

NAVIGATING URBAN COMPLEXITY: CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN PLANNING REFUGEE AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS IN YEMEN AND BANGLADESH

Abstract

The crisis of global refugees and internally displaced people represents an increasingly paramount concern of worldwide significance. Armed conflicts, natural disasters, and political unrest are some of the contributing factors that have forced an enormous number of people to flee their homes in search of safety. In response to this dilemma, many nations and international organizations have hastily established temporary camps and settlements, often neglecting critical humanitarian and urban design considerations. This approach engenders significant contemporary urban planning challenges, as it necessitates the accommodation of large displaced people within a short timeframe. This study explores the many challenges facing refugees and internally displaced people in Yemen and Bangladesh, which include providing shelter, infrastructure, and basic services to large numbers of people who were forced to flee their homes. The two countries stand out dealing with significant urban planning issues in their efforts to solve the complicated issue of resettlement. The research examines the primary contemporary urban planning difficulties faced by both nations, providing insight into the complex issue of addressing the varied demands of refugees and displaced individuals under unique socio-political and environmental circumstances. Through an analysis of the experiences of Yemen and Bangladesh, as well as the collection of data from archives, newspapers, and published reports, this research aims to shed light on the intricate challenges involved in addressing the urgent needs of displaced people in different contexts. Additionally, the objective is to provide a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion surrounding global refugee crises and the associated necessities within the field of urban planning.

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Keywords

Refugees, internally displaced people, refugee camps, urban planning, housing

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the global refugee and displaced people crisis, which is a direct result of the conflicts and climate change that numerous nations are facing. According to a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2018, there was a large rise in the worldwide number of individuals forcibly displaced from 43.3 million in 2009 to 70.8 million in 2018. Additionally, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced globally due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations by the end of 2022 (Figure 1).



Figure 1: 108.4 million forcibly displaced worldwide. (Source: UNHCR Global Trends 2022, 2023.)

This signifies a rise of 19 million individuals compared to the end of 2021 and, according to UNHCR data on forced displacement, is the most substantial inter-year increase ever recorded. Conflicts in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and South Sudan, as well as the massive flow of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2017, have all contributed to this displacement (UNHCR, 2018). As millions are forced to leave their homes, frequently in deplorable conditions, the integration of architectural considerations and innovative, forward-thinking urban planning has assumed an unprecedented level of significance.

Numerous nations and humanitarian organizations, under the guidance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, work to provide shelter for a large number of refugees and internally displaced individuals through the establishment of provisional camps and settlements. However, in challenging scenarios characterized by both the huge number of individuals and adverse climatic conditions, critical humanitarian factors and urban planning considerations are frequently ignored (Podesta, 2019). Refugees are staying in these camps far longer than they should, diminishing its effectiveness as a temporary solution. Many camps across the world have grown into intricate urban environments that are hard to tell apart from actual cities. Economic considerations typically drive the rapid, low-cost, and efficient construction of camps to house as many people as possible in the shortest amount of time. Although these camps are designed temporarily for relocation, they are considered a form of urban housing (Dalal, 2022). Hence, the approach of creating camps that meet the needs of refugees and displaced persons in terms of services, protection, and promoting their engagement with the wider community is considered one of the most important challenges facing planners, international organizations, and policymakers.

The paper examines the contemporary urban challenges that confront refugees and internally displaced individuals in Yemen and Bangladesh. These challenges mostly revolve around providing shelter, infrastructure, climate conditions, and cultural and social constraints. The two countries have witnessed different dynamics of refugees and displaced persons, with Yemen containing many camps for people displaced from the protracted conflict, and Bangladesh hosting Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.

Therefore, the study will focus on the most important urban problems faced by displaced refugees residing in camps, as well as the obstacles facing states and planners in finding permanent and sustainable solutions for these individuals.

IDPs and Refugee Camps

The issue concerning refugee camps and displaced individuals possesses significant historical roots and is intricately connected to many conflicts, wars, and humanitarian emergencies across various historical periods (Ouzan, 2004). The creation of temporary camps as a means to accommodate displaced individuals and refugees has become more prominent since the end of World War II. During this period, a substantial number of individuals in Europe became homeless due to the effects of war, necessitating their placement in camps. Sometimes, military barracks were utilized as a means of providing refuge for individuals who had been displaced. The final camp, predominantly occupied by individuals of Jewish descent, was officially closed down in 1957 (Ouzan, 2004).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Refugee camps are temporary facilities that are built with the purpose of immediately offering safety and aid to those who are forced to flee their homes as a result of armed conflict, persecution, acts of violence, or natural calamities. Although refugee camps are designed to provide a safe environment and meet basic needs such as food, water, housing, and healthcare (Figure 2), they often end up becoming permanent settlements due to the special conditions that force people to flee their homes and the long period of their displacement. These communities have the potential to develop into fully established cities that endure for a long period.

