDISCRIMINATE ATTACKS**

The principle of distinction requires parties to a conflict to distinguish between civilians and civilian objects on one hand, and combatants and military objects on the other. In urban areas, military objects are often situated among persons and objects protected under IHL. This means that targeting often requires greater consideration in urban warfare than in open battlefields. Indiscriminate attacks – such as area bombardments – which make no distinction between military objects and civilians or civilian objects, are prohibited.

### THE PRINCIPLE OF PROPORTIONALITY

Disproportionate attacks are prohibited, i.e. attacks that may be expected to cause excessive incidental harm to civilians in relation to the anticipated military advantage. The incidental harm that requires consideration is not limited to the killing, wounding or disabling of civilians; it also includes such matters as the long-term impact on infrastructure essential to the survival of the population.

The interdependence of urban systems means that the consequences of an attack are likely to spread far beyond the immediate vicinity of the impact zone, and affect large numbers of people in many different ways. For example, damage to one electricity sub-station can dramatically reduce tens of thousands of people's access to water and health care. All the foreseeable effects of an attack, direct and indirect, must be taken into account by a military commander in the proportionality assessment.

### THE PRINCIPLE OF PRECAUTIONS IN ATTACK

Belligerents must take all feasible precautions to avoid – or at least to minimize – incidental harm to civilians. They must choose their means and methods of attack with this principle in mind, and must adapt them to the urban environment in which they are fighting.

#### Recommendation 4

**The ICRC urges Habitat III to recall the obligation to respect IHL during armed conflicts in order to spare the civilian population and civilian objects in urban areas. The specific challenges posed by urban warfare should be taken into account in an urbanizing world.**

### AVOID THE USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS WITH A WIDE IMPACT AREA IN POPULATED AREAS

Explosive weapons with a wide impact area – large bombs and missiles; indirect-fire weapon systems such as mortars, rockets and artillery; multi-barrel rocket launchers; and certain types of improvised explosive devices – can have particularly devastating effects in urban areas. They are frequently used in urban warfare today. Their use is not specifically prohibited under IHL but must comply with IHL rules, including the prohibition of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks described above. The ICRC's experience shows that even when they are aimed at lawful military targets, explosive weapons with a wide impact area have a significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects in densely populated areas.

The ICRC has seen – in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Gaza and elsewhere – how the use of explosive weapons in urban areas exposes civilians to great risk of incidental or indiscriminate death, injury and lifelong disability.

Explosive weapons also have a significantly detrimental impact on infrastructure and essential services. Again, the interconnectedness of cities renders urban services vulnerable to a 'domino effect' of humanitarian consequences. This disruption often comes at the time when the service is most needed. The same blast that leads to a hospital being unable to provide effective services is also likely to cause large numbers of casualties who require hospital care.

Even after armed conflict ends, long-lasting damage to infrastructure that provides essential services and to the public health system, or the presence of explosive remnants of war, can seriously hinder sustainable urban development. In situations of protracted conflict, continuous bombardment by explosive weapons can cause massive displacement of populations and reverse a country's development level by decades. The conflict in Syria, for example, is thought to have already set the country's development back by at least 30 years.

#### SEE MORE:

[www.icrc.org/en/explosive-weapons-populated-areas](http://www.icrc.org/en/explosive-weapons-populated-areas)

#### Recommendation 5

The ICRC urges Habitat III to recognize the particularly damaging effect of explosive weapons in cities and to call for all parties to a conflict to avoid using explosive weapons with a wide impact area in densely populated areas.

### RESPECT THE RULES OF IHL ON SIEGE WARFARE

Some of the most extreme suffering in armed conflicts in today's towns and cities is experienced by people living under siege. IHL sets out clear rules about humanitarian conduct that are very relevant to siege. Many of these rules have not been respected in recent urban warfare so that starvation, family separation and the collapse of health and water services have caused severe humanitarian consequences for besieged populations.

#### Recommendation 6

The ICRC urges Habitat III to remind States of their obligations under IHL when laying siege urban areas.

### ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF HEALTH CARE AND HEALTH-CARE PROFESSIONALS

Health-care services are often disrupted by violence during armed conflict or other emergencies: health-care personnel are attacked or threatened, patients discriminated against, health-care facilities targeted and medical supplies looted.

