

# Beyond 'the better shed'

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It should be of no surprise to anybody that, following a rapid-onset disaster such as an earthquake or flood, or during conflict where people are forced to flee their homes, those affected need shelter to keep them dry, warm and safe. But for humanitarian organizations, governments and others, providing the right support to achieve this is anything but simple. What kind of shelter best meets the needs of these particular people? How long is it meant to be used for? Where should it be located? What are the materials, and who will build it? And there are more questions: what do we do when there is no land to build on (say in a dense city), or when people need shelter for years or decades (as in the case of refugees and other forced displaced people), or there is not enough money, or no political will?

Furthermore, being warm, dry and safe is only one aspect of shelter. People live their lives in homes (which may be a house, apartment, shack or shared room), they may run their businesses from home, and may use their property as collateral to borrow money. The place where people live therefore has many uses. To paraphrase a well-known quote, what matters is what a house (or shelter) does for you – not what it is.<sup>1</sup> So the process of sheltering people is anything but simple, which is why one high-level report on humanitarian aid concluded that 'providing adequate shelter is one of the most intractable problems in international humanitarian response'.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the shelter and settlements sector responds to the burgeoning and varied needs of those affected by disasters and conflict. But determining the numbers and scale of shelter response is complex, and it is for this reason that Part Three of this report assesses the information available, and its limitations. The research undertaken for Part Three found that, in 2017, 42 million people were in need of shelter and non-food item (NFI) assistance. These figures however only report where the Shelter Cluster is active, and are therefore certainly underestimates of overall need; the number of those who rebuild after disaster without external help, which Chapter 4 describes as 'the overwhelming majority', may never be recorded. Also, regarding forced displacement, the UN Refugee Agency estimates that by the end of 2017 there were, globally, 68.5 million forced displaced people.<sup>3</sup> We can safely assume that the vast majority of these people were in need of external help, particularly of somewhere safe to stay.

As with other sectors, shelter programming takes place in both urban and rural environments, under programmes that last months – sometimes years. Efforts might include building temporary and permanent houses for earthquake-affected communities, providing rent money for refugees and other forcibly displaced people living in cities, offering legal support to secure apartments or land rights, and giving technical assistance in building structures to withstand future hazards.

Over the last 40 years, the humanitarian shelter sector has continued to learn, iterate and evolve (an overview of this is provided in Chapter 2). Over this time, the aid landscape has shifted (for example in increased need and the numbers and different types of aid actors), while in other respects it has hardly changed at all.<sup>4</sup> Agencies deliver goods and services immediately after a disaster, or in response to a crisis. In a period of relief, the aim is to meet immediate life-saving needs, followed eventually by a period of recovery. In these early stages, shelter is often provided in the form of tarpaulins, makeshift temporary materials and tents. As time moves on, efforts shift towards a lasting recovery. Ideally, permanent houses are rebuilt, or permanent accommodation is secured, but for many aid agencies this is too expensive and outside their remit. Instead, temporary shelters (a stop-gap between the tent and the permanent house) may be provided, of which there is a variety. Examples include transitional shelters, shelter kits (of which the materials can be re-used for permanent buildings), and quickly erected temporary structures. Added to this may be a multitude of temporary buildings, designed and promoted by private companies.

### People versus products; societies versus structures

This traditional approach aims to deliver the 'shelter product', based on the assumption that people own the land on which their shelters are built (or at the very least have permission to build), and that there is sufficient space to construct shelter (as in rural areas, rather than in denser cities). But this is only one form of shelter assistance – although perhaps the best known to those outside the shelter sector. It is limited in scope, and not always an adequate response, principally because (as noted above) housing is about more than a physical shelter. Writing in 2004, shelter expert Graham Saunders noted the problem of this fixation on the shelter product:

'The ready focus on shelter products rather than the shelter process is a further obstacle to the development and acceptance of simple, universal principles and pertinent guidance subject to the context'.<sup>5</sup> In further critiquing the 'typically prefabricated units or kits produced in developed countries for rapid deployment in post-disaster locations', Saunders noted that 'Many of these imported solutions fail to maximize local enterprise opportunities or acknowledge cultural or contextual concerns, and reflect the relative lack of involvement of specifiers and end-users in the design and development process'.<sup>6</sup>

