

WHAT WORKS FOR RECOVERY? HOW CAN WE LEARN?

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INTRODUCTION

Longitudinal studies are uncommon in the shelter sector. This has contributed to a lack of information and analysis on the long-term impacts of shelter and settlements (S&S) programming. Addressing this concern, between 2022 and 2024, a review was conducted with the aim of “documenting and learning from the challenges and successes of over twenty years of Shelter & Settlement (S&S) humanitarian”. A comparative analysis between the three contrasting contexts of Afghanistan from 2002 to 2021, Nepal after the 2015 earthquakes, and the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 allowed comparisons and insights into different types of assistance, approaches and other factors which influenced the outcomes and impacts of programming.

This research answered the question: ‘how did S&S programming influence recovery of affected populations?’ by addressing two sub-questions: ‘what were the outcomes and impacts of S&S assistance?’ and ‘what factors contributed to or hindered outcomes and impacts?’

METHODOLOGY

The BHA Review was carried out by CARE International UK and the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP) at Oxford Brookes University. This exploratory research used qualitative methods to uncover the nature and impacts of the programming, including a desktop review, key informant interviews (KIs), and, in the case of Nepal and the Philippines, site visits and group discussions. The secondary data for the desktop review included grey literature such as project reports available in the public domain or shared by implementing partners included in the review, as well as academic literature¹.

The scope was defined by establishing what S&S assistance had been implemented by USAID/BHA’s partners, using data in the public domain, or shared by the partners². Findings were limited by the information that the team was able to access. This was constrained by the availability of documentation, varying ability or willingness to share in-house project reports and contacts, and time or access constraints to key informants and former project participants during fieldwork³.

Using a comparative approach, assistance and the outcomes in each context were analyzed in order to identify common trends, as well as any implications when designing future programming. Despite limitations on the quantity and quality of outcome level data, and restrictions on the ability to independently verify claims or discern direct correlations, substantial information was gathered in all three contexts that offers valuable insights into the contribution of S&S as well as key factors that support recovery.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Within the S&S sector, and to an extent, the wider humanitarian sectors, there is a dearth of publicly available outcome and impact evaluation data. Typical Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks collect data on programming outputs through standard post-distribution and implementation monitoring activities, which focus more on whether stated project targets were achieved, rather than the actual outcomes of the provided assistance. Implementing organisations often face time or capacity barriers to carrying out longer-term impact evaluation, usually due to funding restrictions. This status quo limits sector-wide learning and the potential for improved practice regarding pathways to recovery. This comparative study of historical S&S programming in three contrasting contexts offered an unusual opportunity to undertake a longitudinal review and learn from similarities and differences in identified outcomes and the factors which contributed towards them.

In this paper, outcomes are understood as “Intended or unintended changes or shifts in conditions due directly or indirectly to an intervention”. Impacts are defined as “the wider and longer-term effects of the program”, while recognising that people or communities achieve and sustain any changes themselves⁴. In the review, the terms were often conflated, as outcomes and impacts were hard to retrospectively disentangle.

However, some attempt has been made to distinguish between short-term outcomes (those which are reported to have had immediate effects) and long-term outcomes or impacts (those which arose later or were based on the short-term outcomes). Recovery is referred to in its most simple terms to be ‘a process of getting better’⁵ which is not focused on an end goal, but the creation of conditions that facilitate incremental improvements to overall stability and well-being.

1 See, for example, What Impact? in Shelter Projects 8th Edition.

2 Sources of data included humanitarian platforms such as ReliefWeb, ALNAP HELP library and the Humanitarian Library in addition to USAID’s Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC). Publicly available financial data (e.g. from UNOCHA’s Financial Tracking Service) was used to map implementing partners.

