

Defining Key Terms: Urban

Literature Review: Refugee Urban Integration

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF 

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This is a section of a broad literature review on refugee urban integration that was conducted by the Refugees in Towns Project (RIT) at Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University beginning in December 2017 and being continually updated with new publications. It was conducted to inform the public, academics, and policymakers about the state of refugee urban integration, and to prepare the RIT project for analysis of original data on refugee integration collected from towns around the world.

All references that are available online have a URL link provided in text. Full citations are in the Works Cited document.

It is widely recognized that the terms “refugee,” “urban,” and “integration” are not clear-cut or universally defined.¹ There are ongoing debates and inconsistent definitions found in the literature as well as among policymakers and practitioners. The following section will discuss the contested definition of “urban” in the literature and in practice.

Challenges Defining the City

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there is not an internationally agreed definition of a “city,” not a consensus on when a settlement is “urban,” and not a consistent rule for what its boundary is, as illustrated by the diversity of urban definitions in use.² In the forced migration literature, definitions of “city” or “urban” are largely missing, and the term “urban refugees” is often used simply to describe refugees who are not living in camps.³ “Urban” is widely used as a catchall regardless of whether a refugee is living in a small rural town, a peri-urban or suburban periphery, or an urban center of a megacity.⁴

Further complicating the definition, although the term “urban refugees” usually denotes refugees living outside camps, many protracted refugee camps have developed urban qualities, including durable built environments, dynamic globalized economies, and municipal governance systems.⁵ From the early 2000s onward, refugee camps located in peri-urban sprawl began to develop and function like the cities they were proximate to, becoming *de facto* parts of the urban fabric, and becoming viewed as “urban” by practitioners and academics.⁶ This process has at times been aided by deliberate efforts to give urban qualities to camps, such as the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) that maintain camp governance but create an economy like a city.⁷

Urban Features Relevant to Integration

There are numerous features that differentiate urban from non-urban spaces that may affect migrant integration. For one, cities are differentiated from “non-city, suburban or rural areas” because of their “large populations,

¹ [Council of Europe 2000](#)

² [IOM 2015](#)

³ [Jacobsen 2001](#): 6

⁴ Potts 2017; also see “City-level Case Study” list of references for examples.

⁵ Agier 2002; Montclos and Kagwanja 2000; Muller 2012

⁶ [Tibajjuka 2010](#)

⁷ [Refugee Cities 2016](#)

density, administrative functions and social diversity,”⁸ all of which impact the capacity of their space to integrate new arrivals. At least two case studies have found small villages and rural areas to feature “more inclusive growth patterns” than densely populated large urban spaces, perhaps because of stronger local social connectivity.⁹ Another differentiating factor between urban and non-urban settings is the types of stakeholders and capacities in play: large cities tend to have more robust government, infrastructures, and a greater density of businesses and services compared with smaller towns or rural areas, resulting in a more managed and complex integration process.¹⁰

Other qualities that differentiate cities from other spaces vis-à-vis integration are their “density, diversity and dynamics:”¹¹ density allows for a city to have an accelerated social metabolism through an agglomeration economy,¹² overlapping infrastructures, and an entrepreneurial creative class;¹³ diversity shapes how cities create overlapping, contested, and segregated spaces and communities;¹⁴ and dynamism results in cities having complex adaptive systems that are constantly in flux.¹⁵ Each of these characteristics alter how integration unfolds in urban spaces. These features both facilitate and obstruct integration.

The literature identifies several characteristics of cities that facilitate integration, including their population density, cultural diversity, population size, urban footprint (i.e., built environment), the presence of agglomeration economies, concentration of capital,¹⁶ and a “wide array of critical services to newcomers, including language training, skills assessments and orientation, mentoring and placement services, alternative pathways to employment (such as entrepreneurship), credential recognition, and vocational education and training.”¹⁷

However, the literature also identifies several characteristics of cities that may impede integration, including potential social conflict due to a greater concentration of people; overwhelmed infrastructures (especially transportation and housing resources); the convergence of shocks and stressors such as economic downturn or environmental disaster, whose costs are catalyzed in a densely populated, densely networked setting;¹⁸ funding constraints; governance inefficiency; discord with other levels of government;¹⁹ and limited governance capacity relative to needs for services (such as welfare, education, and healthcare services), particularly in developing cities.²⁰

Another impediment to integration unique to urban spaces is how conflict and violence occur in cities.²¹ Early 21st century fears of “feral cities” of sprawling, population-dense, anarchic slums²² have not materialized wholesale; instead, complex and illegible cities, largely informally organized, have emerged as challenges to security.²³ There is a “shift towards ‘urban wars’ (Beall 2006, 2007) and ‘slum wars’ (Rodgers, 2007, 2009) [in] the 21st century,”²⁴ and “in some circumstances conflict in cities is effectively deferred or suppressed rather than channeled into non-violent politics,”²⁵ resulting in segregation between urban and peri-urban spaces and limiting the ability of some areas in conflict cities to integrate migrants, while making other areas points of attraction for migrants who thrive off of irregular economies and illegibility.²⁶

