

Cities as key policy actors: Strengthening urban responses to displacement in the Global South



Figure 1: Bhola slum in Dhaka shortly before its final demolition (Tasfiq Mahmood, 2019)

Key highlights

- **Cities as ‘first responders’:** Urban areas host most displaced populations, especially in the Global South, placing municipalities and local authorities at the frontline of reception, protection and inclusion.
- **Persistent gaps in authority and resources:** Despite their central role, urban actors often lack formal mandates, adequate resources and representation in policymaking arenas. Secondary and intermediary cities, in particular, remain overlooked in migration governance and funding streams.
- **An urgent policy shift:** Recognising and empowering cities as strategic partners is essential to support long-term inclusion and urban transformation. This can be achieved through locally anchored multi-stakeholder partnerships, investments in inclusive urban planning and development, sustained support for community-led initiatives, and the reinforcement of the agency of displaced populations and local actors.

Cities as ‘first responders’: Urban responses to displacement

Urban areas are increasingly the primary destination for displaced populations, contributing to urban social, economic and cultural development, but also reinforcing pre-existing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited resources and complex community relations.^{1,2} Local authorities are frequently the first point of contact for displaced persons, placing them at the frontlines of response, integration and long-term development, particularly in the Global South.^{3,4} However, cities often remain constrained by legal and policy frameworks that are decided at the national and international level, limited support and resources and political opposition.^{5,6} **This mismatch between responsibility and authority has created a gap in**

¹ IOM. (2015). *World Migration Report 2015 – Migrants and cities: New partnerships to manage mobility*. <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2015-migrants-and-cities-new-partnerships-manage-mobility>

² Marquez, P. V. (2016). *Mental health among displaced people and refugees: Making the case for action at the World Bank Group*. <https://doi.org/10.1596/25854>

³ Buscher, D. (2018). *Refuge in the city*. *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute*, 7(12). <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7120263>

⁴ FGSES-UM6P. (2025, February 14). *Cities and forced displacement from the perspectives of the Global South and Global North* [Podcast]. SoundCloud. <https://soundcloud.com/fgses-um6p/cities-and-forced-displacement-from-the-perspectives-of-the-global-south-and-global-north>

⁵ Collyer, M. (2025). *Cities and forced displacement from the perspectives of the Global South and Global North* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEjf9-4LtQU>

⁶ Stürner-Siovitz, J. (2025). *Cities and forced displacement from the perspectives of the Global South and Global North* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEjf9-4LtQU>

governance.⁶ Yet it is within this gap that cities demonstrate responsibility, pragmatism and innovation, forming partnerships and supporting community-led initiatives that respond to the urgent and complex needs and realities of displaced populations.^{4,7}

Between realities and mandates: Key challenges in cities' responses to displacement in the Global South

1. **Fragmented governance and unclear mandates:** Urban authorities are at the forefront of displacement response but often lack formal mandates or resources to act.^{6,7} National policies rarely integrate cities into migration planning, leaving them to interpret legal frameworks inconsistently and navigate responsibilities without the necessary support.⁶ This ambiguity contributes to patchy service provision and coordination, limiting long-term urban planning and hindering the meaningful inclusion of displaced populations.^{4,7}
2. **Neglect of secondary or intermediary cities:** The ability of secondary or intermediary cities⁵ to foster sustainable integration of displaced populations is often undermined by two interconnected dynamics. First, many of these cities suffer from structural economic fragility, such as persistent unemployment and chronic underinvestment, which restrict opportunities for durable inclusion and risk confining responses to short-term humanitarian assistance.^{4,7} Second, policies and investments tend to prioritise capital or border cities, overlooking secondary or intermediary cities⁸ that play critical roles in migration flows and often host large numbers of migrants and displaced persons. As a result, these cities often face increased pressure due to fewer resources, limited funding and rising political tension.^{6,7} However, if adequately supported, their adaptability and proximity to both host and displaced communities offer unique opportunities for new forms of urban planning and innovation that is often not possible in capital cities.^{5,6}
3. **Community-led support as both a strength and a limitation:** Community-led and localised responses frequently fill national governance gaps.^{6,7} Whether through food aid, shelter provision or social assistance, these responses are often essential for survival but can also be seen as acts of resistance and efforts to claim space and dignity.⁷ However, their ad hoc nature means they can be unstable, unevenly distributed and lack institutional backing. While they reflect resilience and solidarity, they also risk masking systemic barriers to the long-term integration of displaced persons.⁷
4. **Detrimental effects of internal dispersal strategies:** Some countries implement an internal dispersal strategy out of humanitarian or logistical necessity, relocating migrants from border cities to more remote, inland areas. However, these extra-legal state practices often deepen exclusion, pushing displaced populations into legal grey zones and areas with weak basic services.⁷ This can result in heightened vulnerability, forced invisibility and the erosion of rights-based governance.⁷

