

*Guatemala. A.I.D. Disaster Relief Program and Reports on Post-Earthquake Distribution of Building Materials.* Agency for International Development, 1977, 178 pp.

The two reports contained in this volume examine an essentially innovative approach taken by USAID-Guatemala in dealing with one of the major problems of post-disaster rehabilitation – that of emergency (and long-term) housing. Both reports also address important aspects of the general problems of post-disaster assistance and long-range reconstruction as well as the implications for future development of such measures.

The first report in the volume is entitled “A Contrastive Analysis of Alternative Reconstruction Models After the February 4, 1976 Guatemalan Earthquake,” authored by Robert Gersony, Tony Jackson and Jo Froman. The report is an important contribution to the scant literature on post-disaster reconstruction because it documents the evolution of a specific, post-disaster assistance project from the time of impact through the early stages of debate and organization to implementation and final “phasing out” stages. One aspect of the utility of this report certainly lies in its detailed treatment of most of the major problems which confront aid agencies as well as a clearly and

candidly staged discussion of the options available for solving the problems and the rationale for the actions taken in the implementation of the project.

The USAID program, following an approach developed first by OXFAM, sold corrugated metal roofing sheets (*lamina*) and wooden poles for housing construction at half-price to disaster victims. The sale proceeds were then invested in labor intensive reconstruction and development projects selected and implemented by the community. The program as administered and managed at the local level by leaders drawn primarily from local cooperatives, in an attempt to decentralize decision-making authority and allow for maximum local autonomy. The major problems to be resolved in designing and implementing the project were: distributing materials versus constructing homes for people, selection of appropriate building materials, saturation versus selective coverage, sale or donation of materials, agency or local distributors and managers, mutual expectations or agencies and recipients, and anti-seismic construction education.

Ultimately the central issue to be resolved focused around, as the introduction states, “an argument between advocates of free aid administered by experienced foreign organizations in full control of funds and projects and advocates of reconstruction efforts based on ideas offered by aid recipients and largely financed by the disaster victims themselves.” The authors, who one assumes were USAID project staff, leave little doubt as to their preference for the latter alternative model. An interesting appendix to the first report is an edited interview with an exponent of the opposing approach, in which the director of the CARE housing materials distribution program details his reasons for the traditional model.

The second report of the volume is entitled “The US/AID-Guatemala Lamina and Housing Materials Distribution Program – An Ex-Post Evaluation Report,” independently prepared

under a US/AID contract with Interect by Alan J. Taylor. In its favorable evaluation of the US/AID housing project the Taylor report complements the US/AID report in some important specific areas. The problematical social dynamics of post-disaster conditions and assistance, particularly in regards to patterns of social differentiation and problems of discrimination in aid distribution, are dealt with at length. The discussion of the differential impact of the same aid in varying cultural areas underscores effectively the point made in the US/AID report of the need for aid to be culturally appropriate to be effective.

The Taylor report assesses the US/AID project on its performance, outlining the logistical, economic, social-psychological and ethical problems encountered in the formation and execution of the project. Taylor praises the housing project for essentially succeeding on two fronts: providing emergency housing materials while simultaneously fostering indigenous rural development institutions.

There are two broad areas of debate where the project and volume as a whole make an important contribution to the field. The sensitivity to local sociocultural patterns and the use of local people in management and decision making in the project constitute outstanding improvements in disaster aid implementation. The use of local personnel or institutions is a function of and only possible through a solidly based understanding of local conditions. In short, you cannot help people you do not know. The use by AID of social anthropologists thoroughly familiar with the stricken area is an encouraging sign of the growing awareness of this principle. In the Third World, an adequate socio-cultural data base is absolutely necessary for the elaboration of an appropriate and effective post-disaster aid program.

Finally, this project marks an important step in the improvement of post-disaster assistance in that while focusing on material concerns, it also attends to the crucial social

and psychological consequences of disaster impact. Disasters have a way of demonstrating to a society and its members the inadequacy of its protective and adaptive capacities in the face of nature. The destruction and loss wrought by impact may have profound effects on individual and societal responses and resilience to stress particularly if these effects are compounded by feelings of dependency engendered by paternalistic programs of disaster relief. Disaster assistance must do more than reconstruct materially. Victims should be given the opportunity to demonstrate renewed effectiveness as individuals and as communities. Paternalistic forms of disaster aid which do not involve the recipients in decision-making and management risk compounding the psychological and social impact of natural disaster. US/AID-Guatemala's avoidance of heavy paternalistic stances and inclusion of local level people in major decision making processes of the project are important and positive steps, and hopefully will stimulate others to think along the same lines.

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