



A shelter ecosystem approach brings long-term benefits.
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Taking the long view

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Two ways to gain a long-view perspective and a better understanding of shelter and settlements following disasters are to consider changes over time, and to recognize the scope of the subject.

Changes over time are often overlooked by decision makers, who are involved in a given situation for a short period then move on to the next crisis. In India after the 1993 Latur earthquake, the ferro-cement domed dwellings provided by an international agency cracked after about four years, resulting in considerable misery for the frustrated occupants, who could not find any local builders able to rectify a problem arising from a totally unfamiliar technology.

Not properly understanding the scope of the subject lies at the root of many problems. For example, if an agency has a mandate to work only during the immediate relief stage, it might not consider the consequences of its actions on long-term housing reconstruction.

The first perspective comes from reflecting on the main lessons learned about the sheltering and housing processes over an extended time. The second is obtained from standing on high ground, well detached from a given situation. From here a panoramic view of the scope of shelter and settlements can be gained, as it can

be seen in a wider context of roles, time-scales, functions, related topics and humanitarian and development approaches. Shelter is complex, but, in a context where fewer organizations and donors are willing to become involved, it can be done well, especially if the lessons from the past are absorbed.

Both viewpoints are adopted in this chapter, as we consider some of the most important issues faced by many organizations and officials as they respond to this demanding subject. We explore four related topics: significant developments in shelter and settlements over the last 40 years; gaps remaining in 2018; the value of long-term, longitudinal studies of disaster recovery; and generating evidence to support the vital learning process.¹

Developments over the last 40 years²

In 2011 a wide-ranging and influential report on humanitarian aid concluded that 'Providing shelter is one of the most intractable problems in international humanitarian response'.³ A later study in 2017 expanded on this inherent complexity, noting the lack of evidence on mechanisms to support self-recovery, timescales

for effective intervention and the effectiveness of shelter interventions.⁴ The shelter and settlements sector has greatly expanded in response to a growing vulnerable population and their needs, caused by an escalating number of disasters and conflicts. The focus on settlements as well as shelter has been a significant shift in itself. Urban disasters have progressively become a major concern (further discussed in Chapter 6). Protracted conflict forces displaced populations into a state of perpetual emergency shelter. Refugee camps can continue for decades, becoming unplanned and unsustainable long-term settlements. National financial and technical capacity has also expanded as certain countries (such as China, India, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam) have dramatically increased in wealth, while research confirms that corruption is a major factor in the creation of vulnerable conditions in seismic areas.⁵

Two of the most significant developments in policy and practice have been user-built reconstruction, and the role of hosts in accommodating displaced families.⁶ User reconstruction has grown in significance since being introduced after disasters such as the 1976 Guatemala earthquake,⁷ to widespread adoption in rural Pakistan following the 2005 earthquake, where it enabled more than 450,000 houses to be built in just three-and-a-half years.⁸ There has been a gradual recognition of the vital importance of hosting displaced families. The 2010 Haiti earthquake provided the first large-scale opportunity to observe where surviving families went, using tracking information derived from their cell phones. One estimate from this data was that 570,000 people (22 per cent of the city's population) left Port-au-Prince to stay with host families.⁹ An interesting development occurred in Sendai following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, where the Japanese authorities had pre-planned the type and location of temporary accommodation. This may be the first instance of such pre-planning and pre-positioning and siting of shelter units.¹⁰

A further significant development over the last 40 years is that shelter and settlement programmes

responding to long-term displacement increasingly emphasize sustainable solutions. These focus on effective consultation, engagement and planning with host and displaced communities and with governments. Following major revisions of the humanitarian system, coordination and technical standards have improved significantly in disaster and crisis situations with the development of the cluster system. Within this is the Global Shelter Cluster convened by UNHCR and IFRC (discussed in Chapter 11).