Saunders went on to argue that 'the provision or acquisition of shelter is a continuing process, subject to level of need, available material, financial and land resources, and the land tenure and regulatory environment'.<sup>7</sup> That shelter is a process, and not a product, is the key for unlocking more successful shelter programmes. Process brings with it engagement – with other sectors and actors – and, most important of all, with the communities that programmes are seeking to help. To these ends, successful shelter programmes focus on people, not on shelters. A people-based approach is hardly new. The first principle of the 1982 publication *Shelter After Disaster* is that 'the primary resource in the provision of post-disaster shelter is the grass-roots motivation of survivors, their friends and families. Assisting groups can help, but they must avoid duplicating anything best undertaken by the survivors themselves'.<sup>8</sup>

While shelter programming is therefore complex, approaches do exist to better involve communities. One is the settlements approach, which is especially relevant to post-disaster recovery in urban areas. Successful settlements approaches rely on involving affected communities meaningfully, making them central to the decision-making process (see Chapter 13 for further discussion).

Closely related to settlements approaches are area-based approaches (ABAs), which seek to coordinate sectoral responses in post-disaster recovery, with shelter often being a primary sector

(given the sheer physicality of neighbourhoods). Evidence indicates that ABAs and wider settlement-based approaches, based on long-held approaches drawn from the development of community participation, are valuable, but are complex, take time and can be difficult to achieve (ABAs are discussed further in Box 13.1).<sup>9</sup>

Cities are particularly complex environments in which to provide emergency shelter and settlement, and indeed all types of humanitarian response. As the world's cities grow by well over one million people per week,<sup>10</sup> disasters such as large-scale flooding (as witnessed in Pakistan and elsewhere across Asia), windstorms (such as Typhoon Haiyan, which struck the Philippines in 2013) and earthquakes are becoming more frequent events in urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

Another urban phenomenon is violent conflict. In Syria and Yemen for instance, where fighting has largely taken place in cities, widespread urban destruction is the result, leaving those people who cannot escape forced to live in ruins with little help from outside, albeit with some support from agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. Of those who do escape, whether as internally displaced persons or as refugees, most end up in other urban areas.<sup>12</sup> In such circumstances, providing shelter presents a particular set of problems: those people who need help may be widely dispersed across a city, unable to work in the formal job market, and mostly reliant on renting. Non-government organizations providing support to such families may need to take novel approaches, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council's programme in Jordan, of giving landlords cash grants to upgrade their properties, in exchange for allowing refugees from Syria to live in the improved accommodation.<sup>13</sup> These programmes use aid funding as investments to improve existing infrastructure, rather than spending it on short-term temporary housing designed to last for only three to five years.

## Cash into houses: choices and challenges

The Norwegian Refugee Council's Jordan programme uses cash as the chief mechanism for obtaining shelter. The growth in cash-based programming is one of the biggest developments in humanitarian action in recent years, with affected populations receiving cash grants in a variety of forms. This 'coming of age' of cash was reinforced in Goal Three of the Grand Bargain (the substantive outcome of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, discussed in Chapter 7), to 'increase the use and coordination of cash-based programming'.<sup>14</sup> To date, the overwhelming evidence has been that this reduces costs, improves efficiency and, most importantly of all, gives affected people choices to spend aid funds on what is most important to *them*.<sup>15</sup> Cash grants can be used in a number of ways, for instance in constructing, rebuilding, repairing and retrofitting shelters, subsidizing rental and utility expenses,<sup>16</sup> or indeed prioritizing other immediate needs. Cash vouchers can be redeemable at specified goods stores in exchange for building materials. (Cash is explored in Chapter 16.)

Using cash can also stimulate markets and provide local employment. It can short-circuit the need for temporary shelter, leading more quickly to permanent housing. In one example, following Typhoon Haiyan, an international NGO used foreign volunteers and wood imported from New Zealand to build temporary shelters, without walls, that cost roughly US\$1200 each. Yet, just down the road, families were paying local builders to construct complete, permanent houses, with a veranda, for less than US\$500.<sup>17</sup>

There is need for caution, however: providing cash alone does not necessarily mean that shelters are adequate, appropriate or safe. As Chapter 7 points out, in situations where there is a risk of severe hazards such as earthquakes, or where phased construction is needed, a combination of cash and technical advice might be better. Agencies may in some cases need to resist the push towards using cash.

