

## DESIGNING SHELTER PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER COMMUNITIES

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Care must be taken to implement shelter interventions that empower communities and help build their resilience instead of having a predefined set of outputs and outcomes that often lead to unsustainable results.



Common difficulties encountered in evacuation centers following disasters are lack of space, privacy issues, and inadequate access to basic facilities.

### INTRODUCTION

In humanitarian settings where speed and agility are essential in saving lives, processes toward empowerment are often set aside for later, as they can be deemed time- and resource-intensive. While efforts at improving the agency of the most vulnerable are gaining ground, “beneficiaries” are still mostly only at the receiving end of response and even development initiatives. With this, power and control over the disaster-affected population’s survival and recovery lie in the hands of external actors who have the resources and “expertise” to provide life-saving aid.

The United Nations defines ‘empowerment’ as the process by which people increase their assets and attributes and build capacities to gain access, partners, networks, and/or a voice to gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives (UNSDN 2012).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, a community is referred to as ‘different groups of people that may be exposed to similar physical, psychological, and/or social impacts from multiple coercive factors and/or share the same resources, often, but not exclusively, related by place’ according to the Community Protection Approach (CPA).<sup>2</sup> At the community level, empowerment is seen as the process of re-negotiating power for communities for them to gain more control over their lives; with communities as actors of change, rather than recipients (Luttrell et al. 2009 cited in Petesque et.al., 2020).<sup>3</sup> Arguably, humanitarian organizations, donors, planners, and technical

experts can still improve on how power and control may be relinquished back into the hands of the communities they serve.

Shelter programs, with the well-intentioned objective of providing immediate protection – tangibly a roof over the heads of the most affected and vulnerable, sometimes fall into the trap of focusing on the number of units built, the number of beneficiaries served, technical compliance, and donor timelines. This approach tends to disregard other priorities of households and social realities on the ground; doing more harm than good in the long run. In some contexts of long-term displacement, in temporary settlements and relocation sites, the failure to consider the locations and types of livelihoods force displaced populations and relocatees to return to unsafe places of origin, leaving housing projects unused or abandoned. In terms of short-term seasonal displacement, the hesitance and outright refusal to evacuate among informal settlers living in disaster-prone areas often stem from the difficulties previously experienced in poorly designed/managed evacuation sites, such as limited provision for water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH), cooking facilities, accessibility for persons with disabilities, and other facilities.

Shelter programs and projects, therefore, need to invest their capacities and resources not only in designing and building shelters per se, but in designing the program and its activities to empower individuals and communities to: 1) make informed decisions regarding their safety, 2) organize their resources and efforts to reduce exposure to harm, and 3) develop local strategies to safeguard their right to life with dignity.<sup>4</sup> By acknowledging that disaster-affected communities, no matter how severely devastated

1 United Nations Social Development Network (UNSDN). (2012). *Empowerment: What Does It Mean to You?*

2 Petesque, M.; Cipriani, S.; and Arriaza, P. (2020) *Community Empowerment Manual*. Francesco Michele and Ayah Bseisy (Eds.) pp 07. WeWorld-GVC

3 Petesque, M.; Cipriani, S.; and Arriaza, P. (2020) *Community Empowerment Manual*. Francesco Michele and Ayah Bseisy (Eds.) pp 10. WeWorld-GVC

4 Petesque, M.; Cipriani, S.; and Arriaza, P. (2020) *Community Empowerment Manual*. Francesco Michele and Ayah Bseisy (Eds.) pp 12. WeWorld-GVC

they are, have capacities and resources that can be tapped into and augmented towards self-recovery, these communities, and their local governments may be supported with appropriate resources, tools, skills, and opportunities. We can challenge traditional notions of shelter aid delivery by reflecting on the following ‘W’ and ‘H’ questions: Who is the designer? When should we empower? What is the end goal? How to design shelter programs that empower?

### WHO IS THE DESIGNER?

Empowerment requires enabling communities to move from being objects of designing, planning, and decision-making to become designers, planners, and decision-makers themselves. Without undermining the knowledge and technical expertise that shelter practitioners bring with them, or the local governments that have political jurisdiction over their constituents, it is worth noting that communities are, in their own right, experts of their cultural contexts, local practices, and social dynamics. By blurring the dichotomy between who is the designer and who is the object of design, the approach fosters a multi-stakeholder collaborative environment where local governments can perform their duties as primary duty bearers, secondary duty bearers like professionals can share their technical expertise, civil societies support and strengthen accountability mechanisms, while communities actively engage in decision-making.

### WHEN SHOULD WE EMPOWER?

Previous disasters like Typhoon Haiyan showed the humanitarian community the latent capacities available within disaster-affected communities even after a major crisis. Affected communities tend to start repairing their homes right away, using whatever available resources they can salvage. In many places, mutual aid is commonplace, with families sharing food and supplies, as well as supporting rebuilding activities. When mobilized collectively, and directed efficiently, such latent capacity may be harnessed towards meaningful ends.

