CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITY:
SUPPORTING RECOVERY FROM HUMANITARIAN CRISES

By Lizzie Babister, Aaron Opdyke, Arvin Hadlos, Charles Parrack, Bill Flinn

INTRODUCTION

For communities affected by crises, their experience of recovery is a continuous journey and an ongoing process, but for the diverse actors supporting them, recovery from humanitarian crises can be understood in many ways. Humanitarian agencies, government and donors often have overlapping, but different, perspectives on recovery. These variations in understanding mean that the space for supporting recovery is not often given, but needs to be negotiated. This study explores how this negotiation takes between humanitarian shelter practitioners and other key stakeholders such as donors and governments, using the term 'constructive ambiguity', which has emerged from this research, to explain these approaches. Constructive ambiguity describes the way practitioners are finding a middle ground that key stakeholders can support, while taking into account wider limitations which can not necessarily be immediately addressed.

Stephenson calls upon humanitarian agencies to *"reflect on how they understand and define recovery, as this affects the objectives they set, the design of their programmes and their evaluation of results"*[1]. This study begins by considering more widely how recovery has been understood by humanitarian and development actors, to reflect on how humanitarian practitioners might approach their own role and objectives in recovery. The second half of this article presents a collection of practitioner experiences highlighting how they have used constructive ambiguity to manage the challenges and opportunities of supporting households to move forward with their recovery.

---

1 Stephenson, M. (2018) 'Chapter 5: Transition to Recovery' in 'The State of Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements', Global Shelter Cluster, Geneva. The State of Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements 2018-CHAPTER 5.pdf (sheltercluster.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com) visited 31.05.23

A transitional shelter built with emergency funds, considered by the household to be their permanent home.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on the early findings of a wider study commissioned by the Global Shelter Cluster following a consultation to establish research priorities. The wider study takes the top priority of approaches to longer-term recovery and focuses on the connections and barriers between providing relief and supporting the recovery of shelter and settlements in humanitarian crises. An initial review of academic and grey literature was conducted, followed by semi-structured interviews. The main inclusion criteria for participants were those with field experience involving the transition from providing relief to supporting household recovery, from a range of geographical and crisis contexts.

DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS, DIVERSE OBJECTIVES

For those who support communities recovering from crises, their perspectives on the meaning of success can differ. This is particularly the case for stakeholders who place boundaries (such as mandates, teams, or budget lines) around their humanitarian or development work. 'Recovery' as an overarching term has become useful to encompass a range of more specific ideas, such as rehabilitation, reconstruction, resilience, peacebuilding, sustainability, and durable solutions which can fall across these boundaries. In humanitarian settings, some of these terms have taken on sensitive associations when the objectives of different stakeholders do not necessarily align (for instance terms associated with construction and permanent buildings). The objectives of different stakeholders may be influenced by the length of time they plan to be involved in the humanitarian crisis, and how they prioritise communities, for instance, by vulnerability, by location or political affiliation. This results in organisations and institutions working together with a range of perspectives on whose recovery should be prioritised, who should support, for how long and what can be achieved. The following section describes the evolution of frameworks to support recovery from humanitarian crises which have attempted to bring together these diverse perspectives and objectives.

AN EVOLUTION OF RECOVERY FRAMEWORKS

Initially, recovery was most often understood as a linear process, and described by phases which followed an initial emergency response[2]. Supporting recovery through bridging from short-term relief to longer-term outcomes

---

2 Quarantelli, E. L. (1982) 'Sheltering and housing after major community disasters: case studies and general observations' University of Delaware Disaster Research Center. Sheltering And Housing After Major Community Disasters: Case Studies And General Observations (udel.edu) visited 31.05.23

supported by development actors has roots in the Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) movement that emerged in the 1980s[3]. Later, the Humanitarian Reform process identified that recovery repeatedly fell between organisational boundaries of humanitarian assistance and longer-term development; between emergency relief and durable solutions, but with the expectation that humanitarian agencies would "facilitate transitions from emergency to recovery"[4].

Recognising that the lived experience of affected communities does not fit neatly into humanitarian or development boundaries, Corsellis and Vitale's 'transitional shelter' approach provided shelter practitioners an interim outcome between emergency shelter and permanent reconstruction or resettlement[5]. This approach was particularly valuable in conflict contexts where a linear journey towards recovery rarely occurs. It acknowledged the reality of the time lag between the type of support offered by key stakeholders, where "reconstruction takes usually between two and five years, but that a tent only lasts for around one year"[6], causing households to remain in tents for an inappropriate period of time. The South Asian Tsunami of 2004 also contributed useful evidence showing how recovery might be supported, acknowledging that there are interim outcomes between short-term and long-term recovery[7]. In other words, recovery involves a series of outcomes, some of which can be achieved quickly, and other outcomes will take longer.

