Invisibility and virality in urban shelter response

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Humanitarian shelter responses should prioritise flexibility in order to accommodate diverse needs and capacities, particularly in the urban environment.

It is clear to many, though not all, within the shelter sector that a one-size-fits-all solution to shelter needs is unlikely to be the most appropriate option for most households. In a recent review of 144 shelter case-studies, one of the strengths most frequently identified was the adaptability of solutions and response.[1] However, we suggest that this concept of 'adaptability' should be reframed as 'flexibility'. Adaptability is a concept that can be retrospectively applied to an initially inflexible programme design, whereas flexibility must be introduced from the start of a shelter project.

At a fundamental level, flexibility is needed because individual households have different demographics and different needs. They come from varied local contexts, have

experienced different specific impacts, and have diverse coping mechanisms, skills, capacities and resources. This diversity is commonly greater in urban settings, where there is an increased range of income levels, housing types and livelihood activities than in rural settings. This underlying diversity of need and capacity highlights the requirement for humanitarian agencies to develop much more flexible shelter solutions when working in an urban response. However, to measure the flexibility of design and response we identify two fundamental but hitherto neglected aspects: in the flexibility of shelter assistance programmes – invisibility; and in the flexibility of response – virality.

Invisibility

Consider first a successful suburban development in a non-emergency context. Successful housing developments blend into the community, matching the needs of the block of surrounding streets, the budget, the household, the regulations and the climate. A community that has evolved naturally generally includes a broad range of housing options. Some people may choose to live with extended family or friends; some may rent a room or apartment. Others may choose to buy, or to build, or to lease, or opt to live somewhere free of charge with or without consent. Some may work from home, and require more space; others need more ventilation, light or outdoor space to accommodate pets or children or to take account of allergies. This diversity creates a holistic community where the footprint of any one developer or designer does not dominate the overall landscape; rather, the urban landscape becomes dominated by the common cultural norms and varied solutions of individual families. The community emerges and grows over time and eventually it could be considered that these housing projects have become 'invisible' within the urban landscape, with it no longer being obvious that any one project was built separately from the rest of the community's housing. At the same time, however, the identity and needs of the individual households are more visible.

By demonstrating flexibility, a good shelter programme will achieve the same diversity as found in the metropolitan environment and, over time, it should be impossible to see that specific shelter programming has taken place.

Shelter projects that are highly visible tend to stamp a single repetitive pattern upon the community. No matter how well designed, they impose the view and vision of one designer or design. By promoting a universal design, such programmes universally fail to address the diverse needs of individual households and become, by default, universally inappropriate. Agencies often chose this high visibility for perceived ease and speed of construction, or because they falsely perceive equity to mean identical, rather than equitably addressing differing needs. While traditionally many programme managers and donors may judge the success of a programme by its visibility, we suggest that the reverse may be a better measure of success. If a shelter programme is visible, instead of adapting the shelter programme to meet the community's needs the affected community has been forced to adapt themselves to fit the shelter programme. The true visibility of a successful shelter programme should lie in the creation of healthier, safer, more rapidly recovered diverse communities, rather than in 'instagrammable' imagery of identical shelters all in a row.

Virality

In the context of large-scale disasters, a shelter project run by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) will have a very small impact relative to the scale of the disaster. The increasing scale and rate of disasters, and waning donor appetite to fund shelter, mean that NGOs are only able to provide a diminishing proportion of the affected community with shelter assistance. Thus, the majority of post-disaster shelter provision, particularly in towns and cities, is undertaken by the affected community and neighbouring communities themselves. As such, disasters can be considered a social problem rather than just a physical problem. Hazardous events, whether natural or anthropogenic,

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The city of Tacloban in the Philippines, after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

only become a disaster if the community is insufficiently prepared to mitigate or overcome the hazard, or to respond to its effects. Successfully addressing the root causes of post-disaster housing damage such as inadequacy to withstand that disaster requires a social approach rather than the usual technical approach. The social approach addresses the underlying issues, such as why housing was built in a disaster-prone area, or why the quality of construction was inadequate for the risks they were likely to face. Solutions need to be culturally appropriate, affordable and environmentally sustainable and to ensure an ongoing commitment to risk reduction. Although finding such solutions may require more investment in social analysis, appropriate programmes will spread and self-propagate, while culturally inappropriate, unaffordable, unsustainable or unrealistic solutions will only occur while funding remains.