⁸ Lee and Guadagno 2015

⁹ Bose 2017 “Northeast Resettlement Trends,” Christiaensen, Joachim and Yasuyuki 2013

¹⁰ [McKenzie 2016](#)

¹¹ [Campbell 2016](#): 14

¹² Ferrão and Fernández 2013; Molotch 1976

¹³ Florida 2003

¹⁴ Attoh 2011; Blokland et al. 2015; [Sassen 2014](#); Smith 2002

¹⁵ Latour 2005

¹⁶ [World Bank Group and GFDRR 2015](#)

¹⁷ Hooper, Desiderio and Salant 2017

¹⁸ [World Bank Group and GFDRR 2015](#)

¹⁹ Hooper, Desiderio and Salant 2017; see also [Balbo and Marconi 2005](#); Lee and Guadagno 2015: 164

²⁰ Lee and Guadagno 2015: 164

²¹ Beall, Goodfellow and Rodgers 2013

²² Norton 2003

²³ Kilcullen 2013: 232-262

²⁴ Beall, Goodfellow and Rodgers 2013; Kilcullen 2015

²⁵ Beall, Goodfellow and Rodgers 2013

²⁶ Kilcullen 2013

Finally, an important difference between urban and non-urban settings is that integration of migrants within cities is wrapped up in other major underlying dynamics of the city, described in the discourse around the “right to the city,”²⁷ including contestation of public space between classes,²⁸ gentrification,²⁹ displacement from neighborhoods by neoliberal forces,³⁰ and the delinking of local place and global capital.³¹ From the vantage of the city, forced migrants are only one part of the global megatrend of urbanization,³² whereby the majority of all people have come to live in cities.³³ City-dwellers are projected to generate the majority of the world’s economic growth by 2025,³⁴ most of which is informal, inconsistently paced, unequal, and bought with severe environmental costs.³⁵

A Working Definition of “Urban” for Integration?

From these observations, a working definition for “urban” emerges based on the important qualities of cities that differentiate them from other spaces: large population size, high population density, administrative functionality, cultural and social diversity, exclusive growth patterns, a high density of infrastructures, a high density of businesses (largely informal), dense social networks, a dense built environment, agglomeration economies, concentration of capital, a wide array of spatially proximate services, a tendency toward civic conflict, contestation over space, and displacement of neighborhoods by unequal distribution of wealth.

Conceptualizing the City

Although the city is the stage for the majority of the world’s migrant integration, the synthesis between urban studies and forced migration is in its infancy.³⁶ To begin forming linkages, seven key points were identified for humanitarian and development actors to know about cities: “1. Recognising that cities are systems; 2. Getting comfortable with uncertainty and complexity; 3. Accepting the changing nature and resilience of urban systems; 4. Understanding urban contexts at different scales; 5. Taking the whole of the urban system into account, not just the separate pieces; 6. Acknowledging hierarchies and relationships; and 7. Focusing on urban spaces without excluding the wider picture.”³⁷

Beyond these points, deeper conceptualization of the city is an open discussion.³⁸ Currently, the urban studies literature generally agrees that the city can no longer be conceptualized as a “fixed, bounded and universally generalizable settlement,”³⁹ in the way that humanitarian actors may think about camps as fixed, bounded, and generalizable. Instead, cities are better conceptualized as complex systems with feedback loops, consisting of physical structures (e.g., court houses), structural processes (e.g., laws), influencing concepts (e.g., governmental legitimacy), functions (e.g., judicial administration), and events (e.g., court hearings).⁴⁰

Since the 1990s, cities have been increasingly conceptualized not as units, but rather as a network of people and places, with cities themselves acting as nodes in a global network,⁴¹ with changing configurations.⁴² The network perspective helps to link local processes with international forces: for example, London may act as a command center for capital, while China’s megacities may act as a manufacturer to the world, determining these cities’

²⁷ Attoh 2011

²⁸ Blokland et al. 2015

²⁹ Attoh 2011; [Sassen 2014](#)

³⁰ Smith 2002

³¹ [Sassen 2014](#)

³² [Ebead 2017](#); Jesuit Refugee Service 2013

³³ [Brenner and Schmid 2014](#); [Campbell 2016](#); [IOM 2015](#); [McKenzie 2016](#)

³⁴ [McKinsey and Company 2011](#)

³⁵ Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006; [Liu, Yan and Zhou 2015](#); [Sassen 2014](#)

