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**Good Practices, lessons learned,
and the unique challenges**
affecting security risk management
in urban humanitarian responses.

GISF Research Article





The Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF)

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Acknowledgements

This Article is authored by Rob Grace and edited by the GISF Secretariat. We would like to give special thanks to Dan Ford and Panos Navrozidis for managing the research, as well as Tolani Ubhi-Mohideen and Dimitri Kotsiras for their editorial and design support.

This Article was designed by Antoine Marinot.

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About this Article (Scope of Work)

This article looks to identify the unique elements in urban environments and the humanitarian security risk management (SRM) considerations resulting from these dynamics. For the purposes of this article, an urban setting is defined as a built-up territory (typically a city) with substantially higher population density and infrastructure

(including housing and transportation) than the rest of the country.

A significant constraint to humanitarian aid in urban settings is that security concerns prohibit access to populations clustered by specific characteristics. There is, generally speaking, a lack of expertise and knowledge in navigating these challenges. This article is not a technical guide but is instead meant to open the conversation and potentially lead to the creation of a comprehensive technical SRM guide in the future.

Methodology

The findings in this article are based primarily on a desk review, complemented by a limited set of key informant interviews with security risk management experts and practitioners to validate and deepen the article's findings.

Suggested citation

GISF. (2023) Good Practices, Lessons Learned, and the Unique Challenges Affecting Security Risk Management in Urban Humanitarian Responses. Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF).

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This publication was produced by the Global Interagency Security Forum through a three-year cooperative agreement funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development under Agreement No. Award No. 720FDA20GR00341

This article is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the Global Interagency Security Forum and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.



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Executive Summary

Given increasing urbanisation across the globe and the proliferation of humanitarian responses in densely populated areas, understanding the unique parameters of security risk management (SRM) in such contexts, including how various urban settings differ from one another, is more relevant than ever. Yet, dialogue and reflection on this topic has just begun. How can aid workers best understand and grapple with security risks in cities? What measures can and should humanitarian organisations pursue and implement in current and future urban operational contexts to better enable safe and secure aid operations? This article delves into these questions, ultimately pointing toward avenues for further research, policy attention, and discussion.

Part 1 offers an overview of key operational challenges that humanitarians have encountered in urban settings, as well as relevant SRM implications of these dynamics, those being:

- **High Population Density:** Urban populations are geographically concentrated, meaning there can be a high level of humanitarian need confined to a small location. In such contexts, the humanitarian imperative can mean tolerating increasing levels of risk. Additionally, the wide array of local actors and networks in cities can complicate acceptance and humanitarian negotiation strategies.
- **Diverse Populations, Dispersed Humanitarian Needs, and Overlapping Networks of Existing Formal and Informal Support Structures:** Communities in cities also tend to be diverse, meaning that humanitarian needs can be challenging to assess. City residents often already have access to a complex network of formal and informal support structures with preexisting deficiencies. All these elements can complicate actor mapping, context analysis, and humanitarians' efforts to design and implement effective aid programming.
- **Urban Violence and Crime:** Patterns of security threats in urban response contexts differ from those likely to emerge in rural response settings. Humanitarians working in a city rife with crime and political instability should adapt precautions accordingly.
- **Locus of Political Activity:** Cities are centres of political activity, a dynamic that can fuel security risks in various ways, including:
 1. Proximity to politicians who might be targeted in attacks,
 2. Political instability in the form of demonstrations that can escalate to organised political violence

3. Armed conflict that centres around cities due to the strategic importance of urban areas.

- **Dynamics of Urban Infrastructure:**

Cities tend to be central locations for infrastructure, including electricity, banking services, and telecommunications (e.g., telephone and internet services), meaning that contingency planning is essential when these services are disrupted. Residents of cities also tend to consume and use social media more than rural residents. Consequently, security risks stemming from misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech can be particularly acute in cities.

Part 2 delves more deeply into key dimensions of urban SRM, illustrating the particularities of safely and securely implementing humanitarian operations in cities. Key dimensions are:

- **Applying International Humanitarian Law as a Tool of Security Risk Management:**

Humanitarian organisations have engaged in public advocacy for legal accountability for attacks against aid workers. Security advisors can and have played a key operational role in supporting advocacy efforts via collecting, reporting, analysing, and sharing information about security events.

- **Balancing ‘Hard’ and ‘Soft’ Approaches:**

Due to the prevalence of urban security risks, humanitarians have turned to ‘hard’ SRM approaches, such as fortified walls, barbed wire, security cameras,

lighting, and guards, and even fortified ‘green zones.’ ‘Soft’ acceptance-based approaches are challenging in cities because of the crowded social terrain. Humanitarians have expressed concern that organisations are trending away from ‘soft’ to more ‘hard’ security measures, especially in cities.

- **Implementing Principled Humanitarian Action:**

Cities present difficulties in implementing principled humanitarian action. Urban settings tend to have highly politicised social terrain where various stakeholders (including governmental actors, religious leaders, and/or urban gangs) might have a personal or organisational interest in the aid that humanitarians seek to offer.

- **Negotiating Safe and Secure Humanitarian Access:**

An urban setting can magnify many of the core challenges of humanitarian access negotiation, those being:

1. Knowing which stakeholders control which segments of territory
2. Building relationships with challenging counterparts (including urban gangs)
3. The multi-stakeholder nature of the process, which can necessitate engagement with rival gangs, as well as governmental stakeholders and other leaders (religious or tribal, for example) who are competing with one another for power, authority, and legitimacy.

- **Coordinating and Collaborating across Organisational Lines:**

Humanitarian coordination in cities can be complicated because limited inter-organisational dialogue can lead to a race toward more ‘hard’ security measures. Cities can also

be fragmented operational contexts where different entities (for example, the government and non-state armed groups, including rebel groups and armed gangs) control different geographic locations.

- **Case studies:** This section contains three mini-case studies—one focused on Aleppo, Syria; the second on Mogadishu, Somalia; and the third on Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Each serves as a practical example illuminating key points and ideas covered throughout the report.

Part 3 offers reflections on pathways that humanitarian SRM policymakers and practitioners can pursue in this area moving forward. Key elements are:

- **Invigorate Dialogue on Urban Security Risk Management Tools:** Future efforts should continue to structure thinking on the challenges of urban SRM, grow the evidence base of challenges faced and recommended approaches, and translate future findings into actionable, practical tools to enable more impactful humanitarian SRM in future urban response settings.
- **Support Urban Security Collaboration:** Cultivating channels of inter-organisational coordination on SRM

could play a key role in enabling more effective approaches, including enabling information-sharing across organisational lines related to a range of SRM-relevant issue areas, such as context analysis.

