

D.I Historical case studies - overview

Case studies from the Cuny Center

Summary

The main focus of this book has been on shelter responses after the year 2000. However, the loss of housing from natural disasters and conflict and the subsequent need for shelter is not a new phenomenon.

This chapter includes case studies from the 1970s and 1980s taken from the Cuny Center in Washington DC, USA. These case studies document responses during which the first guidelines used by humanitarian actors today were developed.

Although some of these case studies are from responses that took place over forty years ago, many of the issues and projects are similar and relevant to those being implemented today.

Need for guidance

There are occasional records of shelter responses going back to the 18th century, but concerted efforts to research and develop a best practise in the field only started in the early 1970s. Indeed, the earliest modern guidelines for shelter response for any humanitarian organisation, dating from 1959, merely suggested finding a military specialist and following his advice when it came to the spacing and grouping of tents in planned emergency settlements.

Post-colonial civil wars, notably in Nigeria and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), and a number of large-scale earthquakes in the late 1960s and early 1970s, led to exponentially greater numbers of forcibly displaced populations and a correspondingly increased role for humanitarian organisations in the field. Without adequate guidance, it became quickly apparent that badly designed shelter and settlement programmes could cause more harm than good.

By 1973, NGOs like Oxfam and CARE, researchers like Ian Davis, and consultants like Fred Cuny were engaged in developing comprehensive guidelines for humanitarian response and continued practical research into issues related to shelter. Many of the concepts that are now accepted as standard practice today derive from the research conducted in the 1970s by Cuny, Davis and their collaborators.

Overarching principles

The two sets of overarching principles in the development of these guidelines were, firstly, that communities must be supported in regaining sustainable livelihoods, and that all

efforts must be community-focused and take into account the community's own potential for self-help. Secondly, that above all else, shelter and settlement programmes must provide the beneficiaries with sufficient levels of hygiene and remove public health risks to the greatest degree possible, as this was the largest danger to human life after the occurrence of a disaster or forced displacement. The development of minimum standards for shelter over the subsequent thirty years, often expressed in numeric indicators, derived from this need to equitably protect the health and hygiene of those living in emergency and transitional shelter and settlements, with limited resources to support them.

First camp guidance

The first sets of guidelines, drawn up by Fred Cuny in 1971, were for shelters within the context of planned camps, but were based on the understanding that the development of a camp was a process taking place over an indeterminate length of time. The guidelines divided the type of shelter response into phases, depending upon whether the camp was subject to an initial emergency influx of population, whether the camp was being maintained and services consolidated, or whether the camp was being upgraded and expanded for longer-term occupancy.

In the face of well-meaning but misguided attempts to create a perfect universal prefabricated shelter and shelter design competitions conducted thousands of miles from any disaster, it was important for Fred Cuny and Ian Davis, with the support of various NGOs and then the UN, to use their own experiences in responses to earth-

quakes in Nicaragua (1972), Guatemala (1976) and multiple disasters in Bangladesh (1973-1975) to argue for shelter responses that helped affected communities build back better from day one, using local labour and materials, and supported by locally adapted hazard-mitigation construction training. If beneficiaries were to be relocated in camps, then the camps would have to be community focused, with the shelters clustered into small neighbourhood groups, and with space for livelihoods and public activities.

Meanwhile, the development of new materials, such as plastic sheeting, and the increasing professionalisation of logistics and communications systems in humanitarian response allowed agencies the potential for a more rapid, wider and larger response.

Lead agencies

By the end of the 1970s and the various crises in south-east Asia, the rapidly increasing number of agencies entering the field for the first time or with little previous experience forced advocates of best practice to change their emphasis, in order to ensure that the ensuing chaos was not as big a disaster as the original emergency. From that point on there would be the inception of 'lead agencies' from the UN that were clearly mandated with overall coordination and technical guidance. This would be facilitated by a decisive change of guidelines emphasis, towards universal, often numeric, minimum standards against which all agencies' performance could be held accountable, but which at the same time ran the risk of failing to take into account needs for local adaptation.

1980s

Throughout the 1980s, the numbers of refugees caught in protracted situations increased, while the willingness of host governments to provide options for permanent resettlement diminished. The UN first expounded a policy response of voluntary repatriation as the single preferred durable solution, and decried camps as the option of last resort. Under such circumstances, the focus of those working on best practice in the shelter sector started to pay more attention to the political aims to which settlements could be twisted. This was often based on their own experiences of witnessing unsustainable camps being used as 'pull factors' or to house hostage populations, in places like Sudan or the Horn of Africa.

1990s and Sphere

The crisis in Rwanda in 1994 gave the impetus to many organisations to capitalise on the movement started in the early 1990s with the Red Cross Code of Conduct. This aimed to not only systemise the qualitative and quantitative aspects of minimum standards across all sectors including shelter, but to also ensure the widest possible awareness of those standards, and the maximum possible adherence and buy-in among humanitarian organisations. This was done in the realisation that in complex emergencies the UN lead agency system could not always be relied upon to ensure

adequate response. Knowledge of best practice among all actors was a prerequisite before the start of a programme, rather than something that could be just learned in the field. This would become the Sphere Project (www.sphereproject.org).

Transitional shelter and settlement

At the same time as the Sphere drafting process, other initiatives gave the shelter sector its first set of independent, sector-specific vocabulary since the 1970s. The shelter process for the affected communities and for humanitarian organisations is now seen as having transitional phases, with an insistence that the first emergency response must somehow demonstrate support for the eventual durable solution.

Urban challenges

The last four years have seen moves to widen the accountability and predictability in all sectors of humanitarian response through the development of the Cluster System. But those years have also seen greater challenges brought closer to the spotlight.

In the last two years, the number of people living in urban populations has reached 50% of the world's population for the first time, and many of those are living in hazard-prone areas on marginal lands. This is especially relevant with the potential threat to coastal settle-

ments and extreme weather conditions attributable to global warming.

Experiences such as those in Aceh, Indonesia following the 2005 tsunami have raised important questions about the unintended effects of shelter responses in accelerating urban migration and extending the sprawl of the cities further into hazardous or environmentally fragile locations.

Fred Cuny

Fred Cuny trained as an urban planner in the mid-1960s, and worked professionally with disadvantaged communities in southern Texas, before his experience as a pilot of small planes gained him a position working with relief agencies during the Biafran War in 1970. Between 1971 and 1995, Cuny and Intertect, the consultancy that he set up, worked with NGOs, the UN, and major donors in a number of high-profile disasters. Through all of these, Cuny sought to develop guidelines for best practice and to advance the state of the art in humanitarian response. Cuny and Intertect were responsible for the writing the first-ever set of camp planning guidelines, contributed to *Shelter After Disaster*, and wrote much of the first draft of the *Handbook for Emergencies*. They were also early advocates for the promotion of minimum standards in humanitarian response, through guidelines and manuals.

Cuny conceived humanitarian response as centred upon the affected communities, and serving to support them in a return to sustainable livelihoods. He advocated for camp designs that clustered shelters into small communities, shelters made of traditional materials that were built by the refugees, and the training needed to ensure that those shelters and houses would be built back safer and hazard resistant. Cuny also advocated a holistic approach to humanitarian response and worked to combine shelter responses with those for water/sanitation, food security, livelihoods and public health. By the early 1990s, he was increasingly involved in advocating for policy and intervention strategies in conflict and disaster. He was killed in Chechnya in 1995.