ALNAP Innovations

CASE STUDY NO. 5

Transitional shelter: understanding shelter from the emergency through reconstruction and beyond

Case Study Summary

People who are homeless because of disaster or conflict need somewhere to live while they rebuild their houses, or find alternative accommodation. Shelter and reconstruction therefore happen in parallel, rather than consecutively. The pioneering approach of transitional shelter acknowledges that reconstruction takes usually between two and five years, but that a tent only lasts for around one year.

Transitional shelter is a process rather than a product, but the transitional shelters themselves are simple re-locatable structures that offer appropriate and flexible shelter over the period of reconstruction. Afterwards, the shelters are upgraded, reused, sold or recycled. The approach is not another phase of response: rather, it involves building and upgrading incrementally, from materials that offer immediate shelter such as plastic sheeting or sustainable local materials.

Most transitional shelters use predominantly local materials, familiar to those affected, thereby contributing to the local and regional economies. Stockpiled versions are being developed to offer a consistent standard of support in instances when local environments cannot provide sufficient materials.

shelter centre

Innovating agency
Shelter Centre

Case Study authors
Sam Collins, Tom Corsellis and Antonella Vitale

Location of programme
Global

Time period
2005 to present

Estimated expenditure
USD 30–100 million over five years

ALNAP Innovations Case Studies showcase innovative solutions to the problems and opportunities faced in international humanitarian response. Each case study focuses on a specific innovation, and outlines the process through which the innovation was developed, from the initial recognition of a problem, through development to practical implementation and scale-up.

The Innovations Case Study series is designed to act as a key mechanism to improve dissemination and take up of innovations across the humanitarian sector.

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Transitional shelter is used only by displaced populations, or where buildings are damaged beyond habitability, and as only one form of assistance within a broad and integrated response to the varied circumstances of the entire population affected. Although transitional shelter will not be applicable in all settings, is does bring about a fundamental reappraisal of the nature of shelter provision in emergencies.

Shelter Centre introduced the transitional-shelter approach in 2005, as part of secondments through DFID to UNHCR in Sri Lanka and UN OCHA in Indonesia. This was in support of the governments concerned agreeing and coordinating the implementation of policies in response to the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of December 2004.

Since 2005, agencies and governments worldwide have used the transitional-shelter approach to accommodate millions of people affected by both conflicts and disasters, from Kenya to Indonesia. This Innovation Case Study highlights the development of the transitional-shelter approach, using recent examples from several implementing agencies.

Why this innovation?

The transitional-shelter approach meets six major challenges facing both people in need of shelter, and those working to help them from within humanitarian and development sectors.

1. **The immediate need for shelter** Reconstruction assistance can be legally offered only when land rights are established, often to a degree that exceeds local tradition. As a result, affected people may not receive timely assistance, or may even remain displaced for long periods beyond the risk from conflicts or natural hazards, sometimes for many years.

2. **The lack of land or tenancy rights** Many of the poorest people affected by conflict or disaster may not have owned their former homes or land, especially in urban areas. Further, the aid community has very little understanding of how to support tenants and the landless in achieving durable housing solutions.

3. **Increasing frequency of multi-family dwellings** Because an increasing proportion of affected people live in urban areas, many live in apartments or multi-family dwellings, often multi-storey. Reconstruction and repair in these cases is therefore considerably more complicated and time-consuming than reconstruction of single-family, low-rise dwellings.

4. **Lack of aid capacity in shelter and reconstruction** Compared with other sectors, the humanitarian and development communities have few opportunities for designing or implementing shelter or reconstruction programmes, or for learning from previous responses. Few agencies have shelter departments, or even full-time specialists within their staff. This lack has affected the quality of shelter and reconstruction programmes to date, and therefore the willingness of agencies to undertake further programmes.

5. **The perception of reconstruction as only long term** The common perception within the aid community is that shelter is humanitarian and life-saving, while reconstruction is developmental and linked to recovery. Assistance to reconstruction often begins only many months after a disaster. This rarely reflects the priorities of affected populations, who begin to recover materials and stabilise their homes as shelter in the first days after a disaster.

6. **Piecemeal support to reconstruction** Because of inconsistent support to reconstruction, which often happens too fast and with insufficient consultation, inappropriate housing can result – sometimes even perpetuating the vulnerability of those affected.

The use of transitional shelters does not respond directly to challenges 5 and 6 above. However, when used appropriately, they may offer adequate and flexible shelter over a sufficient period for these challenges to be met. In these respects, transitional shelter acts in the same way as more traditional 'semi-permanent shelter' or 'core housing' approaches, which quickly offer shelter that can be later completed as permanent housing.