- **Adapt Acceptance Approaches to Modern Contextual Requirements:** Humanitarian SRM practitioners should engage in ongoing dialogue—with a focus on challenges in urban response—on the value, viability, and desirability of acceptance, embracing honest reflection and discussion about practical obstacles and how to surmount them. Such discussions should aim to examine how to adapt and tailor acceptance approaches in light of the complex operational realities of modern urban response contexts.
- **Resource Strategic Urban Security Risk Management:** Proactive planning and budgeting are necessary for effective SRM. Urban SRM is expensive, requiring a significant investment.



Background

The current and likely future nature of humanitarian response warrants proactive discussion and reflection from the field of security risk management (SRM). As a recent United Nations (UN) report states, '[T]he future of humanity is undoubtedly urban' (Khor et al., 2022). Similarly, a policy piece published several years ago on the state of contemporary armed conflict states, 'The era of urban warfare is already here' (Konaev and Spencer, 2018). In recent years, tens of millions of people have been affected by humanitarian crises in urban settings across the globe, including Marawi, Philippines; Mosul, Iraq; Aleppo, Syria; and the Gaza Strip, among others. Contexts also include urban complex emergencies fueled in part by natural hazards and/or public health emergencies, such as Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where a governance vacuum has fueled the rise of urban gangs. Particularly complex security risks can result. Indeed, many of the high-profile security incidents that have sent shockwaves through the humanitarian sector over the past two decades—the 2003 Canal Hotel bombing in Baghdad, Iraq; the 2015 U.S bombing of a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)-run hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan; and the 2016 gang rape of aid workers in Juba, South Sudan—all occurred in urban settings.

In short, there is a growing sense that the 21st century is the 'urban century,' as various analysts and scholars have called it (McDonald and Beatley, 2020). The majority of the world's population now resides in cities, and urban populations are growing rapidly in developing countries, according to UN data (Savage and Muggah, 2012). Effective humanitarian SRM will require an acute knowledge of how to manage urban humanitarian responses, including how various urban settings differ from one another.

How can aid workers best understand and grapple with these issues? What measures can and should humanitarian organisations pursue and implement in current and future urban operational contexts to better enable safe and secure aid operations? This report delves into these questions, ultimately pointing toward avenues for further research, policy attention, and discussion. In doing so, this report strives to support ongoing efforts to proactively prepare for the likelihood that urban response will increasingly define the future of humanitarianism.

This report is based on a desk review of existing literature, as well as a limited set of semi-structured interviews conducted with aid workers with experience and/or expertise in managing humanitarian insecurity in urban contexts.¹ The report proceeds in three parts.

Part 1 offers an overview of key operational challenges that humanitarians have encountered in urban settings, as well as relevant SRM implications of these dynamics.

Part 2 delves more deeply into key dimensions of urban SRM, illustrating the particularities of safely and securely implementing humanitarian operations in cities. This part also includes illustrative mini-case studies of Aleppo, Syria; Mogadishu, Somalia; and Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Part 3 offers reflections on pathways that humanitarian SRM policymakers and practitioners can pursue in this area moving forward.

¹ The author remotely conducted nine key informant interviews during September-October 2023. All interviewees spoke about experiences working on SRM for international humanitarian organisations. The protocol for the interviews guaranteed that names, organisational affiliations, and other identifiable information would be kept confidential.



Urban Humanitarian Operating Environments: Key Challenges and Implications for Security Risk Management

A growing body of literature examines key dimensions and challenges of urban humanitarian response (Alcayna and Al-Murani, 2016; 'Urban Humanitarian Response,' 2019; Lloyd et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the specific SRM dimensions and implications remain underexamined. This section draws linkages between these challenges and urban SRM. As this section explains, urban settings have inherent characteristics that can shape operational adaptations of SRM, including actor mapping, context analysis, risk assessment, risk mitigation strategies, and making organisational decisions about acceptable levels of risk tolerance.² That being said, it is also important to refrain from over-generalising. 'Every city is different,' as one security advisor interviewed for this paper emphasised. Additionally, existing humanitarian SRM literature has not yet drawn conceptual lines that clearly delineate urban from rural contexts. Bearing these caveats in mind, this section offers an initial exploration of the key dimensions of urban SRM that the rest of this report will explore in greater detail.

² For a useful general framework for approaching and understanding humanitarian SRM, see 'Security to Go,' 2020.

1.1. High Population Density

A core attribute of urban areas is high population density. As one analysis states of the resulting dynamics for humanitarians, '[n]ot only are there more people, transactions and organisations, there is a proximity between them that is a fundamental characteristic of the urban environment: people living in close quarters to one another amplifies the spread of information (correct or otherwise), disease, panic, etc. Crises can play out very differently in an urban setting, and it pays to be attentive to how quickly density or proximity can change the dynamics of the operating environment' (D'Onofrio, 2018). For a security advisor undertaking an actor mapping exercise, this can mean assessing a complex social network of different key stakeholders concentrated within a relatively small geographic area. One might effectively assess the dynamics at play within a particular neighbourhood, but stepping outside that neighbourhood can mean walking into uncharted terrain from a security risk standpoint. Conflicting local agendas in relatively limited geographical space can make the employment of typical acceptance strategies a difficult exercise. In addition, the resources needed to conduct

risk analysis in densely populated areas are far greater due to fragmentation of sociopolitical elements and armed actors. There is a level of intensity in collecting information, analysing threats, and mitigating risks in urban environments that supersedes that in rural areas.

Moreover, high population density means that, when a disaster strikes, the human toll can be severe and concentrated within a relatively small geographic location. For crises stemming from natural hazards (e.g., flooding, earthquakes, or cyclones/typhoons/hurricanes), this can mean a large volume of people in need of emergency relief, housing, and livelihood support. In the context of a largescale public health emergency—such as an epidemic or pandemic—disease can spread more rapidly.

