

Barriers to urban shelter self-recovery in Philippines and Nepal: lessons for humanitarian policy and practice

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Abstract: Most households affected by disasters reconstruct their houses themselves by self-building or employing local labour: they ‘self-recover’. Humanitarian agencies’ experience in assisting self-recovery in urban communities is limited; little is known about how to support it in practice. This study draws on the experiences and perspectives of households recovering from Typhoon Haiyan (Philippines 2013) and the Gorkha Earthquake (Nepal 2015). It reflects on challenges faced by households to self-recover from major disasters in urban environments, their interactions with humanitarian agencies, national and local institutions, infrastructures, markets and communities, and the influence of national and local governments’ policies and practices on self-recovery opportunities. Most of these challenges cannot be addressed by adopting current humanitarian shelter response models, largely developed for rural contexts. Humanitarian agencies should put greater emphasis on facilitation rather than implementation, and respond more flexibly to the complexity of post-disaster urban contexts.

Keywords: Self-recovery, humanitarian, shelter, urban, reconstruction.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

By 2050, two thirds of the world’s population (6.5 billion people) will be urban (UNDESA 2018). Urban areas are increasingly the sites of humanitarian crises resulting from natural hazards, conflict and displacement. Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs (UN 2015)) is to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ by 2030; however, it is clear that reducing the risks associated with disasters and climate change will require a ‘comprehensive approach that prevents new risk, minimizes existing risk, and strengthens economic,

social, health and environmental resilience’ (UNDESA 2016). A major challenge facing cities is providing access to affordable, safe housing and basic services. Insecure land tenure and land title are challenges, particularly for the urban poor; and people often build in informal settlements in houses that do not meet safe building standards or building codes. Similarly, after a disaster, most affected households reconstruct their houses themselves, either by self-building or by employing local skilled and unskilled labour, often with little to no external or formal support, a process which has been termed ‘self-recovery’ (Twigg *et al.* 2017).

The international humanitarian shelter sector (the field of work concerned with facilitating access to housing for people who have been displaced or lost their homes to disaster or conflict) is increasingly interested in finding ways to support self-recovery. Most humanitarian support to self-recovery has been in rural areas following rapid-onset disasters. This has often consisted of a three-pronged approach of material, financial and technical assistance. The humanitarian sector has less experience of working in urban settings and supporting self-recovery in dense and complex urban systems, with different formal and informal actors and processes playing a role.

Humanitarian agencies have recognised that their customary ways of working, developed for rural crises, do not work well in urban settings. Urban areas present particular challenges in terms of diversity, complexity and scale, requiring highly flexible responses. For example, reconstruction programmes have to work within the context of complex urban housing, land and property rights and tenure systems; and provision of material assistance to affected people has to take account of existing cash- and market-based urban economies that provide goods and services. Urban populations are not only diverse but also relatively mobile; urban communities are often not clearly bounded spatially. Informal actors and activity are a significant feature of urban crisis response, although humanitarian agencies often overlook or undervalue their roles (Brown *et al.* 2015, Sanderson *et al.* 2012, Twigg & Mosel 2018).

Towns and cities are complex and dynamic socio-technical systems (da Silva *et al.* 2012) but there is still limited understanding among humanitarians of how these function and how disaster response can be made to work more effectively in cities and towns. Urban infrastructure is also complex and supported by a wide range of actors, institutions and markets; but in many towns and cities in the Global South formal infrastructure networks often do not extend into low-income and informal settlements, many of which are in vulnerable locations or whose inhabitants cannot afford to access formal infrastructures except through informal and improvised methods (Brown *et al.* 2015, McFarlane 2010). Moreover, discourse on infrastructure and urban resilience draws mostly on experiences from higher-income countries (e.g., Graham 2010).

Agencies are beginning to adapt their tools and approaches to understand urban conditions and contexts better, but it remains to be seen how effective these will be (Meaux & Osofisan 2016). In particular, there has been increasing interest in, and adoption of, ‘area-based’ approaches (also referred to as settlement or neighbourhood approaches) that engage with all sectors, stakeholders, services and needs, and give assistance to the whole population living in a given target area. This is seen as more inclusive and efficient than other approaches (Parker & Maynard 2015, Sanderson & Sitko 2017).

