Social mobilization helps to solve health problems rooted in the built environment.
© Stephen Ryan / IFRC, Montserrado, Liberia.

People first
Agency, choice and empowerment to support self-recovery

Holly Schofield
Shelter Researcher, CARE International UK

Bill Flinn
Senior Shelter Advisor, CARE International UK

The primary resource in the provision of post-disaster shelter is the grassroots motivations of survivors, their friends and families. Assisting groups can help but they must avoid duplicating anything best undertaken by survivors themselves

Ian Davis (1978) *Shelter After Disaster*.[1]

As pertinent today as it was in the 1970s, Davis's quote goes to the heart of what the shelter sector now calls 'self-recovery'. However, the best way to support self-recovery remains poorly understood. Despite some notable successes, the sector still struggles to know how best to assist self-recovery in a way that keeps the agency of disaster-affected people at its centre.

In this chapter, we discuss why supporting self-recovery is so important. With a focus on naturally triggered disasters, based on experiences in recent interventions as well as research with disaster-affected families and communities, we make some further practical suggestions about what agencies can do to support self-recovery at different stages of the response cycle.

What is self-recovery?

Shelter self-recovery is the process of households making use of their own resources to repair and rebuild their own homes. Householders might do the work themselves, or they might employ local skilled or unskilled labourers. Self-recovery is how the overwhelming majority of disaster-affected households repair or rebuild their dwellings.[2] Methods that support self-recovery are gaining acceptance and momentum in the shelter sector.[3]

In a number of recent disasters,[4] agency support for self-recovery explicitly formed a part of overall shelter responses. Support consisted of technical, material and financial assistance,[5] or some combination of these, to help people construct a safer, permanent house as early as possible. To date, self-recovery research and practice have mostly concentrated on rapid-onset naturally triggered disasters in rural areas in Asia

and the Pacific,[6] but proponents of self-recovery believe that it is also applicable in situations of conflict, displacement and forced migration.[7]

Self-recovery seeks to maximize disaster-affected people's control, agency and choice over their own recovery, and to avoid duplication of recovery activities. Greater user choice and agency throughout the recovery process increase beneficiaries' satisfaction and the likelihood that homes will suit their particular needs, tastes and priorities. Because the degree of self-recovery achieved will inevitably vary between households and communities, supporting the process may not always be appropriate or straightforward. Moreover, there are no easy methods to follow. The 'three-pronged' approach of technical, material and/or financial assistance, which has proved successful in a number of responses, need not be the only, or most appropriate, way to support self-recovery. There may be many barriers to recovery that this approach fails to address. Identifying and dismantling such barriers is a prerequisite to the construction of homes. The degree of government control, the aspirations and priorities of the population, and other factors will also help determine the best choice of intervention. This is discussed further below.

The case for self-recovery

There are compelling reasons for shelter agencies to support self-recovery. Not least is the widening gap between humanitarian financing and post-disaster need. In 2016, the United Nations estimated the shortfall in funds required to meet global humanitarian need at US$15 billion.[8] In this tough financial reality, the shelter sector will be expected to reach an ever-greater number of households, with fewer resources. Supporting self-recovery can be very cost-effective, helping many households with sometimes quite modest cash grants. Technical assistance can be targeted to all families, helping embed safety and preparedness in the entire community.

Does self-recovery bring risks? If so, how might they be avoided? One risk arises because the cash provided is never sufficient to cover the cost of rebuilding a destroyed house. If stringent compliance conditions are also imposed, the family might be forced to borrow to cover the shortfall. Or they may even decide to forego the assistance, rather than run up more debt. This suggests that micro-finance, or village savings programmes, could provide valuable additional support to self-recovery. A safety-net for the most vulnerable people would also mitigate the risk of their failing to recover at all. This was successfully implemented after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, through a 'top-up' grant.[9] Low technical quality is another risk, countered in part by training and community accompaniment (discussed below). Projects that work in tandem with a prescriptive government policy and strict adherence to building codes may seem to conflict with the self-recovery principles of household choice and agency. But strong advocacy may lead to a modus operandi that ensures compliance but still allows some degree of choice. Finally, there will inevitably be circumstances under which a self-recovery approach is deemed unsuitable.

Although there may be an increasing tendency towards supporting self-recovery in the sector, our understanding of self-recovery processes, as noted earlier, is still in its early stages. There is limited longitudinal evidence on the long-term effectiveness of awareness campaigns, messaging techniques and safer-building training.[10] Nonetheless, it is possible to draw on recent research and shelter responses to highlight the effectiveness of agency support for self-recovery, and to continue capturing information that will improve our understanding and guide learning that will lead to better practice. What follows is by no means prescriptive or exhaustive; rather, it draws together some of the main lessons learned, and advances the discussion on more effective support for recovering populations.

