

B.4 A Reflection on the Importance of Settlements in Humanitarian Shelter Assistance

The convergence of disasters and urban areas has propelled the need to address “settlements” as an important component of disaster assistance. But, urban areas are complex physical and social environments which have forced a considerable increase in the complexity of our humanitarian response and the difficulty of recovering after the disaster. Shelter and Settlements are inextricably linked and can no longer be treated as separate units or responses, but must be managed as a single, indivisible programme undertaking.

The settlement is the framework and platform (physically and socially) that establishes the living space of which shelter is but one component. There can be many types of settlements: good and bad, big and little, temporary and permanent.

It is not the purpose of this reflection to address the features and nuances of the potential types of settlements. What we consider here is the situation of a destroyed, primarily residential, urban area and the general awareness that should be considered in an effective humanitarian response that will both assure good habitable space and properly envision recovery and future growth.

In a large disaster, the primary trigger to action is displacement of people from their living space and the attending problems that accompany such displacement. Although there may be many intermediate objectives, transitional goals or temporary situations, the universal, overriding goal is to get those displaced back to their living space (settlement, housing, etc.) in a timely manner and to a state where the family asset base and the settlement service base can sustain community recovery with minimal outside assistance. This goal must be our prime objective and is the necessary ingredient for sustainability and resilience.

There are three important “habitable space” factors to note in dealing with displacement. The first factor is that a person is not in “recovery” until that person is at least in a stabilised, non-transient living environment

that provides a positive momentum to return to normal. The second factor is that settlements, in the urban context, become more important than the shelters, because the settlement sets the conditions for, and feasibility of, the shelter/housing response and the other qualities necessary for sustainability and resilience. In short, if the settlement does not take hold or is inadequate, recovery cannot begin, and decent, permanent housing will not start. Ultimately, if the settlement fails the housing will fail. Alternatively, if a good settlement start is established, housing will likely commence and develop on its own. The third factor is that urban settlements are often too big to deal with all at once. For this reason the best approach is to work with smaller settlement units or neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods are the building blocks for urban recovery. A larger urban disaster, seemingly overwhelming, can be effectively addressed one neighbourhood at a time.

In the urban setting, compounding issues which take on elevated importance in the shelter and settlements dynamic include:

- **Livelihoods:** In cities people are depended upon a job to provide the resources necessary to buy food, services, housing and other needs. Removing them from their neighbourhood usually removes them from their work/living.
- **Dense population:** Living space is much more controlled, confined and limited; buildings are much closer together and “affect” one another; habitable space goes up rather than out; and people are more often renters than owners. All these factors make sheltering and recovery difficult.
- **Land conflicts:** Land use is more regulated; services to land (water, electricity, pathways, etc.) are essential and transcend land ownership boundaries; land related activities, particularly where construction is involved, often have to be coordinated and phased with similar activities of the owners and users of surrounding land.

“...Shelter and Settlements are inextricably linked and can no longer be treated as separate units or responses...”



Muzafarabad, Pakistan 2005 after an earthquake.
Photo: Joseph Ashmore

“A neighbourhood is a settlement which has a socially defined closeness of the inhabitants in the common aspects of their lives”



Gonaives, Haiti 2008, following extensive flooding.
Photo: Joseph Ashmore

- **Social issues:** Political and economic issues; land and property rights; and the interacting impacts of all these issues become important, are germane, and need to be programme components.
- **Poverty:** Urban areas often have large concentrations of impoverished families who live in poor housing, hazardous conditions, and infrastructure and service deficient communities, all of which makes these populations highly vulnerable and difficult to assist.

The operational unit – the Neighbourhood

A neighbourhood is a settlement which, in addition to having a “territory”, has a socially defined closeness of the inhabitants in the common aspects of their lives. This closeness may reflect economic, physical, cultural, ethnic, religious, political, administrative and other characteristics. It is important to prioritise these factors in terms of their importance in any given situation. The neighbourhood is the rough urban equivalent of a village in the rural setting, but significantly more complicated.

