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# STRENGTHENING URBAN RESILIENCE

Five emerging lessons



# CONTRIBUTORS

Based on their rich and varied experience in building urban resilience, a number of Oxfam country offices and partners engaged in a participatory process to harvest, co-create, exchange, use knowledge and embed an appetite for collective learning. This learning document is the result of a two-year learning journey in which Oxfam, together with other diverse stakeholders, generated and shared knowledge from different experiences and contexts, with funds from the Oxfam Knowledge Fund. Hopefully, the main findings will inspire new countries and teams.

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# PROJECTS

Projects contributing to Oxfam’s Urban Resilience Learning project:

## Jordan (Russeifa)

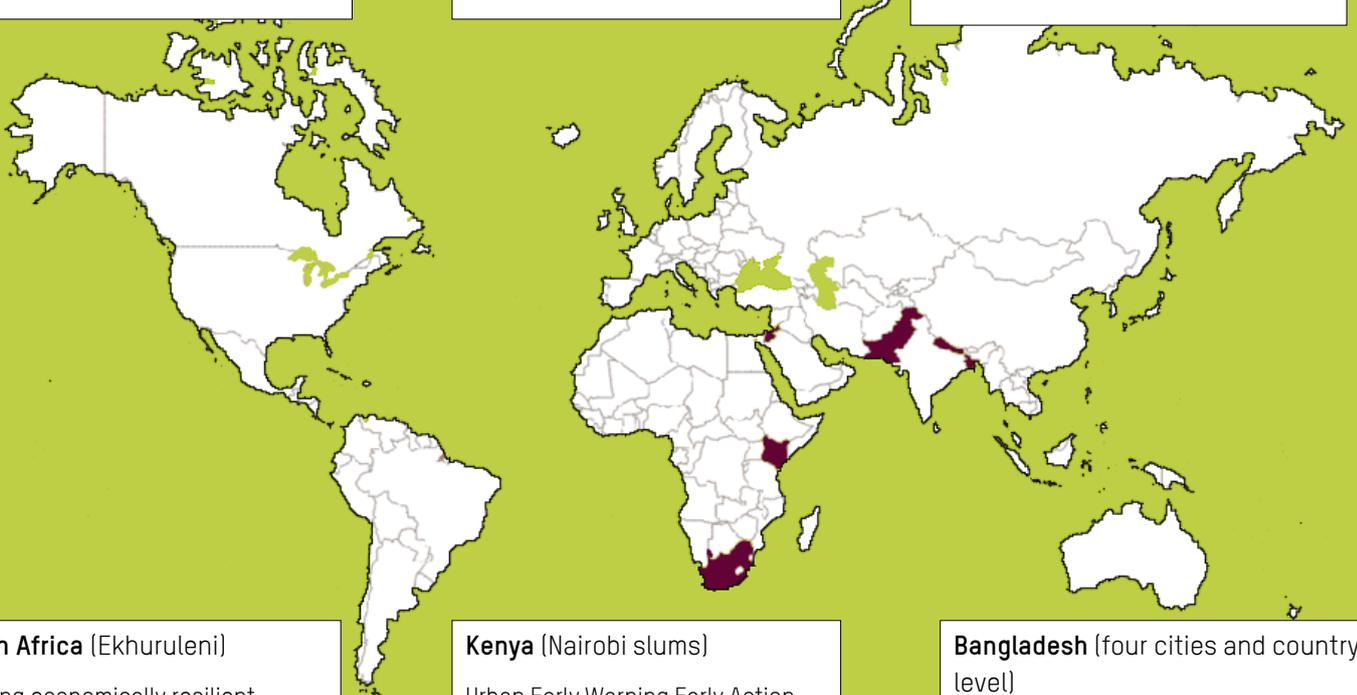
Urban communities’ and government institutions’ responses to population influxes, coupled with urban poverty, unemployment and high disaster risk.

## Pakistan (country level)

Building resilient urban communities, urban resilience mapping and promotion of policy changes; the main entry points are decent work and WASH.

## Nepal (country level)

Model Strategy for Resilient Local Communities: climate-adaptive planning, WASH, waste management, recovery, support to small and medium enterprises (SMEs).



## South Africa (Ekhuruleni)

Building economically resilient communities: solid waste collection and recycling with the government and the private sector.

## Kenya (Nairobi slums)

Urban Early Warning Early Action project: gaps in the identification of, and response to, slow-onset food security and nutrition emergencies.

## Bangladesh (four cities and country level)

Urban resilience strategies at city level: different entry points including disaster risk reduction (DRR), WASH, livelihoods, and gender-based violence.

