

URBAN CRISES



**WORLD HUMANITARIAN SUMMIT
PUTTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE**

THE COMMITMENTS INTO ACTION SERIES

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The Commitments into Action series

Humanitarian needs continue to grow, with millions of people affected by conflicts, natural disasters and other crises every year. Simultaneously, these shocks undermine development gains and block the path out of poverty and towards sustainable development. Furthermore, these negative events can destabilise neighbouring countries and have regional or even global repercussions.

And yet, many humanitarian crises remain underfunded or forgotten. Donors and operational agencies make hard decisions about which operations to prioritise and which to let go. In short, there is insufficient quality money — money to reach all those in need, to purchase what they need and when they need it. Human suffering continues unabated.

In May 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit reflected on the shifting nature of crises and on the need for new ways of funding and delivering humanitarian assistance, so that humanitarian aid can remain a key and effective tool for the critical task of saving lives and preserving livelihoods. The question of how to better finance humanitarian operations – including how to finance some of the emerging good practices and new ways of working in humanitarian crises – was seen as key to delivering a better response.

The OECD, under its mandate to monitor the effectiveness of aid and to promote peer learning, will continue to support its members to deliver on the commitments they made at the Summit, especially the commitments around better humanitarian financing.

As part of this work, the Commitments into Action series was developed to provide straightforward, practical guidance for OECD Development Assistance Committee members and other humanitarian donors. It is aimed at helping them translate their humanitarian policy commitments into quality results in the field, deliver better finance and better engage with the humanitarian community on the key issues surrounding humanitarian responses in modern crisis situations. The series specifically targets professionals in donor agencies making decisions about humanitarian funding.

All guidelines are available on a dedicated website designed for humanitarian donors: <http://www.oecd.org/development/humanitarian-donors/>.

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1. Introduction

More of the world's population is living in urban areas¹ and urban areas are growing rapidly² (OECD, 2015). Unsurprisingly, crises increasingly occur in cities, with growing humanitarian needs following in their wake. Delivering humanitarian aid in cities is a complex endeavor — involving fundamentally different mechanisms than those in classic rural contexts. Responding in cities brings new questions. For example, what criteria should be used to determine which people receive aid? Who should we partner with? And, the most basic question: How aid is to be delivered? The questions outnumber the answers, to the extent that some humanitarian actors find it simply too difficult to operate in urban areas and instead avoid those contexts.

Urban contexts pose many challenges to donors supporting a humanitarian response. On the other hand, cities also offer unique opportunities for increased coherence and effectiveness. Cities can offer better access to basic services and economic networks, better human capacities and knowledge, and often access to an organised civil society. Taking advantage of those opportunities requires donors to understand that cities function through networks as well as according to their geography, and through both formal and informal governance actors, power brokers and economies/livelihoods.

These guidelines are intended to provide donor staff with an overview of what should be considered when supporting a response in urban contexts, as well as key operational considerations for the feasibility, implementation, co-ordination and impact of these responses.

2. Description and definitions

Urban area: An urban area is defined as “land with built-up area cover or urban use. It includes, for example, residential and non-residential buildings, major roads and railways and also open urban areas like parks and sport facilities” (OECD, 2013). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defines urban contexts in a more programmatic way, as “the area within which civilians vulnerable to disruptions in essential services reside as well as the network of components supporting those services”. (ICRC, 2015)

For the purpose of this guideline, “urban areas” are understood to include peri-urban areas that are home to many poor and vulnerable populations who have strong economic connections with cities, notably for food production. (UNEP, 2014)

Cities and towns: Cities and towns are both urban areas which are differentiated primarily by their demography and geography. There is no universal standard of population or territorial size

that distinguishes cities from towns, but cities are larger, more densely populated and cover a wider area than towns. As cities expand, sometimes rapidly, they may incorporate or merge with surrounding areas. Many cities are also the seat of a region's administrative functions and, as such, are centres of power.

Towns and cities have their own dynamics. Each is more than the sum of its parts. What makes a city function is not simply its buildings or streets and infrastructure, but the combination of all its residents and their abilities, and the interactions among them (OECD, 2015). Population density is higher in towns and cities than in rural contexts, so the traditional sense of "community" does not apply in the same way. People belong to networks as well as the place where they live.