The use of transitional shelters does respond directly to challenges 1–4 above, as it is possible to relocate the shelters, just as yurts or caravans can be relocated. In agreement with governments, shelter suitable for occupation over many months or some years can be offered legally to people who are displaced or without property or land tenure, and to those whose apartments are being rebuilt.

With respect to achieving the scale of response necessary, transitional shelters are simple to build, and the approach is designed around the skills and capacity available. The approach can focus on basic technical skills and capacities, agreeing appropriate standards and monitoring their implementation.

The Innovation Process

Recognising the problem and the opportunity

Following the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) seconded staff from Shelter Centre to work with UNHCR in Sri Lanka in 2005. The secondment was a targeted intervention by DFID, directly supporting UNHCR capacity in shelter coordination, understanding from the outset that shelter was the pivotal sector after the tsunami. UNHCR was responsible for coordinating humanitarian shelter response to the needs of people from various coastal areas affected by the disaster, including the north of the country which had suffered from extensive conflict in recent years.

A significant concern was to agree with the government a shelter strategy leading to a policy that would be an equitable response for displaced people in both northern and southern areas of Sri Lanka. UNHCR had also coordinated previous shelter programmes in the north of the country in order to accommodate conflict returnees. The concern was to reinforce and not undermine peacebuilding efforts by ensuring that shelter provided across the country after the tsunami was equivalent to shelter provided previously to conflict returnees. This sensitive political issue would require agreement between the government, the political and military groups of the north, the UN coordinating bodies, humanitarian donors and implementers, and of course those affected.

The Sri Lankan government decided to instate in some areas a setback of 50–200m from the coast in the aftermath of the tsunami. This meant that a significant displaced population would have to be relocated permanently, or remain displaced for a considerable period while the setbacks were reconsidered.

Before the secondment from Shelter Centre, provision of tents had been the initial response. Many thousands of tents were deployed, and consideration was given to procuring many tens of thousands more. It was recognised, however, that purchasing the tents would take up a considerable proportion of the budget available for shelter, and that, once deployed, the tents were not going to last for the duration of reconstruction.

A solution was required that could provide shelter in the short term and would also be conducive to relocation and reconstruction. Shelters that could be moved would be demonstrably not permanent buildings and therefore not subject to the same permissions and laws required for permanent dwellings. With non-permanent shelters, assistance could begin immediately.

Previous response for the conflict-affected populations in Sri Lanka had included the construction of small shelters from local materials that could be easily moved on-site and assembled. After the tsunami, NGOs immediately started to develop more options for shelters.

Finding a solution to the problem

Rather than focusing on the invention of specific products, the transitional shelter approach is based on the principle of shelter provision as a process. In order to achieve consistent response, stakeholders needed to agree common standards for shelters, and to identify alternative response methods for those affected for whom transitional shelter was not appropriate. Initial coordination meetings on shelter, led by UNHCR in January 2005, sought to achieve agreement first within the humanitarian community, and then to bring this consensus to government, to allow implementation.

Almost all of the humanitarian agencies and shelter specialists participating in the coordination meetings also participated in the biannual global forum for shelter and reconstruction, the 'Shelter Meeting', facilitated by Shelter Centre and funded by DFID. Common understandings built there over many years about technical good practice, terminology and coordination constituted a contingency or preparedness capacity. Consensus on the general approaches was achieved within the humanitarian community within a week, and the government agreed in principle to consistent general approaches by the end of a second week.

Two immediate methods for response were decided, in order to maximise and stabilise shelter, and as initial steps in the reconstruction process. The first method was largely for people displaced, who were living in temples or with host families. Transitional shelter was introduced through distribution of pre-designed kits that would, when assembled, offer basic shelter that could later be relocated or upgraded. The kits were supported by technical advice and labour for vulnerable families.

The second method was for those affected but not displaced, who wished to recover materials and reconstruct their homes as quickly as possible – both for shelter and to prevent further weather damage. The phased distribution of materials offered a range of materials and tools for repair and reconstruction, again supported by technical advice and labour for vulnerable families.

These two methods were equivalent in monetary value, so the response provided to each household was equitable. The two methods were based upon the principle of offering support to the entire population affected, prioritising the level of support against need and vulnerability. Assistance was provided to those without land or a house, as well as to those with damaged houses requiring repair.

It was important to achieve a compromise with the government regarding the status of displaced people, who needed shelter over the period in which their permanent housing was

resolved. As predicted, for most families this took more than one year, and for some families it took five years.

