Effective response is complex and interlinked.
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Just one small part of the jigsaw
Why shelter response must serve complicated human realities

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In both very hot and very cold climates, shelter provides essential, life-saving protection from the elements, preventing deaths from exposure. But shelter also protects people from other threats: crime, abuse, ill-health and trauma, which can be equally life-threatening, if less immediately obvious. If there's one thing the shelter sector needs to be able to do, it is to provide life-saving emergency shelter well, and quickly.

This much may seem obvious, and enough of a challenge to keep the entire shelter sector, and the many diverse organizations and individuals that play a part in providing post-disaster shelter, very busy. But after many hard-learned lessons,[1] we are now aware that the need for emergency shelter very quickly develops into the need for longer-lasting housing, with all the requirements and expectations that come with that. Shelter responses that do not take this very quickly into consideration and respond to these changing needs and expectations are likely to be branded as inadequate, and with some justification.

When temporary becomes permanent

Shelter is a sector in which it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to separate the urgent, emergency needs of affected families from their longer-term requirements. Both the shelter materials and the methods of providing shelter lay the groundwork for the next steps to recovery and longer-term housing. Any choice of intervention can potentially open up new avenues of subsequent response and recovery – or close them off. Food, WASH and to some extent protection are sectors meeting needs which, though also present in the long-term, can be met in the short and medium term with relatively simple, adaptable and affordable measures. What is supplied is typically short-term and consumable. Anything but purely emergency

shelter, such as temporary shelters made of wood, or prefabricated shelter kits, is by its very nature durable and expensive. It is difficult to change: the physically hard nature of the materials needed to protect families means that many shelters will remain recognizable in their original forms for years after they are provided. As one example, temporary houses constructed in Tonga after Hurricane Isaac in 1982 still exist today, as testimony to the durability and adaptability of some first-phase shelter responses. The predominant adaptation by families has been to expand the dwelling by attaching additional rooms to the sides.

The shelter sector must provide life-saving emergency shelter well, and quickly. But ignoring the long-term interactions between livelihoods, development, and the process of shelter becoming long-term housing will leave a legacy of failure. Every emergency life-saving intervention potentially provides the materials, however flimsy, to contribute to further repairs, or the incremental construction of a new house, or might allow a household the physical presence by which to stake a claim on a piece of land, and thus set them on the route to recovery.

People's realities are complicated

Successful shelter programmes do not just deliver a shelter product; they support a process of sheltering. But the shelter sector still has a way to go to understand this process, not as one of building an object, but as one of responding to the varied needs and aspirations of people and how they choose to live their lives.

Livelihoods, cultural and social needs, access to services and many other things are all intricately bound up with the basic humanitarian needs of shelter, food, water and protection. If these relationships are neglected in shelter programmes, the programmes tend to fail, sometimes catastrophically. For example, humanitarian organizations worked with local government to construct entire settlements of fully finished permanent core houses in Somali Puntland in the mid-2000s. Those settlements constructed nearer the city centre became sustainable, while those built further away were abandoned after a short time, because they were too far from livelihoods and education facilities. For similar reasons, after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, many households in Port-au-Prince insisted upon remaining, and reconstructing their own housing, in steep ravines prone to landslides. In the Filipino city of Tacloban after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, families resisted moving away from flood-risk coastal areas, again because they needed to stay close to their livelihoods.

These intricate linkages to other sectors could be used as an argument that shelter is of central importance. But such an argument leads to a tendency to prioritize shelter as a visible, high-profile set of objects, over all those other intricate needs. It leads to a tendency to think that the shelter itself is more important than the process of acquiring, occupying and adapting, or that shelter can solve the myriad other problems and risks that people face. It can't.

Such thinking leads in turn to situations where people are re-settled to 'safer' locations, often trapping them in situations – in the short to medium term at least – with inadequate services and livelihoods. Or people are forced to abandon their expensive houses to live in more precarious structures, but with otherwise more sustainable existences. Such thinking can lead to projects that require unattainable technical standards, preventing appropriate recovery. Currently in Nepal there are fears that some people, particularly the poorest, will be unable to meet the standards of construction stipulated after the 2015 earthquakes. If so, they will be ineligible for multiple tranches of reconstruction funding, and may remain in makeshift, unsafe shelter anyway.