# INTRODUCTION

Strengthening urban resilience is key to achieving the Oxfam vision: a world without poverty – a world in which people can influence decisions that affect their lives, enjoy their rights, and assume their responsibilities as full citizens of a world where all human beings are valued and treated equally. Urbanization has become a major challenge for almost all countries around the globe. Cities and city inhabitants are facing additional and amplified challenges as a result of rapid urbanization, a changing climate and rising inequality in urban areas.

The COVID-19 crisis has further highlighted the importance of strengthening inclusive urban resilience to acute shocks and chronic stresses. In this context, urban resilience is a new and upcoming theme for several Oxfam country programmes, regions and affiliates.

Oxfam defines resilience as ‘the ability of women and men to realize their rights and improve their wellbeing despite shocks, stresses and uncertainty’. The Resilience Knowledge Hub conducted the Urban Resilience Learning Exchange (URLE) project with six pilot country programmes to develop a better understanding of what it takes to build resilience in urban settings.

**What has been learned?** All cities are uniquely complex and dynamic in their structure, and thus approaches to resilience vary from city to city. However, five common themes emerge that can help Oxfam to strengthen urban resilience programming. These are the importance of systems thinking; transformative processes; holistic planning; multilevel governance; and social networks. These observations are not theoretical but based on the real experiences of Oxfam projects.

# 1. APPLYING SYSTEMS THINKING TO PROJECT DESIGN

Resilience and systems thinking contribute much to the understanding of complex, multi-scale characteristics of contemporary urbanization, and to the changing, increasingly complex nature of disasters and climate-related events. Cities are dynamic systems operating at different scales that link the natural and built environments with human processes (social, economic, political, demographic). Across all projects, understanding how these different factors connect with, interact and influence one another is vital.

The systems perspective constitutes the real added value of resilience in urban programming, allowing attention to be directed to ecological factors and to a perspective on urbanization that addresses core urban systems: water, food, energy, waste and transport.<sup>1</sup> In short, urban resilience programmes must recognize how the systems that support urban life are inextricably linked. This is particularly important as, in practice, systems thinking requires civil society, research institutes, the private sector and city officials to

step outside their departmental silos, address multiple aspects of vulnerability and resilience, engage with poor communities, and develop plans that go beyond engineered solutions and ensure access to and control over critical 'urban systems' (water, food, energy, transport, shelter and waste).

Projects aiming for urban resilience need to undertake in-depth systems analyses and these, in turn, require significant time and areas of expertise. While examples are limited, the case of **Oxfam in Kenya** (urban early warning systems) and **Oxfam South Africa** (for-profit social businesses), highlight that in practice, undertaking a systems approach requires a shift in thinking and time allocation for evidence and relationship building, redefining operations and breaking down the barriers to change.

**The remaining themes are all interlinked and a result of applying systems thinking.**

# EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS (UEWEA) IN THE INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS OF NAIROBI

In Nairobi alone, over 60% of the city's population lives in informal settlements. Most of them rely on low-wage casual labour to survive and, as such, they rely on food bought from markets to feed their families. These populations are also politically marginalized, live in poor housing and unsanitary conditions, have limited access to health facilities and water, and do not have security of land tenure.

**Oxfam and partners developed an early warning system (EWS) and early action response plan to crises that affect the people living in urban informal settlements.** The experience in Nairobi is illuminating: the standard indicators specific to rural areas could not be used to monitor food insecurity in urban centers. **This work required a thorough understanding of the different system dynamics specific to an urban set-up.** It is important to highlight that the UEWEA project's design was based on the foundation of a five-year research project – Indicator Development for Surveillance of Urban Emergencies – and sought to address the identified need of an EWS within urban informal settlements. The project used these indicators to initiate a model that can inform early warning and early action and revealed that, for an early warning and early action system to be effective, there was a need to also focus on several aspects such as poor living conditions and sanitation and the high prevalence of communicable diseases and insecurity, among others. During the implementation of the EWS, the project had to assist in a cholera outbreak response. This was not part of its objectives, but was adverted as an emergency.

**By working in a consortium and in collaboration with the Nairobi City County government and its six sub-counties, the project promoted collaborative ways of working across disciplines, sectors and levels of governance to address the causes of multiple risks, fragility and vulnerability of people living in the informal settlements.** To this end, the project looked beyond short-term technical solutions and took a longer-term view, which meant that the UEWEA project was blended with other Oxfam projects, programmes and campaigns to build resilient development over realistic timescales. Having said this, the project design underestimated the time required to achieve significant system changes, which requires compelling evidence, relationship building and redefining operations.

