

# GAINING A SENSE OF THE SECTOR

A Participatory Workshop on Shelter and Settlements Activities  
September 22, 2006 \* Washington, DC



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Charles Setchell, Shelter, Settlements, and Hazard Mitigation Advisor, USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)  
Washington, DC, United States**

**T**he September 22 Shelter and Settlements Workshop co-sponsored by USAID/OFDA and InterAction represented the first North American shelter initiative since at least 1996. Nearly 70 participants representing a diverse cross-section of humanitarian actors and institutions engaged in the shelter sector, including non-governmental organizations, academics, international organizations, consultants, and U.S. government agencies convened in response to an open invitation to address a wide range of shelter and settlements issues.

Since 2002, an active dialogue on shelter, largely driven by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Shelter Centre and the 2003-2004 effort to revise the Sphere Project guidelines, has been ongoing. Chapter 4 of the 2004 edition of the Sphere Project guidelines focusing on shelter captured fundamental changes and developments that are reshaping the sector. Along with such products as *Transitional Settlements: Displaced Populations* published by the Shelter Centre, the Sphere revisions represent an expanding body of shelter-related work being generated largely from within Europe. With notably few exceptions, however, North American organizations have not been a part of this rich discourse. A North American counterpart to engage Europe in the diversifying shelter environment is thus long overdue.

The overarching goal behind the Shelter and Settlements Workshop is the improvement of shelter programming and practice. To that end, four central objectives shaped the framework for the day's events; the establishment of a North American complement to ongoing European shelter efforts; a participatory approach and focus to the workshop agenda; a broader definition of shelter beyond plastic sheeting, four walls, and a roof; and an expanded vision of shelter that addresses and incorporates underlying causes into response efforts. The morning sessions targeting a review of the U.N. cluster approach and defining a shelter response were designed to lay the foundation for afternoon discussion focused on strat-

egies and approaches to improving shelter practice and responding to the question of whether or not a North American shelter working group should be established.

The shelter and settlements sector is currently undergoing a period of growth and expansion both in terms of the conceptual framework that guides it and the funding and resources that fuel it. A working definition of shelter is increasingly recognized as wedded to a broader notion of transition. The current spotlight on transitional shelter represents a movement along a continuum away from traditional shelter and towards a transitional settlement approach. Increased U.N. and donor attention to the sector have paralleled a growth in available funding and resources, but fundamental strains and deficiencies are evident. The limited presence of shelter experts within humanitarian organizations and insufficient numbers of external consultants have led to shelter decisions increasingly being made by generalists ill-equipped to do so. A lack of reference materials and resources, and the absence of agreed upon standards and definitions further undermine the capacity of the sector.

Dialogue throughout the workshop articulated the present weaknesses observed in the shelter sector and emphasized the need to advance the organizational capacity and efficacy of the humanitarian shelter community. Several critical starting points were highlighted including the development of a clear mandate with guidelines and principles for a humanitarian response to shelter disasters, a common and consistent shelter vocabulary to ease communication, a registry of shelter professionals and consultants, and the need for donors and institutions to be proactive in launching training courses and mentorship programs to build expertise and greater surge capacity. To advance these objectives, possible next steps were discussed, including the creation a virtual community utilizing online discussion forums, regularly scheduled working group meetings, semi-regular discussion meetings, and training opportunities scheduled to co-occur with working group sessions.

**Dr. Tom Corsellis**  
**Co-Director, Shelter Centre**  
 Geneva, Switzerland

Tom Corsellis provided an analysis of the current status of the shelter and settlements sector in terms of operations, risks, institutional development, knowledge, and principles and standards. He prefaced his remarks by highlighting the need for the sector to examine transitional settlements in the framework of a community approach as opposed to the more traditional view of response in terms of individual family needs.

In respect to operations, the current range of settlement options are potentially equally valid for conflict as well as disaster response, and should be viewed as part of a standard toolkit. The widely accepted premise that refugee camps are a last resort has failed to be applied in action, and has, in point of fact, become the typical starting point for emergency shelter response. It is critical that the assorted range of shelter options receive recognition within the sector. To that end, efforts need to be undertaken to identify and more broadly inform the diverse actors engaged in shelter response of available options.