During urban armed conflict, the proximity of civilians to military targets and parties to the conflict increases the risk of widespread civilian harm ('Outcome Report,' 2017), which can spiral in the form of inadequate access to food, income, and health services (including mental health); mobility restrictions (e.g., elderly, sick, and disabled unable to leave); a lack of information related to missing family members; and exposure to unexploded ordnance (Zeitoun and Talhami, 2016; Muhammedally, 2016; Lloyd et al., 2023). Humanitarians—along with the civilian population writ-large—must navigate these risks for themselves. Among the biggest challenges of urban warfare is also the fact that the majority of humanitarian and health infrastructure and expertise (such as hospitals, doctors, and humanitarian offices) are located in cities. Hence, if people flee a city or are forced to

evacuate, populations might struggle to find the support they need in more rural areas.

Humanitarian organisations' decisions about acceptable levels of risk are typically informed by the humanitarian needs in a given context, the notion being that organisations might tolerate higher levels of risk in contexts where humanitarian needs are more severe ('Residual Risk Acceptance,' 2016; Hermann and Oberholzer, 2019). With higher levels of humanitarian needs in a concentrated area, urban response can mean humanitarian organisations tolerate increasing levels of risk.

However, the exact opposite has also manifested in urban humanitarian response. A research interviewee discussed contexts where humanitarian organisations deemed urban slums (i.e., areas where humanitarian needs are likely highest in a city) to be no-go areas due to perceived security threats and a lack of resources to mitigate the associated risks. A deliberate choice to refrain from working in such low-income areas—especially if humanitarian organisations then direct resources toward higher-income locations that might seem more secure—can reinforce exclusion and power imbalances within a city.

The overall issue to which these comments point is that the geographic concentration of people in urban contexts can magnify tensions between the humanitarian imperative and the need to ensure staff safety and security. For example, while crowd control is standard practice and a typical preventative safety and security measure in distribution and service provision areas, this well documented and

widely rehearsed activity is much harder to implement in densely populated areas, further challenged by lack of space. The volume of bystanders and asymmetric threats can make programme activities hard to implement. Additional efforts are needed from programme teams to disseminate activity-level information, carefully select the right venue/location, and design an efficient distribution flow.

1.2. Diverse Populations, Dispersed Humanitarian Needs, and Overlapping Networks of Existing Formal and Informal Support Structures

Communities in cities also tend to be diverse, compared with rural contexts. Relevant dimensions of diversity can include religion, racial and ethnic identity, and income level. A consequence can be humanitarian needs that are dispersed throughout a community in a manner that is challenging to assess. In the words of one analysis, '[u]rban communities are usually far more complex than rural ones: often not neatly definable geographical entities, but more dispersed networks or groups. Vulnerability is diffused across a town or city, making it harder to identify those most in need and target interventions' (Twiggs and Mosel, 2018). Humanitarians have confronted this challenge in particularly acute terms in relation to urban refugees and internally displaced persons, who tend to be interspersed with local communities

while living in precarious positions in terms of access to livelihood and housing (Ferris, 2011; Archer, 2017; d'Orsi, 2019). Making matters more complicated is the likelihood that urban residents also already have access to a complex network of formal and informal support structures that have preexisting deficiencies. Consequently, in low-income urban settings, it can be challenging to differentiate between those suffering from acute need amidst a humanitarian disaster and residents who had already been living in persistent poverty before disaster struck ('Meeting Humanitarian Challenges,' 2010).

All these elements can complicate actor mapping, context analysis, and humanitarians' efforts to design and implement effective aid programming. With an acceptance approach to SRM, aid organisations invest in building relationships with key local stakeholders and demonstrating that they seek to meet crucial community needs in a depoliticised manner. Any such effort to cultivate buy-in from local urban communities requires that aid workers invest in analysing, understanding, and navigating this complex socio-economic terrain.

1.3. Urban Violence and Crime

Patterns of security threats in urban response contexts differ from those likely to emerge in rural response settings. Although it is impossible to make blanket statements that apply to all urban settings, relevant dynamics in many cities (compared with

rural settings) include more robberies and burglaries and heightened threats from crime during the evening (Wille and Fast, 2010). It can be important for humanitarians to take precautions on par with those that any sensible city dweller would adopt, including refraining from unnecessary movements during evening hours, avoiding routine movements that repeat day after day, refraining from giving money to panhandlers, sharing information about planned movements only with necessary personnel, and generally maintaining vigilant situational awareness of one's surroundings (Elman, 2019). Another key consideration is hiring trusted local drivers who know well the local geography and security situation. It is also quite common for humanitarian organisations to invest more actively in 'hard' security measures, such as safe rooms, barbed wire, and security alarms. Humanitarians working in a city rife with crime and political instability should adopt precautions accordingly.

Road movement is another key consideration. Assessments of travel routes in many urban contexts have incorporated considerations of traffic patterns and access control. In some cases, security managers have deemed likely high-traffic routes unsafe due to risks related to improvised explosive devices. If caught in traffic, it can be important to close car windows to avoid the risk of kidnapping or theft, which can be aggravated even if a window is just cracked open. When caught in traffic, 'You're a sitting duck, in some ways,' as one humanitarian worker with extensive experience in urban settings explained in a research interview.

Humanitarian actors have also increasingly

recognised the threats posed by urban gangs not only to humanitarians themselves but also to urban communities writ-large, especially with gang violence prevalent in cities across Latin America and the Caribbean (Mohor, 2023). As this report later examines in greater detail, in many cities where humanitarians work, armed gangs control vast swaths of territory, meaning that they constitute a type of non-state armed group with whom humanitarians must engage in their efforts to gain and sustain safe and secure humanitarian access. Access negotiations therefore become a routine activity. To be effective, humanitarian staff need to have the necessary soft skills, dynamic access to information and analysis, and a strong contextual understanding.

1.4. Locus of Political Activity

Cities are centres of political activity, a dynamic that can fuel security risks in various ways. First, the mere presence of politicians and government leaders, especially in capitals, can expose humanitarian organisations to security risks, especially amidst concerns that political leaders might be targets for attacks or assassination by opposing political forces. For this reason, as research interviewees discussed, there have been instances when humanitarians have selected lodging locations with the aim of maintaining distance from politicians' residences or, if initially housed in proximity to government actors, have transferred to a different location in response to rising political tensions.

Second, in contexts of political unrest, cities and smaller towns can become centres of political contestation, including political demonstrations and political violence. As just one example of the possible impact on humanitarian SRM, in 2007-2008, security conditions hindered humanitarian organisations' ability to operate in Nairobi and other cities in Kenya amidst violent protests that had erupted due to the disputed presidential election ('Kenya: Fears Rise Over Plight of Displaced,' 2008).