Initially the endpoint of recovery was understood as a return to normal for affected communities, while it is now recognised that recovery should connect with a 'new normal', moving beyond comparisons to pre-disaster conditions. Following the South Asian Tsunami, the "build back better" (BBB) approach, formalised by the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, became a priority of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030[8]. This approach

aligned the development concern for reducing risk, and increasing resilience, with the humanitarian concern for alleviating suffering, in that "Recovery offers the opportunity to address the underlying risk factors from multiple hazards and 'build back better'"[9]. Crucially, BBB, and later 'Build Back Safer'[10], provided a platform for humanitarian actors to not only plan ahead but to overlap their concerns with development actors "by integrating relief and development through long-term planning and disaster risk reduction"[11].

A further evolution in understanding is represented by 'early recovery', which acknowledges recovery as a series of overlapping processes, some of which must start early because they have a longer trajectory:

"*Early recovery is a multidimensional process of recovery that begins in a humanitarian setting. It is guided by development principles that seek to build on humanitarian programmes and catalyze sustainable development opportunities*".[12]

In 2013 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) took the step to request all clusters integrate early recovery into their operations. Much of the discourse on early recovery at this time centred on preparing the ground for an effective 'exit strategy' for humanitarian actors and the expanded development of guidelines on 'durable solutions'[13] by establishing the base on which nationally-led development can occur after a crisis[14].

More recently, a growing theme has been to unify and connect recovery with the sustainable development agenda[15]. This can be seen in the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's current definition of recovery as:

"*the restoring or improving of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities, of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and "build back better", to avoid or reduce future disaster risk*".[16]

3 Mosel,I. and Levine, S 'Remaking the case for linking relief, rehabilitation and development', ODI, London. Remaking the case for linking relief, rehabilitation and development | ODI: Think change visited 31.05.23
4 Adinolfi C, Bassiouni DS, Lauritzsen HF, Williams HR (2005) Humanitarian Response Review. United Nations, New York and Geneva. Humanitarian Response Review 2005 (interagencystandingcommittee.org) visited 31.05.23
5 Corsellis, T. and Vitale, A. (2005) 'Transitional Settlement: Displaced Populations', Oxfam, Oxford. Transitional Settlement, Displaced Populations - Oxfam Policy & Practice visited 31.05.23
6 Collins, S. Corsellis, T. and Vitale, A. (2010) 'Case Study 5 Transitional Shelter: Understanding shelter from the emergency through reconstruction and beyond', ALNAP, ODI, London. Transitional shelter: understanding shelter from the emergency through reconstruction and beyond - ALNAP Innovation Case Study no. 5 | ALNAP visited 31.05.05
7 Ingram, J. C., Franco,G. Rio,C. and Khazai, B. (2006) 'Post-disaster recovery dilemmas: challenges in balancing short-term and long-term needs for vulnerability reduction' Environmental Science & Policy, 9 (7–8): 607–613. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2006.07.006 visited 31.05.05
8 Fernandez and Ahmed (2019) '"Build back better" approach to disaster recovery: Research trends since 2006' Progress in Disaster Science. "Build back better" approach to disaster recovery: Research trends since 2006 - ScienceDirect visited 31.05.23

9 Ievers, J., & Bhatia, S. (2011). 'Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction – Recovery as a catalyst for reducing risk' International Recovery Platform, ISDR. Ievers_&_Bhatia_2011.pdf (preventionweb.net) visited 31.05.23
10 Flinn,B. and Morel, L. (2017) 'The Case for Self-Recovery' Forced Migration Review, Oxford. The case for self-recovery | Forced Migration Review (fmreview.org) visited 25.0523
11 Kennedy, J. Ashmore, J. Babister, E. and Kelman, I. (2008) 'The meaning of "build back better": Evidence From post-tsunami Aceh and Sri Lanka', Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, 16(1), 24–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2008.00529.x visited 31.05.05
12 CWGER (2008) Guidance note on Early Recovery. United Nations Development Programme, Geneva. Guidance Note on Early Recovery CWGER April 2008 | United Nations Development Programme (undp.org) visited 31.05.23
13 Blay, C. Crozet, S. (2017) 'Durable Solutions in Practice' Global Cluster for Early Recovery, Geneva. durable_solutions_in_practice_-_handbook_sept_2017.pdf visited 31.05.05
14 UNDP (2012) UNDP in Early Recovery, UNDP. UNDP in Early Recovery | United Nations Development Programme visited 31.05.05
15 Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals - United Nations Sustainable Development visited 26.04.23
16 Recovery | UNDRR visited 31.05.05