A false divide currently persists between, on the one hand, self-help or contractor strategies of shelter response, and on the other, cash assistance to host families. Frequently, a combination of multiple approaches represents the most appropriate and effective response. Similarly, the perception of a sequential timeline of emergency shelter and transitional settlements followed by post-reconstruction efforts fails to accurately reflect the reality of their parallel occurrence. Unfortunately, development organizations are not set up to address this concurrent reality, and the problem is compounded by the fact that most agencies lack a shelter department or a shelter specialist on staff to inform programming efforts. There is an urgent need to improve the bridge between relief and development in order to facilitate settlement with dignity while communities rebuild. To date, the track record for the sector in enabling this transition has been poor.

The shelter and settlement sector continues to be influenced and shaped by a number of changes and risks that have evolved over the past decade, including a decline in the number of refugees matched by a dramatic increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), an increasingly significant role for the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and a greater reliance on host governments than before, characterized by governments and armed groups seeking to influence the actions of humanitarian actors. Resettlement is often employed as a weapon by governments which creates serious challenges to economic development. The escalating phenomenon of urbanization represents an additional risk confronted



Photo: courtesy of Robert Walker, USAID/OFDA

## RECENT SHELTER EXPERIENCES

by the shelter sector. Hundreds of millions of people worldwide are living in poor conditions resulting from the combined employment of poor techniques and poor materials that are generating greater risk to populations. The humanitarian community's ability to detect these growing risks needs to be improved.

Institutional development in the shelter sector reflects a combination of positive advances and fundamental limitations. The development of coordination tools, including ReliefWeb and the convening of the Shelter and Settlements Workshop, demonstrates the ongoing efforts of the humanitarian community to improve coordination. Additionally, operational capacity of the shelter sector exhibits significant flexibility as represented by the successful completion of 54,000 transitional shelters over a seven month period in response to the Asian tsunami. However, the limited presence of shelter experts within humanitarian organizations creates a dependency on a consultant base that is insufficient to meet current needs, and prevents the development of internal shelter champions to keep a targeted focus on the sector's development. Furthermore, the gap between the humanitarian community's and beneficiary's access to technology is growing and most shelter decisions are being made not by shelter experts but by other actors, such as ambassadors.

In terms of knowledge, there is a dearth of books, materials, and resources focused on the shelter and settlement sector. However, an understanding of the impact of shelter on livelihoods has been documented, and a greater understanding of the weaknesses of a traditional camp approach has promoted a greater interest in town planning. Ongoing constraints include; a lack of commitment to the sector that requires greater traction and consolidation; inadequate description in reporting and budget formulations; and underdeveloped relationships and coordination with the academic and private sectors. A preference for product-based versus research and dialogue-based funding makes it difficult for knowledge development initiatives to get financed. Efforts at developing a relationship of trust between the private sector and the humanitarian community require greater attention in order to incorporate

available technological advances. The continuing usage of canvas tents in relief response epitomizes the failure of the humanitarian community to harness the innovations and realize the potential of collaboration with the private sector.

The principles and standards embodied in the UNHCR and Sphere guidelines mainly focus on family and camp models, but the Sphere guidelines also represent a critical formation stage for the sector by creating a formalized outline that serves as an essential starting point for discussion and refinement. However, a limited understanding of the sector by external actors, and a lack of clarity within the sector on appropriate language and definitions, act as constraints to developing a consensus and consistency to shelter principles and standards.

### **Rick Bauer, Public Health Engineering Adviser, Humanitarian Department, Oxfam**

#### **Oxford, Great Britain**

Rick Bauer presented an overview of Oxfam's approach to shelter and settlements and highlighted general observations derived from his recent experiences in Aceh, Indonesia and Pakistan.

Oxfam does utilize traditional shelter components in the form of tarps and tents in response to need, supported by an advanced logistics system capable of rapid mobilization. However, Oxfam also employs transitional shelter initiatives, livelihood components, and small community projects in developing shelter solutions. Additionally, Oxfam acts as an advocacy organization seeking to influence policy in the broader humanitarian community. Rick Bauer focused on four points in talking about lessons learned from his experiences in Aceh and Pakistan, including; the need for the shelter sector to better understand transitional shelter options; understanding context; gender and reconstruction; and coordination. Tents, tarps and zinc may get the job done but frequently are not the most effective approach to shelter response. Current practice reflects an over-reliance on this traditional approach. However, alternative options

## RECENT SHELTER EXPERIENCES

do exist in the form of support to host families and self-settlement camps. More than 40 percent of families were supported by host families in Aceh. Self-settlement camps largely fall below the radar of humanitarian response efforts, and frequently fail to receive adequate support. Smaller camps of less than 50 families are particularly vulnerable, especially in regards to water and sanitation. Strategies to reach self-settlement groups are required.