Third, during armed conflict, cities tend to be central to combatants' war-fighting strategies. In the context of internal unrest or civil war, combatants tend to view urban centres as especially important to capture and control, a dynamic that is particularly applicable to capital cities, the control of which can signal to foreign governments which entity (i.e., the government or a rebel group) retains control over the country (Landau-Wells, 2008).

1.5. Dynamics of Urban Infrastructure

Cities tend to be central locations for infrastructure, including electricity, banking services, and telecommunications (e.g., telephone and internet services). Aid organisations working in cities have not always had effective contingency plans for disruptions to these services. For example, when civil war erupted in Khartoum in 2023, electricity outages had a range of impacts spanning from hindering the ability of hospitals to operate to humanitarian workers finding themselves unable to

charge their cell phones, which disrupted their communications capabilities ('Sudan: Essential Services at Breaking Point,' 2023).

A related issue is that residents of cities tend to consume and use social media more than rural residents. Consequently, security risks stemming from misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech can be particularly acute in cities. As humanitarians pursue stakeholder outreach as a component of an acceptance strategy focused on reputation management and cultivating buy-in from local communities, social media engagement is an important domain of engagement for aid organisations ('Managing Misinformation,' 2019).



Security Risk Management

This section delves deeper into the dynamics and challenges of humanitarian SRM in urban settings. As this section discusses, the field of humanitarian SRM, in urban contexts and beyond, is grappling with a plethora of complicated issues of policy and practice, including the application of international humanitarian law (IHL), striking a balance between ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ SRM approaches, the role of humanitarian principles in SRM, the intersection between humanitarian negotiation and SRM, and the challenges of inter-organisational coordination. This section probes how urban settings can complicate humanitarians’ efforts to navigate these issues.

2.1. Applying International Humanitarian Law as a Tool of Security Risk Management

As one scholar has noted, ‘[I]ack of compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL), or insufficient observance of its provisions, is probably the greatest current challenge to the continued credibility of this body of international rules’ (Pejic, 2016). Although limited in applicability to situations of armed conflict (excluding humanitarian response contexts that fall short of the armed conflict threshold), the intersection between IHL and humanitarian SRM offers a key entry point to understanding many

of the threats that aid workers face in their work. Indeed, IHL offers definitive legal protection to civilian humanitarian response organisations, legally shielding them from intentional attacks by parties to armed conflict (Brooks, 2016). But this legal shield, in actuality, is quite ‘porous,’ as other scholars have dubbed it (Bussman and Schneider, 2016). Contrary to what IHL proscribes, hundreds of aid workers are attacked year after year in response settings across the globe. In this sense, the need for humanitarian SRM at the operational level in conflict settings stems largely from the failure of IHL to fulfill its potential to sufficiently protect humanitarians at both the normative and legal levels (Brooks and Grace, 2020).

Urban armed conflict has been central to the ongoing discourse on IHL compliance. As one example, consider the 2003 bombing of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, Iraq, which is now commemorated as World Humanitarian Day and serves as an opportunity to draw attention to the issue of attacks against aid workers. Consider also the 2015 US bombing of an MSF-run trauma hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, in the wake of which MSF leadership called for an investigation by the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission, established by Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (Cumming-Bruce, 2015).

Both the Baghdad bombing and the Kunduz attack were instances of armed conflict in urban settings after which humanitarians pursued high-level advocacy—rooted in IHL discourse—to promote the safety of aid workers in conflict zones. The inability of these advocacy efforts to adequately mitigate security risks frames the need

for more operational SRM approaches. Moreover, security advisors can and have played a key operational role in supporting strategic advocacy via collecting, reporting, analysing, and sharing information about security events ('Security Incident Information Management,' 2017).



Case Study #1

Aiding Civilians While Under Attack: Aleppo, Syria

It was 'one of the most devastating urban conflicts in modern times,' stated one senior humanitarian leader of the battle for Aleppo ('Syria: Aleppo,' 2016). 'Everywhere in Aleppo is a target—mosques, morgues, markets, bakeries, hospitals, ambulances, fire trucks. Nowhere is safe any more. This is the shame of humanity,' stated another ('5 Reasons,' 2016). Between 2012-2016, Aleppo, once Syria's most populous city, became one of the most brutal battlegrounds in the Syrian Civil War. Rebel groups took control of Eastern Aleppo in summer 2012. For the next four-and-a-half years, Syria, with Russian support, pursued an evident strategy of deliberate, severe, largescale civilian victimisation while striving to recapture the eastern portion of the city. As hundreds of thousands of residents were deprived of access to aid, humanitarian organisations and local medical responders were left grappling with an operating environment where they almost undeniably were among the intended targets of Syrian and Russian airstrikes.

During the siege of Aleppo, humanitarian organisations sought to provide myriad forms of emergency aid to residents of the city. Humanitarian action encompassed relief items such as food, hygiene kits, as well as towels and blankets; trauma care; broader medical activities, including a measles vaccination campaign; and support for education, including providing school supplies, pay for school staff, and psychological trauma care training for teachers ('Measles Epidemic,' 2013; 'Syria: ICRC Steps Up,' 2014; 'School in Aleppo,' 2015).

Given the high population density of the city, even after many residents had fled, siege warfare in Aleppo exacted an extraordinary humanitarian toll. Hospitals were bombed, in many cases repeatedly. One hospital was hit 19 times within a two-year period ('A Heavy Price to Pay,' 2022). Schools were bombed as well. One survivor of an airstrike that struck a school recounted the aftermath in grim detail, stating, 'I saw things there I can't describe. There were parts of children, blood everywhere.

The bodies were in shreds' ('Death Everywhere,' 2015, 31). By 2013, more than half of Aleppo's hospitals were no longer operational, and there was approximately one doctor for every 69,000 people ('Doctors Warn,' 2013). In the final days of the battle for Aleppo in December 2016, humanitarians negotiated a massive evacuation of over 30,000 people from the city ('The Children Were Silent,' 2017).