Recommendations for policymakers and implementing stakeholders

Cities play a critical role in governing displacement and, therefore, should be treated as full partners in national and international policymaking. The fragmentation of responsibilities across governance levels leads to inconsistent outcomes for displaced people and missed opportunities for much-needed support and inclusion. Based on the podcast discussion,⁴ the presentations and the exchange during the webinar,⁹ we are proposing five key policy priorities:

1. **Formal recognition of urban actors in migration governance:** Urban actors are frequently the first responders to displacement, yet many operate without a clear mandate or legal authority to act. Despite this, local actors in intermediary or secondary cities, in particular, play a crucial role in ensuring access to housing, basic services and protection.^{5,6,7} Recognising cities as key political actors in migration governance would enable them to engage more meaningfully in policy design, resource allocation and implementation.^{5,6}

⁷ El Arabi, S. (2025). *Cities and forced displacement from the perspectives of the Global South and Global North* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEjf9-4LtOU>

⁸ Secondary or intermediary cities are mid-sized urban centres, typically with around 100,000 people, that connect rural areas to capital cities through flows of goods, ideas and capital. These cities often receive limited political attention or economic investment, despite hosting significant numbers of migrants and forcibly displaced persons.^{5,6}

⁹ IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. (2025, April 29). *Cities and forced displacement from the perspectives of the Global South and Global North* [Webinar]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEjf9-4LtOU>

2. **Strengthen local and intercity coordination:** Local responses to migration and displacement often involve a wide range of actors, including municipalities, civil society organisations, informal networks, migrant and refugee-led associations and international agencies. However, the absence of clear coordination mechanisms can result in duplication, inefficiencies or even tensions between stakeholders.^{7,10} Establishing municipal-level platforms or focal points dedicated to the topics of migration and displacement can help align priorities, share knowledge and facilitate collaborative planning and implementation.⁶ In addition, enhanced collaboration between cities can also strengthen migration governance by enabling the sharing of good practices, pooling of resources and co-development of strategies for reception and inclusion.^{4,6,7} Rather than creating new structures, existing global migration city networks such as the [Mayors Migration Council](#) (MMC), [United Cities and Local Governments](#) (UCLG) and the [Mayors Mechanism](#) could intensify their efforts to support city leadership from the Global South, while regional networks such as [UCLG Africa](#), [UCLG Asia-Pacific](#) and [MERCOSUR](#) could further expand their focus on migration and displacement.⁶

Joint training programmes for young professionals

Current academic programmes are often too theoretical, while local actors lack trained personnel. Investing in joint training programmes on migration governance for young professionals can enhance coordination at the local level by building a shared knowledge base and creating bridges between universities, municipalities and civil society.⁶

3. **Invest in inclusive urban planning, development and social cohesion:** Displaced populations often settle in areas with weak infrastructure and limited basic service provision.^{4,7} This can include precarious living conditions, often on the streets, in informal settlements or in temporary shelters, where access to healthcare, education and legal assistance is constrained. As a result, developing sustainable urban housing policies that are integrated into social housing strategies and urban planning is crucial. Such policies must ensure dignified living conditions, reduce spatial segregation and enable displaced populations to establish themselves within the urban fabric alongside host communities.^{4,7} Investments in inclusive planning and development therefore not only support displaced populations but also benefit host communities, fostering solidarity and social cohesion.^{4,6,10} As such, urban responses to displacement must go beyond emergency humanitarian responses and short-term assistance to become genuine drivers of inclusion, resilience and social transformation. Promoting social cohesion is not only about providing basic services but about creating environments where stigma and xenophobia are actively challenged, and where equal access to resources, opportunities and fundamental rights—education, health, housing, justice and employment—is guaranteed.^{6,7,10}