Understanding the context of a relief environment is critical to providing appropriate and effective response programming, and the failure to do so can fundamentally undermine relief efforts. Three minute disasters frequently disguise 30 years of underlying conflict. Temporary shelter versus permanent housing can ignite controversy linked to land tenure and land rights policy. Community's tendencies to view non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as service providers as opposed to through a community development lens embodies another challenge to understanding the context of shelter response efforts. Understanding root causes and expectations represent critical components to delivering effective shelter response.

Women's roles as decision makers are frequently underestimated and ignored. A greater emphasis on providing information to all household members, especially women, in terms of design, materials, and execution is required. In Pakistan, a double burden on men was observed where the dual roles of wage earner and over-seer of household construction were in conflict. Males provided money to support households through remittances from jobs held outside the community, but at the same time they were required to stay in the community to oversee the reconstruction of their homes. The question of what role NGOs and the larger international community should play in challenging traditional roles through relief programming remains.

In terms of coordination, the humanitarian community's efforts to share information and influence others reflects mixed results. In the case of Pakistan, efforts to influence reconstruction policy yielded successes in the promotion of transitional

shelter options, whereas in Aceh limited success was observed. The essential challenge to the shelter sector is how to restore a community to their pre-crisis condition, or to an improved pre-crisis condition, as expediently as possible.

## DISCUSSION

Discussion centered on the challenges and implications of land reform and land rights, and how to manage community expectations. The issue of land reform and land rights was recognized as a new and critical frontier for the shelter sector. Participants highlighted experiences from Nicaragua, Bosnia, and Afghanistan as possible sources of insight and program replication for other environments. Transparency and consistency were identified as key elements to managing beneficiary expectations, along with on-the-ground coordination among relief agencies. Additionally, collaboration with host governments and the need to apply a long term view in sync with beneficiaries' perspectives to shelter response were emphasized by participants.

**The essential challenge to the shelter sector is how to restore a community to their pre-crisis condition, or to an improved pre-crisis condition, as expediently as possible.**

## **Graham Saunders, Head of Shelter Department, International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC)**

### **Geneva, Switzerland**

Graham Saunders provided an overview of the history of the development of the cluster approach and highlighted emerging issues confronting the new mechanism.

In 2005, the U.N. instituted the Humanitarian Response Development Initiative intended to be a consultative process designed to meet humanitarian needs, enable a timely response, enhance capacity, and elicit donor support. From the speaker's perspective, the process failed to live up to its intention of a truly consultative process and was in practice a U.N.-led effort from the onset. Key recommendations, including increasing coordination, strengthening capacity, establishing benchmarks, and revising funding mechanisms, were developed that led to the creation of the cluster approach, the identification of lead agencies, and the articulation of action plans that were then initially rolled out in Pakistan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Beirut, Lebanon, and Suriname.

Following the roll out, subsequent efforts to increase participation and engagement in the process have been made, but limited participation by NGOs continues due to logistical and time constraints in the field. The Geneva-centered manifestation of the shelter cluster approach continues to limit its progress.

Saunders highlighted four emerging issues confronting the cluster approach to shelter. Widespread misperceptions of the cluster approach as a U.N. dictated process and a policing mechanism undermine buy-in and collaboration of partner organizations despite stated goals of mutual and widespread benefit. The absence of a clear and consistent definition of the shelter sector represents a real challenge to coordination and collaboration that should have been addressed in advance of the roll out. The designation of a health expert to head the shelter sector reflects an inappropriate choice that

has led to concerns surrounding the capacity of the cluster lead. Finally, cross-cluster issues represented by the intersection of the shelter and water and sanitation sectors require attention.

