1.5 Urban actors

Cities are by their nature home to a wide diversity of people and groups, many of whom may well become involved in crises – and crisis response – in a variety of ways. This section identifies the different actors that engage in crises. It identifies categories of urban actors and their facets. It discusses four groups: government at its different levels, emergent (voluntary) groups, businesses and the informal sector.

This section closely aligns to others describing how different actors engage with one another. Section 2.1, on coordination, discusses how different actors co-exist and work with one another; Section 1.2.2, on violence, discusses gangs; Section 1.1 looks at different ways of understanding the city and using a systems approach; Section 3.2 on area-based
approaches (ABAs) describes how actors engage throughout the project management cycle; and Section 3.3 on cash concerns working with private sector organisations.

### 1.5.1 Categories of urban actors

There are a number of ways to categorise the wide diversity of actors present in the city. Figure 1.6 (page 054) identifies and organises different national actors according to three groupings: the public sector, the private sector and civil society.

**International actors**

International actors include:

- Donors (governments, collective fund-raising entities, individual groups).
- UN organisations.
- The Red Cross/Red Crescent: ICRC (in cases of conflict) and IFRC.
- International NGOs.
- Private sector organisations involved in recovery and reconstruction and private security.
- Search and rescue teams.
- Faith-based organisations.
- Interested individuals.

**Government**

Governments at their various levels are inevitably critical actors. National governments set national policies and may intervene in the aftermath of large-scale disasters. City governments are charged with municipal management. This is particularly important in post-disaster recovery, and in the provision of services to displaced people. A recurring theme throughout this Good Practice Review is the need for stronger coordination with local government in particular, and within local government departments, for example planning departments (see Section 2.1 on coordination).


Figure 1.6 **Actors in the city**

![Diagram showing various actors in the city](image)

Emergent (volunteer) groups

Recent research has categorised people who organise themselves after a disaster as ‘emergent groups’. Emergent groups are people who come together, often spontaneously, immediately after a disaster to perform first aid and provide water, food, warmth and shelter. Emergent groups may themselves be affected by disaster. Such groups may disappear as spontaneously as they appear (though not always, as illustrated below). A key point to note is that emergent groups are voluntary. Membership is constantly changing; they form and disband quickly, there is usually little or no clarity on leadership, and the focus of work is usually short-term (on immediate needs), rather than long-term.

Depending on the crisis, the activities of emergent groups may be on a large scale. For example, following the 1999 earthquake in north-eastern Turkey ‘relief and rescue activities were carried out mainly by neighbours, relatives, spontaneously formed volunteer groups and some NGOs’. One survey found that ‘34 per cent of earthquake victims interviewed said that they received most help immediately after the earthquake from family members and neighbours, as well as through their own efforts; only 10.3 per cent mentioned help from state authorities’.

Box 1.15  Actors after the Nepal earthquakes

Following the earthquakes that struck Nepal in 2015, a study of five urban settlements found that actors engaged in immediate relief comprised a combination of neighbourhood residents, NGOs and local civil society organisations. Activities included rubble clearance and repairs to infrastructure and buildings. The study found that ‘Lacking support from the government’s National Reconstruction Authority, all five settlements drew on informal governance structures to form community reconstruction and planning committees and collaborative relationships with NGOs and other organisations, loosely coordinated with local government’.


96  Ibid.
Businesses

Private sector organisations or businesses (defined here as for-profit organisations or individuals) are major actors in cities. They range from multinationals with headquarters in cities to small and medium-sized businesses. They also include people working in the informal sector.

The role of businesses during and after crises is wide-ranging and varied, from post-disaster reconstruction and supplying goods to security contracting and providing IT. Businesses can be vital and high-profile: following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the mobile phone company Digicel was instrumental in the rebuilding of the iconic Iron Market in Port-au-Prince. Research following the earthquake concluded that ‘Increasing collaboration between the private sector, humanitarian organisations and governments in order to scale up and better tackle urban post disaster recovery using a fundamentally “private approach” offers opportunities for more effective responses for the next urban disaster’.97

Recent research finds that the ‘greatest direct contribution [of businesses] has come in the form of new technologies and other innovations and the sharing of technical capacities in areas such as logistics, telecommunications and cash transfers. In addition, businesses, as seen in the growth of social enterprises, are increasingly developing models which are commercial in nature but which ultimately help to meet humanitarian needs and reduce vulnerability to future disasters.’98 The same research also identified the benefits of and barriers to private sector engagement for humanitarian action, which are summarised below:

Benefits

- Speed/timeliness
- Coverage
- Durability
- Value for money
- Innovation and transformation.

Barriers

- Few community-wide interlocutors


• Limited forums for interaction
• Limited awareness of novel partnerships
• Lack of clarity in decision-making
• Partnerships remain at headquarters level
• Aid agency vetting (due diligence) requirements.

**Actors in the informal economy**

The informal sector often accounts for an enormous portion of economic activity in many cities in low- and middle-income countries. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa the International Labour Organization estimates that over 66% of people work in the urban informal sector.\(^99\)

The informal sector, crises and disasters are closely linked. High inflation and unemployment during conflict can lead to a growth in the informal sector, which might provide one of the few sources of affordable goods and food. Usually, as conflicts continue, and in post-conflict settings, the informal economy expands to provide livelihood opportunities to vulnerable people, such as selling items of food and clothing, or selling their labour.

Opportunities for humanitarian agencies to engage with actors in the informal economy are often not taken up, except perhaps via links with local NGOs and civil society organisations. One reason for this is that informal actors are by definition considered to be outside the formal system. For example, people squatting on public land may be prevented from getting help from agencies engaged in shelter recovery, since those agencies may be unable to secure the necessary government permissions to build in such locations. This is a significant issue given the large numbers of people living in informal urban settlements (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2 on housing, land and property rights and shelter and settlements for further discussion).

Yet there are opportunities for engagement: informal markets, for instance, are often up and running immediately after a disaster, given that people need to buy and sell goods to survive.\(^100\) Assistance may also be provided to communities who relocate in new areas (see the Canaan example following the Haiti earthquake, in Section 4.2 on shelter and settlements).

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