There is an established body of literature on the advantages and challenges of post-disaster housing reconstruction (Barenstein 2006). Two main approaches have dominated the debate: top-down, contractor-driven reconstruction; and bottom-up, owner-driven reconstruction (Barakat 2003). In the former, decision-making power and technical expertise lie in the hands of implementing agencies and professional construction companies. Contractor-driven reconstruction has been favoured in certain contexts because of its ability to provide standardised housing rapidly and at scale (Kennedy *et al.* 2008). However, it has also faced criticism for adopting a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to recognise the diversity of needs in communities, for bypassing local skills, knowledge and capacities, and for benefitting economies outside the region affected by the disaster (Barakat 2003). In owner-driven reconstruction (ODR) approaches, decision-making power lies with homeowners and communities, who play a more active role in their own reconstruction (Barakat & Zyck 2011). ODR in its various forms tends to be more cost-effective than contractor-driven approaches and has resulted in houses that have high user satisfaction, typically demonstrated by high occupancy rates (Barakat & Zyck 2011, Barenstein 2006). It contributes to the development of local technical capacities in disaster-affected communities as well as providing psychosocial benefits, including restored pride and wellbeing associated with being actively involved in reconstruction (Barakat 2003). However, others have demonstrated the dangers of overburdening communities following a major trauma (Steinberg 2007). A broad range of interventions fall under the umbrella of ODR and there is considerable variety in the levels of beneficiary participation. Barakat and Zyck (2011) describe a spectrum of ODR approaches: at one end are programmes in which homeowners participate in housing reconstruction alongside professional contractors and architects; and at the other are reconstruction activities undertaken entirely by homeowners with or without the benefit of external assistance. The latter have also been termed self-help or self-build initiatives (Barakat 2003, Barakat & Zyck 2011).

More recently, the term ‘self-recovery’ has emerged in relation to post-disaster housing reconstruction. Humanitarian agencies’ interest in this approach comes from

the recognition that most disaster-affected people repair and rebuild their houses with little or no formal support. Provision of complete or transitional housing¹ makes up a very small percentage of shelter assistance to affected households: most shelter assistance is in the form of emergency tarpaulins, and non-food items (NFIs) such as blankets and kitchen sets (Oglethorpe & Welsch 2018). In 2014, it was estimated that, in the preceding decade, humanitarian organisations had rarely reached over 30 per cent of households in need of shelter assistance within the first year following major disasters through the provision of transitional shelters; in Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh in 2007, only 1 per cent of those in need of shelter assistance received transitional houses (Parrack *et al.* 2014).

The term ‘self-recovery’ appears to have first been used in humanitarian shelter practice in response to Cyclone Sidr and the shelter sector’s commitment to providing support to families to self-recover has increased over the past decade (Maynard *et al.* 2017). Providing support to self-recovery by ‘improving construction quality, building safer and more resilient homes and settlements and promoting climate and disaster risk-aware communities’ is one of the ten strategic approaches in the Global Shelter Cluster² strategy 2018–2022 (GSC 2018: 11). However, ‘self-recovery’ is still at a relatively early, emergent stage, both conceptually and in practice. It is most commonly characterised as the process whereby disaster-affected households make use of their own resources to repair or rebuild their houses, either via self-building or by employing local skilled or unskilled labour (Parrack *et al.* 2014). Humanitarian agency support to self-recovery has been defined as the process whereby agencies ‘provide one or a combination of material, financial and technical assistance; during the relief and/or recovery phase; to enable affected households to repair, build or rebuild their own shelters themselves or through using the local building industry’ (Maynard *et al.* 2017: 61). In recent disaster responses, technical assistance has included training and awareness-raising for households, masons and carpenters in disaster-resilient construction techniques, monitoring and the provision of guidance through guidelines and mass communication media, such as local radio. Material assistance includes the provision of materials and tools for construction, salvaging and reusing debris. Financial assistance includes cash or vouchers for the purchase of construction materials, tools and/or labour.

¹Transitional housing refers to agency-provided, post-disaster shelter, made from materials that can be upgraded or reused in more permanent structures and relocated from temporary sites to permanent sites (IFRC 2013: 8).

²The Global Shelter Cluster is a coordination mechanism that supports people affected by disaster and internally displaced by conflict with access to safe, dignified and appropriate shelter.

Proponents of support to self-recovery argue that the approach can reach a greater proportion of the affected population than conventional transitional housing programmes. It can also be very cost-effective, with small cash grants reaching a high number of households in recent interventions (Parrack *et al.* 2014, Schofield & Flinn 2018a, 2018b).

A self-recovery approach also aligns well with current humanitarian thinking, which increasingly seeks to put crisis-affected people at the centre of humanitarian programming, by involving them in decision making and aid delivery (Twigg & Mosel 2018). ‘The Grand Bargain’ agreement, resulting from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), commits to localisation and a ‘participation revolution’ that will include people affected by disasters in decision making that has a direct impact on their recovery trajectories. It also contains the commitment to increase the use of cash transfers in humanitarian response, which gives aid recipients choice about how to spend the cash to meet their own priorities. This escalates the need for complementary technical information that increases awareness of safer building practice among households and builders. A focus on training has the potential to leave behind a legacy of safer building practice, contributing to longer-term disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster preparedness, as also highlighted by Priority 4 of the Sendai Framework for DRR (2015–2030): ‘Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction’ (UNISDR 2015).