Over the course of four years of brutal urban warfare in Aleppo, humanitarian organisations adopted different approaches to grappling with the inherently insecure nature of this operating environment. Some organisations suspended or scaled back activities. Others continued seeking to operate through intensive, sustained humanitarian access negotiation, including on the issue of security guarantees with key interlocutors. Public advocacy, even at the highest levels of humanitarian leadership and spanning multiple arms of the UN, appeared to have little effect. Another notable dimension of the SRM landscape was the humanitarian notification system that the UN established in Syria for humanitarians to share geolocations with military actors to limit inadvertent harm to aid organisations stemming from military activity. Given the widespread and repeated attacks on humanitarians and health sites, humanitarian NGOs lost faith in the system but continued to participate in the hopes that doing so might one day further accountability efforts, although the UN never intended the system to serve this purpose (Miller, 2021).

In Aleppo, IHL failed to serve its intended protective effect for both humanitarians and the civilian population. Moreover, Aleppo constitutes just one example of urban siege warfare that played out in the context of the Syrian Civil War and in other contexts since (one more recent example being the siege of Mariupol, Ukraine in 2022). Aleppo endures as an emblematic example for aid workers of the challenges of operating amidst dire humanitarian circumstances in which SRM measures completely fail or perpetually fall short.

2.2. Balancing 'Hard' and 'Soft' Approaches

Humanitarian organisations select from various 'hard' and 'soft' approaches to mitigate security risks. The 'security triangle,' a classic SRM framework, lays out three overarching approaches, those being:

- 1.** Acceptance (i.e., securing the buy-in of local stakeholders by demonstrating the principled nature and effectiveness of humanitarian action);
- 2.** Deterrence (i.e., posing a counterthreat in the form of armed escorts or other measures of armed protection);
- 3.** Protection (i.e., 'hardening the target' with measures such as a perimeter wall and/or barbed wire) ('Good Practice Review,' 2010).

Historically, humanitarians have generally deemed acceptance (a more 'soft' approach) to be the optimal security strategy, viewing deterrence and protection (more 'hard' approaches) as complementary SRM approaches, to be employed when necessary to keep humanitarians safe and secure when acceptance measures fall short or appear infeasible.

Research interviewees discussed a perceived trend in humanitarian SRM in recent years: an increasing turn away from acceptance and toward more 'hard' SRM approaches. This trend has been particularly acute in cities, driven by urban-specific security risks, including urban crime, as discussed earlier in this report. A prime manifestation of this phenomenon is the proliferation of 'green zones' in capitals across the globe. In cities such as Baghdad or Mogadishu, humanitarians have sheltered themselves within heavily guarded, walled-off areas with the aim of keeping aid workers safe ('Living in the Kabul Bubble,' 2012; Stauffer, 2020; Norman, 2023). However, this approach to SRM has left humanitarian organisations vulnerable to accusations that they have 'bunkerised' themselves in ways that inhibit effective programming, sometimes fueling negative perceptions among local communities, who might perceive that humanitarians care more about keeping themselves safe than about providing lifesaving aid ('Staff Security,' 2011).

'Hard' security measures adopted in cities also manifest in other forms. Especially due to concerns linked to urban crime, humanitarian organisations in cities have employed fortified walls, barbed wire, security cameras, lighting, and

guards (armed and unarmed) to secure humanitarian sites, including offices, medical treatment centres, and residences. Essentially, this approach shifts the level of effort within the security triangle away from acceptance and toward protection. Such measures, when implemented, have not always been contextually appropriate, and indeed, have not always been on par with the actual level of risk evident in the operational environment. Nevertheless, as one research interviewee explained, if a security incident does occur, one does not wish to be the security manager responsible for failing to implement a measure that could have saved an aid worker's life. These concerns can be particularly acute in an urban setting where crime is prevalent.

There is no consensus on what has driven this trend toward 'hard' security measures. Relevant factors could include a genuine increase in the threats that humanitarians face, perceptions in some contexts (even if unwarranted) that humanitarians have been coopted by Western political and/or security actors, and shifting notions of 'duty of care' that have pulled humanitarian organisations toward adopting more staff security precautions (Sandvic, 2018). Nevertheless, it remains the case that acceptance can be particularly challenging to implement in an urban setting as opposed to a rural context. Because a city is crowded with so many different stakeholders, and because (as noted earlier in this report) city residents often have access to a complex array of preexisting informal and formal channels of support, it can be challenging for humanitarians to make themselves known to local stakeholders and cultivate

a positive reputation for themselves. One interviewee stressed that the best route for humanitarians in urban contexts is to partner with local networks that already have acceptance. Such local networks, however, are likely to have particular political, religious, ethnic, or tribal affinities, consequently leading to compromises of humanitarian principles. A key issue remains for urban humanitarian SRM: humanitarian

organisations must seek to maximise the possibilities of acceptance (i.e., cultivating buy-in from local stakeholders) in a crowded social context while not leaving staff excessively vulnerable to the security risks inherent in urban humanitarian work.



Case Study #2

Delivering Aid from an Urban 'Green Zone': Mogadishu, Somalia

The project of building Mogadishu's 'green zone' stretches back to 2007. Amidst severe instability in the city, the Somali government aimed to create an area—modelled after the 'green zone' established in Baghdad after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003—that would ensure security for international workers, as well as others ('Somalia Plans,' 2007). Within the next couple years, the UN opted to use the 'green zone' to house international aid workers who had been working remotely from Kenya due to the volatility of the on-the-ground situation in Somalia (Maliti, 2009). This move of aid workers to the 'green zone' was far from the first time humanitarian organisations had adopted 'hard' security approaches while working in Mogadishu. Indeed, in the 1990s, as Somalia slid into chaos in the wake of the downfall of Siad Barre, humanitarians regularly turned to using armed escorts (Grünewald, 2012). The creation of the 'green zone,' however, would divide international aid workers from local communities in Mogadishu, in terms of perception and actuality, and the legacy of this choice endures today.

Insecurity in Mogadishu, in part, reflects its status as capital city of Somalia. Over the course of three-plus decades of civil war in Somalia, Mogadishu has been a centre of violent contestation. The city fell to the Islamic Courts Union in 2006, and then to the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and Ethiopian troops later the same year. In the wake of the defeat of the Islamic Courts Union, al-Shabaab emerged as a key violent opponent of the Somali government, securing control over large swaths of territory in Somalia. Al-Shabaab's territorial gains included parts of Mogadishu, which became divided between areas of al-Shabaab and Somali government control. Now, having lost control over territory, al-Shabaab exerts control through indirect means and has carried out terrorist attacks in Mogadishu, elsewhere in Somalia, and abroad (Mubarak and Jackson, 2013).