Urban systems / urban networks: Urban environments are complex systems, meaning that different networks and communities co-exist and interact at different moments and in different places. This interconnectedness means that work in one system, for instance economy and livelihood, affects other systems such as infrastructure and services or space and settlement (Campbell, 2016). A thorough understanding a city's systems and complexity — at the scale of the envisaged programme — is a prerequisite to engaging in urban context.

The typology of urban crises

Humanitarian crises in cities take mainly three different forms that pose context-specific challenges for humanitarian response:

- *Natural disasters.* A large-scale natural disaster in an urban environment (e.g. the earthquakes in Haiti in 2010 and Nepal in 2015) destroys a city's normal life, and often its housing and other infrastructure, leaving survivors to cope with extreme stress and to seek refuge in informal gathering places. The disaster significantly disrupts livelihoods, networks, service delivery and the functioning of local authorities. When there is a disaster in a city, the immediate need is for the deployment of rescue teams, such as civil protection, for example to rescue those trapped in damaged building and the military for logistics and engineering, where appropriate (UNOCHA, 2007). In a second phase, national and local authorities have an important role in managing shelter issues and urban planning and reconstruction, including managing sometimes contested property rights. Humanitarian responses can be constrained by physical and logistical constraints, the disruption of telecommunication networks and possibly the movements of large groups of people.
- *Population displacement to cities.* Towns and cities are magnets. They are economic and political power centres, offering livelihood opportunities and often perceived as places of sanctuary or anonymity. As such, they attract people displaced by conflict or disasters in

other places (e.g. the Syrian refugee influx to the towns and cities of Lebanon since 2013). The flow of displaced people will often live alongside the city's original residents, placing significant pressure on service delivery and affecting the city's overall economy. Humanitarian response is complicated by the mixed range of people and needs in densely populated areas, the limitations of public service delivery and the entanglement of development and emergency needs.

- *Conflict in cities.* As centres of power and with growing populations, cities are also centres of violence. The conflicts that took place in cities such as Beirut, Sarajevo and Aleppo epitomise the complexity and human cost of violent conflict. In conflict, service delivery can be disrupted because infrastructure is destroyed or damaged, or local authorities are unable to provide services to the population. In conflict, a war economy takes hold, reflecting individual coping mechanisms, including black markets and privation. Human rights violations and breaches of International humanitarian law are often widespread. Conflict severely restricts humanitarian access, and belligerents often target humanitarian workers and/or public service providers. Various forms of violence collide in cities, creating a negative cycle of mutually reinforcing factors that pose the greatest risks to civilians (OECD, 2016a).

Crises lead to massive displacement. Whether affected people take refuge in a city, or the city's original inhabitants escape violence, or the city was hit by a natural hazard, a city is never the same before and after a large-scale crisis. Physical infrastructure can be damaged or destroyed; new neighborhoods can appear while some historical parts of the city can take on new functions. The reconstruction process reshapes the city's structure and sociology, creating new dynamics and economies. New challenges emerge in the reconstruction phase because of a complicated canvas of immediate housing and infrastructure needs, land management and funding considerations.

3. The specificities of humanitarian response in urban contexts

With the rapid growth in urban populations worldwide, cities are increasingly exposed to disasters, technological hazards or epidemics. Because urban networks overlap, even small and medium-scale disaster risks can negatively affect people's livelihoods. (Campbell, 2016)

In urban contexts as in most situation of crisis, there is no clear point where needs stop being humanitarian in nature and start being a development issue. Responding to crises in cities, especially when they involve population displacement, is about managing the complexity of intermingled populations that have different needs and networks. Urban crises challenge the traditional humanitarian approach, notably the relatively straightforward approach to

population targeting that is the norm for refugees and displaced populations in rural or camps settings. There are few other crisis contexts where short and long-term needs are as intertwined as crisis in urban contexts.

In responding to humanitarian needs in an urban context, donors need solid co-ordination between humanitarian and development programming and budgets, including climate change finance. Needs in cities are intertwined and require donors and their partners to adopt a holistic approach to each city where they work, including an understanding of specific local political and economic dynamics and weaknesses. In this way, donors can mobilise the most suitable tools to address urban challenges, including humanitarian needs.