Although support to self-recovery retains many key characteristics of other ODR approaches, the main point of departure is its emphasis on giving much greater choice and agency to disaster-affected households regarding their own recovery pathways (Schofield & Flinn 2018a). Agency, in this context, refers to the capacity of an individual or group to make decisions and take necessary action to recover as far as possible on their own terms. Nevertheless, individuals and households must act within existing political, social and economic boundaries (as identified by Sen (1999)), and the environmental, legal and technical contexts in which they live. This is further complicated after disasters by the multitude of actors and stakeholders involved in recovery and reconstruction, each with differing and often competing interests, needs, priorities and demands. Recognising people’s agency highlights that self-recovery is an inevitable process underpinned by the normal human response to crises, which is to rebuild and recover, whether receiving external assistance or not.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected between April and June 2018 from stakeholders engaged in urban reconstruction in response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (2013) and the Ghorka Earthquake in Nepal (2015). The research methods were based on a previous

pilot interdisciplinary research project by engineers, social scientists, hazard scientists and humanitarian practitioners on self-recovery in rural Philippines and Nepal (described in Twigg *et al.* (2017)). Research in each community commenced with an introductory meeting with community leaders and members to familiarise them with the project and research teams, as well as to gain insights into the history of the community, its experience during the disaster, the extent and processes of reconstruction and related opportunities and challenges. This was followed by transect walks and surveys using Global Positioning System (GPS) tags and visual observations to understand reconstruction progress; the physical landscape and local hazards; disaster impacts; recovery methods; and land use and settlement locations. Engineers surveyed building typologies; techniques, materials and structural safety features present in reconstruction; the condition of buildings; compliance with building codes; and the materials used to reconstruct.

The field sites selected were Tacloban in the Philippines, and Chautara and Bhaktapur in Nepal. Five affected urban communities were studied—three in Tacloban, one in Chautara and one in Bhaktapur. All had experienced significant disaster damage. The researchers focussed on vulnerable, lower-income households likely to face challenges in self-recovery. Sites were selected based on one or more common criteria providing proxy indicators of urban poverty levels (Moser & Stein 2011): exposure to environmental risks; low-quality and high-density housing; deficiencies in service provision; and tenure status.

The bulk of the data, on which this paper is based, was gathered from semi-structured interviews with residents, community leaders, builders, masons and carpenters.³ Interviews covered a range of topics, including recovery pathways, reconstruction choices, uptake of safety measures, perceptions of risk and environmental influences, and expectations of external assistance. Households were initially selected based on their willingness to participate in the research; the team then undertook purposeful sampling to ensure representation in terms of age and gender, location in the community, status of reconstruction and exposure to environmental risk. Key informant interviews were also carried out with representatives of national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local government⁴ to better understand the context and the assistance provided, and to triangulate interview findings with those directly involved in supporting recovery and reconstruction. Interviews were carried out in the language of the participants. Interview data were manually coded under the broad headings of socio-cultural, economic, political, technical, environment and recovery contexts. The data under each heading were then regrouped into

³ Philippines $N=90$ (participants); Nepal $N=79$.

⁴ Philippines $N=8$; Nepal $N=6$.

themes based on patterns of frequency. Expert workshops with key stakeholders,⁵ including local, national and international humanitarian organisations and donors, were held in Manila and Kathmandu to discuss initial research findings.

Tacloban, Philippines

Typhoon Haiyan hit the Central Philippines on 8 November 2013 as a Category 5 Typhoon, one of the largest to ever make landfall. The coastal city of Tacloban, the largest urban centre in Leyte Island, was one of the hardest hit areas with total damage estimated at PHP7 billion (UN-HABITAT 2016). Much of the damage and loss of life was caused by a nearly 6 metre storm surge. The government established a temporary 40 metre No Build Zone (NBZ; recategorised four months later as a No Dwell Zone: NDZ) on the Tacloban coastline, with the long-term intention of relocating NDZ residents to permanent housing in a less-exposed location north of the city. The policy was criticised for overlooking disaster-affected families' immediate recovery needs, undermining existing livelihoods based on coastal location, and excluding those remaining in the NDZ from aid (Compton 2017, Yee 2017).

Many national and international organisations implemented shelter projects in and around the city. Shelter support was extensive and varied. Humanitarian agencies and government bodies provided cash, material and technical shelter assistance to support families to self-build. Because of government restrictions on activities with communities in the NDZ, material shelter support to these households was limited to construction kits for temporary shelters. Some agencies engaged in advocacy; others offered legal support to secure land. Hosting and rental support was a component of some shelter interventions.

Cash assistance for shelter self-recovery included a government support package of Emergency Shelter Assistance (ESA), which made grants of PHP10,000 (US \$190) and PHP30,000 (US \$570) available for families with damaged or destroyed houses. Humanitarian organisations also gave conditional cash grants, materials for reconstruction and technical assistance. Material assistance consisted of lightweight materials, including corrugated metal roofing, and tools for reconstruction. Technical assistance packages took various forms, including awareness raising and provision of guidance on safer building and eight key build back safer (BBS) messages (a minimum checklist of construction techniques developed and promoted by the Global Shelter Cluster, in collaboration with the Philippines Government's Department of Social Welfare and Development). These messages were specifically for self-recovery of lightweight, non-engineered or non-architecturally-designed structures. Beneficiaries of

⁵ Philippines $N=17$ participants; Nepal $N=21$.

programmes were required to attend training on safe construction techniques and building designs prior to the distribution of cash and material assistance. Training was complemented by monitoring activities by local leaders or selected community members to provide the longer-term accompaniment necessary to support people to reconstruct.