This is however increasingly contested in the context of protracted crises where normality and extended periods of displacement come with unique challenges[17]. In protracted crises, the multidimensional nature of recovery has become recognised through Humanitarian, Development, and Peacebuilding Nexus (HDPN) which acknowledges that simultaneous rather than sequential involvement of different stakeholders is required:

> "… strengthening the coherence between humanitarian, development and peace efforts, … effectively reducing people's needs, risks and vulnerabilities, supporting prevention efforts and thus, shifting from delivering humanitarian assistance to ending need".[18]

The HDPN approach has enabled notable gains to operationalise the meaning of recovery for conflict settings – connecting peacebuilding, stabilisation, state-building, and the 'durable solutions' of voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement.[19]

For shelter practitioners, a further extension to understanding recovery has emerged from the traditions of participation and people centred housing[20]. The notion of 'self-recovery' acknowledges that the majority of those affected by crises shelter and settle themselves on their own without external support[21]. The self-recovery approach encourages practitioners to use household level recovery priorities as a starting point, in contrast to the humanitarian or developmental boundaries organisations and institution place around their support.

WHY DID CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITY EMERGE?

Despite the evolution of recovery policies and approaches, these have not always translated smoothly into practice for the recovery of shelter and settlements. The ways in which organisations, institutions and governments organise their

resources and legislation have not necessarily yet evolved to suit a complex multi-dimensional, multi-actor process. For instance, international funding instruments[22] and existing national building codes may not serve the blend of humanitarian and development approaches required in a crisis. In addition, there are sometimes few incentives for governments and host communities to support the recovery of communities who become displaced without warning, for example refugees from a new conflict or rural IDPs displaced into urban areas. Constructive ambiguity then becomes a necessary approach to secure appropriate and ongoing support by finding a middle ground. The preceding section documented the recurring issue of addressing recovery in a coordinated way, and constructive ambiguity is one way practitioners have managed this. The following section is informed by primary data from key informant interviews with shelter practitioners and uses examples to explain how shelter practitioners have successfully employed this approach.

CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITY IN PRACTICE

This research found that constructive ambiguity has been used in a range of crises over many years, but without being identified as a specific approach. This section identifies several different types of constructive ambiguity which have successfully moved support forward from relief to recovery. These include carefully choosing terminology, funding channels, materials, or legislation.

One way shelter practitioners have used constructive ambiguity to make space for support to recovery is to focus on terminology which highlights humanitarian needs, and is acceptable to all parties. At a certain point in time after the onset or peak of a crisis, the life-saving relief provided begins to fail to alleviate suffering. In Syria, although IDP families still live in tents, construction using concrete in the process of sheltering IDPs was initially restricted by national authorities. Humanitarian agencies addressed this by advocating for 'dignified shelter' rather than using terminology related to recovery or permanence[23]. By renaming the desired outcome as 'dignified shelter', and away from specific materials with sensitive associations, humanitarian agencies were able to support shelter recovery with more substantial options beyond tents. Another example of using specific humanitarian terminology was shared by a practitioner working in Lebanon, where one donor provided 'emergency' funds on an annual basis, but no funding for longer-term activities. As humanitarian agencies worked with the same communities and local authorities year after year, the communities began to recover and their needs

---

17 Devictor, X. and Q.-T. Do. (2016) 'How Many Years Have Refugees Been in Exile?' Population Movement and Development, Volume 43, Issue 2 https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12061

18 The DAC Recommendation on the OECD Legal Instruments Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus 643.en.pdf (oecd.org) visited 25.05.23

19 UNHCR (2011) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Resettlement Handbook', UNHCR. UNHCR Resettlement Handbook (complete publication) | UNHCR visited 31.05.05

20 For example: M, Lyons. and T, Schilderman. (Eds.) (2010) 'Building Back Better: Delivering people-centred housing', Practical Action, London South Bank University, and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Building Back Better: Delivering people-centred housing reconstruction at scale - World | ReliefWeb visited 25.05.23

21 Flinn, B. Schofield. H and Morel. L (2017) 'The Case for Self Recovery', Forced Migration Review, Oxford. download_file (ox.ac.uk) visited on 31.05.23