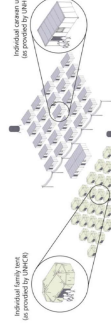


Figure 2: The prevailing model for camp planning according to UNHCR standards. (Source: Alkwer, 2023.)

Architects and urban planners have recently shown a notable surge in interest in the spatial design and planning of refugee camps. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the spatial layout of modern refugee and internally displaced persons camps has only made little progress since the 1940s (Maliki, 1995). There is a lack of agreement over the exact definition of the size of a refugee camp. These camps are characterized as temporary, transient, and semi-permanent in nature. They function as sites located in the transitional zone "between war and city" (Agler, 2002).

As a result, this had a significant influence on the design considerations for the camps, making them insufficient in meeting the requirements of refugees and forcibly displaced individuals. In response to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' plan for the camps, Jim Kennedy voiced his disagreement. His careful research has shown how inadequate the current planning standards are, drawing attention to possible problems that may develop when the number of migrants continues to outstrip the originally allocated area (Kennedy, 2005). Thus, the primary concern facing camp planners and administrators revolves around the provision of a secure and conducive environment.

What can be concluded from this is that the issue of refugees and displaced individuals is not a recent phenomenon, but rather has its roots in ancient history. Hence, this situation provides evidence that the ongoing dilemma remains, making it difficult to consider these camps as temporary shelters. Instead, we need to think about long-term solutions when planning and managing these camps so that we can adapt to the changing dynamics of displacement crises.

Camps and Urban Planning

A key factor that drives planners to identify appropriate approaches for responding to the needs of refugees and displaced individuals is the understanding of urban planning theories and definitions in relation to the creation of shelters for these groups. The primary objective is to examine a range of urban planning theories that connect to the physical construction of cities.

It is important to note that there are several different viewpoints within the topic that should be taken into consideration. Urban planning is defined by John Nolen as "The attempt to exert a well-considered control on behalf of the people of a city over the development of their physical environment as a whole" (Nolen, 1916). Furthermore, Stevenson and Sutton (2011) argue that urban planning theory presents a comprehensive and significant consideration of the interconnection between individuals and their built surroundings.

Diverse theories have appeared as well in the space between postmodernism and modernism, where modernism is linked to the twentieth-century period and focuses on aesthetics without taking into account the needs of individuals. Le Corbusier, the French architect, is considered an icon of the modernist movement, and large interventions and comprehensive design characterized his plans. However, modernism has been criticized for its heavy focus on the physical environment without attention to the social environment.

Modernist city design shows a preference for isolated residential complexes and car-dominated streets, leading to social segregation. In the postmodern period, a counter-modernist movement addressed and emphasized the importance of spontaneous social interaction and community involvement in planning processes (Watson, 2009). Refugee camps represent a form of urban housing, especially since some of them have reached the size of a city. Therefore, learning about the principles of urban planning and linking them to the life practices of refugees and displaced people is extremely important. Especially since these practices or activities have a significant impact on the social and spatial structure of the place and give us a vision for constructing the idea of the place (Aburamadan et al., 2020).

Therefore, conducting an in-depth study of these theories, including an examination of their accomplishments and weaknesses will provide a more comprehensive understanding of urban planning and its potential application in the design and planning of refugee and internally displaced persons camps, regardless of their temporary or permanent. Additionally, this would facilitate the development of more effective solutions that accommodate the specific needs of the camp people living in thus enhancing the connection between individuals and their surrounding physical environment.

Refugees in Bangladesh and IDPs in Yemen as Case Studies

Before we discuss the urban planning challenges facing IDPs in Yemen and Bangladesh refugees and how they make it difficult for planners and policymakers to build camps for them. We need first distinguish these two displacement scenarios by location and legal status. According to The UN Refugee Agency and The UN Human Rights Office, a refugee is someone who was forced to flee his home due to conflict or violence. Refugees cross international borders in search of safety in another country. While the internally displaced person is forced to flee his home but remains inside his country and under the protection of his government.

ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS IN BANGLADESH

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh began in earnest in 2017 (Khatun, 2017) when a series of violent occurrences in Myanmar's Rakhine state forced a large number of Rohingya Muslims to flee across the border into Bangladesh. According to the most recent numbers made available by the (UNHCR), there are close to 931,000 Rohingya refugees currently living in refugee camps in the Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas of Cox's Bazar (Figure 3). Based on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2023), this area hosts the largest number of refugees worldwide. Over 630,000 Rohingya refugees are currently living in the Kutupalong Balukhali refugee camp in Ukhiya, making it the largest and most densely occupied refugee camp in the world (Islam et al., 2021).

Many Rohingya people have fled to Bangladesh, particularly the area around Cox's Bazar, where they hope to find safety. As the number of refugees continues to rise exponentially, a humanitarian and urban crisis is emerging due to a lack of resources and inadequate facilities to house such a large population.

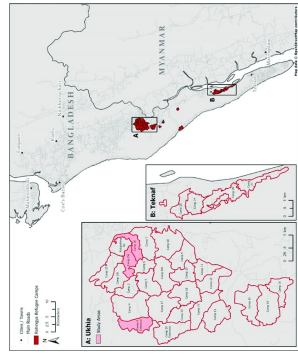


Figure 3: Location map of Cox's Bazar with the Rohingya refugee camps. (Source: Akhter et al., 2020.)

CONTEMPORARY URBAN PLANNING CHALLENGES FACE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMPS IN BANGLADESH:

The potential risk associated with landslides.

Considering the massive influx of people and the limited capacity of existing camps, refugees are often forced to look for other shelter choices such as taking hillside areas and engaging in random forest clearance for building materials (UNDP, 2017). According to research by the United Nations Development Program, there has been a drastic decline in vegetation in the highlands. Deforestation has been documented on about half of the hills in the flow zone (Center for Policy Dialogue, 2017). Erosion has also harmed other areas in the neighborhood of the camps. Hill-cutting activities provide a constant risk of causing landslides. A major result of the Rohingya crisis has been an increase in landslides (Figure 4).

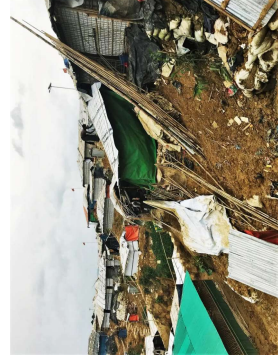


Figure 4: Site of a landslide in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. (Source: Human Rights Watch, 2018.)

Overcrowding and its impact on infrastructure.

The rapid arrival of refugees frequently results in the overcrowding of camps, hence exerting significant strain on current infrastructure and services. The issue of overcrowding presents several hurdles, including a shortage of fundamental resources such as food, clean water, and healthcare, alongside complications pertaining to sanitation and housing (Mahmood et al., 2017).

Effects of climate change and exposure to natural disasters.

Climate change might make natural disasters more often and destructive, increasing an already dire environmental situation. Hurricanes and floods are common in the areas where many of the camps are located (Alam et al., 2020) (Figure 5). Refugees are particularly affected due to the unstable state of their housing situation. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021), more than 21,000 refugees were "affected" by the flooding, and more than 4,000 shelters were either damaged or destroyed. Hundreds of facilities, including schools, hospitals, and sanitary services, were reportedly destroyed or severely damaged, forcing more than 13,000 people into the camps.

Humanitarian challenges and lack of privacy.

The living conditions within the Rohingya camps are characterized by significant challenges and inadequate quality. Individuals encounter challenges such as the issue of overcrowding, insufficiency in shelter provisions, restricted availability of sanitation facilities, limited access to clean water resources, inadequate healthcare accessibility, and a lack of fundamental services (Livelihoods Working Groups, 2018). These circumstances increase their susceptibility to illnesses, exploitation, and issues related to safety.

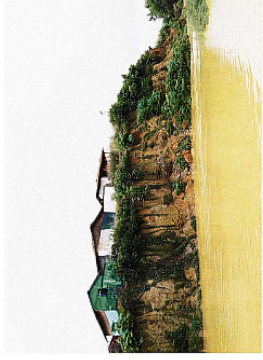


Figure 5: Heavy flooding hits Rohingya refugee camps. (Source: Quader et al., 2020.)

