

GLOBAL BLUEPRINTS FOR CHANGE

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The Global Blueprints for Change contain guidance for working together to improve the capability to identify indicators of physical, social, enterprise, and environmental vulnerabilities throughout the world and to select and implement realistic solutions to reduce them towards acceptable levels.

Theme A: LIVING WITH NATURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL HAZARDS
Topic A.4: Enhancing Public Awareness

“Community Based Housing in a Disaster Context”

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COMMUNITY BASED HOUSING IN A DISASTER CONTEXT

An Interview with Mihir R. Bhatt (MRB) by Mark Conway (MC)

MC: Government and Non-Government Organisations (GOs and NGOs) have carried out many community based housing projects after the January 26th Earthquake in Gujarat, India through both relief and rehabilitation. What are Disaster Mitigation Institute's (DMI's) perspectives on this situation?

MRB: Initial distribution of tents was useful. Though it must be noted that for the first time tents have replaced tarpaulin as a relief shelter in Gujarat, perhaps India. In the future, communities will expect tents. The debate on the provision of temporary shelter was useful but may have been too prolonged and as a result its provision was delayed beyond May 2001. DMI's recent field studies for United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Patan and Kutch suggest that the level of satisfaction with temporary shelter is much higher among the recipients who received it before June. After that there is dramatic increase in their frustration, partly due to the rains and also piecemeal changes in the village adoption scheme. The current ongoing rebuilding activity is skewed in favour of rural housing. Urban housing is almost entirely neglected. Even in rural housing, from an estimated 1,90,000 new houses to be built, the NGOs are building only 8,000– to 12,000, though there is no single source to determine this number. The Government of Gujarat is not rebuilding any damaged or destroyed private or individual houses unlike Latur where the Government of Maharashtra built a large number of private individual houses. Focus on retrofitting—at action and policy level—is very low, though Dr. Rajendra Desai, Kirtee Shah and others have initiated new retrofitting activities. Again the DMI study in 60 villages in Patan and Surendranagar suggest that there is a great demand for increasing understanding of the concepts of retrofitting and building safety among the victims. The village communities also want technical inputs and resources including building construction and finance. Demand for technical inputs and resources is widespread and mostly unmet. Now from where these inputs and resources will come remains to be seen. CARE (India)'s housing programme is worth watching as they are among very few NGOs who have continued to engage local and state governments across the village building activities. This is easier said than done and thus worth watching how they achieve this as administrative, procedural, technical and social intermediation related issues are many. Maintaining the NGO–GO link is not easy. But what CARE (India) has planned is worthy of policy attention. In brief, what is emerging from the field is a fairly wide range of shelter responses from the local and a few from the international relief agencies.

MC: What are your views about the work of GOs and NGOs in Kutch district of Gujarat and what are the reasons for the still poor communications between all those involved in disaster management?

MRB: Excellent efforts are being made to provide semi-permanent and permanent shelter to those who have lost their homes. Local designs, indigenous changes and suitable adaptations are being made and new housing processes are being worked out. Abhiyan has covered an estimated 22,000 households with an indigenous design of temporary shelter. In addition, for example, Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief (EFICOR), which has rebuilt an interesting village, named Malkondji in Latur, has learned from Latur experience for Gujarat rehabilitation, which includes use of salvaged doors and windows for new structures. Action Aid has focused its energies on making sure that social isolation and exclusion is not perpetuated through the shelter rebuilding process. In other words, they are trying to rebuild houses through a social justice process. A fair amount of exchange of ideas and approaches has taken shape due to the regular shelter coordination meetings held by UNDP at Bhuj. Issues of use of technology, location, construction, safety and NGO–GO links were discussed from time to time. Unfortunately all decisions related to shelter are not being taken at the Bhuj or Kutch district level. Obviously these decisions are being taken in other districts, cities, agencies and at the state level. Thousands of individuals who are rebuilding their homes are making individual decisions on time, resources, labour, technology, building material, layout, etc. These individuals or their decisions do not always relate with NGO initiatives. Thus there is a gap in communications among NGOs ,between NGOs and local individuals and most importantly between those who are shelterless and those who can provide resources, material and services to rebuild shelter.

MC: Shelter relief has been managed and implemented badly? Can you expand on the term “value added relief work” in relation to community based housing?

MRB: Before mentioning shelter relief that does need improvement, let me point out that the cash compensation paid by the Government of Gujarat is worth noting. Rarely, in such a short time are so many—almost 7,00,000—households paid compensation for shelter loss and damage. Some received Rs.500 and some received Rs.40,000 towards their first installment. Discounting leakages and misallocation, the efforts of the Government of Gujarat in paying cash compensation are laudable and yet have received little recognition. This does not mean that there is no scope for improvement, especially for the payment of the now due second installment.

NGOs and others with internal technical and managerial capacities jumped into building shelter. But as said, when all numbers are added up, what they will build is less than 8 per cent of the total need. Rebuilding will remain a “people’s building process”. It is the poor and shelterless people who will remove debris,

level the ground, salvage building elements, so on, and so forth. This is perhaps the biggest rebuilding process in terms of numbers of people and buildings. What is needed are ways of making this rebuilding process more informed, innovative, viable, sustainable and safe. A very large number of NGOs who are not already in the shelter rebuilding process can add value to this process by making it safer, timely, accessible and suitable. Currently very few NGOs are doing this beyond Abhiyan, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Punshottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), Navsarjan, Samarthan and others.