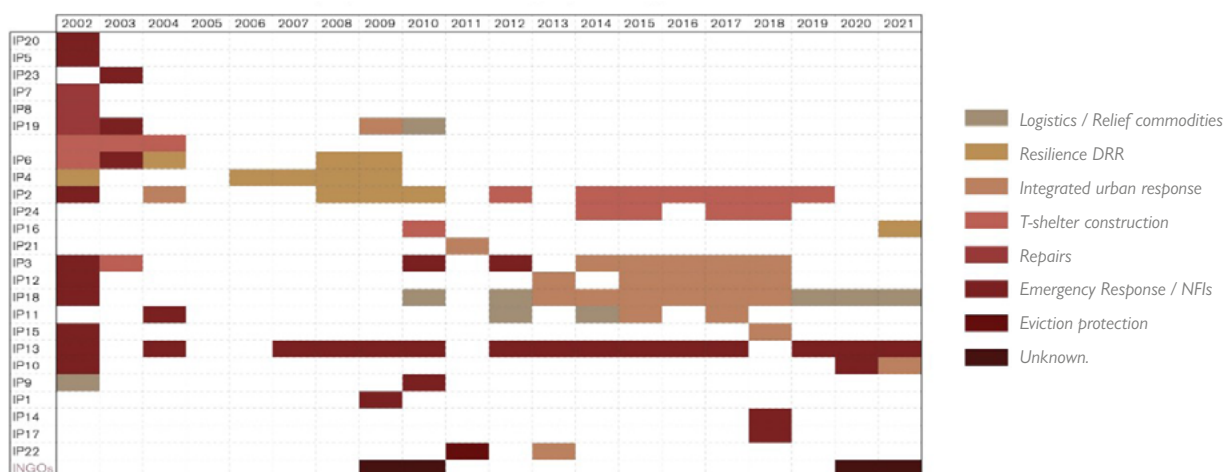
3 This restriction on the methodology means that some S&S assistance funded by the donor may have been unintentionally excluded from the donor Review.

4 The timescale of the review over a period of 20 years of project implementation meant that staff were not easy to identify or access from earlier projects; people’s memories of what happened during the projects’ timeframes were fading; and the documentation produced at the time of the projects had not always been systematically archived.

5 See, for example, ALNAP (2022) The State of the Humanitarian System. London: ALNAP/ODI.

6 Adapted from ALNAP (2016) Evaluation of Humanitarian Action (EHA) Guide. London: ALNAP.

7 Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Researched donor-funded projects arranged by main type of assistance.

NEPAL⁸

In 2015 and 2023, Nepal was struck by major earthquakes, causing widespread damage to housing in both urban and peri-urban districts of the Kathmandu Valley. However, damage was most extensive in rural regions, only accessible on foot or by helicopter. The humanitarian actors included in the review primarily provided Shelter/NFIs and water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) relief items. Of eleven identified projects, nine focused on distribution of emergency shelter materials, mainly in rural settings. The two other projects focused on communication and technical support for resilient construction.

Almost all projects were of six months or shorter duration and were implemented in seven of the fourteen districts categorized as severely hit or crisis hit, close to the epicenters of the major earthquakes in April and May 2015. The government announced the provision of a significant cash grant of 3 Lakh rupees⁹ for reconstruction to eligible families. However, confusion over eligibility, compliance and delays in distribution meant many families waited significant periods of time with little to no interim support. This gap between emergency assistance and reconstruction support possibly delayed households' recovery. The research findings suggest that opportunities for creating enabling environments for recovery through direct and indirect S&S assistance were missed.

PHILIPPINES¹⁰

The Philippines was hit by Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013, carving a swathe of destruction across the Visayas region of the Philippines. The city of Tacloban was the largest urban area affected, with over 12,000 structures destroyed. Many were in the densely, informally settled coastal strip. This area was later declared a No-Build Zone, leaving tens of thousands of families facing permanent relocation. Of two identified projects in the review, one agency operated in 24 coastal barangays¹¹, navigating

8 For a fuller account of the 2015 earthquake context and the implementing partners funded, see the Nepal Summary Report

9 3 lakh = 300,000 rupees, around USD \$3,000 in 2015

10 For a fuller account of the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan context and the implementing partners, see the Philippines Summary Report

11 the lowest administrative unit in the Philippines, responsible for managing concerns at the community level

the challenges to provide assistance to all affected people through offering a range of shelter options, including 'transitional relocation', depending on people's tenure circumstances.

