Area-based Approach: definition, key elements and benefits

Area based approach: An approach that defines an area, rather than a sector or target group, as the main entry point. All stakeholders, services and needs are mapped and assessed, and relevant actors mobilized and coordinated with. (IRC)

1. Principles to inform area-based approaches

- **Focus on location:** area-based planning uses an area/geographical location as the main entry point. The area in which an area-based approach is implemented can be determined based upon a number of factors:
    - The mix of populations within this area (displacement status and other diversity factors)
    - Level of vulnerability within the displacement affected communities (DACs) as a whole
    - Existence of displacement-specific vulnerabilities
    - Existence of, or potential for, locally-owned area-based planning
    - Existing government administrative area or physical features of the urban environment, which in turn can foster a sense of social or community identity
- In practice this entails:
    - *A collective effort among diverse actors in identifying the right location/area with the leadership of government authorities,* based on the outcomes of multi-agency/multi-sector assessments to identify levels of need or vulnerabilities of displacement-affected populations
    - *Considerations of social cohesion is also critical when choosing how broad a geographic area should be.* A key lesson from UNDP's area-based programming is that 'targeting a larger, rather than a smaller area may be less likely to fuel tensions with neighbouring communities. It can also provide a means of bringing separate geographic communities together and building positive relations between them'
    - *Critical to analyse the diversity of economies within rural and urban contexts* – important to consider these diversities into programming e.g how economic capacities of urban areas influence displacement/migration flows from the rural areas? How economic flows connect a specific area to others?

- **Multi-agency, multi-sectoral approach:** to address a variety of needs, embracing a range of social, economic and physical, humanitarian and development objectives
    - The multi-sectoral, multi-agency approach should focus on leveraging the expertise of various actors within an area and to work towards a common vision/collective outcome
    - A key aspect on this is how to build synergies based on the different expertise and to ensure that the various agencies involved in an area-based planning approach do not work in silos

- **Realistic timeframes:** the focus should be on medium-to long term outcomes rather than the short timeframe of annual planning, budgeting and implementation cycles

- **People-centered actions and planning:** with a strong emphasis on community and wider stakeholder engagement to identify potential solutions, and with active involvement of local authorities.

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The people centered approach entails:

- Inclusion of both displaced and host communities in the planning process from the start and allowing them to set their priorities and share challenges and proposals
- Adopting a consultative, facilitative approach and taking time to meaningfully listen to affected populations
- Supporting peer learning between community groups
- Encouraging periodic reflection among community members on community action plans
- Involving women and youth - ensuring they are closely involved in planning and managing change
- Using participatory tools e.g PfIM, MIDNIMO's community action planning wherever possible and be flexible to adjust programmes as they progress according to changing DAC priorities

- **Work and invest in existing structures**: leadership on area-based planning needs to be localized with international actors playing a supportive role. Area-based planning/approaches should consider existing investments and local capacities. A key learning from the RE-INTEG programme in Somalia was that: *existing community structures, capacities and power dynamics should be mapped at the start of a solutions-focussed programme and new community groups should not be formed unless they fill gaps and bring significant value-add*
- In practice this would entail:
  - *Joint planning with various authorities* (at both national, regional/district/municipalities level) – this is to ensure there is alignment with existing locally-owned area-based plans. In the absence of these, area-based programming should contribute to/support their development
  - *Investing time to understand existing dynamics and structures/policy processes or legislations*

- **Collaborating sectors and programmes:** Collaboration between sectors is essential in order to deliver a more coherent and unified response and to contribute to a common vision on durable solutions. This is especially true in an urban displacement context, where there are overlapping and complex needs and vulnerabilities between the displaced and urban poor
  - A key learning from various area-based programs has been the *need to develop, implement and support institutional mechanisms for more effective information flows and coordination* between the many different actors and sectors
  - An effective area-based approach is dependent on ensuring complementarity with other actors and programs within the defined geographical area

- **Flexible programming: adaptive management**: a programming approach that combines appropriate analysis, structured flexibility and iterative improvements in the face of contextual and causal complexity

- **Nimble internal systems**: area-based approaches require actors and their systems to align with the complexities and needs of displacement-affected communities in a location

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- **Plan for scaling-up:** area-based approaches can be scaled up to other areas, which emphasizes the need for local ownership.

- **Measure contribution not attribution:** a key characteristic of the area-based approach is the leveraging of expertise of different actors within a geographical location towards a collective outcome.

2. Key Benefits of area-based approach[1]

Research by the Urban Settlements Working Group shows that the settlements approach can benefit the affected population, local stakeholders, and the humanitarian agencies supporting them.

The settlements approach benefits the affected population:

- Reduces the creation or reinforcement of tensions and inequalities and contribute to improved social cohesion.
- Generates a collective response that addresses overarching needs.
- Ensures no key influencers or affected communities are left behind.
- Addresses the needs of affected groups across multiple sectors and population.

It also benefits local stakeholders:

- Works with existing governance systems.
- Accommodates the multisector and multiple stakeholder perspective that local
- administrations require.
- Strengthens the capacity of local actors to address the multiple needs associated
- with humanitarian crisis.
- Promotes neutrality, impartiality and balances competing issues inherent in a crisis
- response, thus improving trust between stakeholders.
- Improves relationships between communities and local governments.

The settlements approach also provides benefits for humanitarian agencies:

- Allows resources to be better aggregated and allocated to the most affected settlements.
- Focuses resources on prioritised needs of the communities.
- Enhances clarity and understanding of how best to provide multisectoral assistance at the local level.
- Improves communication and complementarity between partners, including humanitarian and development actors and local stakeholders.
- Enables a quicker adaptation to evolving needs through the creation of an information base that supports evidence-based programming.
- Anticipates pathways to multisector recovery interventions.

[1] Excerpt from The Settlement Approach Guidance Note, Reach, 2020.

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