People in urban areas face even more complex obstacles to meeting the requirements of reconstruction funding. In Haiti in 2010, an insistence by many agencies responding to the earthquake upon installing only shelters of a minimum 20 square metres in size (the rough

equivalent of the Sphere guidelines for the spatial standards for a family of five), denied shelter support to the many households whose plots of land were already smaller than those dimensions. (Standards are discussed in Chapter 18.) Following the 2009 floods in India's Andhra Pradesh,[2] two very different communities were relocated to higher, safer ground, with high-quality two-room houses. One fairly homogeneous community moved in its entirety to an existing settlement, was able to continue its traditional livelihood (fishing) and reaped the benefits of better housing, easier access to services, and continued community cohesion. The other, very diverse, community was moved to a new settlement and was unable to engage in traditional livelihoods, or access services. This resulted in those with their own resources returning to their old settlement and rebuilding, while those without remain trapped in a more precarious day-to-day existence than before the floods, despite living in better houses.

We only have to look at low-income urban settlements, or indeed at urban house-shares in rich countries, and the varied places in which people choose to live, to understand that the quality of shelter and housing is the result of a compromise people make in order to be in certain places, jobs and situations. It follows that the objectives of shelter programmes should be subordinate to people's own choices, to livelihoods, to family ties, and to a whole host of considerations that many external shelter practitioners have thus far struggled to understand. Shelter is really important – not as an end in itself, but as a means to achieve many other things.[3] Or, as John Turner once said, shelter is a verb: it's what a shelter *does* for you that matters, and not what it *is*.[4]

Part of this mismatch in understanding is due to the fact that the shelter sector has traditionally been dominated by built-environment professionals, such as architects, planners, builders and engineers, whose training has for the most part focused on providing products, rather than on becoming involved in community processes. As a result, and despite much discourse on the subject and mounting evidence of what works, shelter programmes still tend to focus on the object, rather than on the process and on the wider meaning that shelter might have for crisis-affected people. If shelter is about meeting the aspirations of how people wish to live their lives, then shelter agencies need to draw upon a much wider range of people, skills and knowledge to implement programmes. We should certainly stop putting single-issue practitioners in charge,[5] and stop working in isolation from the many other people and organizations who can provide wider relevant knowledge and expertise.

A means to an end

We have established that shelter is very important, but beyond immediate life-saving needs it is a means to many ends, rather than an end in itself. It is complicated, and intricately related to many other needs and aspirations. It requires a meaningful process that moves towards meeting those needs and aspirations, and not one which is just about a building an object. The shelter sector, at the moment, has to understand and try to respond to all these needs and aspirations with a complement of practitioners drawn largely from a homogeneous built-environment professional background. The shelter sector is burdened (or has burdened itself) with unattainable expectations to provide finished housing that can meet all occupants' needs *and* aspirations.

If the shelter sector is to in any way meet the expectations of the people it seeks to shelter, and those of donors and its own practitioners, it needs to limit its ambition to fix the world's physical housing structure problems, and get better at working within and around those problems by cooperating with communities on the wide range of livelihoods and social factors that are the real drivers of shelter and housing development. This is especially true in urban settings, where almost everything is even more complex and interconnected than in rural

settings, and where we can expect to be working more and more often.

This means being more willing and deliberate about accepting compromises on what we set out to achieve, and accepting that what people want does not always line up with what shelter practitioners *think* they should want. Support should be provided to those building without secure land and/or tenure, such as renters, who may well be in the majority in urban areas. Support should be provided to those who, for very good reasons, are compelled to reside on dangerous land, recognizing that there are many different kinds of vulnerability, and that by focusing only on the vulnerability of the physical house, we risk ignoring and disproportionately exacerbating the other kinds. We may not be able to give everyone the safest possible shelter, in the safest possible location. If people have to live on dangerous land for reasons outside their, or our, control, there should be help to manage and mitigate those risks, rather than withdrawing support. Assistance intended to be short term, such as rental support, will probably be needed for a long time, such as in refugee situations, but will need to be provided as part of a process towards greater self-sufficiency. The absolutely correct desire to achieve buildings that are safe should be balanced with the many other risks people face, which might be less obvious, or less easy for a typical shelter practitioner to understand. Safety must be understood in the round, not just in the narrow sense of safe buildings. Safe-enough might be the objective.

Shelter practitioners need to listen, understand, enable and perhaps influence, but not decide for individuals, households or communities what the right solution is for them. Those individuals, households and communities will understand the constraints and difficulties they face, the possibilities they have, and the goals they wish to achieve, much more than any outside shelter practitioner ever could. Better assessments are therefore needed – ones that genuinely seek to listen to people, and from that, involve people in designing programmes.

