

Improving living conditions in Bossaso, Somalia

Filiep Decorte and Ombretta Tempra

Involving IDPs, host communities and international agencies in thinking about the city, the quality of life and economic opportunities in Bossaso has led to significant improvements in settlement organisation and shelter provision for displaced people.

Displaced people, like others in urban settings, face a continuous struggle to balance livelihood opportunities with personal safety. While it is initially easier for humanitarian agencies to protect and address the needs of displaced people in camps on the urban periphery, later the physical and social segregation and the perceived preferential treatment become increasingly problematic. With time, inevitably the physical boundaries loosen, mainly driven by the pursuit of livelihood opportunities of the displaced in the local economy and the spread of the city as more people arrive. With time, return to their often rural origins is no longer an attractive option, and internally displaced people morph into economic migrants. Protracted displacement also sometimes sees a whole generation born in their 'temporary' urban location.

Bossaso

Bossaso, a port city in the north-east of Somalia, is a case in point where displacement has many facets. Bossaso has boomed, thanks to its port activities, but its growth would not have been possible without the influx of cheap labour, delivered by migrating minority clans. It has an estimated population of 150,000 people of whom 35,000, or almost one in four, are considered displaced.

The displacement picture becomes even more complex as people from Ethiopia, southern Somalia and even far away places like central Africa and Asia see the port of Bossaso as an important gateway to a better life in the Middle East or Europe. This makes it impossible to single out internally displaced people as a distinct group at a precise moment in time or to only

focus on humanitarian response or on long-term solutions.

The physical reality is the uncontrolled growth of numerous dense, un-serviced temporary settlements on the urban fringes. The disintegration of public institutions has allowed massive land-grabbing and left all land controlled by private individuals who are members of the ruling clans. Displaced people have no choice but to rent. They are a substantial source of income for the 'landowners', who commonly charge the highest possible rent while waiting for better opportunities to sell off their land. The economic logic, the absence of any standards and the weak societal position of IDPs translate into high and unhygienic densities, leaving no space for livelihood initiatives, community facilities or even simple privacy. Landlords are reluctant to allow any 'permanent' improvements on their property. No permanent shelter materials are allowed. No latrines can be dug. No water systems can be installed. Thus the 'squatters' are kept in a state of permanent transition, under constant threat of eviction and at risk from outbreaks of disease and various abuses.

When Dennis McNamara, the then director of the Internal Displacement Division of OCHA, visited Bossaso in late 2004, he referred to the sea of makeshift structures, made of wooden sticks, cardboard and pieces of textile and string, as one of the world's most neglected and desperate humanitarian situations. Cholera was just under control. No more than 140 latrines had been constructed over the previous 10 years, and of these barely 10% were in working order. There was worrying evidence of sexual violence against women who had to leave

the confines of their settlement at night in order to relieve themselves. Every year up to a quarter of all shelters would burn to the ground, deliberately or accidentally, helped by hot strong seasonal winds and the high population densities. A straightforward humanitarian response would always kick in, focusing on the distribution of wooden sticks for shelter reconstruction, the typical non-food items and a few daily rations. The end result was no better than what was there before.

New approaches

This led to growing frustration and a search for alternative solutions. One initial idea was to identify sufficient land where all of the displaced could be resettled which would allow security of tenure and easier service provision. The local authorities offered land 10 kms out of town, which was of little economic value in the prevailing informal land market. Fortunately, funds were not available for this massive exercise; the displaced would have been cut off from their livelihood



IDP settlement after outbreak of fire, Bossaso.

opportunities in the port and the local markets, and it did not address the fact that new arrivals would continue to end up in the city.

It was clear that the complexity of the situation required a concerted effort of all the actors involved to develop a joint UN-INGO strategy for displaced communities based on a rights and protection approach, combined with concepts of sustainable urbanisation, slum prevention and incremental upgrading.

UN-HABITAT drew up some basic criteria to assess the viability of land for local resettlement:

- ability to provide adequate, affordable and sustainable basic services and infrastructure
- possibility of security of tenure and shelter
- social sustainability (physical security and some integration into the existing host community)
- economic sustainability (access to economic opportunities)
- spatial sustainability (promoting environmentally friendly, compact city growth)
- cross-subsidising possibilities and benefits for the host community

(for example, the sharing of infrastructure and services and increased value of serviced land)

Agencies pro-actively adopted the principles of the humanitarian cluster approach, which makes a lead agency responsible for bringing actors together, avoiding conflicting approaches and overlaps, and for common advocacy with local authorities, landlords and representatives of the displaced.

