

Picking up the pieces – the aftermath of natural disasters and conflict

*There are no easy solutions when it comes to dealing with rebuilding lives, homes, neighbourhoods, and cities after a major disaster or war. But there is a wealth of carefully documented experience at our disposal, writes the editor, **Roman Rollnick**. This overview draws on insight provided by **Daniel Lewis**, Chief of UN-HABITAT's Disaster, Post Conflict and Safety Section, and **Jaana Mioch**, a human settlements officer in the same department.*

The wealth of experience and knowledge in disaster management and mitigation can be traced to World War II, and still earlier to the California earthquake of 1906, or even the measurements taken of the biggest volcano blast in recorded history – the devastating explosion of the Indonesian island of Krakatoa in 1883.

And one of the key lessons we at UN-HABITAT and other agencies have learned is that it is important to incorporate proper long-term planning for sustainable development with the best protection against repeat disasters from the outset – indeed from the moment the humanitarian rescue operation begins.

As climate change threatens to change the face of the planet, mega-cities loom as giant potential flood or other disaster traps, especially for billions of the world's urban poor – always the most exposed and the most vulnerable.

Therefore, the other important lesson on which we have plenty of experience to draw is this: taking preventive action and planning ahead to offset the worst. The United Nations has calculated that one dollar invested in disaster reduction today, can save up to seven dollars tomorrow in relief and rehabilitation costs.

“Over the last 30 years, natural disasters have affected five times more people than they did only a generation ago,” said UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Jan Egeland, in a paper published this month.

“The bad news is, things are getting worse as our climate changes, threatening more extreme weather and a potential explosion in human misery,” he said.

According to figures provided by his office, in 2006 alone, 117 million people around the world have suffered from some 300 natural disasters, including devastating droughts in China and Africa, and massive flooding in Asia and Africa, costing nearly \$15 billion in damages.

In the case of conflict, whether the world is unable to make more than limited progress to prevent genocide in Darfur, Sudan, or rebuilding Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Rwanda, Serbia, and Somalia – all places where UN-HABITAT is active – this is another matter. We as human beings are responsible for conflict, and for environmental destruction.

“The good news is, we are far from powerless to reduce risks and protect ourselves from nature's wrath. But we must act today if we are to prevent calamity tomorrow. Indeed, we have no time to lose,” Mr. Egeland, said.

It was with a similar sense of urgency, that world governments, through the Habitat Agenda, mandated UN-HABITAT to take the lead in disaster prevention, mitigation, and preparedness, as well as post-disaster rehabilitation when it comes to human settlements – the growing towns and cities in which most of us live.

Indeed towns and cities are now home to half of humanity, whereas in 1950, two thirds of us were rural. In many cities, especially in developing countries, slum dwellers number more than 50 per cent of the population and have little or no access to shelter, water, and sanitation, education or health services.

Today some 1 billion people around the world live in slums, and they are most vulnerable when it comes to disasters. All too often, they live in places where no-one else would dare set foot – along beaches vulnerable to flooding (such as Dhaka, Mumbai), near sites prone to landslides (Hong Kong, Tbilisi), near polluted grounds or shaky structures that would be destroyed the instant an earthquake hit. (Yerevan).

UN-HABITAT's Disaster Management Programme is thus tasked to fulfil this mandate by helping national governments, local authorities and communities strengthen their capacity against human-made and natural disasters. In short, it seeks to bridge the gap between relief and development by combining the technical expertise, normative understanding and lessons learned through UN-HABITAT field operations.

This applies to prevention, mitigation, and the rehabilitation of human settlements. As the agency for urban settlements around the world, UN-HABITAT also helps keep decision makers and communities abreast of the latest thinking and working methods.

The agency has developed a five-point strategy to back national governments, local authorities and communities by:

- Developing techniques and tools for the management of disaster prevention, mitigation and rehabilitation;
- Designing and implementing training programmes, and supporting those of other agencies and field projects;
- Promoting horizontal cooperation by networking institutions, experts and experience on disaster related activities in human settlements;
- Designing, implementing and supporting projects at the local, national, regional and global level;
- Strengthening coordination and networking among communities, NGOs, governments and external support organizations in addressing disaster-related activities.

Explaining this in part, UN-HABITAT's Executive Director, Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka, said: "The need for governments and the international community to adopt early warning systems for cities, towns and villages to prepare and reduce the impact of disasters whether natural or man-made is paramount.

"This could contribute towards safeguarding livelihoods, human settlements and associated basic services, which are easily destroyed when such disasters strike. During post reconstruction special attention should be paid to women's secure tenure, rights to land and adequate housing among other issues. Property restitution must be gender sensitive," she said.

To cite two recent examples where the agency applied its strategy: The devastating earthquake in Pakistan that claimed more than 78,000 lives (among them some 17,000 children killed in collapsing schools), and left more than 3 million homeless.