External constraints, government requirements, funding timelines and entrenched inequalities will always limit what the shelter sector can achieve. But the sector must not impose its own, additional limitations on what the most vulnerable people can decide for themselves, and what they can do. Without understanding people's aspirations, shelter actors cannot know how much to challenge or comply with constraints imposed by governments and others. The sector should be flexible enough, and creative enough, to facilitate people's choices and help them work around the myriad obstacles they face. Doing this well should be the measure by which shelter projects are judged.

Where to from here?

What can the shelter sector do to remedy these weaknesses? We offer four suggestions. A good start would be to spend more time listening to people's shelter intentions, rather than looking at their current housing situation. Their intentions about how they want to recover and rebuild should take precedence over 'our' external intentions, and should inform what support we offer. It is more important to know where people want to live tomorrow, than where they are accepting to live today. Although early assessments must look at needs, later assessments should focus more systematically on intentions and aspirations. Rather than turning emergency shelter agencies into developmental housing agencies, this approach is about understanding how people want to recover, understanding their chosen process, and then doing what can be done to realize this within the constraints and realities that characterize post-disaster response and recovery. If they want a house that can be extended, we should help them build a small house that can be extended. If they want to relocate, we should help them move. If they want to stay put, we should help them stay. Although all these choices will be affected by external constraints, and will change

over time, they should nonetheless form the starting point of shelter agencies' thinking.

Secondly, develop ways to demonstrate that, in some cases, shelter-as-object may not be the best answer. The same spatial planning and recovery objectives may be achievable through interventions focusing on water-points, drainage channels and school-front plazas, rather than on shelter-as-wooden-boxes. They may also be achieved by concentrating on governance, livelihoods and legal or technical assistance, without ever building anything. Good shelter outcomes do not necessarily have to be achieved through traditional shelter interventions; they may be much better achieved by other means. Shelter actors must explicitly work out the role of other sectors in achieving shelter outcomes. The use of unconditional cash is a critical part of this thinking. (See Chapter 16.)

Thirdly, hire and mentor experienced non-technical staff, such as social scientists (or others whose expertise concerns people rather than objects), giving them the capacity to play important roles in shelter programmes.

Fourthly, realize that emergency shelter can be *life-saving*, but beyond that is not – in and of itself – likely to be *problem-solving*. This means understanding that people's safety and recovery depend on more than safe buildings, and that buildings alone cannot make people safe. Shelter agencies and programmes should relinquish control over the big decisions about what really matters to the people affected.

In conclusion, for the shelter sector to truly move beyond shelter-as-object, beyond a process of building an object to one of meeting people's varied needs and aspirations, the agency of project participants and communities needs to be placed much more centrally in practitioners' thinking and project design. In summary: people first, buildings second.

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2   CARE International (2016) *Post-Disaster Shelter in India: A Study of the Long-Term Outcomes of Post-Disaster Shelter Projects*, pp. 37–54. Care India, New Delhi. https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/Post-Disaster-Shelter-in-India_full-report_2016.pdf.

3   United Nations (1966) *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. Istanbul. www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cescr.pdf; United Nations (1996) *Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements* and *The Habitat Agenda*. In *Report of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II)*. Istanbul. www.un.org/ruleoflaw/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/istanbul-declaration.pdf.

4   JFC Turner (1976) *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*. Marion Boyars, London.

5   K Crawford (2018) *Danger! Weird Ways Engineers Think and Talk About Disasters in Cities*. Resilient Urbanism. http://resilienturbanism.org/kcrawford/danger-weird-ways-engineers-think-and-talk-about-disasters-in-cities/.

Box 8.1

We can't engineer a way out of this
Bracing for a disaster within a disaster in Bangladesh

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> I saw them coming, young and old, quick and halt, with their lives bundled on their heads, and I knew it was of them the Poet had spoken when he said: Each slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*

Since 25 August 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people have fled ethnic violence in Rakhine state, Myanmar, and sought refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh. Although they have lived for centuries in what is now Rhakine state – since well before British colonialism ended and the borders of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar were arbitrarily established – the Rohingya are a stateless people.

Today there are more than 884,000 Rohingya refugees crowded cheek-by-jowl in the world's largest refugee camp.[1] Almost 200,000 families, who want nothing more than to be safe, for their children to go to school, to be able to eat, and to contribute and have something to strive for, are living in a maze of makeshift shelters. Made of bamboo and plastic sheets held together with twine – pieces of cardboard and garbage bags patch rips or cover up holes – these shelters cling to steep, sandy, terraced hillsides or are located in gullies and low-lying areas. Minimum standards such as square metres of covered living space per person remain purely aspirational. The people are completely dependent for their survival on the assistance and protection

provided by the government of Bangladesh and the international humanitarian community.