Shelter is an important consideration for the Early Recovery, Protection and WASH (water/sanitation/hygiene) clusters. Technical advice and guidelines have proliferated,¹¹ with extensive duplication and some contradictory messages. One view is that transitional (temporary) housing should be the default approach, while another view suggests that rapid permanent reconstruction supported by extended emergency sheltering can avoid this expense and dislocation. In the UN and NGO sector, there has been an almost universal acceptance of the Sphere Minimum Standards for Shelter in Humanitarian Response (released in 1998, with regular updates, not least the 2018 revision).¹²

Gaps remaining in 2018

Over the last 40 years, shelter practitioners have identified some common areas of concern. These include inconsistent funding, political restrictions, and the scale of need overwhelming response capacity. Practitioners also recognize the importance of the primary role of survivors in their own recovery, and the need to support them. There is also a need to better understand local context and support local capacity; forge stronger relationships between the NGO sector and governments, so that host governments can apply criteria for assessing technical and financial capacity when inviting agencies to operate in their countries; understand the role of shelter in livelihoods, social life and recovery; and manage risk to reduce long-term vulnerability.

There are also gaps in our understanding of the growing importance of the use of cash, financial institutions and insurance companies, and the role of the private sector.

Finally, a separation still exists between emergency shelter response and permanent housing development. This reflects the division between the humanitarian sector, which focuses on short-term disaster relief, and the development sector, which works towards long-term recovery. Although efforts are under way to close this well-recognized gap, through initiatives such as the 'humanitarian and development nexus'¹³ and the rise in prominence of the concept of resilience,¹⁴ progress remains slow.

Few humanitarian agencies possess an in-house technical capacity to create dwellings, or desire to become involved in permanent shelter and settlement, due largely to their restricted operational mandate, and time and financial constraints. For surviving households, the sheltering process from immediate protection to permanent housing is a continuous one. But for supporting agencies the process is usually fragmented into discrete phases (relief, recovery, reconstruction) due to budgets, capacities and timeframes. This fragmentation ultimately undermines longer-term recovery.

This division found expression after the 2010 Haiti earthquake, when a host of humanitarian agencies built thousands of temporary shelters.¹⁵ Many were placed on sites needed for permanent reconstruction, and their materials could not be recycled into permanent dwellings. However, in the following years, based perhaps on this sobering lesson, a paradigm shift appears to have occurred. For instance, in large-scale responses to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 and the Nepal earthquakes of 2015,¹⁶ other measures have been employed, for example the use of shelter kits and the increasing use of cash-based response, which have sought to reap longer-term benefits from investments made in immediate recovery.

Lessons from longitudinal studies

The responses to some of the most significant disasters in history not only determined subsequent development patterns for the cities affected, but led to changes and developments that continue to influence housing and city design around the globe today. The 1666 Great Fire of London led to the first building regulations, while the 1755 Lisbon earthquake resulted in the world's first urban plan designed to reduce the risks posed by earthquakes, tsunamis and urban fires.¹⁷ The 1908 Messina earthquake led to the development of seismic building-engineering design principles, which were formally implemented through building codes in Japan following the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923, and in California following the 1933 Long Beach earthquake.¹⁸

Since 2008 a number of international organizations, for example UN-Habitat, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Global Shelter Cluster members, have combined resources to reflect on past patterns in shelter and settlements programmes – some stretching back to the 1970s – in order to improve future policies and practice. The result has been a regular series of widely circulated case studies, which have been used as evidence to evolve shelter policy and practice, as well as to support advocacy to donors.¹⁹

In addition, it is now widely accepted that returning to the sites of past projects – possibly five or even ten years after completion – can teach us valuable lessons. In 2014 a pioneering book brought together a series of long-term studies: *Still Standing: Looking back at Reconstruction and Disaster Risk Reduction in Housing*.²⁰ This research showed that beneficiary participation in programme design, implementation and monitoring created a sense of community ownership, encouraged housing improvements, and led to replication of safer techniques. Further, the social capital thus developed enabled communities to tackle other, larger problems. Other long-term studies presented in the book revealed failures to adopt disaster risk-reduction

advice, failure of resettlement programmes, culturally inappropriate technical solutions, and a focus on the physical shelter rather than on building the capacity and agency of beneficiaries. The long-term effects of displacement can be devastating. A study from northern Uganda found that returnees from camps attributed much physical, social and psychological harm to poorly designed, overcrowded camp conditions, with poor access to services and limited opportunities to generate income.²¹ Returnees reported fragmentation of family structures and erosion of traditional collective support systems and coping strategies.

