

Understanding Disaster Vulnerability of Chennai's Homeless — *A Policy Paper*



MAY 2021

*According to a
UN-HABITAT
representative, the
homeless are most
vulnerable as they lack
“the very first line of
defence — housing”.*



Figure 1. : A homeless family taking shelter from the rains

INTRODUCTION - CONTEXTUALIZING THE HOMELESS PEOPLE'S VULNERABILITY TO DISASTERS

Over the years, there have been several enumerations of homeless in the city ranging from 40,763 in 1989-90 by Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority to the most recent 9087 by Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC). While the number of homeless may vary, their vulnerabilities have remained similar and related to lack of access to housing and basic services such as water, sanitation, food, education and healthcare. Marginalisation and destitution lead to high degrees of vulnerability amongst the homeless who suffer the most when faced with disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed the vulnerabilities of the homeless and highlighted the importance of access to basic services in reducing risks associated with the virus. Despite these linkages, city, state and national level disaster related policy and program in India is yet to explicitly recognise

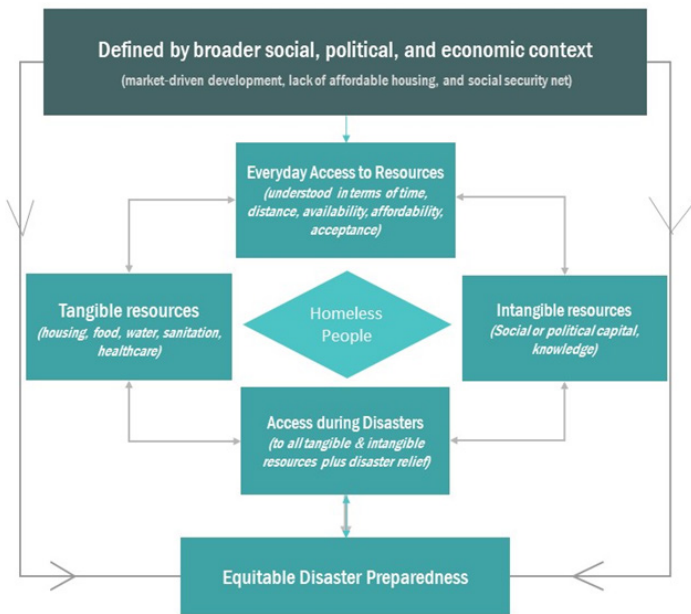
the homeless as a vulnerable group that requires special attention.

Further, researchers and practitioners increasingly recognise that disasters are not isolated from existing societal contexts, but are produced through various social, political and economic forces, putting individuals and communities at risk. Motivated by this understanding, Okapi Research & Advisory collaborated with IRCUDUC¹ to develop a sociological understanding of disasters² focusing on the homeless community's everyday access to resources which in turn shape their ability to cope with disasters and the broader socio-political and economic context within which their vulnerabilities unfold (*Figure 2*).

1 Funded by Azim Premji University

2 We refer to natural and non-natural disasters that are common in Chennai such as heat, drought, flood, cloud burst, storm surge, cyclone, sea level rise and fire and pandemics like COVID-19.

Figure 2. Sociological interpretation of homeless community's vulnerability to disasters



MOTIVATION AND METHODOLOGY

Through a year long effort engaging directly with the city's homeless and individuals/ agencies working closely with them, a comprehensive community - based, understanding of homeless peoples' vulnerability to disasters has been developed. Using a mixed methods and participatory approach (including a comprehensive literature and policy review, stakeholder interviews (13), community mapping (1), surveys (299), focussed group discussions (3) and GIS analysis), this project examines the following issues:

- the state of disaster vulnerability amongst the homeless;
- everyday vulnerabilities with respect to access to basic resources that aggravate the homeless persons' disaster vulnerability;
- coping strategies and government support to deal with everyday and disaster vulnerabilities;
- needs/gaps that should be addressed to strengthen current city disaster management plan and disaster governance to build disaster resilience amongst the city's homeless community;

Much of the field work was concentrated in Zone V which has the largest concentration of homeless in the city. The goal of the project is to inform policy and support more equitable thinking and action in Chennai city's governance of disaster management efforts.¹

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building resilience in everyday lives