³⁶ [UNESCO 2016](#); [Tibajuka 2010](#): 4

³⁷ [Campbell 2016](#): 7; see also [Scott and Storper 2015](#); Farias and Bender 2010

³⁸ [Derickson 2014](#); [Fernández, Parnell and Oldfield 2014](#)

³⁹ [Derickson 2014](#)

⁴⁰ [Campbell 2016](#): 28

⁴¹ [Curran and Saguy 2001](#); Farias and Bender 2010; [Gurak and Caces 1992](#); Halfacree and Boyle 1993: 335; [Kent 2005](#): 2

⁴² Latour 2005. For discussion on Actor Network Theory as a method for studying urban networks, see Farias and Bender 2010; [Curran and Saguy 2001](#); [Kent 2005](#)

capacity for and the opportunities and obstacles through which migrant integration occurs.⁴³ As part of a global network, spatial boundaries are important, but no longer limit the scope of the city or its inputs and outputs as cities' people and capital flow globally⁴⁴ along multinational sociopolitical ties⁴⁵ and a transnational "spiritual geography."⁴⁶

The City's Space and Built Environment

The literature on urban studies demonstrates how spatial dynamics and the built environment of cities might impact integration. Forced migration literature tends to conceptualize space at the international level in terms of distance between borders, while paying less attention to space at the local level within cities in terms of neighborhoods or streets. By contrast, urban studies has a rich literature on local placemaking, the built environment, and physical form.⁴⁷ Urban studies also brings attention to 18 critical infrastructure sectors in the built environment that affect the capacity of a city to integrate a new population: chemicals, commercial facilities, communications, critical manufacturing, dams, defense industrial base, emergency services, energy, financial services, food and agriculture, government facilities, healthcare and public health, information technology, national monuments and icons, nuclear reactors, postal and shipping, transportation, water and wastewater.⁴⁸

The City as a Level of Analysis

Urban studies provides forced migration studies with a useful new meso-level of analysis⁴⁹ that might bridge the individual level and the national level of analysis.⁵⁰ For example, municipal surveys may reveal disparities between national-level political rhetoric and sentiments held toward migrants by local communities.⁵¹ This level of analysis also provides an advantage for regions with particularly fluid borders where spatial scope is more easily defined by city boundaries than state boundaries.⁵²

Typologies of Cities

Currently, only one limited typology of cities is used within the forced migration literature: "transit" and "destination" cities, but these categories are blurred by the commonality of multidirectional migration⁵³ and migrations that continue after settlement, even from destination cities.⁵⁴ The urban studies literature offers several typologies of cities that might be helpful for forced migration researchers to consider when assessing the range of capacity cities have to handle migrant integration.

Demographic Typologies

The most simplistic typology is population size: megacities have more than 10 million inhabitants (and represent 1/8 of all urbanites globally), large cities have 5 to 10 million inhabitants, medium-sized cities have 1 to 5 million inhabitants, and small cities have 500,000 to 1 million inhabitants.⁵⁵ A more complex population-based typology may consider population size *and* population density.⁵⁶

Metabolic Typologies

More sophisticated typologies of cities go beyond simple demographic statistics and focus on metabolic traits of cities as ecosystems, categorizing cities by population density, development status, labor and energy profiles, and flows of consumption and waste.⁵⁷ Cities are categorized by their metabolic characteristics, including their

⁴³ Smith 2002

⁴⁴ Sassen 2014

⁴⁵ [van Bochove and Rusinovic 2008](#)

⁴⁶ Fábos and Isotalo 2014: 3-4

⁴⁷ [Abu-Dayyeh 2005](#); Attoh 2011; [Brown 2001](#); [Higgins, Bird and Harris 2010](#); Low 2014

⁴⁸ [NIAC 2009](#); [The White House 2013](#)

⁴⁹ Watters and Nawyn 2013

⁵⁰ [Aleinikoff 1992](#); Babbie 2014; Fábos 2017,

⁵¹ Bose 2017 "Mapping Local Resettlement"

⁵² [Merx 2000](#)

⁵³ [UNESCO 2016](#)

⁵⁴ [Jacobsen 2001](#): 7

⁵⁵ [IOM 2015](#)

⁵⁶ [Eurostat 2010](#)

⁵⁷ [Kraussman et al. 2008](#)

“material and energy flows,” their “economic–material relations,” the “economic drivers of rural–urban relationships,” the “reproduction of urban inequality,” and “socioecological relationships.”⁵⁸

Grouping by Socioeconomic Trends

The Brookings Institution offers a new typology of cities based on global socioeconomic trends, presenting seven classes of cities:⁵⁹