Urban Diagnostic Tool (UDT) by IOM

The Urban Diagnostic Tool (UDT), currently implemented by IOM Morocco in the Souss-Massa region, in collaboration with the Municipality of Agadir and neighbouring cities, aims to facilitate the social economic integration of migrants in cities by identifying and addressing obstacles in their access to basic services, employment, health, education, social cohesion, wellbeing, while also strengthening migration governance and participation in local development.¹⁰

4. **Integrate the voices of displaced persons and migrants, research and facilitate grassroots and civil society initiatives:** Migration governance policies are more effective and legitimate when they build on the lived experiences of displaced people and migrants themselves.⁷ Establishing regular consultation mechanisms with migrants helps tailor responses to their real needs and strengthens their civic participation and empowerment. In parallel, research and knowledge produced by research institutions provide essential analysis to inform decision-making and anticipate long-term impacts. Informal and community-led responses should also be recognised as playing a central role in meeting the needs of displaced populations, particularly in settings where institutional support is lacking or national frameworks are missing.⁷ These can include food distributions, language classes and legal assistance provided by local associations. While these initiatives are often born out of necessity, they represent important sites of resilience and recognition of human rights irrespective of a person's administrative status.⁷ Facilitating these efforts can strengthen the overall support for displaced populations, creating bridges between formal and informal systems of care.^{6,7}

5. **Adopt intersectional approaches for the inclusion and protection of displaced persons:** Displaced persons often experience various, intersecting vulnerabilities that are shaped by gender, age and access to basic services and livelihood opportunities.^{7,10} Women displaced alone or with children, for instance, face compounded challenges linked to caregiving responsibilities, limited access to livelihood opportunities and exposure to gender-based violence. Men,

¹⁰ Hasnaoui, H. (2025). *Cities and forced displacement from the perspectives of the Global South and Global North* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEJf9-4LtQU>

particularly young men, are both the dominant perpetrators of urban violence and its most frequent victims. Policymakers and stakeholders should therefore adopt intersectional strategies that prioritise protection, empowerment and inclusion of all groups. This entails integrating gender- and age-sensitive urban planning through, for instance, expanding access to safe and affordable childcare, healthcare and education, ensuring protection against gender-based violence, and tailored employment and social programmes.^{6,7,10}

Conclusion: Reframing the urban response to displacement

Cities have increasingly become the ‘first responders’ to displacement, where local authorities and actors play a central role in supporting displaced populations out of necessity, responsibility and solidarity. However, **a shift is needed in migration governance and policymaking**: one that perceives cities not just as passive recipients of migrants and displaced persons or mere implementers of (inter)national policies, but as full partners in inclusive planning and development. Strengthening the role of urban actors, particularly in intermediary or secondary cities, will be essential in moving beyond short-term crisis management and response toward long-term planning, resilience and inclusion by centralising the human rights and everyday realities of displaced populations.

This policy brief was authored by the [IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at Mohammed VI Polytechnic University \(UM6P\)](#)'s team, in close collaboration with the podcast and webinar contributors:

- Prof. Michael Collyer outlined key literature that has informed his research on cities and displacement and highlighted the historical and political significance of secondary cities in migration governance.
- Dr. Janina Stürner-Siovitx presented findings from a multi-country research project on intermediary cities in Africa, showing how local governments engage in multi-stakeholder partnerships to overcome limitations that result from lack of formal mandates to address urban migration and displacement.
- Dr. Sofia El Arabi explored how secondary cities in Morocco respond to the displacement of sub-Saharan migrants within the context of externalised European border security. She highlighted and analysed Morocco's internal dispersal strategy and foregrounded migrants' active role in shaping urban inclusion.
- Hicham Hasnaoui provided an overview of migration dynamics in North Africa and IOM's work on urban integration in Moroccan cities through the implementation of the Urban Diagnostic Tool

(UDT). He also highlighted and analysed the role of national and local authorities, municipalities and regions in strengthening migration governance.

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The *UM6P Research Chair's 2025 Webinar Series* aims to foster dialogue between researchers, policymakers and practitioners from both the Global North and the Global South. While most forcibly displaced people reside in the Global South, research on migration and displacement remains largely shaped by the Global North, where funding, policy and theoretical frameworks dominate. This focus often sidelines the complex realities and inequalities shaping migration and displacement in the Global South. The Webinar Series, hosted by the IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at UM6P, aims to address this imbalance by generating regionally grounded insights to inform policy development.