It was a disaster that underscored the need to re-build smarter and safer. UN-HABITAT therefore helped the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority establish 12 Housing Reconstruction Centers in the quake zone in Pakistan Administered

Kashmir and North Western Frontier Province. The agency also helped train over 12,000 people to help run the new centres and ensure that new homes and buildings are more resistant to seismic activity and better adapted to cold weather conditions.

The other example is the work in the Indian Ocean countries hit by tsunami killer waves triggered by an undersea earthquake in December 2004.

The right to adequate shelter is central to the mandate of UN-HABITAT, and even more important when addressing the needs of communities affected by disasters such as the tsunami.

Shelter is often the primary need in the post-disaster phase, but the delivery of immediate shelter needs must be undertaken within a long-term shelter strategy that puts the survivors at the centre of the recovery process. The same applies to the overall reconstruction and rehabilitation of other infrastructure and services. In parallel, the displacement of populations as a result of natural or human-made disasters is one of the key issues informing UN-HABITAT's disaster management strategy.

Disaster risk reduction is fundamentally a matter of communication and education. The UN has put disaster risk reduction high on the agenda since the tsunami, when experts said scores of thousands of the more than 200,000 dead could have been saved if early warning systems had existed and allowed them to escape to higher ground in the hours after the earthquake struck.

UN-HABITAT has helped build back better on safer land, and incorporate new urban planning to help offset the impact of such disasters. It also partnered with BASF in a unique arrangement that gave rise to an opportunity for private sector engagement in tsunami relief and reconstruction. The added value of BASF participation was the provision of technologies and capacities, including those of their partners, to support UN-HABITAT's integrated sustainable relief, reconstruction and longer-term urban development programmes.

Re-establishing livelihoods, planning and management of settlements and basic services for these vulnerable groups is a key priority of UN-HABITAT's settlements crisis management programming. Likewise, taking into account the specific needs of refugees and internally displaced people, both in the areas to which they have been displaced – and in their communities of origin.

It has created strategic partnerships for resettlements, rehabilitation and housing for these people in every phase from emergency to local integration and reintegration, and beyond to security of housing, land and property tenure, and the development of productive economic activities.

Since the Iraq Settlements Rehabilitation Programme in 1997, for example, UN-HABITAT continues to provide substantive backstopping in the areas of post-conflict reconstruction strategies, capacity building of local governments, urban planning and gender analysis.

In Kosovo, UN-HABITAT continues to support the UN Mission in Kosovo, and the Provisional Government, in four key areas – rehabilitating municipal administration, developing new spatial planning legislation and practice, the regularization of housing and property rights, and the restoration of property and land registries.

In Serbia, UN-HABITAT, with generous funding from the Italian Government, is implementing a social and housing integration programme for tens of thousands of war refugees and other vulnerable people.

On the other hand, in Sudan, UN-HABITAT programming in the north seeks to assist in the integration of thousands of internally displaced people into the urban fabric of Khartoum. In the south, it supports the Government of South Sudan in a range of human settlements recovery initiatives from road rehabilitation, to primary economic programming, to land use planning and tenure integrated in the ‘Sustainable Settlements Recovery Programme for South Sudan’.

The examples of the agency’s work with donors, governments, municipalities and the private sector around the world are too many to list here. But the experience has shown us that when a full-blown crisis erupts, the need for assistance frequently exceeds the ability of local governments to provide it. The response to natural and man-made disasters has been typically ad-hoc, often without concern for the development objectives of countries in question.

Therefore, gaps between relief and development must be addressed. Piecemeal efforts which are not linked with the long-term development strategy can aggravate the precarious social conditions creating not only dependency on aid, but a critical waste of financial and human resources invested in short-sighted emergency relief plans.

UN-HABITAT’s long experience in pre-, mid- and post-disaster planning and implementation proves that in many post-disaster scenarios it is most effective when interventions are designed to begin simultaneously. The consideration of the long-term impacts of ~~the~~ short-term interventions can add value to the latter, and depth to the former. Furthermore, and ironically, the chaos following crises can present opportunities for the highest development gains in the shortest period, if planned and executed hand in hand with humanitarian actors.

Involvement as a supporting partner in the resettlement, shelter, infrastructure and governance sectors from the moment disaster strikes, places UN-HABITAT in a critical position as an institutional partner assisting and adding value to relevant humanitarian agencies, and planning early support for long-term objectives.

In two key areas, *prevention* can be greatly enhanced through the adoption and enforcement of more appropriate land-use planning and building codes. The rapid *restoration of homes and livelihoods*, on the other hand, is more complex and requires that humanitarian relief operations are conceived from the outset as a bridge to development.

This issue of the Habitat Debate explores, through contributions from experts, both the theory and the practice of applying a more strategic view to making cities more resilient. The final word, from the Deputy Special Envoy for the Tsunami, Mr. Eric Schwartz, reiterates and encourages the international community to ‘build back better’. UN-HABITAT fully endorses this idea, and articulates it in its own framework entitled ‘Sustainable Relief and Reconstruction’ within which our agency and our supporting partners develop our own practice of building back better.

Additional reporting, Julia