The other agency focused on two barangays within the Dwell Zone, finding ways to support households with no land to rebuild their informal dwellings. Both partners implemented multi-sectoral projects where shelter was integrated with WASH, Protection and DRR support over a timeframe of 18-24 months, while permanent government-provided relocation sites were being developed north of the city. The multi-sectoral support and transitional shelter solutions enabled households to recover in their original barangays where possible, or gave people effective, dignified temporary living conditions prior to permanent relocation away from the 'no build' coastal zone.

AFGHANISTAN¹²

Over the period 2002 to 2021, Afghanistan was affected by a range of humanitarian crises: natural hazards including earthquakes, flooding, and landslides caused extensive damage to housing and compounded internal displacement caused by conflict and drought. 24 partners were identified to have implemented S&S over the 20-year review period. S&S responses differed according to changing needs and high-level political interests.

In the early 2000s, the high influx of returnees was met mainly with emergency response, including relief items, shelter repairs or temporary shelter support. Significant lack of housing in Kabul led to a focus on multi-sectoral urban interventions between 2004 and 2010, including the construction of transitional shelters. Transitional shelters continued to be provided as part of disaster response, but over time the focus shifted towards disaster risk reduction and resilience-building with shelter components, including pre-positioning and distribution of emergency relief items in response to disaster events. S&S interventions in the Afghan context were regularly affected by insecurity and/or seasonal access restrictions, low socio-economic income and high needs, and often remote and logistically challenging operating environments. Programs which explicitly addressed security of tenure were seen to facilitate stability, which enabled long term recovery.

12 For a fuller account of the Afghanistan context over 20 years and the implementing partners, see the Afghanistan Summary Report

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Similar types of assistance and approaches in different contexts were reported to lead to similar outcomes, influencing the discernible long-term impacts of S&S programming in relation not only to the type of assistance, but to the way in which it was provided. These are explored further below. The first section addresses the research sub-question about outcomes and impacts; the second addresses the second sub-question on the influence of other factors.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS OF REVIEWED SHELTER AND SETTLEMENTS ASSISTANCE¹³

The most basic shelter assistance such as provision of emergency materials and household items resulted in clear short-term positive outcomes, primarily on protection, with some risk reduction. Emergency shelter materials (tarpaulins and fixings, household NFIs) provided lifesaving protection from the elements and allowed families to carry out household activities with dignity. Clothing and household items such as mattresses and blankets helped people at higher altitudes survive cold conditions during winter. In both Nepal and Afghanistan, this was reported to have mitigated negative coping strategies and reduced the risk of further displacement. Use of cash-for-work in Afghanistan resulted in similar short-term outcomes through provision of income, with some potential longer-term outcomes such as improved public health and reduced risk through the resulting infrastructure improvements.

While some of the tarpaulins lasted for many years and continued to provide weather-protection for multiple purposes, generally as shelter assistance increased in durability, so did the outcomes. In both the Philippines and Afghanistan, provision of household shelter assistance (transitional or core shelters, repair assistance, rental support) produced the same short-term outcomes, with the addition of wider and longer-lasting effects. Decent shelter using quality materials increased security, dignity and privacy and was stated to contribute to improved physical and mental health – especially for women, and particularly in the context of cultural restrictions in public places. Spending in the local market

13 Further details and examples are set out in the paper *The significance of Shelter – Maximizing impact through support to Shelter and Settlements assistance*



Research field exercise in the Philippines.

on shelter materials and labour was reported to have an indirect benefit of stimulating the economy. Shelter support contributed to a level of stability that enabled further recovery – in many cases, transitional shelters outperformed their intended lifespan and were maintained, upgraded or expanded by the occupants, providing sustained benefits.

