

ALL THE WAYS HOME

A proposition for the Shelter & Settlements sector to embrace Homes & Communities

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A child, 6, plays with her dad in their Beirut apartment after they fled from Syria with their family five years before. They received shelter and rent assistance and other support to meet their family's needs.



This low-cost housing project in Bangladesh provides families with core houses which are then completed through safe self-build practices in progressive or incremental stages as a crucial step of self-recovery.

“I want a home, but you have given me a shelter?”

quote from a displaced person

Shelter is still too often equated with a physical structure – ranging from an emergency tent to a prefab structure to a basic living space provided within Sphere standards. At the same time, there are spirited discussions and many attempts to expand the understanding and scope of the shelter sector.

The zealots amongst us may propose to entirely do away with ‘shelter’ and replace it with ‘home’: a concept that goes beyond its tangible dimensions to evoke more elusive aspects such as a place where a family nurtures and cares for its loved ones, where people belong, feel safe, cook and share meals, converse, study, produce and where memories are stored and future plans are created.²

We suggest considering a shelter–home spectrum to maintain relevance as a sector. Programming may lean across this spectrum depending on context. The role of the shelter actor may thus vary from direct delivery of emergency shelter to an enabler of ‘home-making’.

In the same vein, the term ‘settlement’ tends to limit the ambition to just the built environment. For some the word ‘community’ is preferred as it represents relationships (solidarity but also tension and power dynamics), common values, a collective vision and agency. Some commentators suggest that a deeper exploration is required before we can use the concept with confidence. We see value in better understanding and engaging with the various dimensions that the term ‘community’ may represent to craft a more considered response.³

A home increases the chances to cope and recover. However, it is important to recognize that humanitarian actors cannot ‘create’ a home or a community for, or in the place of, the affected population. Rather they can be enablers and facilitators, supporting the affected population that seeks to reach a more wholesome sentiment towards their possibly temporary house, or towards the place where they have been forced to flee during displacement or during the reconstruction of a damaged or destroyed home.

It is equally important to note that the meanings of both home and community are elusive.⁴ This text does not attempt to (re)define them. What follows is a proposition to engage with these concepts.

¹ The authors appreciate the further contributions from colleagues within their organizations (CARE, CRAterre, CRS, Habitat for Humanity, NRC and Oxford Brookes University – CENDEP)

² For more reflection on the concept of ‘home’ please refer to: Brun, C and A.H. Fábos (2017) Mobilising home for long term displacement: a reflection on the durable solutions. *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9(2): 177 – 183
Brun, C. (2012) Home in temporary dwellings. In *International Encyclopaedia of Housing and Home*, edited by S.J. Smith, M. Elsinga, L. Fox O’Mahony, O. S. Eng, S. Wachter, R. Dowling. Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 424–433.

³ “Community” may represent a tight-knit group of people with similar beliefs and values. It may equally represent a group of people with a shared objective and interests. “Community” is not necessarily equal to a geographic location (e.g. online communities, diaspora, etc.). The word may also have different meanings and connotation in different languages. And finally one geographic location may be comprised of many communities.

⁴ The meanings also vary between different languages, different cultures and contexts.

WHY THE NEED FOR ADAPTING?

At its inception the humanitarian ‘shelter sector’ was severed from the multidimensional framework for the Right to Adequate Housing to define humanitarian interventions more narrowly to emergency response (thereby leaving housing to development actors). The one-dimensionality that was given to the humanitarian shelter sector falls short of our ambition. Of the seven dimensions that define Adequate Housing,⁵ most of the quality standards and indicators we have developed tend to focus on the habitability dimension. We recognize that being forced to flee means losing one’s home and the impact is beyond the loss of a building. The immediate impact is the loss of the protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, and against other threats to health, safety and well-being. Beyond that, other basic needs are likely to be compromised as well: being cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools and other community facilities and social networks; being separated from loved ones; the (incremental) loss of the ability to express cultural identity and the loss of the sense of belonging.

We are responsible for adapting the shelter sector in the face of current humanitarian trends: record numbers of displaced persons; increasing urban disasters; growing complexity; increased use of cash and voucher assistance; localization; national and regional bodies increasingly taking on the coordination of humanitarian responses and the ever dwindling humanitarian funds; as well as the increasing role of the private sector and philanthropical actors, not just as donors, but as partners in the shelter/housing space. Adding to the above, the lines between humanitarian, recovery, development, and peace building are increasingly blurred. In response to these trends, shelter actors are expanding or shifting from direct delivery to enabling greater access to shelter or housing and engaging in the systems beyond the humanitarian sphere. There is an untapped potential in understanding shelter and settlements as homes and communities as a productive response, and as a natural and logical extension of a sector-wide desire to explore the wider impacts of shelter programming on recovery and wellbeing.

“Homes and communities puts the humanity back in humanitarian work.” *quote from a session participant*

⁵ The global instrument for the Right to Adequate Housing encompasses 7 dimensions: security of tenure; affordability; habitability; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; accessibility; location; cultural adequacy. More information is available here: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/AboutHRandHousing.aspx>



Brigitte prepares some food while her two children study at a table inside their new house. "I had no home, but now I have one... My son says that he feels safe now in this house because a big house like this with thick walls can protect us."