The three communities studied in Tacloban were in the downtown area on a strip of coastal land and remain vulnerable to storms, typhoons and localised flooding. Typhoon Haiyan and its storm surge destroyed the vast majority of houses here. Two communities were entirely or partially in the government-designated NDZ and targeted for permanent relocation. Residents in the third site (not in the NDZ) had a mixture of secure and insecure tenure status. There are several relocation sites, many of them around 15 km to the north of the city. Most of the housing in the research locations was single-storey and made of timber, bamboo, plywood, corrugated metal roofing and other lightweight materials. In the poorest areas along the sea front, there was very high housing density. Narrow pathways run between makeshift houses that are frequently built on stilts above the sea. Latrines are located at the end of planks built out towards the ocean. Post-typhoon buildings in these areas are much the same as pre-typhoon houses, with the addition of agency-provided corrugated metal sheeting in places.

Chautara and Bhaktapur, Nepal

The 25 April 2015 Gorkha Earthquake in Nepal destroyed more than 600,000 houses and damaged another 285,000 (EMI 2015). It was followed by a series of aftershocks. The humanitarian shelter response to the earthquake concentrated on rural areas, with few agencies operating in urban settings. The urban locations in which the research was carried out had not received humanitarian shelter assistance beyond the provision of emergency relief and NFIs.

The Government of Nepal took a central role in recovery. The restoration and improvement of disaster-resilient housing, government buildings and cultural heritage in rural areas and cities was the first objective of the government's Post Disaster Recovery Framework (National Reconstruction Authority 2016: 4). Cash grants for owner-driven reconstruction of private houses formed the centrepiece of the government's recovery strategy. Financial assistance was provided to eligible households, along with training. Grants to households, initially of 200,000 Nepalese Rupees (NPR) (equivalent to US\$2,000), later increased to NPR300,000 (US\$3,000), were distributed in three tranches. Tranche disbursement was conditional, tied to progress in reconstruction, compliance with the National Building Code (NBC) and inclusion of earthquake-resistant features. Meeting these requirements required a high level of

technical oversight, and a package of socio-technical assistance activities was designed to provide support throughout the reconstruction process. Problems arising from the government's reconstruction policy included householders' lack of access to relevant, timely information and affordable materials for construction, together with mounting debts and complications relating to land tenure. The government's approach was also criticised for failing to meet the needs of the most marginalised (Amnesty International 2017). Overall, housing recovery was slow. On the second anniversary of the earthquake, 56 per cent of households suffering major housing damage or complete destruction were yet to begin rebuilding, with lack of money and slow disbursement of the cash grant key contributory factors; vulnerable groups, particularly low-caste, low-income households and widows formed a significant proportion of these households (Asia Foundation 2017). Frustration at the slow pace of reconstruction led the government's National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) to impose a deadline for receiving the second and third tranches (initially set for January 2018, but later extended to April and then to July 2018). These deadlines brought about an obvious surge in reconstruction, but also had a range of secondary consequences which affected the recovery context and process.

The two communities studied in Nepal were Chautara and Bhaktapur. Chautara is located along the top of a ridge and is the municipal centre of Sindhupalchok District. Housing density is greatest in the centre of the town, either side of the main road that runs the length of the hilltop. Houses here are often multi-storey. The town has less density on the slopes of the ridge, with single- and two-storey detached houses. Housing tenure is secure. Before the earthquake most houses were built of stone and mud mortar, which are the locally available materials. Many were damaged by the earthquakes. At the time of the fieldwork, families were reconstructing multi-storey brick buildings with reinforced concrete frames in the centre of Chautara. Others were rebuilding single-storey brick houses in accordance with the technical guidance developed by the NRA. Water for construction was in short supply and had to be bought from tankers.

Bhaktapur is a UNESCO world heritage site in the Kathmandu Valley. Before the earthquake, its traditional Newari brick with mud mortar houses were built in long terraces. Most houses are now built with reinforced concrete frames with brick infill and facades. The use of the house is determined by Newari cultural norms, with storage on the ground floor, bedrooms on the first, living space on the second and the kitchen in the roof space. The tall, relatively narrow housing and streets create a very dense urban environment. Because of Bhaktapur's cultural importance, families are obliged to rebuild according to certain constraints. Houses must be fully faced in brick, should not exceed three storeys and ought to have a tiled pitched roof.

BARRIERS TO URBAN SHELTER SELF-RECOVERY

Urban residents faced a range of barriers to recovery at different stages of the process. Here the research discusses the greatest challenges to urban self-recovery, as identified by affected households five years following Typhoon Haiyan and three years following the Gorkha Earthquake.

Land and property

The issue of land tenure is a significant barrier to the recovery of many urban families and was an issue across all case-study sites. Residents in Tacloban said that insecurity of tenure was the greatest and often the only remaining barrier to their recovery from Typhoon Haiyan. Land-tenure arrangements were often complex and many families even outside the NDZ did not perceive themselves to have tenure security. This affected their sense of permanence and limited the level of investment they were willing to make in their houses for the longer term. The remaining residents of the NDZ were targeted for permanent resettlement, and the same sense of temporality remains, despite the fact they have lived in the same location since long before 2013.