More complex and time-consuming programming, such as the multi-sectoral projects in Tacloban and Kabul, revealed the strongest indications of longer-term impacts, which humanitarian programming contributed towards but which were achieved or sustained by communities and local authorities themselves. This included safer, productive and inclusive neighbourhoods, building on improvements in community cohesion and representation, connection to governance or national systems, economic investment and stimulation, and sustained or continued improvements following provision of basic infrastructure. DRR programming and HLP integration also had immediate benefits on increased sense of security and stability as well as longer-term outcomes through resulting investment. However, the research revealed that programs that had the most wide-ranging or sustained impacts had certain aspects in common, and diverged from other projects where these elements were not included. These elements and the associated outcomes are discussed below.

FACTORS INFLUENCING POSITIVE IMPACTS; WHAT WORKS?¹⁴

1. ADDRESSING (IN)SECURITY OF TENURE

The inclusion of support to housing, land and property rights (HLP) played a key role in contributing to sustained outcomes. Access to land and security of tenure was identified as one of the main barriers to receiving shelter assistance in Afghanistan and the Philippines¹⁵.

In Afghanistan, a household's tenure situation heavily influenced government-defined eligibility criteria. Registration processes prioritized returnees and support to those who were able to prove prior ownership of land, excluding many internally displaced populations, who often resided in informal settlements, from receiving assistance. Agency programming which directly addressed these barriers – whether through support to gather documentation, community verification, validation by municipalities, certificates of ownership based on customary authorities, or negotiating occupancy or rental agreements – provided a level of tenure security that facilitated the provision of assistance and stability that enabled longer-term recovery. Once the ownership of land was officially recognized or the use of the property agreed, people invested their own time and money to improve their living conditions.

In the Philippines, prohibitions on rebuilding in zones designated as unsafe along the coast created challenges to provide support to people who had previously resided in these areas, particularly since the majority were informally settled. While all residents were eligible for resettlement in government sites, regardless of

14 For illustrative evidence of the factors in this section, see the three summary country reports on the Recovery Community of Practice. Each report also includes recommendations for future programming in these and similar contexts.

15 In Nepal, emergency shelter/NFI distributions included in the donor Review used a 'blanket approach'. Later on, land tenure issues certainly affected people's access to reconstruction support in subsequent years.

tenure formality, the new settlements were still under construction for several years after the crisis and located far from people's livelihoods. Different assistance was provided from a 'menu of options', tailoring support to different tenure categories that optimised the household's social capital and preferences. This included support to obtain documents for formal owners to enable repair or reconstruction, materials and labour for households who reached agreements to construct shelters on individual plots, and negotiating rental agreements with landowners to establish collective sites for households with no alternative options. This enabled households to maintain social connections and access to livelihoods and education, providing stability for a crucial (if limited) time period.

2. MULTI-SECTORAL INTEGRATED APPROACHES¹⁶

The projects in the Philippines and Afghanistan suggest that multi-sectoral programming was important in its contribution to recovery by drawing on the co-benefits or mutually enhancing effects of different types of assistance to address interlinked needs. The integrated projects in Tacloban included shelter support and infrastructure upgrading alongside WASH, DRR, and Protection assistance resulting in both short- and longer-term outcomes that stimulated recovery. Training in carpentry and construction ensured safe and durable shelter but also gave participants skills that provided livelihood opportunities and challenged gender norms through women's inclusion. Child protection training was supported by improved household shelter as well as community level safety and security through infrastructure such as lighting, child-friendly spaces and drainage. These household and community infrastructure interventions worked together to create immediate protection outcomes, as well as improved safety, security, health and well-being.