In closing, Saunders posed three questions designed to move the shelter sector forward in realizing the potential of the cluster approach to improve the quality of shelter response. First, what services do cluster participants, including NGOs, governments, and international organizations, want the cluster to provide? Second, how can the cluster process manage shelter as a continuum? And finally, how can agency involvement be increased to maximize ownership of the process?

## **Antonella Vitale, Co-Director, Shelter Centre**

### **Geneva, Switzerland**

Antonella Vitale organized her presentation around three aspects of coordination: coordination in the shelter sector, the three clusters impact, and coordinating the coordinator. A review of coordination is long overdue and limited only by the desire of acting participants. Coordination represents a service, not a chain of command, and accordingly requires the active engagement of all actors to be successful.

Coordination in the shelter sector is currently hampered by the artificial division between relief and development programming. Relief and development mechanisms tend to be viewed as distinct and sequential but in reality typically occur simultaneously. In conflicts, some people return while others remain displaced. In disasters, some people can rebuild while others remain in tents. These events occur in concert with one another and require parallel programming response efforts.

Shelter currently falls under the auspices of three distinct clusters—emergency shelter, camp management, and early recovery—with no overriding mechanism in place to coordinate the three. As a result, gaps persist between the three,

## THE CLUSTER APPROACH

exemplified, for example, by the current failure to direct support to host families. A lack of continuity and accountability among the clusters threatens the likelihood that emergency shelter initiatives will be picked up and included in the recovery phase.

To effectively coordinate the coordinators requires the establishment of standard services that are continually assessed and monitored to reflect the changing environment on the ground. This is critical to building sustainable capacity.

### DISCUSSION

Discussion centered on observations of the cluster experience in Beirut and concerns over the impact and prospects of the cluster approach. Participants expressed a perception that the U.N. role in the application of the cluster approach in Beirut succeeded in acting as a moderator, as opposed to an enforcer. The involvement and incorporation of host governments in the implementation of the cluster mechanism were highlighted as critical components to its success, reinforced by the Beirut experience. However, concern was expressed that donors would only engage NGOs involved with the cluster process and those that were not in agreement with cluster decisions would be shut out from funding opportunities. Ultimately, without donor and implementing organization engagement the prospects of realizing the potential of the cluster approach is severely undermined and the fear of a U.N.-centric apparatus is likely to be the result. Engaging the cluster approach represents an opportunity, but its success is grounded in the active participation and buy in of the humanitarian community.



Photo: courtesy of Robert Walker, USAID/OFDA



## **Richard Hill, Director, Office of Strategic Initiatives & Analysis, CHF International**

**Silver Spring, MD, United States**

Richard Hill provided an overview of the legacy of past programming and the why and what of current shelter response efforts. Contemporary shelter response practices are a product of past experiences that can be traced back to the birth of the shelter sector following the 1970 Guatemala earthquake. The impact of early decisions can be found throughout the range of current practice, including siting, materials, temporary shelters, signals regarding the type and extent of assistance, and signals concerning the roles and actors involved in a response. Decisions from early shelter practice continue to set the stage and occupy a starting point for shelter response efforts but they need not represent the final word.

The reasons behind why people suffer may appear self-evident but rarely do they receive the close examination they warrant, nor are they adequately addressed in shelter response efforts. In conflict and disaster settings, people suffer from exposure, destruction of assets and poverty, damage to housing and other capital, as well as forced or chosen migration. The multiple functions of housing as shelter and as a source of capital need to be recognized and restored when designing and implementing response efforts. Shelter programs have far reaching effects that set settlement, economic, and political patterns, and impact risk and social assistance-dependency.

A broad range of shelter program choices beyond tents and plastic exist, including host families, migration, group shelter, asset protection, and government assistance programs that address the psychological impact of displacement. Unfortunately, post-disaster shelter planning more often reflects political processes than the concrete needs of beneficiaries. The humanitarian community has an important role to play in assisting governments and local communities to adapt and improve their approaches and decision-making processes in regards to shelter.

## **Graham Saunders, Head of Shelter Department, IFRC**

**Geneva, Switzerland**

Graham Saunders briefly highlighted three important points to bear in mind when developing appropriate shelter response. The Philippines experience emphasizes key enabler roles that community and local governments play in shelter response. Bangladesh provides an important lesson in demonstrating the primacy of land issues in shelter concerns. Land issue patterns must be identified first before effective and appropriate shelter responses can be implemented. Guatemala exemplifies the significant role that remittances play in enabling and shaping community shelter response. The shelter sector must be viewed as one of several crucial actors in shelter response that includes government, community, and private sector actors as well.