The issues associated with post-disaster resettlement as a means of disaster risk reduction are well documented (Badri *et al.* 2006, De Silva & Yamao 2007) and policies have been criticised for ‘obscuring the key drivers of vulnerability’, whilst exposing resettled populations to further risks (Mwakalimi Kita 2017: 158). Although factors such as the promise of ownership of a permanent house and the comparative safety of living away from the threat of storm surge made relocation an attractive offer, Tacloban residents noted that it threatened to break the social fabric of their communities and separate them from important services and livelihood sources. Many of those who were relocated were fisherman and pedicab drivers and the new sites did not allow for a continuation of these livelihood activities. Concerns about the quality of construction and lack of access to water (the municipal water system did not extend to the government relocation sites and efforts to do so have been delayed by a series of political and bureaucratic factors) further discouraged resettlement. Faced with these realities, residents have overwhelmingly chosen to rebuild on the site of their original house, although they fear eventual eviction. This allows them a home and base for the working week where they can remain close to livelihoods, schools and social networks, before returning to their resettlement house at the weekend. Insecurity of tenure and forced relocation act as barriers to self-recovery because they create uncertainty, discourage household investment in shelter and reduce the impact of interventions relating to safer building.

We only go [to the relocation house] on Sundays to clean it. We have our things here. You have to go there every once in a while or the government will take it from you. It is better here because my grandchildren are at school here and I want to spend my time with my neighbourhood before everyone gets evicted. My neighbours all come back from their relocation sites too, we all come back together. We're all being broken up. Even my two daughters have houses in different sites. The 'raffle process' has broken my family up.

Female 66, Tacloban

This is an NBZ there is no reason to [implement BBS messages]. I'm by the sea so I don't have the drive to make it safer.

Female 53, Tacloban

Relocation was not a major issue in Nepal, with most earthquake-affected households preferring to shelter in place (that is, in or near their damaged homes), particularly in urban areas (Khazai *et al.* 2016).

In Bhaktapur, Newari sociocultural practices sometimes saw several families residing in multi-storey houses that occupied very narrow plots of land. The earthquake damage to the property encouraged the movement of families into separate houses, with one family, sometimes the least economically secure, remaining in the traditional house. Some families had already been living in this way without having formally divided the original site. In cases where there had been no formal separation of land titles, the earthquake was often seen by sons as an opportune moment to encourage their father to formally subdivide the plot even if they had little interest in investing in its reconstruction because they no longer resided there. Investment for reconstruction of these plots was understandably complicated, causing disputes and delays, as families negotiated responsibilities, trade-offs and pay-offs, often accompanied by complex, lengthy and expensive administrative procedures. Negotiations lasted for months and sometimes years, thereby stalling the recovery process.

We started building five months ago. We had problems with the property. We had to distribute it among the family members. We had to negotiate and decide what we are going to do and it took us a long time to come to an agreement. It was about two and a half years of negotiation. It is complicated because we have land that is about half an hour away from Bhaktapur if you drive. We exchanged it for the land that the house is on. We gave them four annas⁶ of land for 1.5 annas of land here. We also had to sell a plot of our land and those things take a lot of time.

Female 39, Bhaktapur

As part of the recovery in Chautara, the municipality was undergoing road widening under the Nepal Rural Road Standards Right of Way. The policy is generally not applied to settlements constructed before the standards were in place, but if

⁶An anna is a unit used to calculate land area. It is the equivalent to approximately 31.80 m².

buildings are demolished, it must be followed in the reconstruction (HRRP 2018). Significant pushback from roadside communities led to the widening being reduced slightly, but this still caused significant delays in the recovery of roadside households. The process left many households in a state of uncertainty, with insufficient land to reconstruct, or loss of a significant portion of their plot for the road.

I'm not happy with my house because we had to cut the land and the house is small because we had to cut back on the space for the road expansion. So now the house is small and crooked.

Male 60, Chautara

Construction process and technical assistance

Technical assistance is an important accompaniment to cash and materials. It greatly increases the chance of structurally safer reconstruction. Agency provision of technical assistance to households was widespread in Tacloban, but coverage in Nepal has been low, particularly in urban areas. This has meant that families are facing what they often described as a complex, lengthy process with sometimes unclear, seemingly unfair or inconsistent rules, with no advice nor guidance relating to the process or implementation of building codes.

The urban communities in Chautara and Bhaktapur benefitted from being close to municipal headquarters which house the personnel to provide the regular support that households required during the construction process. However, it was very difficult to access the support they needed. Many of those interviewed found the administrative reconstruction process complex and overly lengthy. Households seeking information, advice and guidance made regular trips to place pressure on the municipality to get responses to their questions, for advice and sign-off.

We found the approval process complex. We kept getting sent to different departments, then sometimes the right people were not there to help us or to sign our documents. ... The whole process is too complicated, and you need to chase it up several times at every step. I'm not happy with the municipality, they take a long time to do anything. You go on a Friday they say come back on Sunday. Then you go Sunday they say come Wednesday. It's slow like that.

