

Urban displacement and development: moving the debate forward

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark, 7–8 February 2013

On 7 and 8 February 2013 the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a conference in Copenhagen on behalf of DANIDA and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) of the Overseas Development Institute. The event presented the findings of the [Sanctuary in the city](#) project, supported by DANIDA, which explored the implications of protracted urban displacement. Overriding themes that emerged over the two days included the need to improve cooperation and collaboration between development and humanitarian actors, develop innovative approaches or alternatives to durable solutions and find ways to mainstream long-term, developmental, rights-based responses to urban displacement.

At the level of ‘framing’ the problem, it is necessary to change the narrative of victimhood that accompanies displacement and recognise the resilience and ingenuity displaced people often display. It also means challenging the common assumption that migration is a negative phenomenon for cities, that it is better for host states for the displaced to be in camps, and that the displaced in cities do not need assistance.

The discussion also dwelt on the need for a more pragmatic approach by the international community that focuses on the recognition of *de facto* processes of integration, and the importance of voluntary mobility for generating and sustaining livelihoods. Based on the body of experience dealing with development-induced displacement, important lessons were drawn about the relationship between livelihoods, social networks, forced movement and citizen participation in urban governance.

The roles that different actors play and the contributions they can make was a recurrent theme. Local authorities have the potential to represent the different and often conflicting interests in urban areas, and are also well placed to coordinate the involvement of different stakeholders. Humanitarian initiatives to improve the response were also discussed, alongside the role development actors play in addressing urban displacement. Although displacement is typically protracted and the major needs of the displaced are primarily developmental, donors and other international actors persist in seeing displacement as a humanitarian concern. However, the current, mainly humanitarian, approach is not working and an alternate long-term strategy is needed. The solution lies in shifting policymakers’ thinking, not in further debates in humanitarian forums.

The conference concluded with a number of clear recommendations for changing current approaches to urban displacement, galvanising greater collaboration across the international community, and for moving these crucial debates into forums in the development sphere and at field level.