## **DISCUSSION**

Discussion focused on how remittances could be influenced, the challenge of bridging the gap between relief and development, and alternatives to plastic sheeting. USAID/OFDA will be funding a study to examine the impact of remittances and the opportunities that exist to engage expatriate populations in the U.S. concerning hazard and conflict mitigation. The role of the humanitarian community in stimulating and supporting not only material assistance, but a process and community engagement, is under recognized by the development sector. This significantly hinders efforts to successfully bridge the gap between relief and development. The observation of many that reconstruction begins the day after a disaster, and not at some indefinite point in the future, was reiterated. The need to be open to alternative materials and mechanisms in shelter response was highlighted. Although plastic sheeting does have an important role to play, alternative local materials are often available that are more practical, affordable, and have the additional benefit of creating local incomes and stimulating the economy.

## Graham Saunders, Head of Shelter Department, IFRC

Geneva, Switzerland

Graham Saunders explored the potential of the Sphere Handbook chapter on shelter and settlement to serve as a core reference for shelter experts and practitioners, and as a set of accepted standards for emergency shelter assistance by the humanitarian community. Following a brief discussion on the strengths of the most recent Sphere Handbook, Mr. Saunders addressed the obstacles and limitations of the current usage of Sphere standards and indicators, drawing on examples from response efforts to the 2005 Pakistan earthquake. Finally, the presentation turned to the availability of shelter-specific resources, and provided a number of suggestions to enhance adherence to Sphere guidelines.

Highlighting the assets of the Sphere Project guidelines on shelter and settlement assistance, Mr. Saunders described the publication as a concise, simple, and direct field guide reflecting the current state of best practices. In addition, the origin of the publication as a collaborative effort by non-governmental organizations helped to establish a sense of common ownership over the content, which in turn has facilitated increasingly broad acceptance and application of the guidelines.

Despite widespread acclaim for Sphere indicators, the humanitarian community still faces many hurdles in gaining consistent use of Sphere standards. In some cases, Sphere indicators and standards have been dismissed outright, such as in an emergency response planning document for Pakistan which read “Sphere standards will not be met”. Mr. Saunders attributed this shortfall to an early recognition by response managers that there were insufficient shelter supplies to meet the needs of the affected population at Sphere-approved levels. The decision makers in this case opted to provide fewer resources to more people, rather than meet the minimum Sphere standards for fewer people.

The Pakistan case was an example of a difficult decision under sub-optimal conditions, but it was

also an example of a common misconception of the Sphere Handbook. Mr. Saunders highlighted that while Sphere does provide minimum standards for each sector, the handbook also contains indicators and guidance notes which are intended to guide decision makers through these difficult decisions. The indicators contain both quantitative and qualitative statements on how to achieve a minimal level of appropriate shelter. The guidance notes directly address dilemmas like the one presented in Pakistan, and suggest a prioritization of needs in the event that conditions do not allow for all needs to be met. Pulling together the standards, indicators, and guidance notes, Mr. Saunders urged disaster response managers to view the Sphere Handbook as a tool to help with the thought process behind any shelter or settlement response. The Sphere Handbook should not be viewed as a product, or a checklist to be either used or discarded, but instead as an informative and flexible guide to help experts and non-experts alike make difficult decisions regarding appropriate shelter assistance.

Finally, Mr. Saunders posed several questions to the audience related to the number and quality of current shelter resources. He asked the attendees to consider whether the shelter community has the required tools, if people know of and use the tools, whether there are alternatives to Sphere, and if there is a need for a complementary how-to guide derived from Sphere. Building on earlier discussions of the U.N. cluster system, Mr. Saunders mentioned a potential role for the clusters to play in determining the acceptable standards for shelter response efforts. Lastly, an alternative approach to ensuring broader compliance with Sphere standards could be a public information campaign directed at host governments to promote the use of these international guidelines over national building codes in disaster response environments.