Female 38, Bhaktapur

The most difficult and tedious part was to get the design of the house approved. The engineers of NRA kept changing. For the grant, you have to have the energy to go back and forth every day.

Female 54, Chautara

Another popular means of obtaining information relating to the reconstruction process was to turn to trusted sources of information which tended to be friends, family and other community members.

We built this about one year ago. I sold a piece of land to build this because it is made of cement block so it is more expensive. We were so confused about what type of house to build and we listened to people and built this with the iron truss. It is an iron frame building. We thought that we would get the grant for this house but then we found out that it didn't meet the requirements, so we started to build the other house to get the grant.

Male 49, Chautara

Although this face-to-face information sharing is a very valuable source of knowledge exchange, it is also vulnerable to misunderstanding, leading to misinformation and rumours. This is often less immediately visible but can be a significant factor influencing people's decision-making processes and places strains on recovery.

We started reconstructing two months back when we were told that if they did not reconstruct the house we would have to give the government grant back. We were also told that we would be blacklisted if we did not build the house after receiving the grant. We could not send our children to school or register our new born children.

Female 49, Chautara

We even heard that we won't get services from the government officials. Even things like registering children and things like that.

Male 34, Chautara

Cash assistance and building costs

A recognised feature of self-recovery interventions is that the available cash assistance is often modest and this is partly what allows the approach to reach larger numbers of families than other whole house shelter approaches (Parrack *et al.* 2014). Most recent agency experience in supporting shelter self-recovery with cash grants has been in the Philippines, where lightweight structures, which are typically cheaper to reconstruct, form the dominant housing typology. Even in these interventions, the cash available has rarely been sufficient to meet the cost of a finished house. A household contribution is almost always necessary, and this was the case even in urban Tacloban where lightweight housing construction is the norm. Some households stated that they had to top up the assistance to be able to complete the house.

After I used the 30,000 PHP shelter support I had [a] basic structure but didn't have floors yet. I borrowed the money for floors from a lending association.

Female 25, Tacloban

This presents a challenge in areas where housing may be significantly more expensive to construct. In Nepal, although the government has maintained that its reconstruction grant is intended to support rather than to fully fund reconstruction, much of the criticism from households has centred on the fact that the shortfall is significant. This is particularly visible in urban settings, where a lack of space and high land value have led to high urban density and the construction of multi-storey brick or stone houses. Although the grant in total is 300,000 NPR per house, in Bhaktapur the average cost of reconstruction was 2,500,000 NPR (over US\$21,000) with houses at the lower end of the scale costing 700,000 NPR (over US\$6,000) and those at the higher end costing as much as 4,200,000 NPR (almost US\$37,000) (HRRP 2017). In Chautara, a smaller urban centre with fewer multi-storey buildings, the reconstruction costs tend to be significantly lower at 600,000 NPR (around US\$5,000) (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, urban residents are required to pay several additional costs, including those associated with the design of the house and obtaining approval from the municipality, and building permit fees.

Labour and materials

Residents noted that the costs of construction in Chautara and Bhaktapur increased significantly as a result of the government grant deadlines, subsequent surge in reconstruction and the resultant strain on labour and the price, quality and availability of materials.

The materials were scarce because everyone was reconstructing because of the deadline. They were selling construction materials on the black market at much higher prices

Female 54, Chautara

Material prices increased so much lately. One sack of cement increased by 50 Rupees in just 3 days and in a month it had increased by 100. The middle men in the supply chains are increasing the costs. If the supplier increases the costs then everyone along the chain needs to do so and by the time we get it, it is expensive. The quality has decreased a lot. The sand is not properly washed and it has mud and pebbles in it. Once I had to send a whole truck load back and ask for a new one because the sand was such low quality it was unusable.

Male 25, Bhaktapur

In Bhaktapur, where there was a heavy reliance on contractors to lead the reconstruction, it was common for these contractors to be working on several houses simultaneously, which families felt was significantly slowing down the process.

Another thing that would make the construction easier is if labourers didn't have to rush from one place to another. If they could just focus on one house then maybe they would have finished quicker. Because the government put a deadline, everyone started at the same time. If they hadn't, people would have started at different times and recovered in five or six years.

Male 50, Bhaktapur

In Chautara, the severe shortage of labourers caused contractors to bring in workers from other regions who were often unskilled and were used to building very different housing typologies. There were instances of families dissatisfied with the quality of the work carried out. Several households responded to the announcement of the deadline by quickly constructing a single-storey one-room building, which was often not fit for purpose.

Shortage of labourers was one of the main reasons for delay in construction of the houses. Now, the labourers and masons who came from far west are building his house.

Male 52, Chautara

A lot of construction is happening now because of the deadline and there are lots of masons here from the Terai. They are taking longer to do the work because it is not the same construction for them. This should have all been done by now.

Male 46, Chautara

In all locations, families were drawing on alternative and often multiple finance sources to fill the gap left by humanitarian and government cash grants. Remittances and one-off family donations were an important source of finance for many families. Similarly, many went into debt through borrowing from informal money lenders, banks, cooperatives and/or family.