MC: What is DMI doing to promote this focus?

MRB: DMI is a community based organisation that carries out a range of activities, including: livelihood support through its Livelihood Relief Fund; training and capacity building through its Learning Resources; and water harvesting through its Water Security Programme. Shelter does play a crucial role in building livelihood security, because for so many of the rural poor their house is also their place of work. They produce, store and sell their products from their home. As a result, DMI is involved in shelter processes through livelihood rebuilding activities. This is a somewhat unusual door through which to enter mainstream rebuilding processes. But it is a direct door. DMI designed, developed and disseminated a large number of posters on safer building practices. The posters were based on the material developed by the People's Science Institute, Dehradun in 1997. That design was modified to make it suitable for local structures, materials and methods. Further, the Government of Gujarat reviewed it. It was pilot tested with the affected communities in Patan and Surendranagar districts, modified and, with the help of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it was disseminated in a very large number of villages, especially where NGOs and the government were not very active. A recent review conducted by Joep Verhagen, in 10 villages and across 100 homeowners shows that such 'marginal' value addition added up and did improve and enhance local building processes. In fact the value addition is hardly "marginal". Similarly, Training of Trainers on safer building practices covering 60 villages in Patan and Surendranagar added value to local ongoing building construction, making it safer and cost effective. The review suggests 10 per cent to 15 per cent cost reduction has taken place in almost 30 per cent of the communities covered. Encouraged by this, DMI is now designing and developing a training module on safer building practices for DMI's national course series. The International Labour Organisation is supporting this effort. The work in said 60 villages will continue as soon as UNDP enter into second phase.

MC: How do you see that relief and rehabilitation activities have looked towards disaster mitigation in relation to shelter security?

MRB: Far from satisfactory or appropriate rebuilding is taking place. To what extent disaster mitigation is included in the NGO or local building processes is very uncertain. New shelters may be unsafe in the face of cyclones, have fire hazard material or heat up to high temperatures. World famous Dr. Arya is overseeing some of the initiatives but obviously not all of them. School buildings are without suitable openings and layouts. The focus of safety measures is on buildings that have collapsed. But what about the safety of buildings that have not collapsed? This is a big issue as we move away from Bhuj and Kutch to Saurashtra and Ahmedabad. Mainstreaming mitigation still remains outside most rehabilitation and development processes. In Ahmedabad, DMI has taken up an urban risk reduction activity which will find ways to mainstream mitigation in urban areas.

MC: Shelter security is just one part of DMI's working model. Can you explain how shelter is linked with other aspects of vulnerability?

MRB: As said, for the poor their home is their place of work. Investment in shelter is investment in livelihood. Investment in shelter is investment in health. Investment in shelter is investment in the social safety of women. Similarly, due to the popularity of roof rainwater harvesting structures in Gujarat, shelter security rebuilds water security. When all the important securities are simultaneously built, vulnerability of the poor is reduced.

MC: How far should disaster mitigation be built into community based housing projects and should all those who are involved in rehabilitation and reconstruction after a disaster implement it?

MRB: Community based housing projects cost a lot of money, but more importantly, they cost tremendous efforts on the part of the NGO and also the community.

Increasing disaster mitigation and preparedness measures would increase the value for this cost. But such value addition may not be possible for many communities and all NGOs due to lack of resources, capacities and conceptual groundwork. This area attracts attention and also concern.

Further, as said, mainstreaming mitigation is not a one-time event; it is an ongoing activity. Without repeated investments of efforts and resources, mitigation measures may not perform when needed the most: in the case of a disaster. Thus safety of shelter remains uncertain.

MC: What would be the significance of safer building codes in urban areas?

MRB: Urban areas, in many ways, are engines of economic development in Gujarat, and currently they are also engines of economic rebuilding and rehabilitation. DMI's state-wide benchmark survey on the impact of this earthquake on livelihoods suggests that recovery is being led by linkages between rural areas and urban areas. This is not so surprising. What is surprising is the role small urban areas are playing in this recovery. See what Halwad in Surendranagar is doing to

villages in the surrounding areas. Such strong economic links are reemerging and reviving and rebuilding local economies. In many ways this is the symbol of Gujarat: making money work for you. Thus, by introducing safer building codes in small towns, we can almost introduce safer construction in surrounding and linked villages. The National Foundation of India has also found this to be an important area of involvement. They are funding initiatives to expand the influence of this concept.

MC: After five years, what would stand out as the most important aspects of community based housing after a disaster?

MRB: The limits of NGO reach in rebuilding will be clearer to NGOs and others: what they can do and what they can not do. Also, role of market—shelter, materials, labour—in accelerating or slowing down the rebuilding process will be clearer.

The importance of retrofitting will be recognised again. Similarly, housing finance and building material depots will be recognised in future rebuilding, as will be the valuable role of smaller towns in promoting safety.