In addition, donors who already support development activities in fragile cities have greater scope to perform a risk analysis to identify the main weaknesses and to support emergency preparedness at municipality levels.

4. Commitments

The interconnection between urban risks and development is increasingly acknowledged. This was recognised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”. It was also reflected in the New Urban Agenda. (UN, 2017)

The following table presents the international community’s commitments, goals and guidelines related to humanitarian response and development in urban contexts.

Sustainable Development Goals	SDG 11.5: “By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations.”
The New Urban Agenda	Art. 29: “We commit ourselves to strengthening the coordination role of national, subnational and local governments, as appropriate, and their collaboration with other public entities and non-governmental organizations in the provision of social and basic services for all, including generating investments in communities that are most vulnerable to disasters and those affected by recurrent and protracted humanitarian crises. We further commit ourselves to promoting adequate services, accommodation and opportunities for

	<p>decent and productive work for crisis-affected persons in urban settings and to working with local communities and local governments to identify opportunities for engaging and developing local, durable and dignified solutions while ensuring that aid also flows to affected persons and host communities to prevent regression of their development.”</p>
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5. Programming in urban contexts

General principles for programming in urban contexts

Work with municipal authorities and local actors

Urban networks are complex and entangled; they are not easy to understand for outsiders who are not close to authorities or networks. Designing a programme without fully understanding the context can do harm: the networked nature of cities means that change to one part of the city’s system will have an impact on other areas and systems. Donors should ensure that a proper partnership with municipal authorities is established before any humanitarian or development action in urban contexts begins. This is essential because the legitimacy and sustainability of any intervention — whether emergency preparedness, disaster risk reduction, emergency response or recovery projects — depends on the full involvement of local authorities. This should specifically include local authority staff in technical departments with historical and technical knowledge. These close partnerships can also allow systems to be put in place that will function in future crises after humanitarian actors have withdrawn. (ICRC, 2015) Even in urban conflict settings, maintaining a link with local authority technical staff can increase acceptance and humanitarian access.

Plan for multi-year funding

Crises affect a city’s political and social dynamics and economy over a long period of time; they can change the population makeup; and cities recovering from a crisis can be dramatically transformed. Donors should accompany those changes in a way that allows urban systems and networks to function in the new environment, during the crisis as well as the recovery process to build more resilient cities. In those contexts, multiyear funding can increase coherence and allow for more effective programming. (OECD, 2017a)

Programming before the crisis: Support resilient cities, resilient people

Invest in prevention and disaster risk reduction

Because urban areas are densely populated, natural disasters can have dramatic effects very rapidly. Recurring disaster risks are generally well known and foreseen. Even small-scale hazards can erode the resilience of the most vulnerable. Floods, for instance, disproportionately affect the poorest people, who often settle in flood-prone areas because these areas are cheaper or because there is no relocation plan, even in cities where there are regulations to restrict people from using flood-prone land. Investing in risk reduction ahead of these disasters strengthens city resilience, saves lives and decreases costs.

Financing preparedness allows funds, capacity and relief items to be ready ahead of a crisis. Donors should decide on their support to preparedness according to a risk analysis, balancing the likelihood of disaster with the cost – human and financial – of not being prepared. As explained in the OECD guidance “Financing Preparedness” (OECD, 2017b), donors can support preparedness in several ways:

- **Getting funds ready for an early response.** Pooled funds like the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) can support emergency preparedness in disaster prone areas.
- **Getting partners ready for an immediate response.** When needed, donors can support municipal authorities and national or local civil society to assess risks and analyse the urban systems’ resistance to shocks. Donors can also ensure local authorities have functioning early warning systems in place as well as the capacity to respond to those warnings with the proper disaster response. Support can also be channelled to international humanitarian partners when they have the capacity to manage risks and develop partnerships with the local authorities (in prepositioning for instance, or through forecast-based financing, when relevant).
- **Protecting the most vulnerable people in times of crisis.** The most vulnerable will be the first affected by an urban crisis. In cities, livelihoods are complex and depend on a broader range of coping mechanisms. Sources of income are mostly informal for the poorest, so they are more fragile and their livelihoods are more volatile. To protect these vulnerable people, donors can support social safety nets that are shock responsive and aligned with humanitarian cash-based responses, for example.