All the necessary elements of the settlement (discussed below) become interrelated, interconnected, and interacting with shelter/housing at the centre. The neighbourhood approach becomes the mechanism in which we optimise all the competing factors and create the transformative platform to re-establish, and hopefully improve, the “living space” of the population after the disaster. When linked together through an emergency urban plan, neighbourhoods can serve as the basis of recovery in extended or complicated urban areas.



“Debris removal is decisive... Drainage is essential...”
Photo: Joseph Ashmore

Elements defining a neighbourhood

What constitutes a “neighbourhood” for disaster assistance shelter and settlements purposes is driven first by context and then by need, to provide a safe, functional, and appropriate living space, in accordance with our universal humanitarian principles. There are no “magic bullet” factors (although “driving” factors usually emerge). The ultimate specification of the settlement is an optimisation process that will define the neighbourhood and which may involve the balancing of competing factors. This article does not address how to weigh factors, how to identify “driving” factors, or how to use the resulting neighbourhood attributes in the design function. Those are topics for separate articles. Also the process will differ if one is working in an existing neighbourhood as distinguished from creating a new neighbourhood. In this reflection we consider the situation of working in an existing neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood is defined both by physical attributes and affinity relationships. Factors important to the determination of the neighbourhood for our disaster assistance response purposes include:

a) Physical attributes

- **The neighbourhood should have reasonably defined and determinable natural/physical boundaries.**

Boundaries may be set by streets, railroad lines, etc.; by building types (residential vs. business); by natural features (ravines, waterways, etc.); and/or legal requirements (zoning, land use policy, etc.). The important aspect is that the area determined is reasonably compact, can be serviceable without complex, complicated or involved physical or social infrastructure.

- **For most shelter and settlement programs, the neighbourhood should be largely residential in character, since sheltering care is the primary focus of our humanitarian response.**

Neighbourhoods, many times, will have elements of business, industry or dominant uses. The more these elements are brought into the programme design the more complicated and conflicted the situation can become. One should consider edge matching to these factors rather than bringing them in as major elements. These elements, if important may have to be considered as part of any livelihoods component.



The neighbourhood is defined both by physical attributes and affinity relationships.
Photo: Joseph Ashmore

b) Affinity relationships

- **The neighbourhood must have a reasonable level of social cohesion.**

The cohesion requirement is necessary for community involvement and participation in the neighbourhood design, planning, and implementation functions, all of which are important factors in our participatory shelter and settlements programming.

- **Major consideration should be given to neighbourhoods where compatible organisations (also potential partners) have already been working.**

Any neighbourhood programme will require the use of local assistance to get the job done. In this regard have available community organisations and group that can mesh with the programme can be very valuable.

c) Minimum elements and considerations

- **Land mapping, social occupancy mapping and rights**

Mapping and a community, participatory, land boundary identification process is critical. This approach is necessary to: properly establish land rights for the project; have the agreed parcel boundaries before demolition; and, provide a basis for the settlement design, particularly in improving roadways, housing accesses, drainage and land use. The mapping process must be done in such a way as to fill the gaps in the country's civil land system and to be compatible with that system as it develops.

- **Debris removal, land stabilisation and drainage**

Debris removal is decisive. Even relief response cannot effectively start without rubble removal, much less recovery or development. Drainage is essential because it will dictate the quality of the storm water (which affects floods) and waste water systems (which affects sanitation). Drainage will be tied to a mitigating topology which is also important because most of the places in which responders serve involve hazardous lands.

- **Pathways and roadways**

Pathways and roads must be one of the first design elements because they are hard to establish after the fact. These elements, have a big impact on drainage as so must be considered contemporaneously with land topology work and drainage. Road and pathways also play an important role in access and egress in the case of emergencies and evacuations.

- **Economic viability and livelihoods**

As noted, livelihoods are a critical element in urban disasters, so the settlement response must take account of minimal economic considerations, including the long term economical viability of the settlement location and the context after the disaster.

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