To buy the materials we took out extra loans. We also borrowed from a private person, the system called 5-6, you borrow 5 and you pay back 6 after one month.

Female 31, Tacloban

While access to loans contributed to housing recovery, these could be accompanied by very high annual interest rates. Interviewed households in Bhaktapur and Chautara had obtained loans with interest rates of 3 to 16 per cent. This was causing significant levels of debt, as well as increasing household stress and anxiety. The poorest families were often excluded from accessing finance for reconstruction, even government-subsidised loans, because of unfavourable lending conditions, such as high interest rates and the need to put up land and housing as collateral. These families were usually forced out of the reconstruction process and many remained in displacement camps or temporary shelters constructed with no technical guidance. Elderly people, widows and female-headed households were often in this group. In some instances, families had put their house up for collateral even though they had no idea how they

were going to meet the loan conditions. Selling family agricultural land was a common fundraising strategy to support the reconstruction of housing in Bhaktapur, but it was also a lengthy process which delayed recovery for many families. Families with no land to sell were often forced out of the reconstruction process altogether.

All of the people that had land that they could sell have done so and invested in their houses but that is not possible for me as I have no land. There is a government loan for 25 Lakh [NPR]⁷ [\$22,000] but I can't get that. I don't have the income to pay it back. It wouldn't be enough to build a safe home anyway. Before he died my husband said that a loan would cause us too much stress and worry. There would be no peace. He said he'd rather live in this.

Female 65, Bhaktapur

Water

The need for large quantities of water for reconstruction was a significant challenge in Chautara and Bhaktapur. Water was brought into the communities by tankers, at an additional cost to the household. Delays in water deliveries further increased costs, as households still had to pay construction teams, despite them not being able to work if the tanker did not arrive.

The lack of workers has been a challenge. The materials have got really expensive too with everyone reconstructing. But the worst problem has been the lack of water. We've had to bring water from down the valley and you have to hire someone with a water tanker truck. You pay 1000 Rupees for 1000 litres of water. Then you don't get it on time even when you do pay for it. I hired labourers and then the water didn't arrive so many times. You need a lot when you are constructing a house. You have to wet the cement, you use it with the sand and for the plaster that goes on the walls. Normally we pay 200–300 Rupees per month but that is just for the drinking water.

Female 30, Chautara

A lack of water can compromise the quality of construction: for concrete and cement mortar to reach full strength it has to set in a damp environment.

Urban density, rubble clearance and access

Many households faced difficulties in clearing and rebuilding in dense urban environments left devastated by the disasters. Debris and rubble clearance through cash-for-work schemes were a significant kickstart to recovery in Tacloban, clearing the way for people to commence reconstruction.

⁷ 1 Lakh = 100,000.

Cash-for-work is the number one help. There was a lot of waste, so you have got to clean the surroundings to build your house anyway. And you get a salary so it's like hitting two birds with one stone. I used that money for food and other daily expenses

Male 46, Tacloban

In Bhaktapur, main access routes were cleared by the government soon after the earthquake and there was some demolition of housing along these roads. However, several severely cracked and damaged houses remain standing in the densest parts of the city where narrow roads make demolition and debris removal difficult. An additional and significant challenge faced by many households in Bhaktapur was that they often shared a common wall with one or more neighbours. This meant that demolishing one house often had implications for the structural integrity of several others. Disputes with neighbours about who will demolish and reconstruct and when have lasted months and years. In other cases, property demarcation caused conflict with neighbours fighting over small spaces of land where houses once stood. These factors slowed down the self-recovery process in Bhaktapur but were less common in Chautara, where space was at less of a premium, or in Tacloban where the densest communities were often informal, and people tended to stick to the original footprint of their house—presumably because no property demarcation records exist for such areas.

We started rebuilding only four or five days ago. We've been saving up. We also had boundary disputes with the neighbours. You know when you reconstruct then you have to put up the notice and they disputed our land borders. It took a long time to settle. We had to go to the municipality to get the land formally marked and that process took at least eight months. We'd have started eight months ago had it not been for the disputes.

Female 28, Bhaktapur

Renters and self-recovery

People living in rented accommodation prior to the disaster faced particular, under-recognised challenges to self-recovery. Renters fall outside the humanitarian shelter sector's current definition of self-recovery, which focuses on self-builders, and reconstruction grants are targetted solely at homeowners. Few of the respondents in Tacloban had been renting prior to Haiyan, although some had been beneficiaries of cash-for-rent schemes⁸ for up to two years after the event before ultimately deciding to return to the site of their original house to reconstruct.

In Bhaktapur and Chautara, a number of renters had been displaced to self-built temporary shelters and displacement camps because their rental accommodation was

⁸ Cash-for-rent schemes provide families with support to rent safe housing.

damaged or destroyed. The diminished supply of rental accommodation significantly increased the rental value of the remaining stock. Returning landlords also needed to repossess their properties for their own use or for family members whose homes had been destroyed. In some cases, displacement had occurred several times in line with the shifting availability of rental accommodation.