There is no specific window for empowerment to take place. We need not wait for disasters to happen before vulnerable communities can take part in shelter response and recovery planning efforts. While it is true that speed is a priority in emergencies, experience among community-based organizations implementing shelter response projects shows that some spaces and processes can and should be maximized to build the technical and social capacities of households and communities. Community empowerment can be woven into almost every stage of the shelter mechanism development process – from scoping studies, to the design development, deployment, and even in the project monitoring and evaluation stage. In most cases, emergencies may be one of the best times to infuse empowerment approaches because the material and financial support that can serve as entry points for community mobilization are available. This premise holds even in short-term shelter response projects.

### WHAT IS THE END GOAL?

Shelter programs tend to measure the number of shelters built or technical compliance to standards as indicators for success. These are important indicators that lead to important outcomes. However, to empower, shelter programs need to put more emphasis on intangible and less measurable goals such as improving social cohesion and vesting the power to communities.

Community resilience is a measure of the sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations. Empowerment plays a crucial role in enabling these communities to tap into their latent abilities to address underlying conditions that shape their vulnerability as individuals and collectively as communities. Therefore, designing shelter programs or projects that empower communities not only addresses unsafe shelter conditions but also builds local capacity towards resilience. It facilitates a deeper understanding of the need to go beyond “band-aid solutions” towards sustaining small, incremental adjustments in living conditions. Empowering vulnerable communities:

- **Restores dignity and self-reliance** among disaster-affected communities by giving beneficiaries control over choices and decision-making.
- **Provides a strong foil against disruption** and setbacks brought about by changes in political leadership. Even as external actors come and go, the communities’ strengthened capacities remain intact.



Disaster-affected communities have existing capacities that can be harnessed and strengthened. Women can take on leadership roles in evacuation camps and support camp management efforts.

- **Improves social positions.** Underrepresented groups, such as Persons with Disabilities, the elderly, children, and women are enabled to use their capacities to contribute to response and recovery processes; and even take on leadership roles.
- **Creates an enabling environment for resilience** through strengthening accountability among duty-bearers.

### HOW DO WE DESIGN SHELTER PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER?

Despite the rapid pace of humanitarian response timetables, there are opportunities and elements in implementing shelter response activities where we can embed community empowerment approaches:

- **Risk assessment and analysis:** Beyond the presence of hazards, addressing underlying causes of vulnerability requires understanding contributing factors to risks. To contribute to community empowerment, shelter programs may also assess power dynamics within and outside these communities that serve as enablers and barriers for communities to gain power and control.
- **Goals and objectives:** While strong pressure to design projects based on goals and timelines of funding agencies based on measurable or quantifiable indicators exists in any organization, implementers can embed empowerment approaches in the objective, design, and activities of shelter projects. Measuring the communities' awareness, beliefs, and perceptions of their capabilities to undertake a more active role in their shelter response and recovery is a good starting point. In so doing, the means to an end can be the end itself.
- **Processes and approaches:** Resonating with the “nothing about us without us” movement seeking inclusion, self-reliance, and empowerment, vulnerable communities and marginalized groups should take part in the discussion and have a seat at the proverbial table right from the start. Participatory, rights-based, and inclusive approaches should also define each part of the process.
- **Activities:** Community organizing is key to empowering communities. Shelter project activities may be designed based on community organizing principles. For example, in shelter kits distribution, beneficiaries may be involved in planning the content of the kits, modality of shelter support, and even mode of procurement as well as in its distribution. Collectively rebuilding shelters through sweat equity enables faster rebuilding, facilitates skill/technology transfer, and contributes to community building.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Participatory M&E activities of shelter projects are also key in strengthening meaningful participation and empowerment of communities especially by enabling communities to take the lead in defining desired results, tracking and analyzing progress, and deciding on corrective actions.

### CONCLUSION

During emergencies, it is often thought that there is no time nor resources to empower communities. As such, it is easy to go the route of providing ready-made shelter solutions and handing over predefined outputs to communities, all in the name of saving lives. However, it is important to note that there is no compromise or trade-off between saving lives and empowering communities. Understanding this requires challenging the way we think about disaster-affected populations and our role as shelter practitioners.

Communities are capable first responders and rebuilding partners. To achieve this, organizations, planners, and donors must transition from instructing to listening, from leading to facilitating, and from deciding to informing the process. Since no one holds the monopoly of talent and skill in delivering good solutions, enabling communities to co-create the service experience to suit their context — supporting them in conceiving, designing, steering, and managing these systems and structures, means that the so-called experts need to step back and lead from behind.

Shelter, being the physical and visible component of protection, is shaped by a multitude of decisions coming from multiple stakeholders. Shelter response activities may be embedded with community organizing and empowerment activities to help restore human dignity and self-reliance of communities, improve social positions, and create an enabling environment for resilience. When done inclusively, cross-learning among communities, government units both local and national, as well as the professionals involved in crafting shelter solutions ensure that the response and recovery measures taken lead to greater capacity towards self-determination. By putting people at the heart of the solution-making, we build better mechanisms to cope with, bounce back, and recover from disasters.



*All members of the community can take part in designing and implementing shelter projects. This strengthens self-reliance and uplifts their dignity.*