AN ARRAY OF HOMES AND COMMUNITIES STRATEGIES

Beyond direct delivery of shelter, some humanitarian organizations are looking at systemic challenges faced by families and communities. This approach addresses systemic failures that individuals and families face when accessing safer shelter/adequate housing. These organizations take a people-centered approach and aim to work within a spirit of complementarity, partnering with community entities, local civil society, the private sector, governments, academia and peer organizations. This approach has two distinct advantages: 1) the complementarity brings about a greater impact in the shelter sector and allows work across sectors; and, 2) it allows for the scaling-up⁶ of good practices by influencing and empowering strategic partners to enable greater access to safer and better shelter/housing across larger areas. These models show the potential to navigate through the recovery-preparedness-prevention-development realm.

Humanitarian organizations are also articulating their approach referring to the Right to Adequate Housing or the Integral Human Development framework and the dimensions they encompass to embrace the shelter-home spectrum. We are acknowledging that the living conditions during displacement or after losing a home significantly affect a person’s mental health, well-being, agency and self-esteem. Starting with addressing **habitability, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure** we address basic health and safety. Acknowledging that an increasing number of affected people find accommodation

⁶ Scaling up can be seen as a process whereby the replication of a good practice or innovation is pursued through enabling and empowering other actors in the shelter/housing value chain. This is done with the objective to reach a larger population than one agency alone could reach. In the face of ever-increasing displacement, it has become imperative to find solutions at scale. More information on scaling-up is available here: <https://expandnet.net/scaling-up-framework-and-principles/>

within host communities and the risk of eviction is often a concern, housing, land and property (HLP) due diligence processes contribute to **security of tenure**; and rental market interventions and linkages to integrated programs and particularly livelihood activities contribute to **affordability**. The development of settlement-based approaches and current guidance in the sector focused on inclusion (such as the *All Under One Roof* guidelines), are giving us an opportunity to touch into **accessibility, location, and, cultural adequacy**.

Whereas they firmly acknowledge the importance of immediate emergency shelter as lifesaving, they also recognize that in the longer-term, people affected by disasters and conflict will invariably attempt to undertake the complex process of 'home-making', whilst, if displaced, this home-making does not necessarily change their desire to return to their place of origin – their real home. By acknowledging this, these organizations aspire to be enablers of a housing solution and support a process that encourages families to engage in the functional and aesthetic improvements of their dwelling. In return, this process may restore a sense of agency and potentially hold therapeutic or healing benefits.

Some actors focus on building evidence to demonstrate the wider impacts of adequate shelter/housing on, for instance, health, well-being, child development and social cohesion.⁷ The longer-term goals are: 1) to see more intentional and sustained impact as an integral part of 'success'; and 2) to facilitate an environment in which affected people can create their own homes. It is also hoped that evidence around the wider impacts of shelter will increase cross-sector collaboration.

Across a spectrum and depending on context, settlement interventions also have the potential to enable a collective (re)establishment of a community that is inclusive in its service provision, which nurtures a sense of protection and belonging.

7 These wider impacts have long been recognized in the housing sector. However, it is only recently that the shelter sector has ventured in this domain. For examples of broader impact works please see here: <https://www.interaction.org/blog/more-than-four-walls-and-a-roof/>; <https://www.habitat.org/our-work/impact>



A household comprised of four sisters have set up a home-based workshop creating beautiful traditional Afghan carpets. An example of the link between shelter assistance and economic inclusion.

Organizations are in the early stages of institutionalizing these ambitious ways of working and are gradually adapting their organizational structures to be able to adopt these approaches more systematically and at scale. We acknowledge accommodating a new approach may present a challenge to conventional systems.

HOW TO EMBRACE HOMES AND COMMUNITIES AT SCALE?

Shelter practitioners will be instrumental in influencing their organization to gradually embrace a Homes and Communities approach. Intra-agency engagement can ignite and accelerate ideas on the 'how'.

On an organizational level, we are seeing that expanding to Homes and Communities might require a change in our current organizational structure, allowing flexible management for instance to navigate the nexus, upgrade staff skills to become enablers, strategic use of (flexible) funding and monitoring processes to measure the wider impact of this approach.

On the sector level, we are challenging the way we define 'success' beyond basing it solely in terms of the physical output. We must move beyond production metrics to unlock the potential impact of a home in a functioning community. Under the Homes and Community banner, achievement is better assessed through the lens of wider impacts including, but not limited to, physical and mental health, education, livelihoods, resilience against climate change, social cohesion, and protection.

In addition, the sector and individual organizations should use the results of the wider impact assessments to raise awareness (including of donors) and further raise the profile of the sector.

The concepts of 'Home' and 'Community' are both universal and extremely personal. Their interpretation varies among individuals, families, languages, cultures, geographies, and generations. This opinion piece recognizes that some of these topics are in their infancy among us, and so it is reasonable to expect that the sector would benefit from a wide consultation among a diverse group of peers. Having said that, what we propose is to build upon the valuable experience we do have across the spectrum from housing and HLP, to construction systems, planning and community development, which all have a direct contribution to strengthening family and community bonds to establish strong social, economic and cultural ties which will further contribute to personal, household and community resilience and recovery. More importantly, we acknowledge the privileged position and space we have to articulate and share these thoughts. Affected people should be directly involved in these discussions. Promoting Homes and Communities as an approach can only start by listening carefully to their voices so that we can better accompany them in the creation of a home and the goal of recovery.