A. PROVIDING ACCESS TO SHELTERS (INCLUDING TRANSIT SHELTERS)/ HOUSING

Shelter / housing constitute the first line of defence against any disaster. In Chennai, homeless families who have been living on the streets for several generations need access to permanent housing or temporary shelters. For homeless individuals, there is a need to provide different kinds of affordable housing arrangements such as working men's / women's hostels, rental accommodation etc. as acknowledged by the recently released TN Affordable Urban Housing and Habitat Policy 2020. For homeless to access housing schemes, convergence is required between Municipal Administration and Water Supply Dept. (MAWS) which implements the Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH) programme and Housing and Urban Development Department (HUDD) which implements housing projects. Further, Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB) would need to recognise homeless as potential beneficiaries for their schemes and consider different kinds of ownership models which do not depend on 10% financial contribution from the beneficiaries. Additionally, it is also recommended to set up transit shelters as a first entry point into the system where a thorough examination of homeless persons' mental and physical condition, background and needs can be assessed, based on which they can be directed to the appropriate institution which could be a regular shelter / hospital / care home.

B. PROVIDING ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

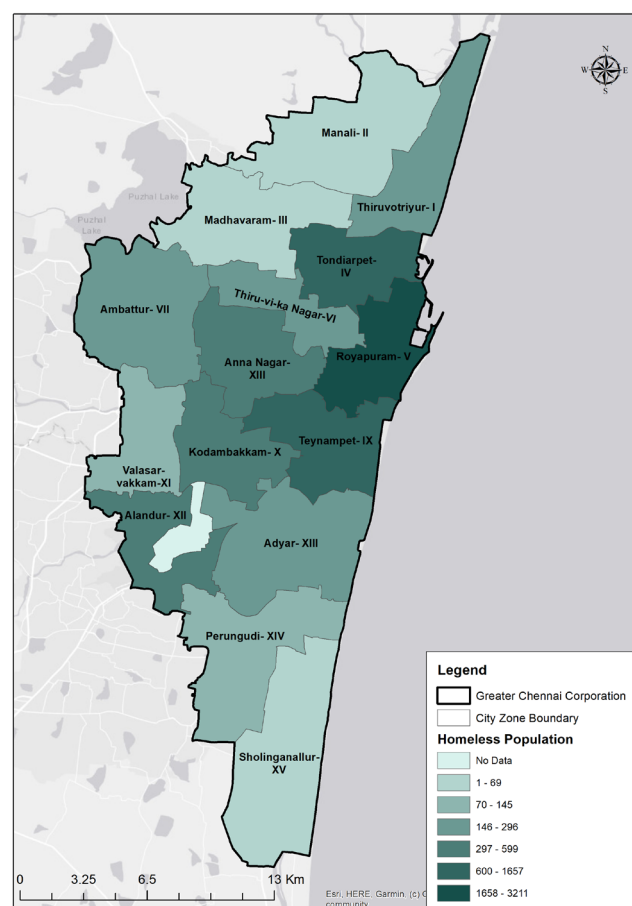
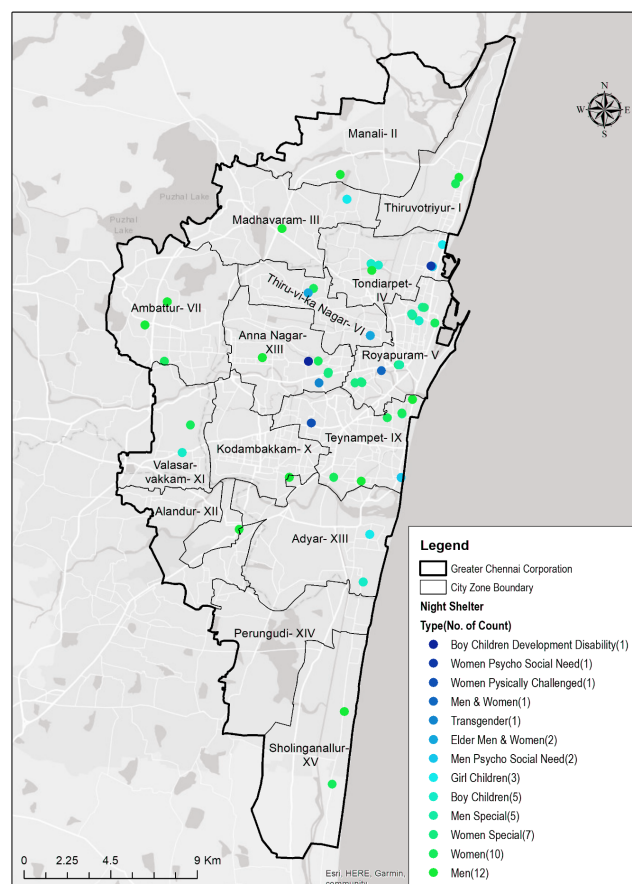
Access to basic services such as water, sanitation, hygiene, food and healthcare (WASH) is closely related to access to shelter. In the absence of shelter, homeless communities also lack access to these basic services in a safe, affordable and adequate manner. For instance, our survey of homeless families reveals that 95% use public toilets for which they have to pay ₹5 per use which restricts the number of times they can use the toilets and the maintenance of the toilets is poor. Also, there are no permanent arrangements to provide water to the families who depend on Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (CMWSSB) tankers. This inadequacy in WASH services has put the homeless into a specifically vulnerable spot during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is recommended that GCC increase the number of public toilets through the Swachh Bharat Initiative, especially in homeless hotspots and make these free for the homeless and provides access to potable and affordable drinking water perhaps through more *Amma Kudineer*³ counters set up in hotspots. With respect to health care, shelters need to mandatorily have at least one staff who is a professionally trained psychiatrist.