**Nan Buzard, Senior Director,  
International Disaster Response,  
American Red Cross  
Washington, DC, United States**

Nan Buzard underscored the importance of a consistent approach to shelter and settlement projects by recounting the humanitarian crisis that spawned the Sphere Project. The large-scale displacement of Rwandans to Goma, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the 1994 genocide shed light on the varying approaches and standards employed by relief agencies. A Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda report published in 1997 was highly critical of the humanitarian response to over 2 million refugees in the Goma area, and faulted the relief community for incompetence resulting in further harm and increased deaths among the refugee population. In response, the humanitarian community embarked on a period of self-evaluation.

National and international organizations engaged in a critical dialogue on the capacities, qualifications, and competencies of humanitarian staff, and the ability of relief agencies to do no harm to beneficiary communities. Ms. Buzard framed the issue by asking participants, “If you gave a refugee \$100, would they in turn choose to pay you for services you provide?”

At an organizational level, NGOs and international organizations (IOs) collaborated from 1997 to 1998 to generate a Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards for emergency assistance efforts. This first phase of the Sphere Project was intended to develop a common framework and improve accountability for humanitarian practice. The Sphere Project has since revised and expanded the Handbook to include additional sectors and incorporate evolving best practices derived from academic and field experiences.

## DISCUSSION

In the open discussion that followed, participants continued to focus on the obstacles to broader use of Sphere Project guidelines. The session concluded with

the identification of two main problems affecting the shelter sector, specifically the insufficient knowledge of Sphere standards, and the lack of an accountability mechanism to promote greater adherence to the standards.

The conversation began with an exploration of different interpretations of the term best practice as it applies to Sphere indicators and guidelines. The use of the terms ‘standard’ or ‘best practice’ could be misleading by suggesting that they are either met completely, or not at all. The concern is that an inability to meet the standards completely could be used as an excuse to implement an even lower quality program since no minimum standard exists to determine the lowest acceptable level of shelter.

An alternate interpretation holds that best practices describe the optimum response under ideal circumstances. While this ultimate shelter response may not be feasible in every disaster situation, humanitarian programs must always strive to get as close to the best practice as possible. In the event that a particular response falls short of a Sphere guideline for best practice, the onus is on the organization to justify the reduced response. This approach to best practices removes the potential of Sphere standards being discarded as irrelevant in complex disaster responses.

Building on this understanding of standards as a benchmark along a continuum of potential response levels, participants reiterated the value of using Sphere as a tool to alert practitioners and decision makers to the relevant issues for any sector, including shelter and settlements. Ms. Buzard furthered this view by adding that the Humanitarian Charter in the 1997 Sphere edition is a statement of acceptable and appropriate relief efforts based on a declaration of human rights. Therefore, even in the most challenging of disasters, Sphere should be a useful tool for identifying critical issues, prioritizing needs, and ensuring that both shelter experts and non-sector specialists are prepared to make informed decisions on shelter and settlement issues. In other words, no situation is so complex or challenging that it would render Sphere irrelevant.

## IMPROVING SHELTER PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF SPHERE



Photo: courtesy of Charles Setchell, USAID/OFDA

One participant suggested that adding broad value statements to the Sphere Handbook could minimize confusion over the overarching objectives which should guide any response. Statements such as “relief programs must not create vulnerabilities,” and “programs should maximize the economic benefit to the community at large” would frame the specific indicators and standards within more general guidance. In the event that an NGO is not able to follow the best practices model, these broad value statements would help NGOs to ensure that even sub-optimal programming is in line with the strategic objectives.

In response, some participants argued that all necessary information, from qualitative value statements to quantitative standards, is already contained in the Sphere Handbook. Instead, the low quality of some shelter and settlement programs has

been the product of insufficient knowledge of Sphere standards within the practitioner community, and the lack of an accountability mechanism to oversee and review projects in the field.

The first challenge is ensuring that those making program decisions read, understand, and apply the guidance found in the Sphere Handbook. The second challenge is overcoming the current lack of accountability for work performed in the field. Suggestions for addressing these problems included: developing a certification program for humanitarian professionals and sector specialists to ensure that the people making decisions in emergency responses have the appropriate knowledge and background; and, establishing donor-to-NGO and peer-to-peer evaluation programs of projects in the field to provide critical feedback and enforce context-appropriate standards.