In Kabul, between 2006-2010, programming included access to markets and basic services, as well as shelter and infrastructure provision, WASH and livelihoods support. Infrastructure improvements such as improved roads and drainage increased access, while also generating income through cash-for-work. Safe shelter and sanitation supported physical and mental health, while also creating a space for economic activity. Livelihood activities including kitchen gardens, and micro-enterprise grants supported income-generation while increasing community assets

¹⁶ For more on this theme and further examples of the value of multi-sectoral programming, see one of the donor Review reports: People and Places – Meeting interconnected needs through collaborative responses.



Research field exercise in Nepal..

and services. Support to the population as a whole, not only individually vulnerable households, also contributed to social cohesion and integration of IDPs. The approach addressed the needs not just of individual households, but the physical, social and economic environment, and contributed to the revitalisation of a whole area. As well as being multi-sectoral, projects were also multi-scale, working at household and neighbourhood level as well as engaging with city authorities and wider systems, particularly in regards to disaster preparedness. Taken together, the implemented activities strongly contributed towards improved safety and security, healthier homes and environment, improved economic opportunities, and increased physical and social resilience.

3. LOCALLY-DRIVEN PROGRAMMING¹⁷

The engagement of the community and level of involvement in decision-making was at the heart of many of the longer-term outcomes and impacts. In Afghanistan, community development councils (CDCs) were supported¹⁸ to prioritise interventions and receive funding to manage resourcing and implementation directly. In the short term, this reduced potential conflicts and improved targeting of people's needs. However, in the longer term, the CDCs continued to be involved in later activities in coordination with municipalities beyond the improvement of housing and physical environment. Increased capacity to contribute to development and improved interaction and dialogue between residents and city officials strengthened recovery of certain geographic areas of the city.

In the Philippines, training and integrating community-based social mobilisers or roving teams into programming helped amplify community voices and create reliable feedback mechanisms. Community emergency teams established as part of DRR training continued to implement risk awareness and community preparedness activities. This has contributed to an increased sense of safety and ongoing hazard mitigation. Likewise, initial support provided to youth and community savings groups has continued to have positive social and economic effects. The highly locally-invested approach has contributed to communities being able to continue their recovery independent of INGOs once programming had ended.

In the multi-sectoral urban programs in both Tacloban and Kabul, the relationship with local authorities was also key. Engagement with local authorities and - in the case of Afghanistan, technical support provided to Kabul municipality - strengthened existing systems and relationships beyond the timeframes of programming. In the Philippines, close working relationships with barangay officials has contributed to maintenance and enforcement of clear access routes and drainage. High community engagement also helped to address key HLP challenges, both through the identification of available land, and innovative ways of securing tenure.

Given the constraints arising from the lack of security and the adverse geography and climate of the country, working with and through local actors has been important for access, security and knowledge of the communities across Afghanistan. DRR programming in later years focused on establishing and training community-based teams to be deployed in disaster response. In the longer term, this has increased the ability to provide rapid

¹⁷ This theme is explored more fully in the thematic paper Going local – Benefits and implications of Community-centred programming in Shelter and Settlements assistance.

¹⁸ or if they did not already exist, were created

assistance to mitigate the negative impacts of hazard events in hard-to-reach areas, reduced loss of life/injury and property damage and was perceived to have improved the self-reliance of communities, including through addressing social risk and protection issues, such as GBV.

These findings suggest that devolving power and putting people's capacity and relationships at the centre can have sustained outcomes. However, while in the Philippines and Afghanistan the benefits of investment in local actors was clear, in Nepal, more transactional relationships left little remaining impact on local organisations. Following the 2015 earthquake, the Nepali government mandated that INGOs had to implement through local partners to support 'localization'. While this resulted in positive involvement of Nepali organisations in the emergency response, many challenges were faced establishing relationships, contracts or new processes that contributed towards delays. Despite this, INGOs recognised the value of local expertise and positive outcomes, such as improved targeting of the most vulnerable households. However, as funding depleted after the initial response, the rapidly established partnerships and forums were dissolved. Some local organisations felt they had gained experience and improved their capacity to respond in future, but little sustained impact was able to be identified at community or household level.