Aid workers, too, have fallen victim to violence in this context. According to the Aid Worker Security Database, between 1993 and August 2023, almost 600 aid workers have been impacted by security incidents in Somalia, many of which occurred in Mogadishu ('Aid Worker Security Database,' 2023). Meanwhile, aid workers in the country seek to provide aid for over 8 million people living through drought; severe food insecurity approaching famine levels; the effects of ongoing armed conflict; and outbreaks of disease, including measles and cholera ('Somalia Humanitarian Needs Overview,' 2023).

The 'bunkerisation' of international humanitarians in the 'green zone' has strained international humanitarian organisations' relationships with local communities, including local humanitarian and health responders. Sheltering international humanitarians behind 'green zone' walls has fueled a sense that international organisations are needlessly separated from Somali communities and even potentially extractive in nature, aiming to spend significant sums of money in ways not perceived to benefit the local population (Tronc, Grace, and Nahikian, 2018). In the words of one recent assessment of the situation, '[l]ocal aid workers feel disempowered... They are on the front line of this emergency, yet feel like decisions are made by faraway bosses working in the guarded green zone bubble of the capital, Mogadishu' (Mahamad, 2023).

The 'green zone' in Mogadishu exemplifies the grave trade-offs of adopting 'hard' SRM approaches. The rationale for the 'green zone' is the need to protect international workers from genuine threats in Mogadishu. However, in this context, as in others, a hardened approach complicates efforts to forge meaningful relationships with local communities, breeding distrust and resentment of international responders, the very opposite of what an acceptance approach aims to cultivate. The question for humanitarian organisations is how to strike the most appropriate balance between 'hard' and 'soft' SRM approaches in a manner that does not set international aid workers' lives and wellbeing at odds with the welfare of the local communities that humanitarian organisations aim to serve.

2.3. Implementing Principled Humanitarian Action

Compounding the challenges just mentioned regarding implementing an acceptance strategy in an urban humanitarian response context, the socio-economic and political terrain of cities can complicate

aid organisations' efforts to implement principled humanitarian action. As already noted, a principled approach in humanitarian response operations is central to acceptance, pointing toward the importance of i) humanity (addressing human suffering wherever it is found), ii) impartiality (basing programming on needs

and prioritising the most urgent cases), iii) neutrality (refraining from taking sides in conflict), and iv) independence (maintaining autonomy from outside forces) ('OCHA on Message,' 2010). The notion of acceptance is that, by shaping programmatic approaches around these principles, and by clarifying with local stakeholders that humanitarians are indeed principled, aid workers can help shield themselves from accusations of political bias, therefore promoting the perception (and indeed, the actuality) that aid organisations serve a primarily humanitarian (as opposed to a political or military) purpose. In this sense, the principled nature of humanitarian response can function as a shield of legitimacy, lowering local stakeholders' incentives to perpetrate violence against aid workers.

Ongoing policy debates persist regarding the immense challenges of applying humanitarian principles in practice (Labbé and Daudin, 2016), and cities present particular difficulties in this regard. First, as already noted, a typical feature of many cities is a diverse populace with varying levels of preexisting access to formal and informal channels of support, meaning that it can be difficult to discern who needs what. To address these operational complexities in urban settings, humanitarian organisations have pursued area-based approaches, meaning that aid organisations, in a coordinated manner, target a particular geographic area and develop programming, through a participatory process of intensive local engagement, that aims to complement existing support structures (Sanderson and Sitko, 2018). Such an approach was adopted in Port-au-Prince, for example,

beginning after the 2010 earthquake, and in the words of one assessment, allowed aid organisations to 'balanc[e] individual and community needs, keeping the most vulnerable at the centre of the intervention' (Pain and Vrebos, 2016).

Second, urban response contexts pose challenges for neutrality and independence. In cities, humanitarian actors tend to work in highly politicised social terrain where various stakeholders (including governmental actors, religious leaders, and/or urban gangs) might have an interest in the aid that humanitarians seek to offer. As one research interviewee explained, in a city suffering from political conflict, if an aid organisation sees the need for a hospital in a certain neighbourhood, supporting or running a hospital there could lead to the perception that the organisation supports the neighbourhood's political or religious leaders. In this sense, designing programming based on needs could inadvertently fuel accusations of aid organisations' bias. Especially given the challenges of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech—as noted earlier, driven by higher levels of social media use by urban residents—there can be a need to devote intensive resources to reputation management.

It is also important to note that there has been a growing debate around the centrality of the principle of neutrality in humanitarian work. The notion underlying this questioning is that, in contexts where widespread violence against civilians persists (often visible and well documented in urban centres), humanitarians should not remain neutral but rather should speak out

against civilian victimisation and adopt a stance of political solidarity with vulnerable communities (Ali and Romain Murphy, 2020; Slim, 2020). As with discussions about the state of IHL as a legal and normative safeguard for humanitarians and civilians more broadly during armed conflict, the discussion about neutrality has an inherent yet underexplored urban dimension. Consider the context of Myanmar, where this debate emerged amidst widespread government violence against civilians in the wake of the February 2021 coup. Anti-government political protests erupted in cities across the country, including Naypyidaw, Mandalay, and Yangon. Some aid workers felt drawn to participate in these political demonstrations yet felt constrained by their organisations' reticence about taking sides in a political conflict (Fishbein, 2021). There was a widespread sense that humanitarian organisations could better cultivate legitimacy by aligning themselves with this movement of civil resistance, as opposed to abstaining in accordance with the principle of neutrality. At stake in such debates is the nature of acceptance as an SRM strategy. The question is whether humanitarians can better garner buy-in from local stakeholders—supporting the pursuit of safe and secure humanitarian access—by embracing or abandoning neutrality as a core principle.

2.4. Negotiating Safe and Secure Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access negotiation is another dimension of an acceptance strategy for which urban contexts present particular challenges. In the past couple decades, the field of humanitarian negotiation has matured, as aid organisations have explored how to best cultivate negotiation competencies (Grace, 2020a). Key considerations include the role of one's profile in negotiation, navigating simultaneous engagement with stakeholders who are violently opposed to one another, managing the emotional dynamics at play in negotiation processes, and mastering the process of understanding (and building a trust-based relationship with) one's counterpart (Grace, 2020b; Alsalam and Grace, 2021; Grace and Lempereur, 2021; Sutton and Paddon Rhoads, 2022).

