

Post-crisis, long-term shelter response is vital

Failure to deal with the long-term aftermath of a disaster and bring development thinking into the humanitarian response at the outset usually leads to further trouble, argues Charles A. Setchell, a Shelter, Settlements, and Hazard Mitigation Advisor with the USAID Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA).

In the 1989 movie, *Dead Poets Society*, a teacher played by Robin Williams challenged his students with *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase commonly translated as “seize the day.” Although the phrase is heard to this day, few will recall that the teacher lost his job because he didn’t consider the long-term implications of his actions.

The teacher’s fate in the movie is not all that different from many humanitarian shelter responses: Not thinking long-term when acting short-term – or more specifically, not informing relief actions with developmental thinking – can get you into big trouble.

So how long is the long in the long-term? In a related vein, and given recent changes in the humanitarian community organizational landscape, how early is the early in early recovery? When do we start long and early?

Based on innumerable discussions I’ve had with people directly affected by disaster or crisis, often while standing amidst the rubble of their destroyed homes, the response would likely be now, tomorrow, or perhaps even yesterday.

No organization can be that responsive, of course. But a well-conceived recovery programme that links relief and reconstruction activities can have beneficial outcomes – or, at least, minimal harm – at significant scale to affected populations in the four- to eight-month time-frame common to most humanitarian shelter programmes.

Whether done well or not, and whether done knowingly or not, humanitarian assistance also initiates a much more complex process of addressing the need for shelter in a developmental context. This context features largely urban-based growth occurring on a massive scale well into the future, primarily in developing countries. Those engaged in humanitarian shelter, then, would be wise to know of this interplay of action, process, and context.

This is not a trivial matter, for it is not an understatement to claim that many recent conflicts have had their genesis in unresolved resource, social, and political issues. It is also not an understatement to claim that many recent disasters have had their genesis in development policies that have placed – and continue to place – people in harm’s way. One way of refuting these claims is changing humanitarian shelter assistance so that it more effectively contributes to, indeed jump-starts, efforts to address these large development issues.

Ian Davis provides us with guidance in this regard, and has done so quite clearly in his brief article. Additions to his list of self-evident truths could include the potential of shelter as a significant livelihood generator, and recognizing and learning more about the scale and mechanisms of remittance-driven shelter financed by affected populations.

These truths, together with some presented by Davis, suggest strongly that shelter assistance should focus less on “four-walls-and-a-roof” approaches, and more on the institutional require-

ments and strategic vision needed to promote a settlements-based approach to guide delivery of shelter at scale. Such a focus will require concerted humanitarian community engagement with development community actors so that long-term shelter strategies reduce the risk of future conflict and disaster.

Two truths mentioned by Davis, namely transitional shelter and “building back better,” merit further elaboration. Recent experience in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and elsewhere suggests that transitional shelter – emergency shelter that designed intentionally to jump-start recovery and reconstruction – appears a useful means of addressing short-term needs within a long-term framework, perhaps because it reflects the following:

- **Respect for the Past.** A common feature of transitional shelter is the emphasis on salvaging of building materials for reuse in post-crisis/disaster shelter programs. Davis even calls for a ban on destruction of salvageable building materials, in the name of efficiency. Much more importantly, however, reuse of these materials connects affected populations with the past in a tangible, respectful manner, and
- **Linkage to the Future.** Transitional shelter often requires new inputs, sometime from outside affected regions, to supplement salvaged materials. This merging of new and old materials, together with “building back better” measures, can serve as a model for shelter activity precisely because it links to the incremental, and thus long-term, housing delivery process present in most countries, which must be accessed to achieve meaningful impacts at scale.

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“Building back better” is far more than measures to resolve communal violence, or promote seismic mitigation.

This form of “thinking long, acting short” is an opportunity to re-acquaint development community actors with crises and disasters, enabling those actors to take measures that reduce vulnerability to hazards, both natural and human-caused, and mitigate the causes of conflict. Whenever and wherever possible, such opportunities should be recognized and exploited with *carpe diem* zeal. To do otherwise, is to put people back in harm’s way.

By the way, no sequel to *Dead Poets Society* was ever made. We’ll never know, then, whether the Williams character would have been able to resume his teaching career after heeding the message of “Think Long, Act Short” reflected above.

Had there been a sequel, and the message heeded, the humanitarian community would have had quite a story to guide its work.

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- Note: this article reflects solely the views of the author – not USAID or the US Government.

