



Re-Defining Shelter: Humanitarian Sheltering

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian shelter responses have impact on health, livelihoods, economic stimulation, education, food and nutrition, and in reducing vulnerability¹. They are central to the recovery of communities in post-crisis situations. However, the shelter sector also operates between conflicting priorities of government-donors and affected populations, a concentration on products over processes, and short-term response inadequate for long-term needs. Entrenched power structures in the shelter sector are inhibiting successful, people-centric approaches in decision-making. To overcome this, sheltering needs to be re-defined as an enabled process to facilitate a living environment for crisis-affected communities and individuals to meet their current and future needs.

CONTEXT

In 2020, a report by InterAction identified the wider impacts that shelter has, across health, livelihoods, economic stimulation, education, food and nutrition, and reducing vulnerability¹. There has also been an increasing body of research on the importance of long-term planning² and examination of the effect of shelter on the wider critical infrastructure and host community³. Additionally, there has been a longstanding movement to recognise shelter as a process for a community rather than a product, beginning with Ian Davis in 1978 who stated that 'a specific product may form a part of the process' but that 'it is important to emphasise at the outset that shelter must be considered as a process, not as an object'⁴. Davis also argued that the participation of affected communities in humanitarian shelter programmes was critical to their success.

Participation has since been enshrined in numerous policies, tools and approaches. These include the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, tools such as the Participatory Approach to Safe Shelter Awareness (PASSA), and approaches such as Owner-Driven Reconstruction (ODR) or Supporting Shelter Self-Recovery (SSSR). Despite all of these movements and recognition of the importance of shelter, in 2016, The Grand Bargain was still calling for a 'participation revolution' through people-centred approaches that involve communities in decisions which affect them⁵. Forty years have passed since Davis' publication, *Shelter after Disaster*, and yet there is still difficulty in placing community priorities at the heart of shelter decisions.

'A house is merely the end product of a long chain of social, economic, technological, environmental, political and other interactions.'

- UN Disaster Relief Co-ordinator, 1982

RE-DEFINING SHELTER

To reach donors and policy makers at the top of the power structures in the shelter sector, and place affected communities' priorities at the centre of sheltering, the way in which we define sheltering needs to change to reflect progressions in the sector. Five key aspects have been identified for inclusion:

1. To reflect the concept of process over object⁶
2. To reflect that the needs of shelter affect communities as well as individuals⁷
3. To reflect the often-longer-term nature of sheltering and related needs⁸
4. To reflect that shelter is often at the centre of wider needs⁹
5. To reflect that shelter also impacts the host communities and the wider environment^{10,11}.

Sheltering is an enabled process to facilitate a living environment with crisis-affected communities and individuals to meet their current and future needs, whilst also having due consideration for the needs of the host communities and environment.

Top Down

Bottom Up

'I think if you asked every single agency, they would say lots [of community involvement happens] and I would tell you [instead] that it's within the preordained box that's being created. We are getting junk takeaway food for dinner tonight. What would you like, pizza or hamburgers? ... Oh, the community likes Kentucky Fried Chicken. No, we offered them that... limited framework of choice.' (KII, 2020)

ENTRENCHED POWER STRUCTURES

Sheltering processes are required to operate within the politics of crisis management. This can present a series of conflicting priorities between the requirements and drivers of governments and donors compared to those of the affected populations. During a series of 40 in-depth interviews from 2020 to 2021, it was highlighted that community involvement in the decision-making processes for shelter is often a very constrained exercise. Most interviewees mentioned that affected communities should have some influence on the outcome of project design but not that they did have influence. Instead, it became evident through these interviews that it is donor requirements and government policies which are perceived as having the most significant influence on the overall project design and decisions. Participation of communities is far down the line of strategic evaluation or decision making in shelter projects. It often follows on after donor constraints, local and national government priorities, mandates of implementing organisations, pre-conceived notions of shelter managers, cluster priorities, and drivers of private sector markets.

CONCLUSION

The primary impact of changes to the way we view and define shelter will most affect the communities who must live through the process of sheltering, of re-defining their home, and of re-establishing their needs over time. The needs of affected populations and standards of adequacy can only be defined by the populations themselves, aided by the technical guidance of expertise in the sector. The purpose of this new definition is to reflect the recognition of this within the sector, and to place affected communities at the heart of any sheltering process.

REFERENCES

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