An urban setting can magnify many of the core challenges of humanitarian access negotiation. First, in an urban context, it can be particularly challenging to know which stakeholders control which segments of territory. Territorial control can shift rapidly, complicating humanitarians' efforts to discern with which stakeholders they should engage when seeking access to a particular neighbourhood or area. This dimension also arises in rural settings, but in a city, this challenge requires context analysis that is as microscopic and up-to-date as possible. In rural settings, territorial control tends to shift more on a kilometer-to-kilometer basis. In a city, it can be road-by-road or even block-by-block.

Second, as already noted in this report, many cities require intensive humanitarian negotiation with urban gangs, a type of non-state armed group with whom many humanitarians are unaccustomed to engaging. Humanitarian organisations operating where gang violence is rampant (in particular, in various cities across Latin America and the Caribbean, including Port-au-Prince, as this report explains in greater detail below) have struggled to scale up their negotiation capacity with urban armed groups, especially in settings where gangs are motivated more by economic incentives, lack a preexisting understanding of what humanitarian organisations are and how they operate, and bear responsibility for extensive violence toward civilians. As one research interviewee described, in the context of a discussion about the necessity

of cultivating relationships with such interlocutors, '[i]f you don't want to get your hands dirty, don't engage in humanitarian action.'

Third, further complicating humanitarian access negotiation in cities is the multi-stakeholder nature of the process. Access negotiation in cities can necessitate engagement with rival gangs, as well as governmental stakeholders and other leaders (religious or tribal, for example) who are competing with one another for power, authority, and legitimacy. In such situations, humanitarians must navigate parallel efforts to build and sustain relationships of trust while mitigating the risk that an interlocutor might perceive that a humanitarian organisation has sided with an enemy.



Case Study #3

Navigating the Security Landscape of Urban Gang Violence: Port-au-Prince, Haiti

The hospital's entry gate opened to admit two men seemingly needing urgent medical attention. It was the evening of 6 July 2023 at the Tabarre trauma hospital in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. Next, 20 armed men stormed inside, threatening hospital workers and kidnapping a patient receiving treatment for gunshot wounds ('Armed Men Violently Enter,' 2023). For years, the MSF-run hospital has offered surgical care to tens of thousands of Haitians and has operated the only burn unit in the country.

However, following a trend by which security risks had led MSF to suspend or entirely shut down operations in various Port-au-Prince hospitals over the past several years, MSF halted all trauma and burn care at Tabarre, resuming operations as conditions allowed. Amidst a protracted humanitarian crisis impacting millions of Haitians, the July 2023 incident—just one among many others with similar characteristics—further strained Haiti's struggling healthcare system (Rivers, 2023).

Humanitarians working in Port-au-Prince operate in the context of a multi-faceted humanitarian crisis driven by natural and human-made hazards. Haitians have confronted hurricanes, earthquakes (in particular, in 2010, which killed approximately 300,000 people and triggered a much-criticised massive international humanitarian response, and in 2021, which killed over 2,000), landslides and flooding, infectious disease (cholera erupted in fall 2022 after three years with no confirmed cases), persistent poverty, and widespread governance failure. In 2021, the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse plunged Haiti, already in a state of political turmoil, even deeper into unrest. According to UN estimates, armed gangs now control 80% of Port-au-Prince, where over 100,000 people have been displaced (Stoddard et al., 2023).

Hundreds of people in Port-au-Prince have been killed each month, leaving all residents of the city—humanitarian or otherwise—vulnerable to persistent security risks that threaten lives, stymie mobility, and inhibit humanitarian access. Humanitarians have been threatened, assaulted, kidnapped, and killed. The Aid Worker Security Database records 71 aid workers in Haiti affected by security incidents between January 2004 and July 2023, with 22 aid workers kidnapped between 2021-2022 ('Aid Worker Security Database,' 2023). Data gathered by Humanitarian Outcomes illustrates the grave consequences: the vast majority (69%) of Haitians surveyed perceive that aid fails to reach those most in need (Stoddard et al., 2023).

As aid workers navigate the complex security terrain of a city under the fragmented control of a plethora of armed gangs, humanitarian negotiation has been central to promoting safe and secure humanitarian access. Indeed, implementing aid operations in Port-au-Prince now requires intensive and sustained engagement with numerous armed gangs that control different areas and neighbourhoods, and humanitarian organisations have scaled up efforts on this front, especially since 2021 (Obert and Dupraz-Dobias, 2022). Humanitarian negotiation has also been essential for unlocking access to Haiti's main port (where goods and fuel shipments arrive in the country), roadways to Haiti's international airport, and two major roads that connect Port-au-Prince to other parts of the country, all of which have been controlled by different armed gangs.

Negotiations with gangs have benefitted from the incentive that armed gangs can have to facilitate humanitarian access, especially when gang members' family members reside in areas under the gang's control. Nevertheless, the fragile state of the pockets of access that have been successfully negotiated, as well as the complex multi-stakeholder nature of the fragmented context, suggest the need for much deeper and widespread local engagement, especially with the affected population in Port-au-Prince, as well as the government, which currently lacks capacity but nevertheless constitutes an important long-term stakeholder in the context (Stoddard

et al., 2023). Humanitarian negotiation also sits alongside a range of other SRM approaches in Port-au-Prince, including scaled-up incident monitoring (maintaining situational awareness of personnel by regularly generating and distributing security reports), travel management (providing safe and secure transportation for staff and/or enabling staff to work from home), and revamped security training ('Maintaining a Commitment,' 2022).

For many humanitarians, urban gangs are a new type of negotiation counterpart. In a violent urban setting where a breakdown of government authority fuels urban gang violence, the ability to cultivate fruitful engagement with these non-state actors can be essential to operate. Given the myriad humanitarian response settings in which these dynamics have arisen—including cities in Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia—Port-au-Prince constitutes not an outlier but rather a test case for humanitarians' skill at navigating urban environments where gangs control humanitarian access (Fernández, 2023).