The UEWEA consortium was reactivated in the wake of COVID-19 and used as a mechanism to coordinate and respond to the COVID-19 emergency in Nairobi County. The UEWEA outcomes helped other actors design COVID-19 response interventions. The EWS is being used to gather data on food security in the informal settlements in Nairobi, and there are plans to expand to Mombasa, which has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2. AIMING FOR TRANSFORMATIVE URBAN RESILIENCE

Strengthening the resilience of cities for the most vulnerable people is an opportunity for action to improve quality of life, enhance liveability in the urban environment, and make it safer and more resilient to climate change, but also to create a place where equity and equality are respected and guaranteed for all citizens.

Urbanization is an arena of contested values, interests and power structures driving vulnerability and entrenching poverty. Investment in public infrastructure is shaped by vested political and economic interests, often working against the interests of poorer urban people. There is a real danger that interventions, even when system analysis is undertaken, will not deliver much for poor people if the approach taken is to focus narrowly on physical, technical solutions.

While resilience measures must be provided at multiple levels, it is important to constantly ask 'resilience for whom?' to ensure that a human rights approach is at the heart of the agenda. Herein lies the real added value of the Oxfam Resilient Development Framework:<sup>2</sup> paying attention to human rights and people's well-being.

When applied to urban resilience, a focus on the rights of urban citizens as the utmost priority of resilience investments, rather than physical and ecological infrastructure, may help to address many of the root causes that characterize the risks urban residents face on a daily basis.<sup>3</sup>

Urban poor communities live in a permanent coping state. People-centred urban resilience requires transformational processes that address the underlying risks and root causes of vulnerabilities and existing structural inequality. Furthermore, resilient development is only possible when gender-based inequalities are transformed and women and men can fully enjoy their rights. Oxfam has explicitly included gender justice and empowerment in its Framework for Resilient Development.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, rights and power analysis, particularly issues of gender, have been the missing links in the six urban resilience projects to date.

# PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE RESILIENCE FOR PEOPLE IN A CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT: THE EKURHULENI RECYCLING PROGRAMME

The Ekurhuleni project in South Africa has been working in the waste management sector and in partnership with national and local government since 2009. Right from the start, **the project concentrated its efforts on building an enabling environment to support employment-generation for those people most marginalized.** To this end, the first step was to analyze the systemic blockages that excluded waste reclaimers from the formal economy value chain. A critical step for the programme was to work with and influence the municipality to change a by-law to outsource waste collection to cooperatives and/or small enterprises, rather than solely establishing private provider companies. Up to this point, there was not a waste recycling strategy for informal settlements, and the separation of waste had been managed by informal collectors and waste pickers, who were prone to exploitation by raw materials buyers.

The change in the by-law allowed local community-based organizations (CBOs) to operate as service providers to the city, leading to the integration of informal collectors into the formal waste management system. To date, 66 recycling cooperatives and small enterprises have been supported to establish the Ekurhuleni Waste Management Association. Women form the majority of members and some of the providers are women-led cooperatives or small enterprises.

**Through training, awareness-raising and evolving partnerships between the community, private business, the recycling industry and multinational companies, the project is now supporting a people-centered economic model**

**addressing the common goals of reducing poverty, job generation and climate action.**

Currently, five recycling facilities are fully operational and they employ over 120 full-time employees, with an additional 250 indirect income-generating opportunities created for waste pickers. These facilities do not only create employment, but they also assist in diverting over 90 tonnes of waste from landfills.

The Ekurhuleni project demonstrates the long-term collaboration (from 2009 in this instance) required from all those committing to support excluded and marginalized communities in realizing livelihoods and their rights. Furthermore, it also highlights how building the resilience of excluded communities can be integrated with other city priorities. At present, the project continues to work with vulnerable waste community-based groups whose resilience capacity is still fragile. A plastics recycling industrial plan is being established and managed as a for-profit social business through an evolving partnership between the waste CBOs, the private sector, Oxfam and the municipality.