**Antonella Vitale, Co-Director, The Shelter Centre  
Geneva, Switzerland**

Antonella Vitale addressed the need for capacity building within the shelter sector of the humanitarian community. She advocated for the development of a set of tools and resources which would be specific to the shelter and settlement community, yet still benefit a wide range of stakeholders in shelter responses.

As a cross-cutting sector, shelter programs and practitioners interact with a range of additional sectors. Joint training programs and workshops for shelter, health, and water and sanitation experts could facilitate the dissemination of shelter knowledge to the broader humanitarian community. Additionally, a shelter library of reference materials, case studies, and guidelines would serve to promote further study and analysis of shelter issues.

Separately, Ms. Vitale discussed the need to improve existing skills, such as large-scale project management for emergency shelter responses. She identified the private sector as a valuable, though currently untapped resource in shelter and settlement humanitarian programming. The private sector has experience in managing projects and conducting assessments for sizeable initiatives. In order to exploit this capacity within the private sector, donors need

**Ms. Vitale identified the private sector as a valuable, though currently untapped resource in shelter and settlement humanitarian programming. The private sector has experience in managing projects and conducting assessments for sizeable initiatives.**

to start supporting human resource departments to attract solid shelter candidates and fund internships to develop the next generation of specialists.

Similarly, local capacity within many recipient countries represents an additional underutilized resource in emergency shelter response efforts.

A key consideration in the development of shelter sector resources is the trend of strategic decisions on shelter and settlement programs being made by generalists, unfamiliar with the potential impact of their decisions. Several tools must be developed to best support these decision makers, including a clear mandate with guidelines and principles for a humanitarian response to shelter disasters, a common and consistent shelter vocabulary to ease communication, and a registry of shelter professionals and consultants.

**Richard Hill, Director, Office of Strategic Initiatives and Analysis, CHF International  
Silver Spring, MD, United States**

Richard Hill focused on the challenge of maintaining a surge capacity for responding to rapid-onset shelter disasters when confronted with limited resources. A consistent constraint is the ability to train new staff quickly in the field. Mr. Hill argued that the best way to speed up this training process is through a mentoring system which pairs knowledgeable shelter experts with newer recruits to help identify commonly used resources and shelter solutions.

**DISCUSSION**

Participants' comments centered on the theme of how to get information, expertise, and support to the people making decisions in shelter response efforts, whether these people are in the field, donor community, or host governments.

One audience member argued for inclusion of one, straightforward, simple answer on minimum standards within the Sphere Handbook, counter to apprehension expressed by many sector specialists

## IMPROVING SHELTER PRACTICE: ENHANCING IN-HOUSE CAPACITY

given the variation present in shelter disasters and the appropriate responses. The participant emphasized that the Sphere guide needs to be a product for several distinct audiences, including both sector specialists and generalists. While the former category tends to prefer more in depth guidelines for shelter responses, it can be extremely valuable to the decision maker to have benchmarks which outline the minimum acceptable response.

A second discussion addressed the slow evolution and improvement of shelter practices, as demonstrated by the repetition of mistakes from the 1995 – 1996 Rwanda experience in the ongoing Darfur, Sudan crisis. Certification programs for individuals or institutions to work in the shelter sector could provide greater accountability, and ensure that organizations are operating with a minimum level of knowledge on shelter and settlement issues.

The conversation repeatedly emphasized the need for more skilled professionals in the shelter sector, and the need for donors and institutions to be proactive in launching training courses, mentorship programs, and internship funds. These initiatives will serve to develop a greater base of shelter practitioners, and build a stronger surge capacity.

**The conversation repeatedly emphasized the need for more skilled professionals in the shelter sector, and the need for donors and institutions to be proactive in launching training courses, mentorship programs, and internship funds.**





Photo: courtesy of Shelter for Life

**Tom Corsellis, Co-Director, The Shelter Centre  
Geneva, Switzerland**

Tom Corsellis presented the benefits that a shelter training program could provide to the humanitarian community, beyond the direct benefit of a broader pool of trained shelter experts, such as a more defined shelter sector. Next, he provided examples of existing resources and organizations which support the shelter sector, and ways to leverage these into a more coordinated training module. Finally, Mr. Corsellis reviewed the implications of a formal certification process and the resources it would require to maintain.