C. SINGLE WINDOW SYSTEM FOR PROVISION OF ENTITLEMENTS

District Collectors are mandated to provide entitlements to the homeless through a single window system for those applying through shelters. Homeless families on the streets cannot access these entitlements because they there are no dedicated shelters for them leading to disenfranchisement. Further, shelter staff are struggling to provide their residents with Aadhar cards, ration cards and other entitlements, because of the complexity in paperwork. The District Collectorate / GCC can consider

3 Amma Kudineers are water ATMs which supply RO purified water free of cost to those who cannot afford it.

Figure 3. Top: Map of homeless shelters; Bottom: Zone-wise concentration of homeless people living on the streets



opening a dedicated 'e-seva' counter (with staff who are sensitised to the condition of the homeless and aware of the SUH programme) for homeless persons to register for Aadhar cards and other entitlements like ration cards, livelihood and housing schemes etc.

D. CREATING AWARENESS AMONG THE HOMELESS ABOUT WELFARE SCHEMES

Interactions with the homeless revealed majority of the homeless are unaware of several Government of India and Government of Tamil Nadu welfare schemes such as the Chief Minister's Health Insurance Scheme. It is recommended that awareness is created on these and other relevant schemes supporting the homeless. This can be done through SUH programme's monthly meetings and mass awareness drives on the streets. A dedicated day, perhaps once in three months, can be selected to create awareness at the shelters (depending on availability of the residents), while on the streets plays, mime, songs, street theatre etc can be used to spread the word. NGOs working with the homeless and selected homeless who are active in specific areas may also be roped in for this purpose.

E. SENSITISING GENERAL POPULATION AND GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS ON HOMELESSNESS

Restrictive policies and negative social attitudes aggravate homeless people's vulnerability by criminalising and disempowering them. Public sensitisation campaigns are essential to showcase the invaluable contribution of the homeless in the local economy and can happen through the radio, events in public spaces like malls / beaches and social media challenges involving celebrities (like the [#SafeHands](#) challenge propagated by World Health Organisation (WHO) for tackling COVID-19). World Homeless Day which is already being utilised by GCC to create awareness on the shelter programme, can be leveraged for this purpose.

It is important to sensitise other line department personnel in addition to the SUH staff including those from Parks, Roads and Storm Water Drains departments, TNSCB, CMWSSB, and most importantly Police. A mandatory sensitisation workshop can be held twice a year for these key personnel, facilitated by the SUH team and other NGOs working on the ground. The workshop can include details on how to communicate with / handle homeless persons and how to contact/ direct the homeless to the SUH team and/or homeless shelters.

F. PROVISION OF TIMELY RELIEF/ PREPARING FOR THE MORE COMMON / EVERYDAY THREATS IN THE SHORT RUN

The homeless are highly vulnerable to everyday social and environmental vulnerabilities including mental and physical harassment, road accidents, rain, heat, common diseases (cholera, dengue) etc. They feel more threatened by these everyday threats than by major disasters. Vulnerability of homeless can be greatly reduced if adequate and timely warnings and Standard Operating Procedures to deal with these less-than-disaster situations are systematically provided. Also, simple measures can be adopted especially for those living on the streets. For instance, providing tarpaulin covers to protect belongings and raincoats for children, can be extremely beneficial support before the NE monsoons. Similarly, to deal with heat, water / buttermilk / *elaneer* stations can be set up in homeless hotspots.