Learning to learn: developing a culture of knowledge and evidence

Despite having learned from all of this research, the sector still has much to learn. In 2017 a review of the evidence on shelter self-recovery found that 'evidence within the shelter sector remains largely based on experience and expert opinion, project or programme evaluations, case studies and academic papers on specific topics – with little evidence on the outcomes or impact of programmes undertaken'.²²

The consequences of shelter assistance are long lasting: settlements become housing, camps become temporary cities. But the long-term impact of the different types of shelter and settlement assistance remain unknown. Despite a wealth of evaluations, there has been little assessment of the harms and benefits of shelter programmes. Reasons for this include a culture of project delivery (where outputs are measured, but not longer-term results or repercussions), the lack of a link between humanitarian and development activities, lack of research funding, and clear organizational mandates. An important task for the research sector is to build up an objective body of evidence.

All these actions and processes for gathering evidence and applying lessons are supported by practitioners, but are subject to constraints including time, donor policies, organizational

practice, opportunities for sharing, and the cost of consolidating knowledge.

Some organizations are focused on learning and managing knowledge in the humanitarian sector.²³ Operational agencies and donors possess extensive project knowledge, whether gained from project evaluations or stored in the memories of their staff, but it can be difficult to access. Governments and international agencies, with their high rates of staff turnover, have often been poor custodians of knowledge, which is not their primary function, and the private sector tends to keep to itself the knowledge it acquires, for commercial reasons. Publishing reports on freely available websites such as Shelter Projects and the Shelter Cluster is a valuable service.²⁴

For genuine and effective learning to occur, certain changes are needed, such as avoiding the danger of narrow or isolated perspectives in professionals who focus on shelter design and logistics while ignoring, or not even knowing about, the wider context. Such considerations might include low-income housing, systems of legal tenure, safety from future hazards, protection, linkages to other sectors, long-term effects, local markets, reconstruction strategies and disaster preparedness planning, to name just a few.

The creation of a learning culture, and localizing learning at a community level, are two great tasks for the humanitarian community. Nevertheless, strenuous efforts have been made over the past 40 years to document and disseminate experience, with substantial progress during the last decade – witness alone the creation and sharing of information among the Global Shelter Cluster.

Conclusions

Taking a longer-term perspective helps us form a clearer view of recurring themes, issues, concerns and difficulties for shelter and settlements. The shelter and settlements sector is rising to the immense challenges posed by naturally triggered disasters and unprecedented human

displacement caused by conflict. Applied research is taking place, learning is increasingly valued, practical knowledge is being disseminated, better coordination is in place, new ideas are being tried and tested, and lessons are being learned.

However, we still do not know the long-term consequences of different forms of shelter and settlement assistance; this is where we need better evidence from more long-term studies. Far too many disaster survivors have to cope with no shelter or housing support whatsoever, while watching others receiving assistance. In areas of protracted conflict, where displaced families move from place to place, we need to know what types of shelter best meet their complex needs – and indeed when the best response is not to provide shelter at all, but perhaps cash, or a ticket to a safer place.

Taking a long view is not easy. Project managers, under relentless pressure to deliver tangible results in a limited timeframe, are rarely offered opportunities by their organizations to stand back, reflect and learn, and as a result possibly change focus or direction. Our long view convinces us that effective sheltering and housing are the bedrock of durable and sustainable recovery, and as such they need a higher priority and closer attention. Survivors of disasters, and families displaced by conflict, deserve accommodation that brings them dignity as well as livelihoods, that is a home not just a house, and that makes them safe and secure from danger.

- 1 We consider the sources of our various statements as supporting evidence, but space limitations prevent us from citing a source for every item we discuss.
- 2 I Davis (2011) 'What have we learned from 40 years' experience of disaster shelter?' *Environmental Hazards* 10(3), pp. 193–212.
- 3 P Ashdown (2011) *Humanitarian Emergency Response Review*. Humanitarian Emergency Response Review, London, p. 25. www.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-emergency-response-review.
- 4 V Maynard et al (2017) *The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Interventions Supporting Shelter Self-Recovery Following Humanitarian Crises: An Evidence Synthesis*. Humanitarian Evidence Programme. Oxfam, Oxford.
- 5 N Ambraseys and R Bilham (2011) 'Corruption kills'. *Nature* 469(7329), pp. 153–155.
- 6 We use this term as a general description of processes, including owner-driven and self-recovery.
- 7 J Cosgrave (2014) *Responding to Flood Disasters: Learning from Previous Relief and Recovery Operations*. ALNAP Lessons Paper. Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, and Overseas Development Institute, London, pp. 22–23. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/alnap-lessons-flood-cosgrave.pdf>.
- 8 I Davis and D Alexander (2016) *Recovery from Disaster*. Routledge, UK, pp. 294–295.