> *'60,000 transitional shelters were built in 6 months! This was a result of cross-sectoral collaboration combining engineering and humanitarian expertise, and adopting a standard performance specification which allowed flexibility in material selection and design in response to local cultural preferences, availability of resources and the capacity of implementing agencies.'* (ARUP, 2009)

The agreement of common, response-wide technical standards for shelters built from local materials was included in the DFID Terms of Reference for the secondment of Shelter Centre staff, constituting the first step in the identification of transitional shelter for the Sri Lankan and subsequent responses. The transitional-shelter approach in Sri Lanka in 2005 proved itself to be flexible, as beneficiaries could use a wide variety of locally available and salvaged materials to upgrade their shelters incrementally, and in some cases the shelters were entirely relocated.

Development of the innovation

The transitional-shelter approach coordinated by UNHCR in Sri Lanka could not be considered an innovation until it became clear that the approach could be appropriate in other circumstances. A second DFID secondee from Shelter Centre worked in Aceh from January 2005 with UN/OCHA and later UNDP. In Aceh, the context and nature of shelter needs were different, and the scale of the damage was far greater.

After considerable efforts, the response in Aceh finally also used transitional shelter as an appropriate approach to supporting those displaced. The approach began to show its inherent flexibility, as it was suitable for people in a range of contexts, with a variety of materials available locally. The strategy of the UN in Aceh was informed by the approaches developed in Sri Lanka, as the seconded shelter coordinators in both locations maintained communications, while understanding the differences in their circumstances.

The innovation process for the approach was not planned, and its flexibility was not known until it was implemented elsewhere, under different circumstances. Key to the innovation was a small body of technical professionals represented in all of the major agencies present, especially among the donor community, who grasped the opportunities that the approach presented. They were able to achieve an immediate consensus, and quickly progressed the adaptation and implementation of the approach at scale in varied contexts.

Later, although while transitional shelters were still occupied in Sri Lanka and Aceh, it became clear that the approach was also being used in other locations in very different contexts. Consolidation was required, in order to learn lessons from the varying experiences as good practice.

Implementation, through piloting and then scaling up

The shelter coordinators seconded by DFID during the Indian Ocean tsunami were leading the development of guidelines for shelter for displaced populations, funded by DFID and later published by Oxfam GB, as part of a group of independent shelter specialists called the 'University of Cambridge Shelter Project'. These guidelines, Transitional Settlement: Displaced Populations (Corsellis and Vitale, 2005), were being completed in January 2005.

The same project also identified options commonly taken by displaced and non-displaced populations after conflicts and disasters, investigating the approach of transitional settlement and the need for incremental support to shelter programmes. After the secondment following the tsunami, there was recognition within the group that transitional, re-locatable and incremental shelter was valuable to the transitional-settlement process.

The transitional-settlement approach categorises all of the options facing populations displaced by conflicts and disasters, from refugee camps to host families, so that the entire population affected is supported from the onset of the disaster until durable solutions are found. As part of a broad consultation with the humanitarian shelter community over two years, which resulted in the ongoing biannual 'Shelter Meeting', six options for transitional settlement options were identified. In Aceh and Sri Lanka in 2005, the options preferred by those displaced were rural and urban self-settlement in transitional shelters, collective centres in the forms of temples and barracks, and host families.

Following the tsunami, it was possible to offer within the finalised guidelines a definition of transitional shelter:

> *'Transitional shelter provides a habitable covered living space and a secure, healthy living environment, with privacy and dignity, to those within it, during the period between a conflict or natural disaster and the achievement of a durable shelter solution.'* (Corsellis and Vitale, 2005)

After the tsunami, an immediate effort was made to consolidate the experience from many different instances of the use of transitional shelter during the response to the tsunami and other emergencies. Experience to date shows that transitional shelter can be used in four

ways, presented below as four types. It is possible for four transitional shelters supported in the same area to be used in these four ways, which indicates the flexibility of the approach to those affected.

It is also possible to design the transitional shelters to be better suited to use as one or more types, as well as to use on-site or off-site. Each of the four types presented can be used either on-site, next to a destroyed house or apartment during reconstruction, or off-site, as part of transitional self-settlement. Each of the types can also be used to support the return process, relocating the transitional shelter as necessary if circumstances change.

Type 1: Upgradable

While being inhabited, the transitional shelter is improved over time to become a permanent shelter. This is achieved through maintenance, extension or by replacing original materials with more durable alternatives.