Cash also has wider reach than the traditional support provided after a disaster. Humanitarian shelter organizations have in recent years focused their efforts for people who receive no support from aid agencies or local governments on 'self-recovery'. It is thought that in the great majority of disasters, and as noted earlier, aid reaches only a small proportion of people affected: one study states that as many as 80 per cent of those in need of shelter after a disaster go without external assistance.<sup>18</sup> In arguing for a greater role in supporting self-recovery, Holly Schofield and Bill Flinn note in Chapter 4 that, with an increase in humanitarian need and with ever-stretched funding, the shelter sector will be required to help an ever greater number of households, with fewer resources.

Humanitarian support for self-recovery can include (in addition to cash), technical assistance, awareness campaigns, and guidance for 'building back safe' – in effect, the provision of knowledge, information and skills. While there is a financial argument for supporting self-recovery (it may be possible to do more with less), there is the larger argument that the purpose of aid should be less about direct provision, and more about providing support. As Goal Six of the Grand Bargain asserts, there needs to be a 'participation revolution to include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives'.<sup>19</sup>

To achieve this also means that aid providers need to improve project management. For example, assessments need to be more participatory, and take time to genuinely listen to people's needs and priorities. When this doesn't happen, the results are dismal: one study made shortly after the 2015 Nepal earthquakes found that 'When women were asked if their particular problems are being addressed, a resounding 73% said "very little" or "not at all"'.<sup>20</sup>

## Process as well as product

In the context of ever greater shelter needs, stretched resources and the urgent need for informed, nuanced, targeted and effective humanitarian responses, getting assessments right is vital. Evidence points to multi-sectoral assessment providing better results in complex urban environments: 'A population's needs for shelter, water, sanitation, health, food security, and livelihoods do not exist in isolation from one another'.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Chapter 7 warns against overly reductionist assessments, in which shelter risks are reduced to the number of damaged buildings, and other elements – such as markets, tenure needs and spatial use – are overlooked.

More flexible project management tools are also needed, such as adaptive management: 'a programming approach that combines appropriate analysis, structured flexibility, and iterative improvements in the face of contextual and causal complexity'.<sup>22</sup> Early trials of the use of adaptive management in several contexts are proving positive.<sup>23</sup> Effective shelter programmes are therefore not only about the product – as Saunders might say, developing 'the better shed'. They involve a spectrum of processes, only some of which have been touched on in this chapter. Because shelter programming is complex, we must seek out better approaches. Providing shelter is difficult because it is central to disaster response and sustains not just life itself, but processes of economic, social and cultural recovery, without which humanitarian action would be almost impossible. Without somewhere to live, it is impossible for people to feel safe, continue their education, stay healthy, well fed and clean, or earn a living,

Rapid urbanization, the development of cash-based programmes, the rise of inter-sectoral area and settlements-based programming, and the need for meaningful collaboration with local groups and individuals are just some of the complexities faced by 21st-century humanitarian shelter organizations. There have been major changes in the way shelter work is done, but

the endeavour requires even greater thought, research and investment. The emphasis on settlements in addition to shelter indicates the importance of location and a societal basis for actions. Better cluster coordination, the holding of regular shelter forum meetings across the world, and the Global Shelter Cluster's regular publication since 2009 of *Shelter Projects*

(documenting hundreds of examples of shelter programmes) show that our sector wishes to learn and improve, to equip itself to meet future humanitarian needs.<sup>24</sup> This is important, because people rendered homeless by disasters and crises need a humanitarian approach that understands that shelter is so much more than just four walls and a roof.