These disruptions occur when health-care services are needed most. The short-term impact of such violence is obvious: medical staff are prevented from providing critical assistance and patients are deprived of essential care. The long-term impact is equally serious: hard-won gains, such as improvements in maternal health or reduction of child mortality, can be erased in minutes, causing significant setbacks for sustainable development.

IHL and other applicable international legal norms aim to safeguard access to impartial health care. IHL, where applicable, protects medical personnel and their equipment and means of transport, and hospitals and other medical facilities, from violence. It also provides protection for the performance of medical activities in line with medical ethics.

Habitat III is an opportunity to draw attention to the need to enhance the preparedness of health-care facilities. This can be done by implementing preventive and reactive measures, such as ensuring the safety of health-care infrastructure, efficient provision of supplies, and protection for patients and their relatives and for health-care personnel – including by training and other means.

#### READ MORE:

*Ensuring the preparedness and security of health-care facilities in armed conflict* ([shop.icrc.org/des-structures-medicales-plus-sures-et-mieux-preparees-aux-conflits-armes-et-autres-situations-d-urgence.html](http://shop.icrc.org/des-structures-medicales-plus-sures-et-mieux-preparees-aux-conflits-armes-et-autres-situations-d-urgence.html))

#### THE HEALTH CARE IN DANGER PROJECT

Health Care in Danger is an initiative of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement that aims to respond to violence committed against patients, health-care personnel and facilities, and medical vehicles in armed conflict or other emergencies. It brings together States, the health-care community, national and international organizations and other relevant stakeholders; by doing so, it also draws attention to the need to implement comprehensive and interconnected measures at local, national and international levels. Most recently, the urgent need to protect medical facilities and personnel was affirmed in Security Council Resolution 2286.

#### Recommendation 7

The ICRC urges Habitat III to reaffirm the need to ensure that urban health-care facilities can function in safety, by adopting preparatory and practical measures.

### 3. SUPPORT GOVERNMENTS WORKING WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CHRONIC URBAN VIOLENCE

Urban violence is a growing problem. Rapid and unregulated expansion means many urban centres – particularly in South Asia, Africa and Latin America – are struggling to absorb increasingly large populations. The result is the growth of slums and shanty towns which frequently appear as ungoverned and often violent places.

The ICRC welcomes the recognition, expressed in Issue Paper 3 on ‘safer cities’, of the severe humanitarian effects of urban violence, notably the very high rates of homicide and sexual violence. We share this concern. We have seen the widespread and direct consequences of chronic urban violence (large numbers of wounded or dead people); but we are also aware that it causes significant indirect harm to the population. These less visible indirect effects of urban violence are numerous, ranging from forced displacement to long-term psychosocial impacts. The ICRC seeks, in several of its operations, to mitigate the direct and indirect humanitarian consequences of such violence.

Urban violence, far too often, has an adverse impact on daily life and long-term development by hindering access to basic services. In violent contexts, local authorities often find it difficult to provide essential public services without interruption. When that is the case, people are cut off from the basic services without which it is extremely difficult to live in safety and with dignity.

The impact on the provision of health care can be severe. Fear of violence around the nearest health centre, the closure of health centres, the reluctance of health professionals to work in the areas affected and obstacles to outreach activities: all these can affect the delivery of health care and reduce health indicators.

Educational services are also affected by urban violence. In many areas where the ICRC works, incidents of armed violence put both students and teachers at risk, and school closures occur regularly. The psychological distress caused by close proximity to armed groups, and the behaviour of such groups towards a school community, can have a broad range of consequences, from higher rates of absenteeism and staff turnover to tensions within the school itself.



Discussing Safer Access with health workers in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, 2009)

Sustainable development becomes problematic when access to basic services is cut off as a result of violence. It is, therefore, essential that these indirect effects of violence be taken into account when setting the path for sustainable development in violent urban areas.

The difficulty armed violence creates for service delivery often leads local authorities to take a mainly law-enforcement approach. The ICRC recognizes the vital role law enforcement plays in these contexts, but it also believes that law enforcement can be effective only when it is part of a broader multidisciplinary response.

The Zero Draft's focus on 'the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility' is particularly relevant to situations of urban violence. The ICRC welcomes this aspect of the first guiding principle of the New Urban Agenda – "Leave no one behind" – which emphasizes the importance of providing equitable access to physical and social infrastructure. A comprehensive approach that fosters better understanding of the impact of urban violence – in humanitarian, social and financial terms – and empowers both service professionals and the communities themselves is needed if the principle of leaving no one behind is to be realized in situations of chronic urban violence.