See the case study in section A.4, Kenya in 'Shelter Projects 2008' (IASC Emergency Shelter Cluster, 2008)

Families in Kenya were displaced by election violence, but could later return to their homes, although these had been largely destroyed. Families were provided with wooden transitional shelters with corrugated galvanised iron roofing and plastic sheeting, and incrementally upgraded these using locally available materials and methods that they were familiar with. The families had land rights, so it was possible for them to make their shelters permanent. Adobe cladding, brick or cement was used to upgrade the walls, and cement was used for the floor. The families could then remain permanently settled in a house that was comparable to their original dwelling.

Type 2: Reusable

See the case study in section B.6, Yogyakarta in 'Shelter Projects 2008' (IASC Emergency Shelter Cluster, 2008)

In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, families were displaced from homes damaged by the tsunami. The local community was trained to construct bamboo transitional shelters, which had been designed and tested in the months before implementation. The project targeted the vulnerable in urban and rural areas. In urban areas, the shelters were demolished after permanent housing was built. In rural areas, the shelters were reused for other purposes – commonly as barns for livestock, storage sheds or restaurants.

Type 3: Resellable

The transitional shelter is inhabited while parallel reconstruction activities are taking place. Once reconstruction is complete, the transitional shelter is dismantled and its materials are used as a resource to sell. Therefore, materials need to be selected for their suitability for resale after the shelter is dismantled.

See the example in 'Preliminary Impact Evaluation of the Tsunami Shelter Programme in Aceh Province, Indonesia' (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2007)

Families in Aceh Province were provided with transitional shelter after the tsunami. Most families upgraded their shelter to some extent, but securing the financial resources to do so remained a problem. This lack of resources meant that, after two years, some families saw that there was value in selling the shelters once permanent reconstruction was complete.

Type 4: Recyclable

The transitional shelter is inhabited while parallel reconstruction activities are taking place. The transitional shelter is gradually dismantled during the reconstruction process, and the materials from the transitional shelter are used in the construction of a durable home.

See the case study in section B.10, Pakistan in 'Shelter Projects 2008' (IASC Emergency Shelter Cluster, 2008)

Following the Kashmir earthquake, families could no longer inhabit their houses, which had been destroyed or damaged. Materials for transitional shelter were distributed for a self-build programme. The shelters were built from polypropylene sandbags to be filled with soil for the walls, corrugated iron for roofing, and timber for the frames, supplemented by reclaimed timber. Two years after the construction of the transitional shelters, many families had used materials from the shelters in the construction of longer-term housing. The elements most commonly recycled were the corrugated-iron sheeting and timber.

Diffusion of the innovation beyond the original setting

Since the transitional-shelter approach was introduced in response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, it has been used to accommodate millions of people around the world (IASC Emergency Shelter Cluster, 2008), including in responses to:

- the Kashmir earthquake, Pakistan, 2005

- the Yogyakarta earthquake, Indonesia, 2006
- the Pisco earthquake, Peru, 2007
- return after conflict, Sri Lanka, 2007
- return after election violence, Kenya, 2008.

The diffusion of the approach occurred in part due to the involvement of most major agencies and donors in the tsunami response. As a result, generalists and technical specialists in different agencies witnessed the successes of the transitional-shelter approach in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In conflicts and disasters in subsequent years, both generalists and specialists were aware of the strengths, weaknesses and risks of the approach. They had experiences on which to base judgements about the appropriateness of transitional shelter and now it might best be adapted to local contexts.

Risks

The absence of detailed guidance, regular training and comparative case studies and evaluations combine to threaten and constrain appropriate use of the transitional-shelter approach and its development. At times, other approaches, such as cash programming and host-family support, will be more appropriate. Any inappropriate use of transitional shelter is likely to result in a questioning of the approach.

Questions have already been raised that might be summarised as ‘transition to what?’ This seems to reflect concerns about the limits of humanitarian responsibility, and handovers to government. Other connected issues are the need to develop consistent strategies from the onset of an emergency until the return to sustainable livelihoods, and the relative lack of attention by donors and the humanitarian community generally to transitions from settlement to reconstruction.

Partnerships and collaborations

Initially, the use of transitional shelter was not supported by any guidance, training or standards, apart from the general definition and categorisation in Transitional Settlement: Displaced Populations (Corsellis and Vitale, 2005). To provide more guidance, Shelter Centre initiated an intern project in 2007, working towards brief guidelines on transitional shelter, engaging a broad range of field practitioners in a working group that reviewed a series of partial drafts. This project is unfinished and has received no support to date, although it is

hoped that a continuation of the intern programme with DFID will result in a full draft later in 2010.