- 1 JFC Turner (1976) *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*. Marion Boyars, London.
- 2 P Ashdown (2011) *Humanitarian Emergency Response Review*. Humanitarian Emergency Response Review, London, p. 25.  
[www.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-emergency-response-review](http://www.alnap.org/help-library/humanitarian-emergency-response-review).
- 3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2017) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*. UNHCR, Geneva.  
[www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017](http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017).
- 4 In terms, for example, of the fundamental aid architecture of aid agencies, donor organizations and recipient countries.
- 5 G Saunders (2004) 'Dilemmas and challenges for the shelter sector: Lessons learned from the sphere revision process'. *Disasters* 28(2), pp. 160–175.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

- 8 Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Co-ordinator (1982) *Shelter After Disaster: Guidelines for Assistance*. UNDRO, New York, p. 3.
- 9 See for example the experiences of British Red Cross after the Haiti earthquake, in Advisem Services (2016) *British Red Cross' Haiti Urban Regeneration and Reconstruction Programme (URRP): Final Evaluation (Full)*. Advisem Services Inc, Ottawa.  
[www.alnap.org/help-library/british-red-cross-haiti-urban-regeneration-and-reconstruction-programme-urrrp](http://www.alnap.org/help-library/british-red-cross-haiti-urban-regeneration-and-reconstruction-programme-urrrp).
- 10 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018) *2018 Revision of World Urbanisation Prospects*. UN DESA/Population Division, New York.  
[www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html).
- 11 D Dodman et al (2013) *Understanding the Nature and Scale of Urban Risk in Low- and Middle-Income Countries and its Implications for Humanitarian Preparedness, Planning and Response*. Human Settlements Discussion Paper Series, Climate Change and Cities. International Institute for Environment and Development, London.
- 12 Globally the figure is thought to be as high as 60 per cent.
- 13 Notio Partners (2015) *Final Report: The Norwegian Refugee Council Jordan: Integrated Urban Shelter and Information Counselling and Legal Assistance Programme (ICLA)*. Notio Partners.  
[www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/evaluations/evaluation---shelter-icla-urban-programme-in-jordan.pdf](http://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/evaluations/evaluation---shelter-icla-urban-programme-in-jordan.pdf).
- 14 Agenda for Humanity (2016) *Initiative Grand Bargain: Summary*. [www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861](http://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861).
- 15 See for example The Cash Learning Partnership (2011) *Making the Case for Cash: A Field Guide to Advocacy for Cash Transfer Programming*, as well as other reports at [www.cashlearning.org](http://www.cashlearning.org).
- 16 European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (2017) *Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements Guidelines*. Directorate-General of ECHO Thematic Policy Document No. 9. ECHO, Brussels, p. 24.  
[http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/sectoral/shelter\\_and\\_settlement\\_guidelines.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/policies/sectoral/shelter_and_settlement_guidelines.pdf).
- 17 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](http://www.humanitariancoalition.ca/sites/default/files/publication/dec_hc_haiyan_review_report_2014.pdf).
- 18 B Flinn (2013) 'Changing approaches to post-disaster shelter', *Humanitarian Exchange* 58, pp. 38–39.  
<https://odi.hpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/HE58web.pdf>.
- 19 Agenda for Humanity (2016).
- 20 Ground Truth Solutions (2015) *The Inter-Agency Common Feedback Project: First Community Survey*. cited in D Sanderson et al (2015) *Nepal Earthquake Appeal Response Review*. Disasters Emergency Committee, London, and Humanitarian Coalition, Ottawa, p. 5.
- 21 R Patel et al (2017) *What are the Practices to Identify and Prioritize Vulnerable Populations Affected by Urban Humanitarian Emergencies? A Systematic Review Protocol*. Humanitarian Evidence Programme, Tufts University, Cambridge, USA.  
<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/what-are-the-practices-to-identify-and-prioritize-vulnerable-populations-affect-605166>.
- 22 R Chambers and B Ramalingam (2016) *Adapting Aid: Lessons from Six Case Studies*. International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps, p. 2.  
[www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy\\_Corps\\_ADAPT\\_Adapting\\_aid\\_report\\_with\\_case\\_studies.7.21.16.pdf](http://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Mercy_Corps_ADAPT_Adapting_aid_report_with_case_studies.7.21.16.pdf).
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Global Shelter Cluster (2017) [shelterprojects.org](http://shelterprojects.org).