The trees that previously covered these slopes have gone, as refugees strip the hills of the equivalent of more than four football fields of forest a day, cutting the trees and digging up the roots for cooking fuel. This has destroyed the habitat in which elephants habitually forage, precipitating deadly encounters between refugees and elephants. This denuding of the countryside has also exacerbated the environmental risks posed by the monsoon and cyclone season.

More than 100,000 Rohingya people are living in identified high-risk areas. The destruction that cyclonic winds could wreak on shelters constructed out of plastic sheeting borders on the apocalyptic. Monsoon rains could trigger landslides, endangering families living in shelters perched on sloping hills, and could inundate gullies and low-lying areas, potentially submerging thousands of shelters. Site improvement and settlement works have made the camps more liveable, but these efforts will not prevent the flooding and landslides that would accompany a severe storm. Such flooding would inundate the many latrines, water pumps, washrooms, clinics and health posts located in low-lying areas, bringing a concomitant public health risk with a high potential for disease outbreaks.[2]

Because Bangladesh has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol, there are no laws guaranteeing the rights of the Rohingya *as refugees*. Integration of Rohingya families into the local community is not permitted. The Rohingya cannot move freely, work, or protest that the official (if presently unenforced) policy of return might be a form of *refoulement*. The strategy being practised is one of containment.

British and Chinese engineers are hard at work making a camp on the uninhabited island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal, to which the government of Bangladesh plans to relocate 100,000 refugees. The government has stated that relocation to the island would be 'temporary'; that 'it's not a concentration camp'. Nevertheless, those relocated would not be able to leave, except to go back to Myanmar or to a third country.[3]

The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner has recently made an additional plot of land available, and has given humanitarian organizations permission to pilot more robust 'mid-term' shelter designs and to supply refugee and host families with liquid petroleum gas (LPG) stoves and cylinders and half a year's fuel.

Engineers with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, and the World Food Programme are clearing and preparing land to which several thousand families currently living in high-risk areas will be relocated, and various types of 'mid-term' shelters are being tested. However, given the lateness of the hour, it will not be possible to implement these programs until after the monsoon season.

Community leaders and heads of households are being trained in safer shelter awareness. Technical guidelines and workshops designed to train community leaders and humanitarian workers to strengthen and retrofit community structures are being conducted by engineering experts brought in by non-government organizations. Humanitarian agencies are distributing upgrade shelter kits and tie-down kits. As part of Bangladesh's national cyclone preparedness program, 500 volunteers have been trained to provide early warning messages and catalyze early emergency preparedness action at the camp level.

Yet, despite this concentrated action by the government of Bangladesh, the United Nations, and humanitarian aid organizations, there is growing acceptance that there is simply not enough money, materials or time to engineer a way out of a potential catastrophe. The Information, Education and Communication materials and community messaging reflect this reality:

'In the case of a severe storm or deadly cyclone there will be no mass evacuations.'

'Community shelters are not cyclone proof.'

'There are no cyclone shelters in which families can take safe refuge.'

'Here are some materials and simple strategies that may help you and your children survive a cyclone, such as lowering the roof of your shelter and reinforcing the walls with sandbags in a type of bunker.'

All of this is not nothing: together, these represent the combined efforts of the government of Bangladesh and the international humanitarian community to help the Rohingya. Yet the Rohingya are slowly being forgotten; there is little hope and no light – no long-term resolution is in sight. If a strong storm were to eventuate, all that has been done will not be sufficient to prevent a disaster from occurring within the current disaster, which is already one of the worst I have ever seen.

1   International Organization for Migration (2018) *IOM Bangladesh: Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM): Site Assessment: Round 8*. https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/iom-bangladesh-needs-and-population-monitoring-npm-site-assessment-round-8.

2   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Asian Disaster Preparedness Center, and International Organization for Migration (2018) 'Rohingya refugee crisis / Bangladesh: Flood and landslide impact analysis'. *Humanitarian Response*. www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/infographics?search=risk+analysis.

3   R Paul et al (22 February 2018) 'Floating island: New home for Rohingya refugees emerges in Bay of Bengal'. *Reuters*. www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-rohingya-island/floating-island-new-home-for-rohingya-refugees-emerges-in-bay-of-bengal-idUSL2N1QA03N.

Box 8.1 **We can't engineer a way out of this**   **79**