Shelter Centre has revised 1982 coordination-level guidelines on shelter on behalf of UN/OCHA, now included in Transitional Settlement and Reconstruction after Natural Disasters (UN/OCHA, 2008). A further edition is forthcoming as Shelter after Disaster: Strategies for transitional settlement and reconstruction (UN/OCHA, 2010). Given the broad scope of the guidance, however, this will offer only an overview.

Also in 2007, Shelter Centre included a module on transitional shelter as part of the technical training it developed for the IASC Emergency Shelter Cluster (now Global Shelter Cluster). However, this training was delivered only once. The module has since been adapted and delivered by Shelter Centre within IFRC training of the Red Cross Movement and its National Societies, and this training is ongoing. The module was also adapted, delivered and released, open source, on the Shelter Centre website as part of its programme with DFID.

On behalf of the Global Shelter Cluster and UNHCR, Shelter Centre is currently consolidating this training with others for release as a standard training, which it is hoped will broaden dissemination. Currently, globally, there is no regular training in support of humanitarian shelter or reconstruction that is available to all agencies and specialists. The 40 organisations participating regularly in the Shelter Meeting recently voted in favour of regional training, although this has yet to be organised or funded.

In terms of developing standards, DFID has initiated a programme of sector support through Shelter Centre to engage the humanitarian-shelter community in progressing the development of stockpiled transitional shelters. This will begin with the agreement of common global standards, also involving innovations and expertise of the private sector. Transitional shelters are not pre-fabricated housing, as they are designed and developed to be locally specific. Stockpiled versions are being developed with manufacturers and a broad consortium of humanitarian stakeholders to offer shelters consistent with locally built shelter, when it is not possible to use local materials exclusively.

Lessons learned and evaluation findings

T Shelter Projects 2008 includes case studies and evaluations by various agencies, and is available online (IASC Emergency Shelter Cluster, 2008). Further annual editions will follow, with new studies. Several evaluations mention transitional shelter, if briefly and from general rather than technical perspectives. To date, neither case studies nor evaluations have been compared to generate wider lessons or good practice.

Evaluations of the post-tsunami response and consolidations of experience with transitional shelter have revealed the flexibility and effectiveness of the approach, but have also highlighted the tendency of humanitarian agencies to implement it inappropriately. Humanitarian agencies tend to view transitional shelter as another product-based solution, and not as a method supporting settlement and livelihoods in the transition between displacement and reconstruction. Some agencies have 'failed to take into account...that permanent housing usually takes about or upwards of up to 2–3 years during which time the displaced need to be housed in transitional accommodation' (Battacharjee et al., 2005).

Evaluations of specific programmes are often more revealing about the successes of the approach, and identify the need to take wider strategic concerns into account. For example, the IFRC's transitional-shelter programme in Aceh Province, Indonesia, supported livelihoods and reconstruction well:

> *'The transitional shelter programme provided households with a viable shelter alternative while they were waiting for permanent shelter. Despite some problems in communications, shelter recipients were highly appreciative of their transitional shelters. [By residing in transitional shelters, dwellers are better positioned to pursue their livelihood recovery.]'* (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2007)

Transitional-shelter programmes, like all shelter programmes, require a more holistic approach to needs:

> '*Future transitional shelter programmes should carefully assess recipient needs for living space, cooking, water and sanitation, and privacy to ensure that basic shelter needs are met and that those willing are allowed to participate in the design and construct of their dwellings.'* (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2007)

Wider sectoral implications

Transitional shelter adds to the vocabulary of humanitarian response, and, as importantly, to the understanding by generalists of the importance of shelter, settlement and reconstruction in both life-saving and recovery. This understanding will become even more valuable as the impacts of climate change are felt through further displacement and the increased vulnerability of urban populations.

Transitional shelter is not in itself a long-term option in response to displacement, such as self-settlement, nor is it an option for those not displaced, such as renting a house or owning an apartment. It is instead an approach that supports people either moving between these options, or recovering them. It should be implemented only as part of an integrated and varied programme that supports the options and decisions facing affected people, and then only when appropriate for the circumstances and context.

Achieving a holistic, diverse and flexible strategy for shelter and reconstruction for the entire population affected by disaster or conflict remains extremely problematic. The range of solutions offered by the transitional shelter approach are not intended to preclude the continued search for an adequate answer to the question, ‘Transition to what?’

Key contacts

Tom Corsellis – tom@sheltercentre.org

Antonella Vitale – antonella@sheltercentre.org

To contribute shelter case studies: **Joseph Ashmore** – joseph@josephashmore.org

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Published June 2010

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