



## A.4 Haiti - 2010 - Earthquake - Overview

### Sheltering in Haiti:

#### Looking forward while looking back

In August 2010, seven months after the devastating Magnitude 7.0 earthquake near Port-au-Prince, a think tank made the following key shelter-related recommendation<sup>1</sup>:

*"The Haitian government, together with the donor community, should accelerate removal of rubble. This is the single most important step toward reconstruction of housing and infrastructure that the Haitian government and donors can take."*

The study went further:

*"For housing to be reconstructed, sites have to be cleared... Unless rubble is cleared expeditiously, hundreds of thousands of Haitians will still be in tent camps during the 2011 hurricane season."*

That hundreds of thousands of Haitians still face the very real prospect of remaining in camps during the upcoming 2012 hurricane season, and perhaps beyond, speaks volumes about the challenges of delivering humanitarian shelter assistance and housing reconstruction in Haiti - and elsewhere.

The difficult, dangerous, and generally thankless task of clearing rubble is viewed largely as a means to the end of enabling the recovery of lives, communities, and societies in the wake of disasters. Clearing rubble, then, is a critical precursor to recovery; it can't be overlooked or sidestepped. Perhaps more so than any previous natural disaster since the adoption of the UN cluster system in 2005, the Haiti earthquake challenged that system significantly with the profound issue of ownership: which cluster would take the lead in addressing clearance of the enormous rubble pile generated by the earthquake? Which donors would fund the planning and clearance of rubble? Which organisations would actually do the clearance work?

While the case studies that follow reflect extraordinary and laudable effort, they also at least suggest that the questions remain only partially answered, to the detriment of those living in - and out of - camps.

As central as the rubble issue has been to recovery, the more important issue, and underlying rubble both literally and figuratively, is the land that was the locale of the homes, shops, schools, neighbourhoods, and other features of a primarily densely populated urban area affected by the earthquake. The rubble and broken buildings littering settlements after the earthquake effectively decreased the size of those settlements, and thus the supply of land available for sheltering people and recovering economic, educational, governance, and other activities. The land and housing markets in those settlements, constrained by myriad tenure, infrastructure, service, and hazard risk issues prior to the earthquake, were exacerbated significantly by its impacts, making it extremely challenging to respond to widespread shelter needs, while also affecting the longer-term process of recovery.

Shelter and land issues in urban areas pose particular challenges to humanitarian organisations, many of which have their genesis, institutional memories, protocols, and expertise in rural areas. Confronting rubble, land, and related issues in dense urban areas anywhere would thus be a challenge to even the most experienced humanitarian organisations. All the more so in Haiti, where extreme poverty, environmental degradation, and a host of hazards, coupled with the limited capacities of a complex network of regulatory, political, community, and market actors, combined to create the highly vulnerable settlements that sustained such overwhelming destruction, and making it all the more difficult to respond to needs generated by the earthquake.

<sup>1</sup> RAND Corporation. Building a More Resilient Haitian State, 2010. Available from <http://www.rand.org>



Dealing with the rubble has been a central issue to recovery.  
Photo: Joseph Ashmore

Many of the case studies that follow contended directly with land and related settlements issues, bringing both reaffirmation of and new meaning to the phrase “shelter and settlements” (S&S) sector that has been used increasingly by humanitarian actors in recent years to reflect a recognition that sector activities entail not just the four walls and roof of a shelter, but also its contextual setting. A focus on the settlements side of the sector will likely remain a feature of continuing efforts in Haiti, as well as future sector responses elsewhere, particularly those in urban areas. To do otherwise would only further increase the vulnerability of populations in hazard-prone settlements.

Perhaps the zenith of shelter and settlements sector programming in Haiti has been the “neighbourhood approach” adopted by several actors to plan and integrate multi-sector, area-based programming, often in collaboration with other humanitarian agencies, civil society organisations, the private sector, and local and national government offices. This settlements-based approach to shelter provision was identified early on after the earthquake as a means of both working in rubble-strewn areas to provide humanitarian assistance and establishing a platform for subsequent reconstruction. Although initial results of the neighbourhood approach are promising, there are still more earthquake-affected neighbourhoods than actors to work in them. Further, a macro-level, city-wide complement to the neighbourhood approach, which could link currently disparate and distant efforts, is still very much a work in progress in Haiti, despite the intensive and concerted efforts of UN-HABITAT and others. Finally, it must not be overlooked that the neighbourhood approach, if adopted and implemented early in the response effort, is an effective means of promoting inter-cluster coordination, lending critically important on-the-ground support to the cluster approach, which is, after all, the primary means of guiding humanitarian action.

One very large “lesson learned” of the Haiti earthquake is that both the neighbourhood approach and its macro-level complement, an emergency master plan,

are fundamental to any effort to address shelter needs. No less important than these foundational elements of sector strategy is the communication of strategy, for even the best of strategies are less than effective if not understood widely, adopted by key actors, and implemented expeditiously. The strategic communications outputs of humanitarian actors in urban areas must be disseminated early and repeated often in order to inform and guide response activities. Messaging also needs to be creative, visible, and pervasive to compete with the multiple and voluminous messages received daily by those living in urban areas. Although this was and remains a challenge in Haiti, as it is anywhere, the rapid emergence of numerous forms of social media enabled not only delivery of strategic messages, and much needed feedback, but also actual implementation of shelter programmes, with “mobile money” initiatives to pay for rent and other necessities a good example.

Finally, the following case studies reflect considerable innovation and flexibility by humanitarian actors in response to numerous constraints, an awareness that risk reduction is paramount to “Building Back Better” and a recognition that “one-size-fits-all” approaches, if they ever were effective in rural settings, are most definitely inappropriate in urban settings. Moving ahead, a focus on the neighbourhood approach will likely remain a feature of continuing efforts in Haiti, as well as future Shelter and Settlement sector responses elsewhere, particularly in urban areas. In Haiti, the range of interventions will have to expand, as impoverished families in camps, limited land supplies, complex land tenure issues, and limited resources will likely conspire to produce not just more transitional shelters and more repairs of damaged housing, but also greater resort to hosting support, rental housing production, and rental subsidies. It is hoped that the effort going forward will feature the continuing quest for clarity on the seminal issues that confound and define the sector, perhaps the largest alluded to in the study quoted above: what is shelter, what is housing, and what is meant by “toward reconstruction”?

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A humanitarian response to urban context: Two-story transitional shelters, part of a project to apply a “neighbourhood approach” in central Port-au-Prince. Photo: USAID/OFDA.