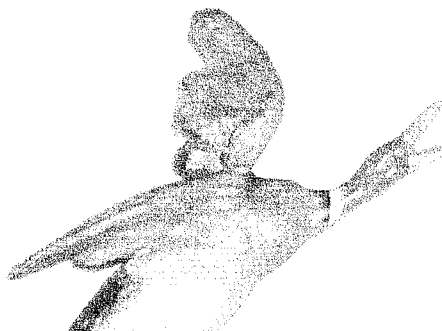


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Developing Humanitarian Guidelines for Transitional Settlement

shelterproject.org



Albania, 1999. Refugee camp planned and built by a team including Dr Tom Corsellis from shelterproject.org whilst a consultant to DFID.

Photo: Tony Conlay, DFID consultant.

This article presents extracts from a report on shelterproject.org's current 'Guidelines' project, describing their pivotal role in bringing together practitioners (NGOs UN, government and industry) and academia for an improved coordination of shelter response.

In humanitarian emergencies, the most striking images are often of thousands of tents housing families in extremely difficult conditions. These camps, some as large as cities, represent one form of transitional settlement response.

Affected populations require a covered living space that provides protection from the elements, security, privacy and dignity. Yet camps are often built without proper planning or full consideration of the wider implications at local, national and international levels. Moreover, camps are only one solution amongst many options and are often a knee-jerk reaction to a problem, rather than a well-considered strategy.

shelterproject.org's aim is to improve the appropriateness, quality and sustainability of transitional settlement and shelter for populations affected by conflict and natural disasters. Key to achieving this aim is a move away from planning focused at an individual or family level and towards a focus on wider settlement issues. The term 'Transitional Settlement' has been developed by shelterproject.org and its collaborators to cover all aspects of emergency shelter, settlement provision and the broader political, social, economic and environmental impacts of these conditions.

Adopting a 'livelihoods approach' is vital to understanding these impacts at the local level. A livelihoods approach is simply the understanding of the ways in which people manage their lives in order to access the resources they need for an acceptable quality of life. Therefore, they have some resources (such as a workshop and tools), they adopt strategies (such as mending shoes or subsistence farming), and they plan for outcomes (such as having food security for the winter and being able to send their children to school). The livelihoods approach is well researched and applied in development projects, yet its potential is unfulfilled for application to emergency situations. Using the livelihoods approach will assist in bridging emergency relief and development work, particularly in connecting transitional settlement responses with rebuilding communities.

To indicate the scale of the need for transitional settlement responses, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN agency responsible for providing protection to refugees, estimates the number of people of concern who fall under their mandate as almost twenty million, mostly in Asia.¹ Refugees are defined under international legislation as people having a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, mostly outside their country of nationality and unable to return or avail themselves of the protection of that country.² The UNHCR also has responsibility for some internally displaced people (IDP) who have been forced to move or who lack the basic necessities of life for reasons similar to refugees, but who are still inside their country of nationality. Many other organisations also provide transitional settlement responses, so the real figures for displaced populations are difficult to know exactly.

shelterproject.org has identified a problem in the humanitarian aid community that workers in the transitional settlement sector are not adequately equipped and are not supported by appropriate structures. Support documentation such as field guidelines and a

comprehensive description of choices does not exist for this sector. A common vocabulary is absent. The under-developed character of the transitional settlement sector is in stark contrast to other sectors such as health, water and sanitation which have well-developed sectoral guidelines and profiles.

The research of *shelterproject.org* indicates that throughout the evolution of the aid community, the nature of transitional settlement response has been misunderstood.³ The focus has been on the physical shelter needs of the individual, such as protection from weather and insects, resulting in disproportionately small resources being committed to meeting wider needs such as security, dignity and a sense of community. When combined with insufficient legal mechanisms to support transitional settlement as a human right, this approach has undermined the development of the sector.⁴

The type and location of settlements for displaced populations may destabilise the receiving country, or even region. Responses to these needs do not have to produce further detrimental impacts. Instead, they can and should facilitate a durable solution and offer long-term development opportunities to everyone affected.

In the field, the design and implementation of transitional settlement programmes is often undertaken by generalists, specialists from other technical disciplines or consultants. No specialist assessment tools are currently available to form an accurate understanding of the transitional settlement needs and coping strategies of everyone affected by such situations. Tools available to design and implement responses lack coherence and wide acceptance by both the humanitarian aid community and governments.

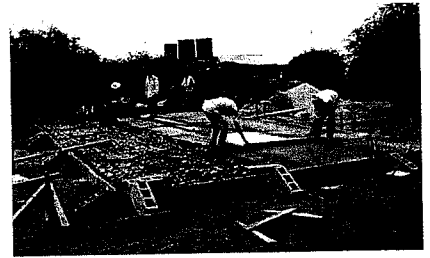
Through studying the transitional settlement sector's evolution, work responsibilities and activities, the 'Guidelines' project, along with the humanitarian aid community, hopes to understand the displaced people's needs and therefore the appropriateness of different responses. The culmination of this research will be the production of guidelines to be used in the field as a handbook.

The guidelines will offer assessment, decision-making and implementation tools to maximise benefits and to minimise negative impacts for those affected by disaster and for other sectors, such as water, sanitation, food, and public health, involved in responding to these needs.