Supporting self-recovery in practice

Preparedness

Many people begin to reconstruct or repair their buildings shortly after a disaster. The shelter sector will be best able to support self-recovery if the in-country cluster and agency country offices, as well as the national government, have undertaken preparedness planning. The time taken in recent interventions to develop and disseminate messages on building safety has impeded effective, timely support to the most rapid self-builders.

Messages developed by the Shelter Cluster for the 2015 Nepal earthquakes took months to be approved; the process was much quicker in the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan, but still lagged well behind the faster self-builders, who began work within days of the storm.[11] Currently the sector lacks the skills to contextualize each unique disaster, arrive rapidly and reliably at important technical messages, and systematically and effectively communicate these in an accessible way that ensures informed decision making and maximum acceptance by the affected population. Evidence from the 2015 Nepal earthquakes suggests that demand for technical assistance was very high after the event, but that many families commenced reconstruction with little or no knowledge of safer building techniques.[12] Evidence from recovery following Typhoon Haiyan also found that a high percentage of people would have appreciated more timely technical information.[13]

Measures that may help shelter agencies prepare include the development of locally suitable housing designs that incorporate inter-agency-agreed Building Back Safer (BBS) techniques for known disaster hotspots, and the development of plans for materials, technical support and communications which can be mobilized rapidly in the event of a disaster. These activities will help ensure that interventions correspond more closely with affected people's initial self-recovery timeframes.

Assessment

Self-recovery begins rapidly after any disaster. But a family's needs and priorities shift over time.[14] This is part of the messy reality facing any humanitarian response, and is difficult to capture during an assessment process. With its emphasis on beneficiary choice and agency, self-recovery means that agencies should accept the complexities and changing needs of disaster-affected populations, and adapt their programming accordingly.

Currently, agency-employed rapid needs assessments are, through necessity, a snapshot, rarely capturing information that may be important for the development or amendment of self-recovery programming at a later date. Moreover, detailed assessments take time to gather and analyze; during this time reconstruction is usually already taking place. In contrast, a more contextual analysis that incorporates a needs assessment will explore perceived recovery trajectories and timeframes, and other social and behavioural factors.[15] A good context analysis supports the design of self-recovery programmes, and caters for the need for adaptation over time. Following a disaster, needs and priorities evolve rapidly; continual and live assessment is essential if programming is to adapt to the changing circumstances of self-recovery.

There is a balance between gathering information that is 'nice to know' and the minimum needed to realistically initiate work in an emergency phase. The affected household's plans and priorities in the short, medium and longer term fall into this minimum category. Examples might include whether they plan to repair, rebuild, rent or buy; where, and importantly when, they will do so, and for what reasons; their priority for shelter support, and its intended use. This will help agencies predict flurries and lulls in self-recovery – as populations adapt to harvests, monsoons and winters for example – so that implementation aligns with self-recovery timeframes. Events such as monsoons, local festivals and harvests, or the economic imperative

of focusing on livelihoods, can influence the speed at which people reconstruct. This shifting pattern of priorities can shape varying perceptions of a house's permanence or durability, and consequently the levels of physical and financial investment that people are likely to devote to self-recovery at different times.

Project design and implementation

The characteristics of self-recovery programmes will inevitably vary according to the context. They should be informed by all stakeholders (affected communities, governments and local partner organizations), as well as by local market and supply chains and environmental analysis. In recent interventions, technical assistance has included training builders and stonemasons, constructing model houses to demonstrate hazard-resistant techniques, BBS training, and disseminating information to households.

Although beneficiary agency and ownership lie at the heart of self-recovery, supervision and accompaniment throughout the reconstruction process are important. This is essential if hazard-resistant construction, informed decision making, and monitoring of construction quality are to remain as a sustainable disaster risk reduction legacy.[16] House-to-house monitoring and technical support by roving teams – selected by the community and supported by implementing agencies – was an important component of the response to Typhoon Haiyan (see Box 4.1). These teams, typically comprising two carpenters and a non-technical community member (sometimes called a 'social mobilizer'), were valued for their ability to give families encouragement and technical advice that reinforced what they had learned by other means.[17] Research in post-earthquake Nepal found that families frequently possessed the will to reconstruct, but lacked the confidence to know whether their work complied with local building codes. They lacked 'accompaniment', suggesting that a similar approach might have been useful.[18] The Nepal response shows that not all barriers to safer and better housing are technical;[19] a mix of technical

and social skills in these roving teams will help the shelter sector and the community identify and overcome social, economic and cultural barriers.