Invest in livelihood analysis

Most vulnerability analysis tools were conceived for rural contexts and rural livelihoods. Delivering humanitarian aid in cities requires a better understanding of poverty and vulnerability

in urban contexts. There is a growing momentum, since the World Humanitarian Summit and the Habitat III summit, to invest in city resilience and better grasp the challenges of linking humanitarian aid and development co-operation in urban contexts. Donors can support urban livelihood analysis to better design their humanitarian, disaster risk reduction and development action. Some of the work to improve vulnerability and context analysis is already available to both donors and their partners (Box 1)

Box 1 – The urban context analysis toolkit and the urban multi-sector vulnerability assessment tool for displacement contexts

The urban context analysis toolkit is a set of practical tools (such as questionnaires, analysis tables, and report templates) tailored for humanitarian organisations to conduct an analysis in urban responses by understanding the political, social, economic, service delivery and spatial dynamics.

The urban multi-sector vulnerability assessment tool for displacement contexts (UMVAT) was developed for humanitarian responses in urban environments affected by significant displacement of populations due to conflict and other causes. Developed by a consortium of NRC, World Vision and IRC, donors and humanitarian organisations working in similar contexts can also apply the UMVAT in their work.

Sources: Mohiddin, L, Smith, G and Phelps, L (2017), International Rescue Committee (2017)

Programming during a crisis: ensure basic services and protection

In urban areas, donors should prioritise action aimed at ensuring continuity of basic services. Breakdown in basic services will have grave impact on urban contexts, leaving the population in general, and the most vulnerable in particular, with few alternatives. A water cut, for example, has immediate consequences because of the population density that dramatically increase the risk of transmissible diseases or epidemics, worsening the effect of the crisis. A crisis can halt health services, if targeted by belligerents in conflict, or severely strain them, as occurs when there is an influx of displaced people to a city.

Be mindful of targeting

Not all refugees or displaced persons are in need of humanitarian support. Many vulnerable people already living in cities, on the other hand, have basic needs that would qualify as humanitarian needs, including lack of access to basic services like health or education, and livelihood opportunities. As a result, when cities receive a large influx of vulnerable people affected by a crisis elsewhere, as recently occurred in cities in Lebanon or Jordan, humanitarian targeting can prove challenging for humanitarian organisations. For example, providing aid only to refugees who seek shelter in an urban slum area will rapidly create tensions and decrease acceptance for the newly arrived population. Instead, humanitarians should work coherently with development programmes, such as social safety nets and micro-insurance schemes, programmes that can be better suited to address vulnerability in urban contexts when they are

designed and have the capacity to rapidly increase their scope and delivery channels in times of crisis.

Humanitarian must be prudent, however, as after a natural disaster or during a conflict, social protection services are likely to be disrupted, and therefore emergency distribution or a cash-based response may be more appropriate.

Humanitarian information is humanitarian aid

In cities where the vulnerable population is spread across several neighbourhoods, donors can support information systems, so that people know where and when aid is available. Cities function on networks and the humanitarian response must understand and feed into those networks to reach the people most in need. For example, a displaced population that is scattered across a city can be helped by smartphone applications designed to provide information about humanitarian aid, rights and other relevant issues.

Support a cash-based response when relevant

The urban poor and people affected by a crisis both pay for services and food. In urban contexts where both formal and informal economies are cash based, providing cash to crisis-affected people is often an effective solution (IIED, 2016). Cash can meet basic needs, help economic recovery and provide longer-term solutions. However, cash-based responses, like any other form of humanitarian assistance, should only be used when appropriate and feasible — that is, when markets are functional, when safe and efficient delivery mechanisms are available, and when risks can be mitigated. (OECD, 2017c)

Rights-based support and protection

In cities, the most vulnerable people are at the greatest risk of all forms of exploitation. Yet, rights violations may be barely visible, notably because population density in cities can be high or because exploited people do not have local social networks to identify or help them. Instead, they can often be identified by local social workers, by law enforcement and justice authorities or by humanitarian workers handling protection cases. Donors should ensure that their partners work closely with these actors. Donors can also support governments in addressing legal issues related to the rights of urban populations, for instance related to refugees' right to work (Box 2).