- 9 L Bengtsson et al (2010) *Internal Population Displacement in Haiti. Preliminary Analysis of Movement Patterns of DigiCell Mobile Phones: 1 January to 11 March 2010*. Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, and Columbia University, New York.
- 10 Davis and Alexander (2016), pp. 181–183.
- 11 Examples of shelter and settlements guidelines include Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (nd) *Shelter and Settlements: DG ECHO Thematic Policy Document*. European Commission. ec.europa.eu/echo/sites/echo-site/files/ss_consolidated_guidelines_final_version.pdf; and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2015) *Shelter After Disaster* (2nd edn). IFRC and OCHA, Lyons. www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/201506/Shelter_After_Disaster_2nd_Edition.pdf.
- 12 See The Sphere Project (2018) *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*. www.spherehandbook.org/en/1-shelter-and-settlement.
- 13 See InterAction (2018) *The Humanitarian and Development Nexus*. www.interaction.org/fabb2016/humanitarian-and-development-nexus.
- 14 See International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2016) *World Disasters Report 2016: Resilience: Saving Lives Today, Investing for Tomorrow*. IFRC, Geneva. www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/201610/WDR%202016-FINAL_web.pdf.
- 15 I Davis (2011) *What is the Vision for Sheltering and Housing in Haiti? Summary Observations of Reconstruction Progress Following the Haiti Earthquake of January 12th 2010*. UN-Habitat, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation_Report_215.pdf. This point is a simplification in order to highlight the evolution of different sheltering strategies. It does not capture context, and evolving strategies.
- 16 D Sanderson and Z Delica Willisen (2014) *Philippines Typhoon Haiyan: Response Review*. Disasters Emergency Committee, London, and Humanitarian Coalition, Ottawa. www.humanitariancoalition.ca/sites/default/files/publication/dec_hc_haiyan_review_report_2014.pdf.
- 17 I Davis (1978) *Shelter After Disaster*. Oxford Polytechnic Press, Oxford, pp. 74–76.
- 18 WH Lee et al (eds) (2002) *International Handbook of Earthquake & Engineering Seismology*. Academic Press, London.
- 19 Global Shelter Cluster (2017) *Shelter Projects 2015–2016: Case Studies of Humanitarian Shelter and Settlement Responses*. International Organization for Migration, Geneva. www.shelterprojects.org.
- 20 T Schilderman and E Parker (eds) (2014) *Still Standing: Looking Back at Reconstruction and Disaster Risk Reduction in Housing*. Practical Action Publishing, UK.
- 21 InterAction (2017) *A Longitudinal Look at the Recovery of Conflict Affected Communities*.
- 22 Maynard et al (2017).
- 23 For example ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, www.alnap.org) and the Humanitarian Library Project (www.humanitarianlibrary.org).
- 24 See Global Shelter Cluster (2018) shelterprojects.org.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Some interesting concepts that put housing at the centre were developed by UN-Habitat and referred to in the World Urban Forum. See UN-Habitat (nd) *Housing at the Centre of the New Urban Agenda*. <https://unhabitat.org/housing-at-the-centre-of-the-new-urban-agenda/>.

Shelter

A human right

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In recent years there has been a trend towards considering shelter needs in conflict or post-disaster settings as a human rights issue. We have become accustomed to the notion of a human rights-based approach to development – indeed the United Nations maintains that all its development programming is rights-based.¹ This rights-based approach has been gradually transposed into the humanitarian sector, with growing acceptance among response actors that the provision of both shelter and housing is a human right.