2.5. Coordinating and Collaborating across Organisational Lines

Humanitarian coordination in cities can give rise to complications with serious implications for SRM. First, obstacles to inter-organisational coordination play a role in fueling the aforementioned turn toward 'harder' SRM approaches. The following scenario has played out in many urban humanitarian response contexts, as research interviewees attested. A security advisor working for a humanitarian organisation opening up operations in a city examines what security measures other humanitarian organisations have adopted. The security advisor, seeing that most other humanitarian organisations in the area have adopted certain 'hard' SRM measures (for example, a fortified wall, barbed wire, etc.), sees these as the standard for the area and decides to implement a similar

set up. However, in an effort to be cautious, the security advisor recommends a few extra measures (for example, an armed guard, surveillance cameras, etc.). Other aid organisations then begin to implement these other measures, which become a new 'standard' for SRM in the neighbourhood. The cycle repeats, and an escalating trend toward 'hardening' occurs. Absent humanitarian coordination on SRM, the resulting inter-organisational race is driven by individual organisations' incentives not to 'stand out' as the less secure organisation, leading organisations to mimic and one-up one another in ways that might not be aligned with the actual level of risk evident in the environment.

Second, as already mentioned, cities can be fragmented operational contexts where different entities (for example, the government and non-state armed groups, including rebel groups and armed gangs) control different geographic locations. In

such settings, humanitarian response itself can, by necessity, become fragmented. One example is Mogadishu, which was previously split between areas controlled by the government and areas controlled by al-Shabaab (Zimmerman, Curran, and Jarvis, 2010). In this time of fragmented control, organisations working in government-controlled areas were not able to interact with those working in al-Shabaab-controlled areas. Reputational concerns (i.e., the government or al-Shabaab perceiving an organisation to be aligned with the enemy) even impacted individual organisations, which could conceivably work in both areas, as long as those running operations in government-controlled territory did not interact with those working in al-Shabaab-controlled territory. In such a fragmented context, inter-organisational security collaboration is infeasible.

Third, humanitarian response in cities evokes concerns about transferring risk to local organisations. A key thread in the ongoing discourse on localisation of humanitarian response, 'risk transfer' refers to international humanitarian organisations sub-contracting or coordinating with local organisations in a manner that passes along security risks from international to local organisations and staff (Fairbanks, 2018). In cities, collaborating with local partners can be essential, especially given the difficulties in assessing and understanding the complex socio-economic and political terrain of an urban context (Alcayna and Al-Murani, 2016). Responsible SRM in cities means leveraging local relationships and increasing first responders' capacity in a manner that does not also increase local stakeholders' security risks.

What measures can and should humanitarian organisations adopt to most effectively grapple with the issues discussed in this report?

This section offers comments on this question, drawing on lessons learned from the past and practitioner perspectives on how humanitarian organisations can better navigate SRM in urban response contexts in the future. These comments constitute the beginning of a conversation worthy of further attention from the humanitarian SRM community.



Toward the Future of Urban Security Risk Management

3.1. Invigorate Dialogue on Urban Security Risk Management Tools

The realities examined and the debates presented throughout this article suggest the need for greater reflection and analysis of the distinct challenges of humanitarian SRM in urban settings and also how urban contexts differ from one another. Cities such as Aleppo, Mogadishu, Port-au-Prince, Baghdad, Manilla, and Nairobi all encapsulate different dimensions of urban SRM challenges. On the one hand, each context is distinct, yet on the other hand, there are discernible patterns and lessons from past contexts that can be carried forward. Further work remains to define, conceptualise, and typologise urban humanitarian response contexts, including how distinct SRM challenges manifest in different types of urban settings. Humanitarian organisations have begun to explore the development of SRM tools specifically tailored to urban response ('Urban Context Analysis Toolkit,' 2017; 'Urban Competency Framework,' 2019; 'Urban Humanitarian Response,' 2019), but much remains to be codified and documented. The overview of urban SRM offered in this report points toward the importance of continuing to structure

thinking on these issues, grow the evidence base of challenges faced and recommended approaches, and translate future findings into actionable, practical tools to enable more impactful humanitarian SRM in future urban response settings.

3.2. Support Urban Security Collaboration

Inter-organisational security collaboration assumes many forms, including peer-to-peer security groups, inter-agency security networks, security consortiums, NGO-managed security forums, and NGO security platforms ('NGO Security Collaboration Guide,' 2022). Nevertheless, in many contexts, engagements between security managers and advisors from different organisations tend to be ad hoc, driven by personal relationships. The lack of or in another instances, the quality and effectiveness of in-country coordination forums at the level of security manager can give rise to dynamics that include the aforementioned escalation of 'hardening' measures that can occur when humanitarians seek to 'one up' security measures adopted by their organisational peers. Cultivating channels of inter-organisation coordination on SRM could play a key role in tempering

such dynamics while also better enabling information-sharing across organisational lines related to a range of SRM-relevant issue areas, including context analysis.

3.3. Adapt Acceptance Approaches to Modern Contextual Requirements

There is concern across the field of SRM about the turn from ‘soft’ to ‘hard’ security measures. Views are divergent, with some advocating for a re-embrace of acceptance while others express concern that acceptance represents merely an ideal that is unachievable in reality. In urban settings, those in favor of a strong turn back to acceptance want to see fewer ‘hard’ fortifications and a turn away from the ‘green zones’ where humanitarian remain sheltered in various capital cities across the globe. According to this view, the future of humanitarian SRM—urban and rural alike—should be a shift from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ SRM measures. Still, others emphasise the practical difficulties of achieving acceptance on the basis of humanitarian principles in cities. Ongoing dialogue among humanitarian SRM practitioners on the value, viability, and desirability of acceptance will benefit from honest reflection and discussion about practical obstacles and how to surmount them. Such discussions should aim to examine how to adapt and tailor acceptance approaches in light of the complex operational realities of modern urban response contexts.

3.4. Resource Strategic Urban Security Risk Management

Proactive planning and budgeting are necessary for effective SRM. Often, especially for mid-size and smaller organisations, budgeting SRM comes as an afterthought, overshadowed by other programmatic priorities. Such inadequate resourcing can lead to ad hoc SRM approaches. Especially in cities—where intensive context analysis, planning for humanitarian access negotiation, and a strategic approach to balancing ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ SRM measures are essential—proactive resourcing is necessary to ensure that SRM is taken seriously. Moreover, it is essential for humanitarians working in cities to understand local trends in crime, contextually appropriate measures that can best mitigate security risks, and local networks of power and influence to inform acceptance and humanitarian access negotiation strategies. The overall conclusion is that urban SRM is expensive, and hence, requires a significant investment.



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