Overall, the Jordanian government estimates, more than 1.3 million Syrians are living in Jordan but only 650,000 are formally registered as refugees. Most of these people live outside refugee camps, in urban and peri-urban areas. Their presence in host communities has increased the informal economy, decreased wages, impeded access to public services, and increased child labour. With UK support, the ILO has launched an e-learning programme for Syrian refugees in Jordan that explains their rights and responsibilities under the country's labour law. The online programme is part of on-going efforts by the ILO to help formalise the work of Syrian refugees in Jordan, notably in the agriculture and construction sectors. Through mobile technology, the programme could develop refugees' skills by helping refugees through the administrative process to request a work permit. It also improved regulatory frameworks and implementation measures through working with both employers and relevant ministries.

Source : International Labour Organization (2016)

Help interrupt violence

In densely populated urban areas, violence can spread rapidly and create a negative cycle of mutually reinforcing factors that lead to its durability (OECD, 2016a). In this sense, violence can be thought of like an epidemic, and one theory is therefore to think about a response in epidemiological terms. Much like children who are exposed to violence being more likely to engage in it, violence can also become normalised within urban communities enhancing its acceptability and thus making it much more difficult to eradicate. During a crisis, programmes that help protect civilian population from violence are a way to interrupt transmission and represent an effective investment for the future of those cities.

Invest in innovation and research

Urban crises create needs that traditional humanitarian responses struggle to address. This makes it all the more important for humanitarian actors to promote and develop innovative approaches to urban contexts. Such approaches may include everything from logistical innovation, for example on shelter design, to the use of data, mapping and communication technology. Donors should support innovative uses of technology once they have been proven efficient so that they become a normal part of humanitarian response. Programmes using innovative technology modalities should clearly demonstrate their added value and accessibility for the most vulnerable people, including those without access to the internet. Some donors are supporting pilots of innovative humanitarian approaches (Box 3).

Box 3. – The Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation

Innovation has yet to be fully integrated within humanitarian operations. Emerging ideas tend to get stuck at the pilot stage or siloed within a single organisation, unable to achieve scale and impact. However, some donors have available funds to support innovation and are developing policies that encourage innovation. The Netherlands, for instance, has created the Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation. The coalition is comprised of governmental actors, knowledge institutes, academia, businesses, and humanitarian organisations in the Netherlands who develop innovative solutions to increase the impact and reduce the costs of humanitarian action. Their projects make use of

data and technology to help both humanitarian workers and affected people directly. The Nomads project, for example, designed a “crowd-sourced information platform” for refugees to share information, where people and trusted entities (including refugees and institutions that support them) can add, retrieve and rate personal experiences.

Source (Skriven, 2016)

Programming after the crisis: Accompanying changes

Crises are heavily transformative for cities. Power structures and other systems can be altered forever. The city of Mostar in southern Bosnia, for example, lost 17% of its population between the two censuses of 1991 and 2013, The number of Croat and Bosniak residents rose significantly during this time, but the size of the Serbian community dropped from 23,846 to 4,421 (BHAS, 2016). People will adapt and new networks will be created, altering government capacity to design and impose a recovery or reconstruction plan. Donors in these contexts should accompany those changes during the recovery or reconstruction process.

Support protection through land rights

Donors involved in recovery or reconstruction processes should pay particular attention to the legal protection of the most vulnerable. Support for urban preparedness, building codes and planning regulations can make cities more resilient as a system, but these actions can also lead in the short term to adverse effects on the most vulnerable. For example, an urban regulation banning construction in a flood-prone area is a good disaster prevention measure; however this can lead to the expulsion of the poor and vulnerable population that have settled in those cheaper areas, and must therefore be carefully managed. Land records and information exist in most urban areas, but they may be out of date or destroyed. Moreover, informal settlement residents often do not have legally recognised evidence of their land rights, increasing their vulnerability (Ziervogel, 2017). The enforcement of customary and informal land rights is a particularly important role for donors because they influence local authorities. When blatant protection issues are identified, such as land grabbing, donors should convey protection concerns in very concrete terms.