The starting point of any attempt to frame shelter as a question of human rights is the right to adequate housing. This is contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – generally viewed as customary international law – and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which is a binding treaty ratified by 167 states. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the UN expert body tasked with interpreting and enforcing the International Covenant, has identified seven distinct elements of the right to adequate housing: security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy. The list is not intended to be exhaustive.²

In principle, this right to adequate housing applies equally in situations of conflict or disaster; it would be perverse to conclude that a right no longer applies at the very moment when it is most needed. On the face of it, the seven elements of the right to adequate housing might seem desirable but not all essential in short-term humanitarian response. Yet, for example, much shelter response in Haiti in 2010 foundered because of the choice of remote locations for temporary shelter.³

The most comprehensive effort to place shelter in a human rights framework came in a 2011 report to the UN Human Rights Council by Raquel Rolnik, then the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing.⁴ Rolnik identified security of tenure as one of the particular contributions of a human rights approach to shelter. Tenure issues may arise in several forms in humanitarian crises. Homes may be destroyed and, along with them, any evidence of ownership. Or land may be held under a variety of different systems, such as traditional or communal tenure, that lack paper

documentation. In these circumstances, authorities may exploit a disaster to trigger reallocation of land to commercial interests – as happened after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.⁵ Human rights norms are an appropriate means to resolve tenure questions, operating as they do on legal terrain.

Human rights standards offer a further important contribution, which is canvassed only implicitly in the elements defined by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and barely discussed in Rolnik's report. The principle of non-discrimination is fundamental to human rights law. Vulnerable groups – particularly female-headed households, non-nationals and people with disabilities – risk being disadvantaged in the provision of shelter. An affirmative right to housing for such groups should be integral to shelter programmes. Ultimately, this right to non-discrimination is international law and should be legally enforceable.

This leads to one further question: so what? It is easy to state that such-and-such should be enforceable, but quite another thing to enforce it in practice. Who will ensure that a non-discriminatory right to shelter is a reality? Two potential actors have been mentioned already: the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing. Regional human rights bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights have shown some willingness to act on housing cases (usually on non-discrimination grounds, since there is no right to housing in the European Convention), but this is necessarily a slow process.

The most effective response has been from human rights mechanisms at the national level. These work best when there is constitutional protection of the right to adequate housing, as there is in a number of countries, including Portugal, Mexico, South Africa and the Philippines. Some national human rights institutions have an exemplary record in defending people displaced by conflict, including on housing matters. Examples include the ombudsman offices in Georgia and Colombia, which have been heavily influenced by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. In Colombia, the Defensoría del Pueblo has taken an interest in the plight of internally displaced people since the early 1990s. More recently, it has been assigned by the Constitutional Court to monitor compliance with court rulings protecting displaced victims of conflict (an approach that the South African courts have also used in their housing judgements). There are fewer instances of such bodies intervening in post-disaster shelter, but there have been notable examples in Sri Lanka, where the human rights commission already had long experience with victims of conflict, and in Peru.⁶

The 'right to shelter' has no separate legal existence independent of the right to adequate housing. It is properly understood as an application of this right. However, many of the detailed provisions developed by human rights expert bodies on housing have scant relevance in disaster response. This has been increasingly acknowledged in the human rights world, at the same time as shelter practitioners take increasing account of issues such as land tenure and non-discrimination, where human rights doctrine has much to offer.

- 1 U Jonsson (2005) 'A human rights-based approach to programming'. In P Gready and J Ensor (eds) *Reinventing Development? Translating Rights-Based Approaches from Theory into Practice*. Zed Books, London.
- 2 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1991) *The Right to Adequate Housing (Art. 11 [1] of the Covenant)*. CESCR General Comment No 4. United Nations, Geneva. www.refworld.org/docid/47a7079a1.html.
- 3 R Carver (2011) 'Is there a human right to shelter after disaster?' *Environmental Hazards* 10, pp. 232–247.
- 4 R Rolnik (2011) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing as a Component of the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, and on the Right to Non-Discrimination in this Context*. A/HRC/16/42. United Nations General Assembly, New York. www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/A-HRC-19-53_en.pdf.
- 5 Housing and Land Rights Network (2006) *Do People's Voices Matter? The Human Right to Participation in Post-Tsunami Housing Reconstruction*. Report of a Factfinding Mission to Tsunami-Affected Areas of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. South Asia Regional Programme, Housing and Land Rights Network, Habitat International Coalition, New Delhi. www.hic-sarp.org/publication.html.
- 6 R Carver (2014) 'National human rights institutions, displacement and human security'. In C Ryngaert and M Noortmann (eds) *Human Security and International Law: The Challenge of Non-State Actors*. Intersentia, Antwerp, pp. 75–99.