Key components of the new plan were: a) changes to emergency response after fires; b) upgrading temporary settlements by planning access and firebreaks, creating community facilities, building latrines and water points and stocking mobile shelter kits; and c) planning sustainable local resettlement to effectively integrate some of the displaced with the host community.

The emergency response now starts from a 'build back better' approach, using the aftermath of fires as an opportunity to introduce fire-breaks and to distribute mobile shelter kits which use metal poles and fire-retardant canvas rather than wooden sticks and cardboard. This was coupled with disaster preparedness programmes, such as raising community awareness and training displaced people themselves and local authorities in fire response. A simple training guide for upgrading temporary settlements, aimed at municipal officials and community leaders, was developed to allow for a quick transfer of the basic skills needed and to empower displaced people to initiate improvements themselves. In 2008 the number of families who suffered fires fell by 50% compared to 2007.

A campaign was also launched to advocate for the 'rights' of the displaced. The argument was that if you pay rent, there need to be minimum standards for what you get in return. Local authorities and traditional and religious leaders were mobilised, as it is they who define what is acceptable and what is not within the local community. Radio and TV were used to ensure that the debate was widely heard. The discussion focused not only on the 'rights' of the displaced

and their contribution to the local economy but also on the negative impact of unhygienic conditions and heightened fire risk on the host community. The end result was that the first landlords came forward and agreed to negotiate a tri-partite agreement between themselves, the local authorities and the representatives of particular displaced groups. The agreements opened the door for upgrading the settlement and included simple principles preventing ad hoc evictions.

Empowerment of the displaced community has been one of the key factors allowing change for the better. Ms Karoon Sheikh Hussein is the settlement leader of Tawakal:

"In Tawakal we are now about 150 families. We have been living in Bossaso for over 10 years and experienced many difficulties because our clan is a minority in this area. Before Tawakal was created, we were staying in a settlement called 100 Bush but we had to leave eight months ago when the land rent increased. Our former landlord also objected to the construction of latrines, and the sanitation conditions were very bad. 100 Bush was very congested, without access roads and open spaces. We had frequent damage and loss of property from fires and we lived in fear of new fires."

"When I was in 100 Bush I observed UN-HABITAT demarcating the site after a fire to create fire breaks. This is why, when we settled here I and other camp elders insisted on keeping the settlement spaced out and on creating firebreaks. It is the only way to prevent fires spreading."

Displaced people who choose to integrate permanently into the host community have some land made available within the urban growth areas. Services and infrastructure are now planned in a way that benefits both the host community and the displaced. The original landowners benefit as the market value of their land, which will now have services and amenities, is increased. Now displaced people in Bossaso have started purchasing land on an individual



basis and more landowners have come forward to share part of their property. Mosques and schools are being built next to the resettled displaced and shops are opening.

Conclusions

Although it is too soon for a full evaluation, key lessons so far can be summarised as follows:

- A protection and rights-based approach can facilitate access to land and services.
- An inclusive process empowers displaced people and pushes the authorities to fulfil their role.
- A 'One UN/INGO voice' is key to creating the necessary political leverage.
- A focus on the upgrading of temporary settlements, in parallel to integrated resettlement, allows an incremental response. It also improves access to services for

Upgraded IDP settlement with fire breaks, Bossaso.



Filiep Decorte

the urban poor and promotes social and economic integration.

Only an approach that starts from the urban reality, that builds on strong ownership by both the host community (its elite in particular) and the displaced themselves, and that focuses on local integration, albeit temporarily, has the hope of ensuring better protection, more sustainable livelihoods and more durable shelter conditions. Such

an approach also ensures shared benefits for the host community and its urban poor and might indeed be where displacement ends for some.

Filiep Decorte (filiep.decorte@unhabitat.org) was Project Manager and Ombretta Temptra (ombretta.temptra@unhabitat.org) was Programme Support Officer in the Somalia Unit of the Regional Office for Africa and Arab States of UN-HABITAT (<http://www.unhabitat.org>).