G. DEVELOP AN URBAN HOMELESS POLICY

There is currently no homeless policy in the country and the homeless shelters are being administered through the SUH scheme under the Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) programme., which restricts the scope of the shelters since the programme is a livelihood mission and not a housing programme. The SUH scheme does

not directly help address broader issues of lack of access to permanent housing or basic services which are linked to homelessness. Further, there is no certainty in its continuance and funding is restrictive as SUH is only one component of the DAY-NULM programme. Therefore, there is a need for evolving a comprehensive policy for the urban homeless that will, among other things:

- recognise and mainstream issues of the homeless in all existing housing, disaster and welfare policies and programmes of the state and central government such as the Smart Cities project etc.;
- improve access to entitlements by enhancing coordination between government departments and through convergence of schemes and laws;
- suggest inclusion of homeless shelters and hotspot locations in the master plan to ensure integration into the formal planning process;
- explicitly recognise that the homeless are not a homogeneous group, but are very diverse with different demographic and social characteristics who have different needs (e.g. children, women, elderly persons with disabilities) and equip shelters in terms of qualified staff and infrastructure to cater to their varied needs;
- facilitate reintegration with families by linking with Missing Persons Registry and referral to long term institutional care where reintegration is not possible and;
- enable access to socio-economic and psycho social rehabilitation processes.
- Implement a dedicated homeless programme with budgetary allocation from the TN Shelter Fund.

Building resilience to cope with disasters

Mainstreaming disaster risk reduction in urban policy and programming is essential for inclusive and just disaster management. The SUH scheme, like most other development programmes, does not incorporate disaster risk reduction officially in its framework. Rather, SUH officers undertake ad-hoc actions to reduce disaster impact including advising shelters to keep stock of essentials before onset of the monsoon. To effect sustained, long term change, more systemic actions are required to target homeless shelters and homeless individuals and families on the street. Some of these actions include:

A. INTEGRATING RISK ASSESSMENTS IN SUH PROGRAMME

Disaster risks need to be recognised and integrated in the shelter programme including introducing risk assessments in identification of spaces for shelters (e.g. is the street flood prone), assessing general accessibility (e.g. is the street too narrow for emergency services) in existing shelters and their exposure to disasters.

B. EARLY WARNING AND COMMUNICATION

An essential part of disaster mitigation is to communicate to communities well in advance, about upcoming disasters so that they have the time to prepare and respond effectively. This involves setting up early warning communication / announcement systems that can quickly/easily communicate warnings to shelters. Some kind of transmission system originating from the GCC control room with loud speakers on the other end at each shelter and homeless hotspot locations on the streets, can be set up. Information that can be relayed would include: warnings, government guidelines, contact info of emergency services. A similar kind of message was relayed by Government of Tamil Nadu for COVID-19 on the phone. Downloading the Tamil

Nadu State Disaster Management Authority (TNSDMA) app can also be made mandatory among shelter coordinators and staff.

C. AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

Information regarding disaster risks, preparation and rescue/recovery efforts need to be widely available through multiple media and in multiple languages as the homeless comprise of a diverse group of people including differently abled persons from across the state and country, with low levels of education and limited access to smart phones. This could include: print media - newspapers, visual media – street art and posters (with braille options), street plays and theatre (with scripts available in braille), radio campaigns and phone calls. Shelters for the disabled can consider recruiting professionals who can this information to persons with disabilities especially those who have visual or hearing impairments. The campaigns can be conducted aggressively before impending disasters and before specific seasons like the monsoon and summer. Advertising agencies can be roped in as consultants for this purpose through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes.

D. COMMUNITY LED DISASTER PREPAREDNESS PLAN

Disaster risks can be significantly reduced if communities are actively involved in planning for disasters. Traditional knowledge and experience can often be more effective and sustainable in managing disasters than more contemporary methods. Therefore, including the



Figure 4. Community mapping underway for this project

homeless and organisations/ people working closely with them in any disaster management planning exercise should become an institutionalized practice. The SUH team has a very good working relationship with all shelters and can easily conduct these planning meetings every year along with the periodical monitoring meetings that are already underway. However, a separate action plan needs to be incorporated to involve homeless families living on the streets in this process and may be done by conducting focussed group discussions in hotspot locations.

