

Commonwealth People's Forum Workshop Report

Vulnerability, disasters and development – learning from recent experience

Summary of Outcome

ComHabitat's workshop - Vulnerability, Disasters and Development – learning from recent experience – developed a consensus on approaches to post-disaster reconstruction. Participants agreed that post disaster reconstruction is more successful when affected communities are able to play a key role in planning and implementing recovery programmes. It was also recognised that professionals could play a valuable role provided they respected community knowledge and priorities.

The workshop put forward 3 recommendations to the plenary of the People's Forum:

1. The Commonwealth Secretariat and Foundation should support international networks, such as ComHabitat, to facilitate knowledge exchange and practical partnerships between Commonwealth Governments, donors, civil society, local government, professionals and scientists seeking to reduce the vulnerability of people living in low income and informal settlements.
2. Commonwealth professional associations should explore how partnerships with the poor can be developed in a manner that optimises the contributions and knowledge that both have to offer.
3. Governments, local government and donors should ensure that their responses to disasters do not result in forced evictions and should ensure that analysis of vulnerability to natural and man made hazards is incorporated into Poverty Reduction Strategies.

The workshop

The meeting was attended by civil society organisations and built environment professionals from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Europe. Three speakers outlined post-disaster recovery and reconstruction processes, linking these to wider issues of poverty and vulnerability.

Carmen Griffiths from the Construction Resource & Development Centre, Jamaica spoke about poor communities vulnerability to disasters, particularly in relation to hurricanes. She emphasised the importance of using the knowledge of communities, particularly women, and of investing in building community capacity to engage in disaster preparedness, mitigation and post-disaster response.

In a video presentation, Arif Hasan from the Urban Resource Centre in Pakistan outlined the scale and impact of the recent earthquake and the challenge of reconstruction. He emphasised that housing can be rebuilt using local materials by local people, with appropriate technical support.

Tony Lloyd-Jones from the Tsunami Recovery Network steering group emphasised the need for core principles in post-disaster recovery – including poor communities right to return - and for transparency in monitoring donor assistance. He stressed the benefits of international networking and knowledge exchange within and between communities, governments, donors, civil society, local government, and professionals.

Discussion

The workshop recognised that there are strong parallels between the vulnerability resulting from disasters and that resulting from forced evictions and from conflict scenarios that result in involuntary displacement. Addressing this issue requires a recognition that secure tenure is a crucial component in helping the poor to withstand the impact of natural disasters as well as poverty. People's right to return to where they were previously living was recognised as a complex issue, particularly when post-conflict or post-disaster land grabbing had occurred. It was agreed that where communities prioritise return to their land, they should be supported to do so with appropriate housing and infrastructure reconstruction, and support in preparing early warning and escape plans. In post-disaster or post-conflict situations, there is often an opportunity to take a fresh look at options and to plan settlements in a more sustainable way. The input of professionals and scientists in helping communities to assess disaster vulnerability and options for mitigating this vulnerability could be of great value providing that this assistance is provided through consultation and dialogue rather than by edict. In post-conflict situations, relocating infrastructure (such as roads and ports) that has contributed to the conflict may be desirable.

Participants recognised that many different kinds of knowledge are essential for disaster preparedness and post disaster response, and that past interventions had not always used this knowledge effectively. It was agreed that professional, scientific and technical knowledge was important, but that professionals need to ensure that they work in partnership with local organisations that are linked to the local community. Scientific knowledge, if shared effectively with governments and local communities, can enable communities to make informed decisions. It was pointed out that no matter what the technology, disaster-warning systems would only work if that information can be got to the poorest communities. Communities often had detailed historical knowledge of disaster-resistant construction methodologies, but there are examples of this knowledge being lost during periods when disasters were less frequent. Professionals can help with simple guidelines for post-disaster reconstruction, for example the current guidelines for earthquake-resistant construction produced by architects linked to the Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan. Globalisation also presents opportunities for sharing knowledge between countries and communities facing similar disaster risks. Participants discussed mechanisms for sharing knowledge, including effective use of the media and international exchanges involving community members and young professionals.

The roles and responsibilities of government, local government, civil society, professionals and communities were explored. Networking and the exchange of knowledge between all these actors, locally and internationally, were seen as of great value in improving the effectiveness of post-disaster reconstruction. The Commonwealth could help in networking and sharing knowledge, and in getting information into schools. The importance of strengthening the response capacity of local government – frequently the agency responsible for infrastructure such as water, sanitation, schools and hospitals – was particularly emphasised.

Participants gave examples of inappropriate international donor responses, particularly in terms of in-kind donations of equipment, and felt that there was a general lack of transparency and accountability in the expenditure of donated funds. Local civil society is able to hold government programmes to account, but found it difficult to influence the big international NGOs' post-tsunami work. It was also noted that post-disaster recovery needs not only to take account of rebuilding housing and infrastructure, but also rebuilding lives, and that in this context psychological support was crucial. The short-term nature of much professional support post-disaster was also seen as an issue, as was lack of technical expertise (e.g. examples of aid agencies putting victims into unsafe buildings after a disaster because they lacked staff with construction knowledge).

The workshop concluded that Commonwealth Governments should be addressing disasters as a human settlements issue within the context of their commitment to the Habitat Agenda and MDGs, and in the formulation of national poverty reduction and sustainable development strategies, including PRSPs.