WASH and health sector experience in motivating better hygiene practices suggests that simply informing people about safer construction techniques may not necessarily result in their uptake.[20] Nevertheless, agencies continue to rely heavily on the distribution of BBS messages, albeit complemented by other training and awareness activities. Hands-on technical training for affected people, and the construction of model houses, have been valuable in self-recovery in a variety of places.[21] But they can consume a lot of time, for agencies and people alike: the former struggling to provide at scale, and the latter being diverted from other important day-to-day activities.

Shelter practitioners need to improve their knowledge and understanding of how and when to best communicate for building safety. They need to explore alternative, contextually specific ways to learn from, and with, communities. For instance, conventional methods of disseminating messages through posters, training and the like can be complemented by imaginative use of locally influential actors and popular types of audio-visual media, such as drama, radio, television or smartphones.

While the three-pronged approach of material, financial and/or technical assistance may have been used successfully in recent rural interventions, it may not always be a sufficient or most appropriate way to support self-recovery. A continuing study of the urban post-earthquake recovery in Bhaktapur, Nepal,[22] has observed that a high number of families faced numerous difficulties, causing significant delays to the start of construction; these difficulties could not be resolved via the three-pronged approach alone. The need to demolish partially collapsed houses in this high-density area caused disputes between neighbours whose houses would also be damaged or destroyed in the process. These disputes have run into months and years. Equally commonplace are land disputes between neighbours, or siblings

competing for the small plot where the house once stood. The lengthy legal and administrative process of selling agricultural land – a popular fundraising strategy for families in this area – has also significantly contributed to delays. Ways to overcome these social and legal barriers – as well as recognizing their underlying causes – must be incorporated into self-recovery analysis.

Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning

Leaving a legacy of safer building, achieved through technical assistance, is a central aim of self-recovery programmes. But lasting legacies cannot be measured in the relatively short timeframes of disaster response, and there is limited longitudinal information from which to draw firm conclusions. Consequently, assumptions that technical activities currently implemented will leave a legacy of safer building might be based more on shelter agencies' aspiration than on empirical evidence.

The importance that the sector places on structural safety and the benefits of technical assistance as measures of success raises both programming difficulties and ethical dilemmas. Currently, evaluations measure uptake and compliance with BBS messaging, and quality of technical implementation, as among the determinants of the success of a programme. But it is not feasible to make more than a very superficial assessment of engineering safety at scale among a diversity of non-engineered buildings. Moreover, although these measures are important short-term goals of self-recovery, using them as the principal indicators of success deviates from a central tenet of self-recovery: that the choice and agency of the family and community are paramount.

Disaster-affected populations may prioritize structural safety in the immediate aftermath of an event, when perceptions of danger are highest, but over time priorities change as other needs, values and aspirations – all of which shape the way a home is used and modified – come into play. Measuring success in this context means much more than technical quality: our definition of recovery must accommodate the shifting needs and priorities of the family.[23]

However, by accepting lower technical quality we face an ethical dilemma in certain contexts. The implications of unsafe masonry buildings in an earthquake zone, for example, are of a different order from the risk posed by bamboo housing in a storm. Ultimately, we may need to strike a balance between objective measures of safety and subjective family values in the context of the prevailing risk. But where that balance lies should be decided by, or at least in close collaboration with, recovering households, who are equipped with sufficient knowledge and information to make their own informed choices and determine their own way to recovery.

Conclusion

Supporting self-recovery has generated considerable interest and acceptance, but still remains a relative newcomer to aid agencies' efforts in post-disaster shelter reconstruction. The shelter sector is finding its way in understanding the process of self-recovery, and developing appropriate ways to support it. The level and type of support will vary for different disasters and contexts, and according to the shifting timeframes and priorities of affected populations. There is much to learn, including how to support self-recovery in cities and towns, or in situations of protracted displacement. The success of self-recovery projects in the Philippines demonstrates the importance of putting people's agency and control at the very centre of humanitarian thinking. In a world of shrinking resources and increasing disasters, supporting communities on their own way to self-recovery is likely to be favoured by shelter agencies. If managed well, this inevitable change brings with it advantages of community ownership, agency and empowerment.

1   I Davis (1978/2015) *Shelter After Disaster*. 2nd edn. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, p. 36.

2   C Parrack et al (2014) 'Getting the message across for safer self-recovery in post-disaster shelter'. *Open House International* 39(3), pp. 47–58.

3   V Maynard et al (2017) *The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Interventions Supporting Shelter Self-Recovery Following Humanitarian Crises: An Evidence Synthesis*. Oxfam Great Britain, Oxford.