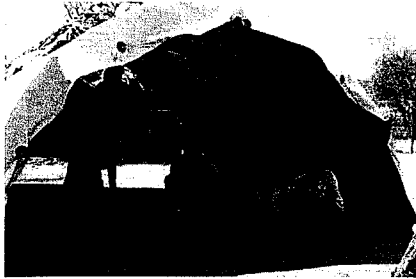
In order to develop a coherent response strategy, *shelterproject.org* have developed a peer review process. Twice a year in Geneva, an interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners within the humanitarian aid community come together to review the current situation. The participants include government agencies such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), UN bodies such as UNHCR and UNICEF, over ten NGOs (including the International Committee of the Red Cross and Oxfam) and several research groups. The participation of these organisations ensures that the research undertaken identifies and meets the needs of the humanitarian aid community.

The peer-review meetings discuss:

1. The activities of the Transitional Settlement sector.
2. Technical specifications for products and materials used.
3. Methods for improving the sector's performance in the field and advocacy tools for the promotion of the sector.



Kenya, 1995. Constructing offices for the aid agency CARE at the Dadaab Refugee Complex.
Photo: Dr Tom Corsellis, *shelterproject.org*.



Sudan, 1998. Construction trials of the Oxfam shelter conducted by Pete Manfield from shelterproject.org with Dinka women and children.
Photo: Pete Manfield, shelterproject.org.

Outside these meetings, continual feedback is sought and obtained from the organisations to ensure that communication continues throughout the year. The input and needs of people in the field are continually factored into the guidelines, training, summaries, and reports on transitional settlement with which *shelterproject.org* has been tasked.⁵

For example, following a request from the peer review panel, the technical specifications of the emergency shelter systems used by the humanitarian aid community (usually tents) have been compiled for the first time in a *shelterproject.org* report.⁶ The report includes *shelterproject.org*'s shelter system, the standard emergency family shelter of Oxfam, which was recently field-tested successfully by MSF (Médecins sans Frontières) in Chad in a refugee settlement planned by *shelterproject.org* staff.

The humanitarian aid community continually finds itself without the resources or capacity to undertake such basic technical research and analysis. Even terms and definitions have not yet been agreed with which NGOs can describe problems to donors or to coordinating bodies such as the UN. For example, at the peer review panel's first meeting (6-7 June 2002), fundamental terms such as 'shelter', 'transitional settlement', and 'shelter system' lacked accurate and comprehensive definitions. This terminology and the definitions are currently under discussion.

The aim in agreeing terminology is to improve response through improved communication within the humanitarian community. The guidelines will ensure that the transitional settlement sector will have freely available, comprehensive documents which describe the sector and provide guidelines and training. The community will have helped create them and will have accepted them before publication. This engagement ensures a coherent voice from the sector; whilst bringing together, and creating a forum for dialogue amongst many of the people who deal with transitional settlement in the field on a day-to-day basis.

The practical field guidelines and training material, along with associated elements such as the glossary, the sector definition and the sector aim, will be finalised, including field tests, by the end of the project in March 2004.

notes

- 1 See <http://www.unhcr.ch> for information on UNHCR's mandate and activities.
- 2 UNHCR (1951/1967) *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, UNHCR, Geneva.
- 3 See I. Davis (1978) *Shelter After Disaster*, Oxford Polytechnic Press, Oxford and E. Babister and I. Kelman (2002) 'The Emergency Shelter Process with Application to Case Studies in Macedonia and Afghanistan', *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, January 2002, <http://www.jha.ac/articles/a092.pdf>
- 4 See the detailed discussion in *shelterproject.org*'s *Report on the transitional settlement sector (2003)* by J. Ashmore, E. Babister, T. Corsellis, K. Crawford, S. Foster, J. Fowler, I. Kelman, P. Manfield, O. Stanton, A. Vitale, and U. Woodburn.
- 5 See, for example, the *shelterproject.org* reports *Existing guidelines supporting the shelter sector (2002)* by K. Crawford, *Report on spend in the shelter sector (2002)* by E. Babister, J. Fowler, I. Kelman, L. Morris, G. Newell, and A. Vitale, and *Report on the transitional settlement sector (2003)* by J. Ashmore, E. Babister, T. Corsellis, K. Crawford, S. Foster, J. Fowler, I. Kelman, P. Manfield, O. Stanton, A. Vitale, and U. Woodburn.
- 6 *shelterproject.org* report *Technical comparison of tent specifications (2002)* by J. Ashmore and T. Corsellis.

shelterproject.org, based in the Martin Centre at the University of Cambridge's Department of Architecture, is an informal group of physical planners (designers of settlement solutions such as camps), shelter specialists, and volunteers. In the last few years, members of the *shelterproject.org* team have worked to implement, monitor, and evaluate transitional settlement responses in countries including Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Chad, Chile, Eritrea, India, Kenya, Liberia, Macedonia, Mozambique, Nepal, and South Africa. The group comprises:

Joseph Ashmore	University of Cambridge	Ilan Kelman	University of Cambridge
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Rachel Battilana	Buro Happold	Allan McRobie	University of Cambridge
Tom Corsellis	University of Cambridge	Robin Spence	University of Cambridge
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Jon Fowler	University of Cambridge		