# 3. DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS

Systems thinking and transformative approaches must be translated into integrated interventions that put people's rights at the centre of urban resilience, with resilient institutional and physical infrastructure an important enabling factor in supporting this goal. An example of this is the approach taken by **Oxfam in Pakistan** as a result of the URLE process. Based on its recent experience, it has developed a Pakistan theory of change for urban resilience in cities. In collaboration with partners, it has identified four key pathways: strengthening municipal services, supporting income generation, improving urban governance and disaster risk, and climate change. The theory of change acknowledges that addressing any of these factors in isolation will not be enough. It remains to be seen how this theory will be translated in practice. At **Oxfam in Kenya**, staff

arrived at a similar conclusion, as addressing food insecurity in the urban informal settlements required a wider approach than just focussing on obtaining food. For an effective early warning and early action system, there is also a need to focus on other aspects such as poor living conditions and sanitation, and the high prevalence of communicable diseases and insecurity, among other issues affecting the population in the informal settlements. In the future, Oxfam should consider how best to integrate different sectoral interventions into a 'one programme' approach.



# UNDERSTANDING THE WAYS IN WHICH POPULATION SURGES IMPACT SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES, WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON RUSSEIFA

In Jordan, Oxfam conducted a piece of research to understand how various inhabitants of the Russeifa municipality have coped with its growing population – mainly driven by the movement of refugees and changes in the socio-economic situation – and what strategies communities have adopted to deal with its changing demographics. It also included a thorough examination of how services have developed over time to match the needs of the population.

**The study undertook a historical review to understand the extent to which the current political, environmental, economic and demographic circumstances of the city are impacting on household, community and institutional resilience. It specifically included an examination of gender roles and their impact on coping mechanisms.** The findings highlight that people-centred urban resilience requires analysis that is both national and localized and firmly grounded in political economy analysis, with a strong historical perspective and an understanding of power and rights.

The review also demonstrated how urbanization and population density significantly impact environmental and economic outcomes for residents of Russeifa, while women play a critical role in mitigating urban poverty. In the wake of protracted economic hardship, women who took part in this study have shown greater flexibility than men in pursuing career change and reorientation, along with setting up small home-based businesses that provide services to the community, such as catering and beauty salons, while also accommodating social norms that reduce women's ability to seek formal employment. The findings led to the following recommendations on how to shift towards more holistic approaches to urban resilience-based programming:

- Gender-sensitive resilience-building programmes should promote an ambitious balance between

safe programming, women's expectations, factoring in care work, and behavioural change related to social acceptance of female labour participation.

- Age-sensitive resilience-building programmes for working males need to factor in not only what young people hope for in terms of career, but also to address the issue of the predominant academic culture, which is in part responsible for widening the gap between skills and available jobs.
- Understanding how social norms and social cohesion dynamics impact resilience in poor, densely populated urban areas. Resilience-building programmes with a women's employment component need to be rooted in a fully-fledged gender transformative approach, from the programme participant level to the policy level.
- Understanding the local host community's perception of refugees, in order to uphold do-no-harm best practices, as well as better tailor social protection and wider resilience-building interventions.
- Factoring in how traditional, family and community-based resilience mechanisms have been impacted by socio-economic shocks such as COVID-19 to better tailor social protection interventions in urban areas, their targeting methods or vulnerability criteria, as loss of income for one individual is likely to impact the resilience of many others.



# 4. FACILITATING INCLUSIVE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER AND MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE

Building partnerships and collective action across different scales and sectors, through multi-stakeholder collaboration, reflects a system-based approach, which, as highlighted under theme 1, is critical for building resilience. The Oxfam Framework for Resilient Development recognizes the need for effective multi-stakeholder relationships to work towards resilient development. Transformative change needs engagement of and collaboration between different stakeholders at different levels, bringing different capacities and different mandates. It also requires critical engagement with different world views and political interests. The implementation process itself offers a testing ground not only of the definition of urban resilience but also of its practical implications.

Oxfam has built relationships with stakeholders from the community to national levels, working in partnership to foster resilience. For example, in **Pakistan**, the participation of stakeholders such as municipal authorities, the planning and development coordinator and community members in decision-making processes brought all relevant stakeholders under one umbrella to negotiate resilience measures. In **South Africa**, the Ekurhuleni project required levels of collaboration that went beyond the initial partnerships built up from 2009 with the City of Ekurhuleni and targeted waste reclaimer cooperatives. Working in this way

helps promote a holistic and inclusive approach to decision making and planning that is context-specific, and helps harness and build on different stakeholders' needs, capacities, expectations, knowledge, skills and resources.

The challenge of coordinating with multiple levels of governance – city, sub-national, national and international levels – as well as a wide range of non-government actors, was highlighted as the main concern across the six projects. Challenges included defining roles and responsibilities, extensive coordination between government and non-government agencies, dealing with entrenched bureaucratic structures, high turnover of staff, and adapting project implementation to a changing context. These challenges point to the need for in-depth political economy and power analyses, longer project timeframes and flexible project design. In order to ensure the greatest impact and uptake of its work, it is vital that Oxfam continues to take a multi-stakeholder, multi-level governance approach to its programming, cognisant of its implications.