After the earthquake we went to the fields. We looked for a place to rent but anyone with rental space wasn't renting anymore at the start because they needed it for their own families. There is a big engineering college down the road. We went there for four months but then after that they wanted to open again and they said that we were disturbing the education of the students so the municipality found the land where the shelters are now.

Female 30, Bhaktapur

In Chautara, there were instances where misinformation surrounding grants, in particular that renters were able to get access to the grant, had actually motivated some long-term renters to seek out land and finances to start constructing a house.

The government has not done anything to support people renting. We lost our homes too. We should be considered for the grant because we have lived here now for fifteen years but the municipality thinks that we have a home in the village. That is my parents' home and I left fifteen years ago. I've submitted an application but it was refused; I appealed. I am confident that I will get it, other people in my situation have managed to.

Female 43, Chautara

CONCLUSIONS

Self-recovery is an inevitable process. Following a disaster, populations never remain passive. This study has provided a snapshot of the recovery process in three very different urban contexts in the Philippines and Nepal and shows a range of issues that pose major challenges to household self-recovery.

In both countries, policy decisions aimed at improving housing safety have significantly influenced the recovery trajectories of affected families, with often unintended negative consequences. In Tacloban, while the resettlement policy aims to enhance households' physical security by putting them in a safer location, it places families at risk of further impoverishment by separating them from established livelihood sources. A family's need for shelter does not exist in isolation from other fundamental needs, including access to livelihoods, water, sanitation, hygiene, health and food security. Moreover, people who have continued to live in the NDZ or on informal unsafe land do not want to invest in permanent structures.

In Nepal, the policy of conditional cash grants for reconstruction is intended to support safer buildings, but has had unintended consequences. The cost of materials

and labour rose significantly and, in many cases, the grants were insufficient. The most vulnerable households and groups often remain excluded from the formal urban recovery process and are unable to access the grant, meaning that they have to remain in unfinished and damaged housing; the long-term impact is unclear.

The households who were interviewed said little about the influence of physical infrastructure on their self-recovery choices and practices, although access to water was a significant issue for households in Nepal; and other research suggests that the earthquake reinforced pre-existing inequalities in access to domestic water supplies in the urban Kathmandu Valley (Shrestha *et al.* 2017). Households had much more to say about the large-scale ‘soft’ infrastructure⁹ for recovery created by institutional policies and actions, particularly relating to housing, land and property rights, and to the conditionality associated with reconstruction grants. Market forces were also a significant part of this recovery context. Interviewees said little about social capital and networks, although research has highlighted the valuable support roles played by these after the Nepal earthquake (Daly *et al.* 2017, Devkota *et al.* 2016). A study in Bhaktapur district found that nearly half of respondents believed there was less harmony in their community since the 2015 earthquake (Penta *et al.* 2016), while research in Tacloban has shown that unequal distribution of aid and the slow pace of relief efforts following Typhoon Haiyan undermined trust and local traditions of mutual assistance (Eadie & Su 2018, Field 2017).

As the shelter sector increasingly moves towards supporting self-recovery, these case studies raise key questions about what shape these interventions should take in the urban context. In locations such as Tacloban, where there is a tendency to rapidly construct lightweight housing at relatively low cost, the three-pronged approach of material, financial and technical assistance, which has been adopted to date, may successfully address people’s immediate housing needs. However, it will not address the other longer-term challenges that families face that are typical in the urban contexts and relevant to their recovery, including access to livelihoods, services and secure land tenure. Conversely, other urban built environments, such as in Nepal, will require more substantial and sustained inputs in terms of money, materials, labour and skills to support safer reconstruction.

The field research demonstrates the profound influence that national and local governments’ policies and practices have on self-recovery opportunities. Individual households interact with much larger systems of humanitarian agencies, national and local institutions, infrastructures, markets and communities, identifying recovery opportunities and attempting to create recovery pathways through this crowded and

⁹Our understanding of ‘infrastructure’ includes the social and institutional as well as the built environment, in line with the holistic perspective of the British Academy’s Cities and Infrastructure Programme.

complicated landscape. Supporting urban self-recovery requires working with communities to identify, understand and work within urban systems, taking institutional, social, economic and cultural factors into account as well as the built and natural environments, the many operational barriers holding them back, and the opportunities for recovery. This suggests not only that humanitarian agencies should put greater emphasis on facilitation rather than implementation, but also that they should respond more flexibly to the complexity of post-disaster urban contexts and the dynamic nature of recovery and reconstruction processes.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the British Academy Cities and Infrastructure Programme with funding from the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund. The authors would like to thank the Promoting Safer Building Team, the communities and research teams in the Philippines and Nepal, CARE Philippines and CARE Nepal, Aaron Anderson and Alex Willcox.

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To cite the article: Holly Schofield, Emma Lovell, Bill Flinn and John Twigg (2019), 'Barriers to urban shelter self-recovery in Philippines and Nepal: lessons for humanitarian policy and practice', *Journal of the British Academy*, 7(s2): 83–109.
 DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007s2.083>

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Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052-7217) is published by



10-11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