### **MEASURE THE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF URBAN ARMED VIOLENCE**

To respond effectively to the consequences of armed violence in urban areas, a better understanding of its impact on people and on public services and development is needed. This requires all relevant government institutions to strengthen their capacity to collect and analyse reliable, representative and disaggregated data: the number of days that schools or health centres were closed, the number of cancelled family health home visits, the number of times emergency services were obstructed, and so on.

The ICRC has learnt from working in violent urban areas that such data are crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate the impact of armed violence. We assist the authorities concerned to reach a more detailed understanding of the effects of urban violence, which enables them to design more effective holistic responses.

#### **Recommendation 8**

**The ICRC urges Habitat III to draw attention to the humanitarian consequences of urban violence and to encourage State authorities to prioritize accurate measurement of its impact.**

### **TRAIN STAFF TO WORK SAFELY AND EFFECTIVELY IN AREAS AFFECTED BY CHRONIC URBAN VIOLENCE**

Effective delivery of services in violent areas requires staff to be adequately trained because urban centres with high levels of armed violence demand particular ways of working. Training personnel to identify risks and develop security management protocols can help to ensure the safety of service delivery agencies and their staff.

#### **TRAINING HEALTH PROFESSIONALS TO WORK IN AT-RISK AREAS IN RIO DE JANEIRO**

In Rio de Janeiro, the ICRC realized that violence in certain favelas – shanty towns or slums – had a significant impact on the provision of public health care. Between November 2012 and October 2013, six health centres reported that over 25,000 home visits by community health workers and almost 3000 clinical consultations had to be cancelled owing to armed violence. To lessen the risk from armed violence to health professionals and improve their access to such areas of the city, the ICRC and the Municipal Secretariat for Health ran a training course in the ICRC's Safer Access programme. The programme helps health professionals identify and classify the signs of imminent danger and determine what course of action would minimize the risk to their person. The programme was extended to all at-risk areas of the city, and 2,648 health professionals have now been trained in it. As a result, primary-health-care services have been provided to roughly 86% of the population in violence-affected areas.

The Zero Draft Outcome Document makes specific reference to the need to ensure that measures for safety and for preventing violence and crime are incorporated in urban planning. The ICRC welcomes this. We would like to add that those who deliver services in violent contexts play a crucial role and should be recognized, and that the necessity of training for those assigned to work in violent contexts also be included.

#### Recommendation 9

The ICRC urges Habitat III to include policies for training and providing support for staff to deliver services safely to people in violent urban areas.

### EMPOWER COMMUNITIES TO OBTAIN BASIC SERVICES SAFELY

Community members must also be given training and support in self-protection, to mitigate the risk to their safety and prevent harmful coping strategies. This empowerment approach aims to ensure that individual rights are respected, and that the people affected are agents of their own protection when they seek to obtain basic services safely. Such initiatives typically centre on the community and aim to foster community leadership, organization and unity. Young people may also be empowered by such community-based activities.

#### EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE ICRC'S CREATING HUMANITARIAN SPACES PROGRAMME IN JUÁREZ

In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the Ministry of Education, the Mexican Red Cross and the ICRC are empowering young people to develop safer behaviour in their daily lives. The programme encompasses psychosocial support and the acquisition of life skills such as critical thinking, active listening, tolerance and empathy, conflict management, teamwork and planning for one's future. This is supplemented by encouraging peer-to-peer support through recreational activities. The programme provides a safe space for students to talk about how chronic armed violence affects them.

This programme enables the ICRC to gain proximity to violence-affected communities in order to better understand their needs and adapt its humanitarian response accordingly. The programme is taught to teachers so that they can replicate it.

#### Recommendation 10

The ICRC urges Habitat III to include policies for empowering communities living in violent urban areas to obtain safer and more regular access to essential services.

A course on Safer Behaviour with young people in schools in Padre Miguel, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, 2009)



## NEXT STEPS

The ICRC hopes that this policy paper will make a useful contribution to States' deliberations on the links between armed conflict, urban violence and the New Urban Agenda. We look forward to taking part in further consultations and discussions before Habitat III. We stand ready to advise interested parties on any further details of the main points raised in this paper and its accompanying submissions.



Two men ride through a severely damaged urban area in Taiz (Yemen, 2015)