A coordinated training program covering principles and best practices of shelter response activities could be instrumental in building a more defined shelter community than currently exists. Furthermore, instructing humanitarian staff on the current state of shelter activities in a common training course could build a more unified framework, understanding, and language within the shelter and settlement community, thereby facilitating further communication and cooperation. Additional advantages of a central training mechanism include the opportunity to establish relationships between the public and private sectors, local and international actors, and generalists and specialists.

Mr. Corsellis elaborated that separate training courses can be designed to serve the purposes of headquarter teams and field-level staff. While an introductory course meets many of the objectives outlined above for a wide audience, additional field seminars can serve as refreshers on key points relevant to the specific disaster environment, and begin to develop an institutional network of relevant actors in the field. By including local decision makers and sector generalists, these field level seminars can also be a medium for public outreach and broader information sharing that is a crucial component in any disaster response. Subsequent, more specialized training sessions can also be offered to build on an introductory course, and provide more detailed

**A coordinated training program covering principles and best practices of shelter response activities could be instrumental in building a more defined shelter community than currently exists.**

instruction on particular issues within shelter and settlements, such as camp planning or host family support.

Many online resources for shelter and settlement issues are currently available, including the Disaster Management Center through the University of Wisconsin, the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP), and U.N. Habitat. The Shelter Centre in Geneva also provides several shelter specific resources.

The question of whether a training program should lead to accreditation raises many issues. A formal, universally recognized accreditation program for shelter professionals requires buy-in from donors to not only establish, but also maintain the training system, including courses to reflect recent lessons learned and the evolving nature of the shelter sector. The magnitude of such an effort would require the continuous coordination, support, and active involvement of multiple agencies.

**Nan Buzard, Senior Director,  
International Disaster Response,  
American Red Cross  
Washington, DC, United States**

Nan Buzard provided two examples of approaches to accreditation used by professional communities as potential models for the shelter and settlement sector. The first is the Human Accountability Project which certifies institutions to practice within a certain sector, as opposed to individual certifications.



A benefit of this approach is the incentive for institutions as a whole to ensure that staff are adequately trained and knowledgeable in a given field in order to maintain certification.

The Fritz Institute certification of logisticians and supply chain management professionals is an example of an individual-level approach, similar to professional societies within the medical community.

Regardless of the approach, Ms. Buzard commented that for an accreditation program to be effective, there would need to be recognition of the accreditation program by an outside organization, such as a stipulation for accredited personnel from donors.

## DISCUSSION

Discussion centered on ensuring that shelter practitioners have read, understood, and are able to apply Sphere guidelines as the basis for any future training program. Practical field experience must complement classroom instruction, and it may be more feasible to gradually build up a curriculum starting with existing programs as opposed to establishing one centralized and removed training center. This would allow the demand for certified professionals to build in pace with supply. In addition, dispersed programs in the field and at academic institutions would serve to connect these communities, and emphasize the need for academic involvement to help define humanitarianism as a distinct field and profession.

# NEXT STEPS

## Charles Setchell, Shelter, Settlements, and Hazard Mitigation Advisor, USAID/OFDA Washington, DC, United States

**C**harles Setchell concluded the workshop with a call to create a North America shelter and settlement working group to spearhead efforts to define the sector and build a community of practice. The proposed working group would build capacity by forging a lateral network of experts, identifying and disseminating lessons learned, and bringing students up through the system with training and field experience. Mr. Setchell identified a meeting in Geneva in November as a potential next step in this process of building a formal working group.

Mr. Setchell probed the audience for reactions to the development of a shelter working group for North America. The objective would be to build a coherence and greater capacity among U.S. and Canadian shelter practitioners, and possibly supplement the work of the Shelter Centre in Geneva.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Participants' comments confirmed the need for a forum on shelter issues based in North America, and the desire to create a community of practice that ties together the various elements of such a cross-cutting sector. One attendee summarized the discussion with a statement that there is agreement on the substance involved in the proposed working group, but not a clear picture of the appropriate structure. Suggestions included a virtual community utilizing online discussion forums, regularly scheduled working meetings, semi-regular discussion meetings, and training opportunities scheduled to co-occur with working group sessions.