1. “Global giants” (e.g., New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Osaka-Kobe, Paris, London)
2. “Asian anchors” (e.g., Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul-Incheon, Shanghai, Singapore)
3. “Emerging gateways” (e.g., Johannesburg, Mumbai, Sao Paulo, Istanbul)
4. “Factory China” (e.g., Shenzhen, Guangzhou)
5. “Knowledge capitals” (e.g., Boston, Dallas, San Jose, Seattle, Amsterdam, Zurich)
6. “American middleweights” (e.g., Indianapolis, Miami, St. Louis)
7. “International middleweights” (e.g., Melbourne, Sydney, Montreal, Toronto)

Cities may also be classified by climate,⁶⁰ usually using the Köppen-Geiger Climate Classification.⁶¹ Given that climactic conditions,⁶² climate change,⁶³ and exposure to weather hazards⁶⁴ all have effects on wellbeing, the experiences of refugee integration may be impacted by the climate type of the city where migrants settle.

Development Classification of Cities

The literature distinguishes between integration dynamics in cities in the Global North versus the Global South. In general, “cities in the South tend to exhibit a persistent disconnect between capital and labor [and]... their metabolic configurations are discontinuous, dynamic and contested.”⁶⁵ Therefore, the Global South will become the “epicentre of urbanism,”⁶⁶ yet the “cities that are growing fastest are the cities with the fewest resources to deal with displacement.”⁶⁷ Another important difference between cities in the Global North and Global South is data availability, as the developing world’s cities are generally lacking in valid, accessible municipal data.⁶⁸ This data deficit has led researchers to focus on cities in the Global North.⁶⁹ These findings and methods will need to be adapted and re-contextualized for cities in the Global South.⁷⁰

Geographic Classification of Cities

Robinson (2006) cautions us to think of all cities, regardless of their geographic region or development status, as “ordinary” places,⁷¹ to avoid prejudging or exotifying them. At the same time, the literature identifies numerous ways in which a city’s geographic region will affect economic integration of migrants⁷² and will define the kinds of migration patterns that a city will experience. For example, “cities in Africa are still either ignored - banished to a different, other, lesser category of not-quite cities - or held up as examples of all that can go wrong with urbanism.”⁷³ As a result, in Africa’s cities there is a stark disconnect between the development community’s

⁵⁸ Castan Broto, Allen and Rapoport 2012

⁵⁹ [Trujillo and Parilla 2016](#)

⁶⁰ [Niccola and Saldivar-Sali 2010](#)

⁶¹ [Kottek et al. 2006](#)

⁶² [Penckofer et al. 2011](#)

⁶³ [Whitmore-Williams 2017](#)

⁶⁴ [Dodgen 2016](#)

⁶⁵ Parnell and Robinson 2012

⁶⁶ [Fernández, Parnell and Oldfield 2014](#)

⁶⁷ Setchell 2017

⁶⁸ Potts 2017

⁶⁹ [Scott and Storper 2015](#); [Schindler 2017](#)

⁷⁰ Parnell and Robinson 2012

⁷¹ Robinson 2006

⁷² [Higgins, Bird and Harris 2010](#)

⁷³ Myers 2011

“fantasies” of cities and the reality of “deep poverty and with minimal urban services” and “worsening...marginalization and inequalities.”⁷⁴

Generally speaking, African cities have not developed like European cities, do not typically feature effective municipal or community-level governance, do not have agglomerated infrastructures, and do not have robust formal economies.⁷⁵ African cities are also unique because of their security situation. While there is “little evidence that urbanisation per se increases the likelihood of conflict or violence in a country, in recent decades Africa has experienced exceptional rates of urban population growth in a context of economic stagnation and poor governance, producing conditions conducive to social unrest and violence.”⁷⁶ But while African cities have developed differently from European cities, they should not be thought of as “failed.” Instead, they should be considered to be functioning differently, “largely through fluid, makeshift collective actions running parallel to proliferating decentralized local authorities, small-scale enterprises, and community associations.”⁷⁷ Ethnography of African cities reveals chaotic informality often characterized as “rogue,” yet still preserving of identity, community, and function.⁷⁸

Indian cities are also described as unique, with particular challenges of “nature conservation...urban housing and slum development, waste management, the history and practice of urban planning, and contestations over the quality of air, water, and sanitation.”⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Middle Eastern cities are self-described as unique from other cities due to their embeddedness in long historical legacies, the forces of decolonization, the role of petroleum-based-capital on who owns the city, and unique geographic positioning between Europe, Asia, and Africa.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ [Watson 2014](#)

⁷⁵ [Kibreab 2007](#)

⁷⁶ Fox and Beall 2012

⁷⁷ Simone 2004

⁷⁸ Pieterse and Simone 2013

⁷⁹ Nair, Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013

⁸⁰ [Madbouly 2009](#)