4   For example, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (2008), monsoon floods in Pakistan (2011), Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013) and the Nepal earthquakes (2015).

5   Maynard et al (2017).

6   J Twigg et al (2017) *Self-Recovery from Disasters: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Working and Discussion Papers. Overseas Development Institute. London; Maynard et al (2017).

7   B Flinn et al (2017) 'The case for self-recovery'. *Forced Migration Review* 55, pp. 12–14. www.fmreview.org/shelter/flinn-schofield-morel.html.

8   High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing (2016) *Too Important to Fail – Addressing the Humanitarian Financing Gap*. Report to the Secretary-General. United Nations, New York. https://reliefweb.int/report/world/high-level-panel-humanitarian-financing-report-secretary-general-too-important-fail.

9   CARE International UK (2016) *CARE Philippines Typhoon Haiyan Shelter Recovery Project Evaluation*. CARE International UK, London. https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/care-philippines-typhoon-haiyan-shelter-recovery-project-evaluation.

10 Although see D Hodgkin (2017) *Scoping Study Report January 2017: Shelter Sub-Cluster Coordination Support Scoping Mission, Pidie Jaya Earthquake 2016*. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva. www.sheltercluster.org/sites/default/files/docs/shelter_sub-cluster_coordination_support_scoping_mission_pidie_jaya_earthquake_2016.pdf.

11 CARE international UK (2016).

12 Shelter Cluster Nepal (2015) *Nepal Earthquake Recovery Monitoring Assessment: Nepal 25 April / 12 May Earthquakes Response*. Global Shelter Cluster, and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_npl_report_shelter_recovery_monitoring_assessment_nov2015.pdf.

13 CARE International UK (2016).

14 Twigg et al (2017).

15 For instance, see M Turnbull et al (2015) *Extending Impact: Factors Influencing Households to Adopt Hazard-Resistant Construction Practices in Post-Disaster Settings*. Catholic Relief Services, Baltimore. www.preventionweb.net/publications/view/52732.

16 Twigg et al (2017).

17 CARE International UK (2016).

18 P Batra et al (2017) *Resilience Scan: January–March 2017. A Review of Literature, Debates and Social Media on Resilience*. Overseas Development Institute, London. www.odi.org/publications/10846-resilience-scan-january-march-2017.

19 For instance, see Housing Recovery and Reconstruction Platform, and the Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project (2017) *Clearing Away the Rubble: Moving Beyond Blockages to Reconstruction Progress. A Joint Advocacy Report*. https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/joint-advocacy-report-clearing-away-rubble-moving-beyond-blockages-reconstruction.

20 T Newby (2014) 'Promoting safer building'. *Resilient Urbanism*. http://resilienturbanism.org/guest_blogger/promoting-safer-building/; C van Wijk and T Murre (1995) *Motivating Better Hygiene Behaviour: Importance for Public Health Mechanisms of Change*. UNICEF, New York. www.unicef.org/wash/files/behav.pdf.

21 See Turnbull et al (2015).

22 CARE UK in association with Overseas Development Institute, British Geological Survey, University College London and Loughborough University.

23 CARE International UK, and Habitat for Humanity (2018) *Lessons from Typhoon Haiyan: Briefing. A Review of Shelter Self-Recovery Projects in the Philippines, and their Lessons for the Shelter Sector*. CARE International UK, London. https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/lessons-from-typhoon-haiyan-briefing.

Box 4.1

Self-recovery in the Philippines

Holly Schofield
Shelter Researcher, CARE International UK

Bill Flinn
Senior Shelter Advisor, CARE International UK

Typhoon Haiyan devastated large parts of the Philippines in November 2013.[1] The typhoon, which was the strongest to have ever made landfall, displaced more than 4 million people, and damaged or destroyed 1.1 million homes.[2] CARE Philippines responded with extensive shelter and livelihoods programmes, based on self-recovery. Almost 16,000 families received cash, materials and tools, combined with technical assistance. This helped them rebuild their homes so that they were stronger and better than before. Many of the *barangays* (local administrative units) that received shelter support were also recipients of livelihood support through two cash grants, which families spent on projects as varied as piggeries and rice-mills.

The programme targeted remote communities (known as GIDA – geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas) predominantly inland, across the islands of Leyte and Panay.[3] All had been very severely damaged by the typhoon, with a high percentage of houses totally destroyed. In many instances CARE (working with local partners) was the only international agency operating in these barangays.[4]

This was a shelter response with an explicit focus on self-recovery. At best, the new homes were a significant improvement on the pre-Haiyan houses: better built, stronger, often bigger, and with the families expressing an evident sense of pride, satisfaction and 'ownership' of their achievements. The CARE programme was considered better than the contractor-built 'whole-house' approach of other agencies, because it allowed for flexibility and choice, as well as potentially leaving a legacy of education in Build Back Safer techniques. Despite having to invest their own time and resources into the houses, families recognized that their homes, once finished, were tailored to their needs and resources. There are some delightful houses as a result.