To be more effective in this landscape of diminishing aid, agencies should focus on influencing and improving the shelter outcome for all rather than provide perfect shelters for a few. Rather than focusing on engineering perfect high-level housing interventions for a limited number of families, agencies need to focus on smaller, less intrusive interventions that better address the underlying social problems that brought about the disaster. Simple solutions that resonate

and are easily replicated can empower communities to help themselves, ensuring a better overall humanitarian outcome for more of the affected population, and leading to a greater reduction in future risk. One measure of success in this landscape of diminishing aid, therefore, could be the 'virality' of the assistance provided – that is, its tendency to be reproduced. Examining to what extent the core ideas of the programme 'went viral' may provide a better measure of success than how well a particular programme housed a particular family. One might assess, for example, whether the retrofitting of a house was done in a way that was so culturally and environmentally appropriate, affordable, and convincing in its safety improvement that the neighbours copied it, thus giving the programme far greater reach.

Flexible shelter strategies in Palu and Tacloban

In recent years, flexibility has been written into the Recovery Shelter Guidelines for several projects across urban areas of Southeast Asia, including Tacloban in the Philippines and Palu on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. In the shelter standards documents for both responses, agencies were provided with diverse options for addressing shelter needs. The Recovery Shelter Guidelines for the Philippines response to Typhoon Haiyan promotes a rights-based

approach, specifying the right of households to "access housing options that best suit their needs and desires".[2] Both documents also provide guidance on minimum performance standards as well as applicability of different options to zones vulnerable to different types of hazard. One of the aims of this approach was to encourage agencies to offer a variety of solutions to address differing needs. These included: temporary shelter, sharing of accommodation, rental support, bunkhouses, repairs and retrofit, core houses (designed to be used as permanent housing in the future), and permanent housing guidelines. The guidelines also included ways of assisting decision making about shelter solutions which, crucially, took account of this need for flexibility from the start.

Unfortunately, in reality most agencies tended to revert to business as usual in these two responses, choosing the option they were most comfortable with, which was usually the pre-designed type referred to as a T-shelter. A notable exception to this case was Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In Tacloban, CRS successfully developed a 'shopping list' of shelter typologies that fitted the standards provided and, in the more recent Palu response, ensured flexibility by providing cash grants and technical assistance to address community shelter needs through a range of diverse options. However, the lack of uptake in flexibility elsewhere indicates that, beyond the development of improved guidance, there is a need for a more significant shift in mindset among the sector.

Overcoming constraints

The flexibility of shelter assistance programmes is often constrained by the ambition to engineer perfect shelter solutions and by misconceptions of equity, which can limit the number of households assisted. A shift to a minimal intervention paradigm focusing on less visible and more viral, minimalist inputs has the potential to assist more people and have longer-lasting impact. Simple interventions can make a huge difference – such as sending in teams to assess what fell down and why, clearly photographing and documenting the

difference between the two and then, using this information, advising communities on what they can do themselves. Following Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh, a small group of engineers and architects visited a village and looked at which buildings remained standing and which did not. They were unable to assist the community directly but during the visit their translator informed the community of what findings emerged from the building assessments. Six months later, another visit to the same village found that the community had been completely rebuilt and all of the problems previously discussed had been addressed. The village had achieved this without agency assistance by pooling money and resources and following the advice of the team who had visited. Meanwhile, however, there were shelter programmes nearby that had barely started.

Invisibility can also be constrained by global agendas and by the alignment of shelter programmes with donor requirements, pre-set architectural/engineering notions of what is correct, mandates of implementing organisations, and responders' other priorities. Although global reviews continue to talk about self-recovery and owner-driven approaches, the sector continues to focus on designing highly visible products rather than low-visibility processes. The way the system is currently set up means that shelter projects are often initially designed within certain boundaries established by each agency's disaster management team. Within this operating space are a shelter manager and a team of architects and engineers, who then define a further set of boundaries based on their preconceived notions of the physical problem they are facing. Commonly, it is only after all these boundaries have been established that the community is asked to participate. Instead, we suggest that these boxed-in spaces for operating should be removed, and that more detailed sociological and anthropological analysis of the underlying problems that have led to housing failure should be undertaken. Direct assistance, where provided, should be highly flexible, leveraging each household's capacities and addressing their individual needs.

Assistance budgets should be discussed directly with affected families, allowing them to define what they want or need in the context of shelter. Within urban settings this is even more important, particularly where building new shelters may not even be possible. Whether it be a house repair, house rental, living with family or a temporary shelter in the backyard, each household should determine what they want to do.

At the core of this proposition is rethinking the job description of the shelter project manager. Rather than an architect or engineer being responsible for designing a perfect physical shelter, in their place should be a team of individuals with diverse backgrounds who are focused on ensuring that the largest number of affected people can live in safety, comfort and dignity with the ability to make an individual journey to self-recovery and safer permanent housing.

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