

C.4 Guatemala - 1976 - Earthquake

Case study: Shelter construction

Case study credit:
UNDRO 1982

Disaster:

Guatemala earthquake

Disaster date:

February 1976

Number of houses damaged or destroyed:

384,762,
(Guatemala City 221,261)
(Rural areas 163,501)

No. of people displaced:

1.6 million

Value of damage:

750 million USD estimated

Funding - external sources:

7.5 million USD for relief,
and 17.5 million USD for
reconstruction.



Quote:

"A Committee of voluntary agencies writing to the President of Guatemala two years after the earthquake of the 4th February, 1976, admitted that many mistakes had been made and listed the following five as the most important: too much aid was given away; too many of the houses constructed were merely of an emergency type; some organizations used large numbers of foreign volunteers; too much was done under pressure and without proper consultation, so that the victims became mere spectators of the work carried out rather than participants; a lot of reconstruction work was undertaken without first consulting the Government's Reconstruction Committee"
-R. Norton.

Emergency

No clear policy on shelter emerged in the initial weeks following the earthquake. The Reconstruction Commission allocated towns and villages to the very large number of relief agencies.

The Government planned to build 100,000 temporary houses with military support, but there was little follow-up. Many agencies adopted a policy of providing corrugated iron sheeting (lamina) which could serve as emergency shelter, and subsequently as permanent lightweight roofing. These programmes developed from week 1 onwards.

Reconstruction

There was no clear reconstruction policy. This was left to individual municipalities to determine, in consultation with assisting groups.

Reconstruction in Guatemala City was made more complicated by land tenure problems, which delayed all urban reconstruction.

Strengths and weaknesses

✓ The widespread improvisation of shelter in Guatemala City underlined the resourcefulness of survivors.

✓ The Oxfam World Neighbours Housing Education Programme was a major innovation in post-disaster housing programmes, with its emphasis on accountability and training in low-cost, anti-seismic construction.

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type; some organizations used large numbers of foreign volunteers; too much was done under pressure and without proper consultation, so that the victims became mere spectators of the work carried out rather than participants.

- Problems of land use were a fundamental issue in Guatemala City, since the majority of earthquake deaths related to unsafe siting as much as to precarious building.



Families salvaging materials and beginning reconstruction 5 days after the earthquake
 Photos: Ian Davis



Left: improvised huts in the streets of Guatemala. Left: tents and shelters built from sheets. Survivors were quick to build their own shelters, whilst aid often ignored them, making the survivors spectators of the work carried out rather than the participants.
 Photos: Ian Davis



An improvised shelter on a truck four days after the earthquake. In this photo it is being demolished so that the materials can be re-used.
 Photo: Ian Davis