When operating at its best, the Filipino system of *bayanihan* ensured that no one was left out.[5] Through this informal, but long-established, system of community cohesion and mutual support, neighbours helped build homes for elderly residents, widows, single parents and other disadvantaged people.

Each of the almost 16,000 homes is unique. Families built according to their individual needs and resources. Some homes are substantial, to accommodate large or extended families; others, belonging perhaps to a couple or a widow on her own, are modest; many incorporate small *sari-sari* convenience stores, providing a small income to supplement farming.

It is important that, despite this very good result overall, we do not ignore some critical observations and lessons: occasionally, houses were not finished; in some communities bayanihan was not functioning; technical quality was patchy; compliance with Build Back Safer techniques was inconsistent. There is much to do to improve the dissemination of technical messages and to find ways to embed these techniques into a long-term legacy of disaster risk reduction. Nevertheless, these important points should not detract from the effects that this project has had on the wellbeing and general recovery of the communities. Houses are now stronger, bigger and healthier than before the typhoon. The constructive criticisms are valuable lessons for future improvements in self-recovery shelter programming.

What did the programme look like?

In December 2013, CARE began distributing corrugated galvanized iron (CGI) roofing sheets; tools; a few materials such as nails, wire and strapping; and a cash grant of PHP3000 (about £43). This package was known as Shelter Repair Kit 1, or SRK1. This was followed several months later by SRK2: a further cash grant of PHP5000 (£70), widely referred to as the 'top-up'. Eligibility for SRK2 was based on a second

Figure 1   **The Philippines: CARE Philippines response to Typhoon Haiyan, 2013.** Photograph courtesy CARE UK/Marta Echegaray.

assessment, and not all SRK1 recipients qualified. The entire process was accompanied by awareness training for all beneficiaries, and further training for carpenters. In each community, a roving team was established, typically two carpenters and a social mobilizer, who offered the families encouragement and technical advice.

The barangays generally organized themselves into groups of ten or more families, often one group per *sitio* or *purok*, a subdivision of the barangay. To differing degrees, the community would employ the bayanihan approach of collective community support, sharing the burden of construction between them and ensuring that the homes of vulnerable families were given priority.

In the inland barangays where CARE was working, people's main sources of income were share-cropping, backyard vegetable plots and livestock (pigs, ducks and chickens). Pre-Haiyan houses were mainly timber or bamboo frames with bamboo or *amacan* (woven bamboo matting) walls and *nipa* (palm thatch) roofs, with occasional CGI roofing sheets. The new houses, tailored by the families to their needs and resources, were considered by the beneficiaries to be a substantial improvement. The CGI roofing, in particular, was said to be much, much better, as it lasted longer and did not leak.

Recognizing the merits of supporting self-recovery

The project received the 2017 World Habitat Award. This is recognition not only of the success of this particular project, but also of the merits of self-recovery more broadly: a philosophy that puts people, and their own needs and priorities, at the centre. People are never passive after disasters; they are always the first to respond and, of course, they are the most important actor in their own recovery. This project shows that supporting self-recovery is not only effective, but also empowering.

1   This case study has been adapted from CARE International UK (2016) 'CARE Philippines post Haiyan/Yolanda shelter response'. *Stories of Recovery*. https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/stories-of-recovery-care-philippines-post-haiyan-yolanda-shelter-response.

2   National Economic and Development Authority (2013) *Reconstruction Assistance for Yolanda*. National Economic and Development Authority. Pasig City, Philippines.

3   CARE International UK (2016) *Care Philippines: Typhoon Haiyan Shelter Recovery Project Evaluation*. https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/care-philippines-typhoon-haiyan-shelter-recovery-project-evaluation.

4   CARE's local partners included ACCORD, The Leyte Center for Development, Metro Ormoc Community Cooperative, USWAG Development Foundation, Laua-an Multi-Purpose Cooperative, Pontevendra Vendors Development Cooperative, and Sara Multi-Purpose Cooperative.

5   *Bayanihan* is an ancient, core Filipino value and culturally specific coping mechanism. It has been defined and understood in various ways, but generally it describes a system of mutual help and support. GR Ang (1979) 'The Bayanihan spirit: Dead or alive? *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 7(1/2), pp. 91–93.

Box 4.1 **Self-recovery in the Philippines**   **37**