Parrack, C. Flinn, B. and Passey, M. (2014) (PDF) Getting the Message Across for Safer Self-Recovery in Post-Disaster Shelter (researchgate.net) visited on 31.05.23

Twigg et al (2017) 'Self Recovery from disasters: an interdisciplinary perspective' Working Paper 523. ODI, London. (PDF) Self-recovery from disasters: an interdisciplinary perspective (researchgate.net) visited on 31.05.23

22 See also Babister (2022) 'Overseas Development Aid for Humanitarian Crises: Implications for the Recovery of Shelter and Settlements', Open University, Open Research Online. Overseas Development Aid for Humanitarian Crises: Implications for the Recovery of Shelter and Settlements - Open Research Online visited 25.05.23

23 Dignified and Safer Living Conditions for IDPs in Protracted Crises: North West Syria, Global Shelter Cluster. Dignified and Safer Living Conditions for IDPs in Protracted Crises: North West Syria | Shelter Cluster visited 25.0523

evolved. The humanitarian agency worked with the donor to make sure the terminology in their reports fulfilled the donor's humanitarian requirements, and the donor allowed programming flexibility in the knowledge that no other funds were available.

In other situations, it is the source of resources which needs to change, rather than just the terminology. For instance, in the Central African Republic, one practitioner found that donors would not fund construction from their humanitarian budgets, yet would use their development budgets to fund construction for the same affected communities. Similarly in Burkina Faso, certain donors would fund durable shelter solutions from their long-term budgets. For the humanitarian agencies in these locations, it was a case of liaising with several different donor teams and knowing how to describe the same activities in different ways to secure resources.

A further type of restriction is legislation in the form of building legislation or tenure legislation. In these cases, practitioners may need to adapt the shelter design or simply know the right type of legislation to apply. An example of changing the shelter design occurred after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 in the Philippines. The national government created 'no-build' zones in coastal location, which restricted construction of shelters to using only lightweight materials. Some humanitarian agencies negotiated with local governments to use pre-cast concrete only in the pillar foundations, because these could be removed, so that more resilient shelters could be constructed while a sustainable relocation process could be planned. After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, humanitarian agencies applied specific tenure legislation to support households with their next step of recovery. Land tenure issues made reconstruction difficult for those without formal tenure documentation. Some agencies were able to support families to register their transitional shelters as temporary rather than permanent construction, similar to a 'usufruct'[24] agreement, to allow for occupancy while formal tenure discussions continued. A further example where the choice of materials allowed for flexibility followed the Padang earthquake in 2008, Indonesia. Donors restricted their emergency funds to the construction of transitional shelters, even though local materials and labour were available

_____

24 See here for a definition: Usufruct | law | Britannica visited 25.05.23

for permanent construction. Humanitarian agencies used these emergency funds to provide cash assistance for construction with a restricted pallet of materials. Using less masonry and more timber allowed households to qualify for the funds. The households, however, openly stated that they considered the houses to be their permanent homes, not transitional, and an indicator of their recovery.

The examples above demonstrate that effective constructive ambiguity can take many forms, but the common objective is discovering what is acceptable to key stakeholders. Practitioners can use terminology to advocate for recovery, or they can negotiate with donors in a range of ways to secure funds for recovery. Where legislation is a barrier, they can negotiate which materials are used or find the key pieces of legislation which enable recovery to take place.

CONCLUSION

As recovery policy evolves to advocate for a more complex multi-dimensional, multi-actor understanding, in practice, shelter practitioners may need skills to think outside the box and collaborate with a range of different actors to negotiate the space for recovery. The examples of 'constructive ambiguity' above demonstrate two key points. First, they provide insights into how shelter practitioners can successfully support the recovery of households from humanitarian crises, despite barriers created by different understandings of the process and outcomes of recovery. Second, they highlight the opportunities to advocate for more connection between the promotion of recovery processes and outcomes in policy and the methods by which this can be achieved on the ground. When faced with the transition between providing relief and supporting the recovery of shelter and settlements in humanitarian crises, practitioners can assess whether the understanding of recovery going forward is shared among stakeholders. By reviewing how the process and outcomes are understood, some shared middle ground may be established. For instance, questions to ask may include what different stakeholders expect to achieve and by when, who is expected to be involved in the process and how, and whether joint assessment and analysis might be possible. By starting to ask these questions it may become clearer to practitioners how to secure resources for recovery and create a platform to advocate for a smooth transition.

A range of masonry shelters in Northwest Syria.

www.shelterprojects.org