E. REVISE THE CITY-DISASTER MANAGEMENT PLAN / CREATE A DISASTER PREPAREDNESS GUIDE RELEVANT FOR CHENNAI'S HOMELESS

The city disaster management plan brought out by GCC in 2018 sets out the roles of and responsibilities of government departments within and outside GCC and identifies streets and areas at high risk from flooding. However, it does not include specific steps to involve communities in disaster management and does not include targeted actions to address vulnerabilities of marginalised communities especially the homeless. The following recommendations can be incorporated in the existing plan / new plan:

- make provisions for affordable, adequate and safe basic services such as water ATMs, sanitation and handwashing facilities in homeless hotspots;
- build capacity of homeless people (including those on the streets) to act as first responders including information on how they can

connect to SUH staff and other essential services like police, health care, National and State Disaster Response Force (NDRF/SDRF);

- **build capacity of shelter staff** on how to manage disasters effectively. The capacity building session will include training on disaster preparedness, mitigation and response and how to provide emergency first aid for specific disasters. Some of this is happening but is not systematic - The NDRF team from the 4th Battalion, Arakkonam provided training on “Community awareness/preparedness programme on Disaster Management” for all the shelter Coordinators last year. Programmes like these can be conducted every year or twice a year before the monsoons and summer;
- **build capacity of other government agencies** apart from GCC such as Police, CMWSSB and TNSCB on how to engage with the homeless specifically during disaster situations;
- **leverage social capital** to reduce disaster impact. Discussions with the homeless reveal that for the homeless, their social ties and networks are the primary strength and coping mechanism during difficult times. For instance, collective kitchens thrived during lockdown in April – May 2020 when homeless families requested for dry rations as relief so that a few of them could cook together. Even during normal circumstances, they support each other, and often have a “go to” person within the community to help. These

ties can be leveraged by officially identifying community leaders who can coordinate and lead disaster efforts on the ground.

F. GOVERNMENT-NGO COORDINATION FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Good coordination within and across government and nongovernmental organisations is crucial for managing and mitigating disasters risks. The current State Disaster Management Plan 2018 and City Disaster Management Plan 2018 detail management structures, roles and responsibilities for government agencies but do not include non-governmental organisations

in their framework. The important role NGOs and citizen groups play in rescue and relief was highlighted during the 2015 floods, cyclone Vardah and COVID-19 pandemic. Coordination can be strengthened by:



Figure 5. Homeless families cooking collectively during the lockdown in 2020

- **mobilizing existing institutional**

structures such as SUH programme, Domestic Workers Association and Street Vendors Association. Periodic first responder training can be provided to residents and staff of shelters, community leaders from the streets and members of these above-mentioned associations as many homeless are part of these. Through the programme a volunteer army of first responders can be trained who can be called upon to assist in the event of a disaster.

- **mobilizing volunteer / NGO base** and creating an inventory of organisations with data on which communities they work with and socio-economic characteristics of these communities. Some of this data can be digitised and can direct relief operations during disasters and can greatly reduce duplication of efforts and ensure all those who need relief have access to it. However, for this exercise to work, private-public collaborations are essential and need to be based on trust. Trust-building exercises, can be conducted not just before disasters but periodically through the year and a formal structure of collaboration can be devised and detailed in the disaster plans.
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For the homeless in Zone V, it's not just the major floods or storms that are threatening, but the 'silent disasters' that pose everyday challenges –

“மழை வந்தால் கஷ்டம்
வரும்... வெயில் இருந்தால்
கஷ்டம் வரும்... மழை
வந்தால் தண்ணீர்
அப்படியே தேங்கி நிற்கும்...”

*(the rains bring difficulties... the heat
brings difficulties... whenever there is
rain, water stagnates...)*

ENDNOTE

i Please contact Okapi Research & Advisory at proy@okapia.co or IRCDUC at ircduc.chennai@gmail.com for the larger research report.

ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS



Okapi Research and Advisory is a research and consulting group focused on helping our clients better understand policy ecosystems, design resilient solutions, and facilitate sustainable social and environmental transformations in cities.

Reach us at: proy@okapia.co



Information and Resource Centre for the Deprived Urban Communities (IRCDUC) is a Chennai-based consortium of community-based groups and individuals from different sectors working to assert the rights of urban deprived communities.

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Uravugal Social Welfare Trust is a non-governmental organisation working to uplift the lives of the urban poor in Chennai.

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Azim Premji University's research centre is largely focused on issues that have social relevance and impact and that contributes to knowledge in practice beyond contribution to scholarly knowledge.



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