# 5. SUPPORTING RESILIENT SOCIAL NETWORKS

Projects need to go beyond formal planning and resilient infrastructure development to strengthening linkages among community members. Community resilience is influenced by the strength of neighbourhood social networks and cohesion,<sup>5</sup> among other factors. These factors also improve collective capacity to cope with, and adapt to, shocks and stressors. Strengthening social networks was a key component across all projects. For example, in **Bangladesh**, volunteer youth groups have been established at ward level and in schools. They have brought together youth from informal settlements and formal neighbourhoods, which is significant because slum dwellers are stigmatized by mainstream society. Together, these groups have undertaken a range of activities, as well as advocating for disaster risk reduction (DRR) priorities to be implemented by school and local government authorities. In **Nairobi**, the project built a network of community-based volunteers to conduct surveillance and operationalize a dashboard in three informal settlements. This enabled the project to have accurate and timely data (early warning) on hunger and malnutrition, insecurity and sexual violence, among others, and initiate

appropriate responses in the form of cash transfers and engaging leaders and security agencies to address insecurity as interventions based on surveillance data. The actionable data was used to prevent severe food insecurity for 15,000 people. The community volunteers' network was also vital during the long electioneering period of 2017 when most government organs had diverted their resources and attention to the elections. This allowed the project to conduct surveillance and intervene (with cash transfers) at a time when the data showed that the long electioneering period had affected the income flow of most people, who depended on casual labour as their only source of income.

# THE BUILDING URBAN RESILIENCE COMMUNITIES (BRUC) PROJECT IN SELECTED ASIAN CITIES

The Urban Climate Change Resilience Trust Fund (UCCRTF) is a multi-donor trust fund initiative established in 2013 to help fast-growing cities in Asia improve their resilience and reduce their risks from increasing urbanization and climate change to urban populations, particularly poor people. The Trust Fund is administered by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with contributions from the Governments of Switzerland and the United Kingdom, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Building Urban Resilience Communities (BRUC) is a regional project being implemented by Oxfam and its partners across four countries in South and South East Asia. **The project goes beyond infrastructure development by looking at resilience building through the lens of the empowerment of community voices for social accountability, inclusive decision making, and the development of tailor-made solutions based on specific resilience needs.** The unique element of this project is its bottom-up inclusive approach, which is centred around urban communities. The theory of change adopted by the project has merged the Asian Development Bank's Urban Resilience Principles<sup>6</sup> and Oxfam's Resilient Development Framework. These principles include: combining hard and soft measures; engaging diverse perspectives through multi-stakeholder processes; working with different geographic and governance scales; addressing today's problems while embedding a long-term vision; tapping into local expertise; and building leadership through local action and by focusing on vulnerable communities. These principles are merged with Oxfam's Resilient Development Framework planning to not only achieve specific development objectives, but also overall resilience outcomes in the target area. These outcomes are defined by the stakeholders in the target area, including communities, city government and local political and social activists. The development of cities' profiles has led to the development of resilience strategies to identify challenges and prioritize responses.



# GOING FORWARD

Building resilient cities is a long-term endeavour, demanding considerable commitment and resources, but offering exceptional opportunities to contribute to a world where people and the planet are at the centre of the economy, where the climate crisis is contained, and where governance systems are inclusive and allow for those in power to be held to account. With its depth of experience, extensive local partnerships, in-house expertise and unique vision of resilience, Oxfam has a key role to play in supporting urban resilience. Oxfam is well placed to contribute to harnessing transformational change in urban settings and help their inhabitants to fulfil their rights. While the six projects recognized the added value of the Oxfam Framework for Resilient Development, it remains unclear how best to translate it into practice in the urban context.

More work is required by Oxfam to realize the potential of its resilience programmes. In particular, there is a need to ensure the systematic considerations of gender and inclusion to transform the power dynamics that underpin vulnerability and exclusion. In the future, Oxfam should therefore consider tailoring the resilience framework to the urban context, in order to consistently apply an urban lens throughout the programme cycle and place the programme response within an urban analysis framework. Keeping these issues in mind will help ensure Oxfam improves and tailors its resilience programming to urban settings and demonstrates a higher degree of effectiveness in building absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities.

## NOTES

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For further information, please contact [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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