Shelter interventions prevent and mitigate displacement

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In hazard-prone developing countries, shelter interventions are an important way to prevent or mitigate natural disaster-induced displacement. To be effective, however, they need to be multi-faceted and carried out with the involvement of the communities affected.

Each year millions of people are driven from their homes by natural disasters and often remain displaced because their homes have been damaged or destroyed. The likelihood that climate change will increase the force and frequency of storms, floods and other weather-related events makes the need to improve shelter all the more urgent. Governments, donors and local and international NGOs must focus on a combination of both 'hard' and 'soft' shelter adaptation and mitigation interventions, and do so in consultation with communities.

Hard interventions refer to physical shelter structures and include strengthening their resilience through repairing or retro-fitting existing structures, and building new disaster-resilient structures. (Retro-fitting is the process of modifying an existing structure to make it more disaster-resistant. For example, the shelter can be improved by adding bracings and reinforcements to make it better able to withstand earthquakes or strong winds, or by including higher waterproof storage areas to protect belongings from flood damage.)

A man shows how high floodwaters reached during floods in 2011 in La Mojana region in northern Colombia.

In some situations, repairing and retro-fitting a shelter will not prevent displacement and, instead, communities will need new, disaster-resistant homes. A good example of this is a flood-resistant shelter design implemented in 2008 by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in consultation with communities in India's disaster-prone states of West Bengal and Orissa. The project involved the construction of 157 houses that were elevated above flood-water levels and built using locally available materials like concrete mix and chicken wire which do not wash away in flood waters. All 157 shelters withstood Cyclone Aila in May 2009.[1] The plinth, walls, roof and pillars remained intact, and only the mud daub (which washed away) needed to be replaced.

Repairing, retro-fitting and building new disaster-resilient shelters stop the cycle of displacement in a number of ways. Firstly, disaster-prone areas tend to experience frequent, sometimes annual, disasters. Not only does this cause recurrent displacement but it also creates a cycle of poverty that further prevents people from safeguarding against future displacement. For example, CRS found that displaced flood victims in Orissa were forced to seek substantial loans from local money lenders, which could take a year or more to repay. However, because they were only able to afford cheap, inferior building materials to reconstruct their homes, these households often lost their homes in the next flood.[2] One participant in the project reported that he had lost his house 10-15 times. Secondly, small pilot programmes such as these encourage other community members to build similar shelters, and can promote greater community awareness of disaster adaptation and mitigation practices and strategies.

Soft interventions include mapping, usage zoning, erosion control, drainage, land-use assessments, investments in community shelter management and maintenance programmes, and policy and advocacy regarding land rights and tenure. For example, projects that assist local governments to map out disaster-prone areas and to implement better zoning and land-use planning can be particularly helpful in preventing displacement by discouraging communities from building homes in identified hazard-prone areas. Such projects should in principle incorporate risk mapping and disaster planning as well. Strengthening land rights and tenure can assist and empower communities to invest in protections against displacement (such as insurance) and encourage communities to better maintain their homes. And investments in community training programmes on the management and maintenance of existing housing – such as repairing roofing and maintaining bracing and joints[3] – is a cost-effective strategy for making shelter more disaster-resilient.[4]

Complementary interventions

If communities are not consulted or involved in the implementation of shelter interventions, such interventions are unlikely to be sustained by the community in the long term. Also, a failure to consult and involve local communities can lead to unrealistic expectations by local communities about the outcome of the shelter intervention and can undermine trust between local communities and NGOs, and hinder future access by NGOs to implement shelter interventions in disaster-prone areas.

Shelter interventions should be accompanied by disaster risk reduction measures such as early warning

systems, weather forecasting, and improving water management and flood control through flood defences and protection or restoration of wetlands, mangroves and other natural ecosystems. Disaster risk reduction measures will only protect against displacement if they are locally implemented, and if local communities have the capacity to effectively implement such measures. For example, in early 2012 Refugees International travelled to Colombia and interviewed people who were still displaced 15 months after heavy rains and flooding had forced them to flee. Colombia had a disaster risk management plan in place before the flooding started in 2010 and was considered a leader in disaster risk management in the Latin American region. But its plan failed to effectively protect the three million Colombians who were either displaced or otherwise affected by the disaster. The scale of displacement exposed serious flaws in the system – most notably the lack of local implementation and capacity.[5]

Conclusions

Despite extensive research and expertise in effective shelter interventions, the biggest challenge has been the failure of governments, donors and NGOs to proactively undertake preventive shelter interventions. Most often, disaster-resistant shelter is built with humanitarian funding after a disaster and only a small fraction of donor money goes to stand-alone, proactive measures. This is not an effective use of limited resources and it does not prevent displacement in the long term. For example, shelter construction after a disaster is often focused on building the largest number of shelters within the shortest time frame, often at the expense of community consultation, education, mapping, zoning and erosion control, all of which are essential to preventing displacement in the long term.

Given all the above, it is important that governments, donors and NGOs:

- implement both hard and soft shelter interventions
- focus on shelter interventions which involve community consultation and encourage capacity building and mobilisation of communities
- complement shelter interventions with investments in disaster risk reduction measures, such as local implementation of early warning systems
- focus in hazard-prone areas on proactive shelter interventions rather than on short-term humanitarian responses to shelter needs.

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1. http://tinyurl.com/CRS-Shelterposter
2. http://tinyurl.com/CRS-FloodResistantShelter
3. http://tinyurl.com/UNHabitat-SaferShelter
4. http://tinyurl.com/CCCEP-ClimateRisk
5. http://tinyurl.com/RefsIntl-ColombiaFloods