Shelter in flux

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Current humanitarian guidelines do not sufficiently cover what shelter means in volatile and protracted conflict settings, particularly outside organised camps. We propose improved tools that will address that gap.

Humanitarian guidelines and standards for how to work with shelter in displacement have been formulated but in practice are often understood in too general terms and do not always take into account fast-changing and diverse conflict contexts. There is little or no discussion about the relationship between the characteristics of a conflict and how different types of shelter provision will influence the conflict. Guidelines are also still mainly oriented towards more organised approaches to shelter rather than self-built and spontaneous settlements. Additionally, many initiatives concentrate on provision of shelter rather than the building process and the activities that take place around shelter.

Specific characteristics of conflict settings and conflict-induced displacement may directly influence shelter-related projects and initiatives. In our research project on 'shelter in flux', we are particularly concerned with the spatial and temporal dimensions of conflicts. Even in cases where causes or patterns of displacement look similar, there will be variations between types of violence, categories and interests of stakeholders involved or embedded in conflict, and the risks, assets or vulnerabilities of populations. The particularity of each case makes systematisation of experiences and learning more challenging and the search for common or global guidelines complicated.

A crucial element of the relationship between conflict and shelter is the contestation of space related to land ownership and access to (land) resources – which are often root causes of the conflict. Humanitarian interventions that require access to and use of land will thereby be embedded in the conflict, politicised and may put humanitarian principles at risk. The planned and deliberate destruction of homes or the destruction of cities or land as an instrument of war gives shelter its political nature. This can be witnessed in attitudes of parties to conflict towards specific shelter responses in cases such as Gaza, Syria or South Sudan. Restrictions on access to land, the right to settle, freedom of movement or the use of building materials or building techniques may restrict opportunities for shelter and sometimes force

interventions to be limited to distribution of temporary shelters and Non-Food Items.

Approaching shelter in conflict

Intensity and flows of displacement, trust built between humanitarian organisations and local actors, density of settlements, remaining infrastructure, and policy of host governments at local and national levels are aspects that influence shelter interventions. In our work on 'shelter in flux' we emphasise the inclusion of dimensions of volatility, space and time in understanding the interactions between stakeholders. Shelter in flux works with the shelter sector's already established understanding of 'sheltering' – a process as much as the finished product. Here, shelter is not just about finding safety but about risk mitigation and adaptation to the changing realities on the ground. To enable the integration of sheltering into current guidelines, and with the aim of enhancing

opportunities for changing current practices, we need to document how shelter practices and meanings of shelter in conflict settings have evolved, adapting to actual shelter needs.

Conflict sensitivity and the analysis of spatial dimensions of conflict are key elements, but relatively new trends. Conflict-sensitive shelter programming will enable increased recognition of the risks linked to the politics of shelter by more systematically taking into account relationships between land rights and conflict, restrictions on mobility in conflict zones or disputes over territories. To develop existing shelter practices in conflict settings we thus suggest emphasising three dimensions: integrated responses, resilience and pragmatism.

First, given the spatial and temporal nature of conflicts, shelter specialists and other humanitarian actors are forced to merge rights-based approaches with material needs-based approaches and, in

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A makeshift shelter in the Malakal Protection of Civilians site, South Sudan.

the process, to re-think the boundaries and the possible coordination between shelter and protection. In the Protection of Civilians sites in South Sudan the tension between protection needs and the humanitarian imperative generated just such challenges of prioritisation and coordination.[1] One pilot example of an integrated shelter programme, developed by the Norwegian Refugee Council in Jordan, combines an urban shelter programme and an information counselling and legal assistance programme.[2] Integrated shelter programmes are based on a holistic understanding of shelter and have been applied in post-disaster settings but offer, as in this case, an interesting use of the notion of 'sheltering' in conflict settings. Currently a more systematic approach to the dynamics between gender-based violence and shelter is being adopted by numerous organisations and institutionalised in the Global Protection Cluster's advice on gender-based violence in shelter, settlement and recovery.[3]

Second, while there is some debate over the notion of 'resilience' – the creative capacity of community or society exposed to conflict to resist, adapt, transform and recover from the impacts of conflict in a positive and efficient manner – we suggest further development of its meaning as an integral part of sheltering to 'transformative resilience', which enables the linking together of short- and long-term interventions as well as bridging needs-based and rights-based approaches. Roles and interactions of and between protection, shelter provision and recovery need to apply the lens of resilience to build on local actors' capacities and local practices, or to give displaced people the means to do so. The shift towards cash transfers or investigation into self-recovery can be read through that lens.

Finally, being pragmatic is an interesting starting point for approaches to shelter in flux. Pragmatic humanitarianism is not a new approach and some consider it a move away from, or in opposition to, humanitarian principles. It is consequently criticised as a tendency to think about what works in a shorter-term perspective rather than in the long term. However, pragmatism may also make a more flexible and contextually based approach to humanitarianism feasible. Pragmatism opens up the possibility of using conflict sensitivity in programming to identify what is possible within a given context, to permit the flexibility that is required in volatile settings. Additionally, a pragmatic approach enables more emphasis to be put on what relevant actors are doing – that is, how civilians and humanitarian actors define and approach shelter in their day-to-day lives in the context of a conflict.

Conclusions

Providing shelter in conflict requires an understanding of the temporal and spatial dimensions of a particular conflict setting. With a 'shelter in flux' approach an analysis of the situation on the ground can be used to formulate more locally grounded approaches to shelter, complementing general global guidelines. Provision of shelter takes place in conflict and sometimes with dimensions of integrated responses, elements of resilience and pragmatism. With improved tools to analyse the specific local context in its relationship to shelter provision, humanitarians can develop better understandings of what is both realistic and possible in a given situation.

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