4. SUPPORT FOR SELF-RECOVERY¹⁹

The extent to which assistance was flexible and built on what people and communities were already doing themselves was also seen to influence longer-term outcomes and impacts. However, this was revealed through gaps that were highlighted as well as assistance that was provided.

Support that built on existing efforts, incorporating capacity building or addressing barriers as required, had longer-lasting positive outcomes. In the Philippines case, flexibility of transitional shelter designs promoted to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach encouraged additional investment and modifications to meet their needs over the years. In Afghanistan, communities that self-settled and received support to upgrade were far more successful than new resettlement sites allocated to returnees/IDPs, which failed as a result of being far from existing networks and markets. Negotiating interim solutions such as a Memorandum of Understanding with local authorities was also seen to be a starting point for longer-term negotiations on land occupancy rights and recognition, especially when combined with improved infrastructure which was seen to increase the possibility of future formalisation.

The short- and longer-term outcomes stemming from technical training highlighted its importance and contribution to reducing vulnerability. In the Philippines, there were positive economic as well as physical outcomes from carpentry training that generated livelihood opportunities, and facilitated continued and wider implementation of safe construction methods, reducing risk from future hazards. In Nepal, long-term investment in technical expertise contributed to prevention of waste of resources by unnecessarily destroying houses suitable for retrofitting. The engineers and social mobilisers trained in earthquake-resilient construction have gone on to pursue careers in other organizations both in

Nepal and abroad. With limited humanitarian program time-spans and government support slow to arrive, the research highlighted Nepal as a missed opportunity for supporting self-recovery. Investment in programs of socio-technical accompaniment alongside the provision of shelter materials as in the Philippines and Afghanistan could have enabled better shelter provision in the interim period and provided a stronger platform for recovery.

CONCLUSION

The themes that emerged across all three contexts suggest that the approach taken and willingness to adopt key considerations early on influence the scope and likelihood of positive long-term outcomes or impacts being achieved. This study highlights the wide range of protection and longer-term outcomes on health, wellbeing and economic recovery possible through the provision of S&S assistance which contribute – to greater and lesser extents – to a foundation on which people's recovery can be built. It suggests that even basic shelter assistance has immediate outcomes on protection and risk reduction. However, more substantial assistance was seen to result in wider and longer-lasting contributions to recovery.

The comparison of methods and types of assistance across contexts finds that the most sustained outcomes were the result of multi-sectoral, multi-scale, community-driven programming that addressed security of tenure. Committed local engagement, while more costly and arduous, contributes towards a variety of sustained positive outcomes. Building on what people are doing and investing in technical training has short-term benefits as well as longer-term outcomes that contribute to recovery.

For implementing agencies and donors who aim to stimulate recovery, this research suggests the importance of taking a longer-term view. This means being willing to engage with key barriers such as land tenure, maximising the multiplier effects of multi-sectoral assistance, committing to devolution of power to households and communities, and considering how best to provide support that can address the gap between emergency relief and more permanent housing provision. The review highlighted that often the most limiting factor (to community engagement) was the timeframes for implementation. This suggests that the desire to influence recovery should determine this rather than preconceived response 'phases'.

As an uncommon undertaking, the research also highlights the value in investing in longitudinal studies in order to learn how programming can support recovery of affected populations. At the same time, it revealed a need for better measurement, documentation and archiving of project reports by agencies. Since the completion of the review in 2024, significant cuts in international humanitarian funding have made future efforts to understand the impacts of S&S assistance even harder. Donors are urged to enable further longitudinal reviews, ensuring that open data sharing benefits as fully as possible from the investment and that the research is timely enough to be able to capture the immediate outcomes while still allowing sufficient time to have passed for impacts to have emerged.

¹⁹ For more on this theme and further examples of the value of supporting self-recovery and having a longer-term approach, see one of the BHA Review reports: Relief to Recovery – The potential of Shelter and Settlements assistance on the humanitarian side of the Nexus.