Support reconciliation when necessary

Trust and understanding can be permanently lost when a crisis leads to a dramatic population turnover in a city and to new structures for municipal governance (IDEA, 2003). For example, a large population influx from rural areas or from other countries during a conflict will reshape a city’s post-conflict population, and can create social and political tensions with the historical inhabitants. In addition, when a crisis leaves large-scale destruction, the reconstruction process can lead to massive expropriation and destruction of historical sites for private or political

interest, eroding social cohesion and shared cultural, religious and historical ties. Donors can support all actions aimed at easing the resulting tensions, through peace and justice programmes, and by creating economic or cultural links.

Reconciliation must be a local process, which donors can support but not lead or impose. Reconstruction of historical sites is an example of post-conflict action that can help reconciliation around a shared cultural patrimony. (ICCRROM, 2005)

6. Risk management

Risks should be assessed based on their likelihood and possible consequences. Urban contexts bring specific risks that can be mitigated by careful analysis at the design and planning stage. Risk mitigation measures may also be embedded in partnership arrangements.

Project scale

Donors supporting projects in urban areas should ensure that the project they intend to support fits into the overall urban architecture. Projects in urban areas can be undertaken at different levels and at different stages of crisis. During or after a crisis, for example, city-scale structural projects on energy supply or transport can be deployed, and can run parallel to other neighborhood-level or micro-projects. However, caution needs to be applied to the overall mix of projects so that interventions are coherent. When smaller projects are not connected with nearby interventions, or when they are not aligned with citywide initiatives and structures, the overall response becomes incoherent and the potential for inefficiency grows. For example, a neighborhood sewage system needs to be linked up to city-wide planning.

In addition, what works at the micro- or neighborhood level does not automatically work at a larger scale, where power structures are different and more partners are involved. Scaling up a project requires specific capacities, and donors tempted to scale up a successful neighbourhood project should ensure their partners have the proper strength and buy-in from municipal authorities to make it successful.

Multidimensionality

Infrastructure and social networks are deeply interconnected in urban contexts. As a result, addressing one problem, such as emergency healthcare during an epidemic, will not be sufficient without taking into account the other dimensions of the crisis. While the interconnectedness of response programmes is not specific to crises in urban context, not addressing all the aspects of a crisis in a densely populated area does represent a major risk. In 2014 for example, when the first Ebola case was registered in the city of Lagos where 21 million people live, public health

measures were immediately supported by communication and awareness campaigns, strict population control and transportation restrictions (CDC, 2014). Only a co-ordinated effort taking into account the multi-dimensionality of a crisis could achieve such an outcome.

7. Impact and monitoring

Monitoring humanitarian responses in urban contexts is complex. The scale and geographical spread of cities can represent serious challenge to monitoring and measuring impact. In such contexts, mobile and data management technology (e.g. satellite imagery or crowdsourced data) can facilitate the collection and availability of data. Donors who have a field presence can support innovations in data collection and management when relevant, and should seize opportunities to regularly visit projects and interact with partners, including municipal authorities. Donors should also ensure humanitarian aid is linked with recovery and reconstruction wherever possible. Donors without a field presence can draw upon partner reporting, but could benefit from joint monitoring visits with other donors when possible.

Linking long-term humanitarian needs and development co-operation is essential in urban contexts. As such, donors should measure their contributions to the process of change rather than focusing exclusively on programme outputs. Reporting on humanitarian action, especially regarding the delivery of basic services, should be complemented by indicators that also measure the recovery and the resilience of urban system as a whole, including institutional development and society resilience (OECD, 2016b).

ENDNOTES

- 1 See UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015), “World Urbanization Prospects - The 2014 Revision”, at <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2014-Report.pdf>
- 2 The urban population have increased from less than 1 billion in 1950 to roughly 6 billion by 2050. By 2100, it is likely to reach somewhere around 9 billion, corresponding to close to 85% of the projected total population. (OECD 2015)

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