

After Disaster

Time and again the media-sphere lights-up with news of a disaster unfolding in one part of the world or another. How do post-disaster organisations respond, what are their priorities, and what role does re-building and shelter play in relief efforts? **Bill Flinn** and **Charles Parrack** outline just how complex the challenges are, and with the onset of Climate Change how these challenges are set to increase through the twenty first century

IT IS HARD FOR US TO IMAGINE losing our house and home. But this is the reality for hundreds of thousands of families every year, the survivors of natural disasters. The last few years give some clear illustrations: the earthquake in Haiti destroyed 250,000 houses; the floods in Pakistan an unprecedented 1.8 million. To put that last figure into perspective, that would be almost every house in a country like Ireland or Norway. A country as vulnerable as Bangladesh loses tens of thousands of houses to floods and cyclones every year.

The challenge is two-fold. First to respond to the needs of the survivors; to ensure that the time spent in a tent or under an Oxfam tarp is as short as possible; a new home is a first step towards getting your life back on track. However, just as important is to help communities to prepare for future hazards, to develop and encourage safer building practices, to build strong refuges where families can shelter and to develop effective warning systems. In the language of aid jargon this is known as disaster risk reduction, or DRR.

The quantity and severity of natural disasters are increasing as our planet struggles with climate change, population growth and conflict. The need for effective “shelter after disaster” – the provision of houses and homes for those affected – has never been greater.

The term “natural” disaster is misleading. On the whole it’s not earthquakes that kill people, but the buildings they live in. Many cities – Tehran, San Francisco, Kathmandu, Dhaka, Guatemala City – are built in areas of high seismic risk. The same size earthquake that killed so many in Haiti killed nobody in the first New Zealand quake several months later. The



number of people in vulnerable situations is also rising with increasing urbanisation. The poor and the vulnerable are forced to settle on the sides of ravines, in houses densely packed together and in inadequately built multi-storey homes. Poor quality reinforced concrete is a death trap. This was starkly evident when thousands of children were killed in the 2005 Pakistan earthquake by collapsing flat concrete roofs of inadequately built schools.

Most agree that climate change in part explains the increasing number of cyclonic storms, floods and droughts. Yet again the term “natural” disaster does not apply: blame for increasing severity and frequency can, in part, be laid at the door of man-made climate change. However, more often than not, the families that lose their homes are the least to blame with an infinitesimal carbon-footprint.

Some hazards – a major earthquake is the obvious example – are impossible to anticipate with any accuracy and cause widespread destruction and loss of life. These are the ones that make the headlines. Others, sometimes referred to as “slow-onset disasters” creep up unawares; these are the floods and droughts. A very big earthquake may cause more immediate deaths, but taken together the less-media grabbing events affect many more people. These slow on-set disasters are responsible for untold longer-term suffering through destruction of livelihoods, infrastructure and housing and through vast displacement of population.