IDP CAMPS IN YEMEN

Yemen is facing a huge internal displacement issue, affecting millions of its people. The extended duration of nine years of continuous conflict has resulted in significant physical and human casualties. An estimated 23.4 million people in Yemen, or 73% of the overall population, currently rely on humanitarian aid (UNHCR, 2023). About 4.5 million Yemenis had been displaced within the country by 2022 due to military operations (UNHCR accessed, 2023; HLP WG, 2022). The UNHCR United Nations Refugee Agency (2023) reports that around 2,300 locations provide shelter for internally displaced people, accommodating 1.5 million people (Figure 6). These sites consist of emergency tents, shelters, and informal settlements, and unfortunately, lack sufficient access to basic services. Urban planners and policymakers face enormous challenges in attempting to house the displaced population within the country due to a lack of appropriate housing options, a shortage of basic services, and adverse weather conditions (Sowers et al., 2021).

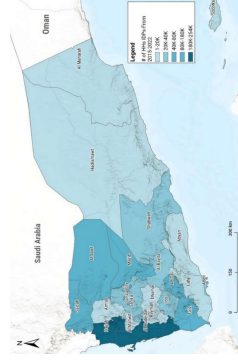


Figure 6: A map of Yemen showing the distribution of IDPs across the country. (Source: ACAPS Yemen Analysis Hub core dataset.)

CHALLENGES OF URBAN PLANNING IN ESTABLISHING CAMPS FOR IDPS IN YEMEN:

- **Limited resources and infrastructure.** Yemen is recognized as one of the poorest countries in the Middle East, characterized by a significant scarcity of economic resources (Alassar et al., 2020). Consequently, the country has significant challenges in its ability to effectively address the housing, infrastructure, and service needs of its displaced people (Figure 7). The ongoing war has also resulted in significant damage to critical urban infrastructure, encompassing residential structures, transportation grids, water distribution networks, and sanitation facilities (Sowers et al., 2021).

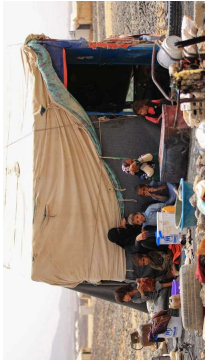


Figure 7: An internally displaced Yemeni family sits outside their shelter at Al-Suwaidi camp in Marib city, Yemen. (Source: UNHCR, 2021.)

- **Land tenure and property rights.** Yemen is marked by the existence of tribal communities, where the occurrence of displacement frequently leads to problems

around land and property rights. Tribal land claims are resulting in tensions and the potential for additional displacements (ACAPS, 2023). Hence, the resolution of these conflicts and the construction of clear frameworks for property rights present a substantial challenge for the state and urban planners.

- **Informal shelters.** As a result of the significant increase in the number of displaced Yemeni individuals, and the extreme poverty they live in, which prevents them from finding more suitable housing, displaced families find themselves living in informal settlements, often in basic forms of informal camps (Elayah et al., 2021) (Figure 8). It has been noted that current emergency shelter facilities are largely insufficient to withstand long periods of displacement and multiple displacements, especially under difficult climatic conditions.

- **Religious and social limitations.** The complexities associated with the construction of camps for displaced individuals in Yemen encompass a range of factors, including social conventions, traditions, religious standards, and privacy issues. Yemeni society frequently follows strict rules of gender segregation (TFPM, 2016). Consequently, it is necessary that we focus on the creation of living environments that respect these established requirements in order to protect the overall comfort and well-being of those who have been displaced. Moreover, the designated sites for prayer according to Islamic norms, encompass elements such as the accurate orientation of prayer spaces and the provision of ablution facilities.



Figure 8: Displacement site in Rameh in Aman Governorate, Yemen. (Source: United Nations OCHA, 2015.)

Conclusion

The main goal of this paper is to examine the current urban and urban planners in Yemen and Bangladesh face in their efforts to design the most effective camps for internally displaced people and refugees. According to the case studies of the two nations, the difficulties faced by IDPs and refugees show the camps' profound inadequacy in providing necessary provisions like shelter, infrastructure, fundamental services, and a life of dignity. The challenges associated with contemporary urban design in constructing camps for displaced individuals and refugees require careful consideration of differences in climate, geographical location, and cultural aspects.

In the context of Yemen, camp designers face significant problems, including internal conflicts, economic collapse, tribal dynamics, and cultural complexity. In Bangladesh, the risk of landslides due to deforestation, overcrowding, and climate change pose direct threats to the safety and well-being of refugees. The design of camps for refugees and displaced individuals should prioritize permanent and sustainable factors rather than relying on temporary approaches. Therefore, the thoughtful choice of displacement camp locations, taking into account the necessary planning concerns, could prove an achievable and more acceptable alternative for those who have been displaced.

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