

## ISSUES FACED IN PROGRAMMING GUATEMALA DISASTER REHABILITATION ASSISTANCE: VIEWS AND IMPRESSIONS OF AN AGENCY PROGRAMMER\*

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### INTRODUCTION

The Guatemala earthquake of February 4, 1976 occurred at 3:15 a.m. It registered an average intensity of VII on the modified Mercalli scale throughout a 33,000 square km area encompassing the Western Highlands and Motagua River Valley regions. The greatest devastation was caused by the collapse of traditional *adobe* (sun-dried bricks) and tile roofed houses on their sleeping occupants, resulting in the instantaneous death of over 23,000 people, and injury to 60,000 more. Over one million people (1/6 of the total population) were left homeless, and public service infrastructure (schools, markets, water systems, roads, churches, etc.) were severely damaged or destroyed. Indian, Ladino, urban and rural communities were equally damaged, yet the most affected were the rural and urban poor whose subsistence level resources can scarcely bear the additional demands created by reconstruction needs.

This essay examines some important factors that almost all assistance agencies faced in the Guatemalan post-earthquake period and analyzes the different ways these were taken into consideration in programming each agency's

\*The views presented in this paper do not necessarily represent USAD's official position, but are personal observations of the author.

response. The arguments summarize actual experiences drawn from the whole gamut of programs and their results. As such, this is not a report of a systematic social science study but a synthesis of observations and impressions of an agency program participant on the scene for two years after the earthquake. Specific agencies are mentioned and their programs are discussed in order that those not familiar with the scenario can more clearly visualize the discussion, but no criticism or judgment is intended of the organizations or activities. A situation identical to the Guatemala 1976 earthquake will never reoccur, however, the key issues entertained in this disaster are relevant to other disasters as well as to developmental programs. The application of the lessons learned and experiences gained remains a potential exercise for future disaster relief programmers.

### DEFINITION OF DISASTERS

There are two vantage points for examining and understanding a disaster situation: from within the disaster (i.e., the victim's perspective), and from without. From both perspectives, the conditions resulting from loss of life, physical and emotional suffering, lack of food, and shelter are readily comprehended

and identified. Common perceptions and greater sympathy are more likely where there are natural social or economic affinities between the two groups. Therefore, the question arises as to how close was the mutual comprehension in the situation where the victim was a rural traditional peasant, and the non-victim (i.e., assistance provider) was middle class urban elite? And one step farther removed, did outside assistance agencies understand the disaster in the same terms as the victims and nonvictims?

There are several key points to be aware of when examining a disaster situation to clearly assess what occurred, to whom, and what needs to be done about it. I would suggest the hypothesis that the basis for a real definition of disaster must be in terms of the affected people themselves. Outsiders (national and foreign) clearly may not recognize shock or imbalance to a traditional cultural activity, economic factor or social pattern. It is important that these hidden material and human factors be identified and considered by assistance agencies in determining the extent of the disaster. Victims automatically develop extraordinary coping mechanisms for dealing with their own problems and can suggest what is most needed to alleviate the suffering, in a way that compliments existing capabilities for recuperation.

In its own right, the outsider's perspective is important because it is more rational and analytical, and it is that through which official assessments are made. Outsiders may clearly appraise the overall extent of damages, but are conceivably capable of overstating or understating the disaster's impact. A problem or contingency may be overstated in order to obtain funds and resources, even though a serious need may not exist. Several cases were experienced. Of more than 100 tons of medical supplies shipped to Guatemala, approximately 30% was immediately useful in the disaster. Over 60 tons of food stuffs were donated, but no major food shortage existed;

the previous year had provided an abundant harvest and food was not damaged in the earthquake. Likewise, understating the extent of the disaster is possible. For example, the aerial photography carried out immediately after the earthquake did not expose the true extent of damaged rural homes, because in peripheral areas where roofs appeared intact, severely cracked walls went undetected. Also, simply a lack of sensitivity to the affected people can be the basis of an indifferent or incomplete assessment of the disaster.

At best, a gap exists between the victim and outsider. To define the disaster in order to provide effective assistance that meets real needs, it is necessary to bridge differences through open-minded dialogue between the victim and the assistance provider.

#### **TYPES OF RELIEF AGENCIES**

The over 200 agencies who worked in Guatemala after the earthquake had the common goal of providing well intended charitable assistance to the disaster victims. Otherwise, each agency was a unique entity characterized by its own set of goals, priorities, available resources, past disaster experiences, working relationships in Guatemala, personnel, ideology, etc. Each of these characteristics alone suggests a wide range of quantifiable and qualifying variables. A detailed analysis of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is possible to categorize the majority of the disaster relief agencies in the following manner:

**A. Socio-political institutions** are those with a long-term commitment to change and development. They are professional development agents who expanded their regular activities to include a disaster relief component. The size of their resource base is variable; they can be governmental or private; local or international; they have a well defined position on how to accomplish social change; they generally have ongoing association with local target

groups; and have easy access to technical expertise. This category includes, International Development Bank, the United Nations, Agency for International Development, Canadian International Development Agency, some of the private volunteer organizations (PVO) such as CARE, OXFAM, Save the Children Federation, Penny Foundation, to name a few. In general, they are motivated by a desire to promote development through social and economic change.

**B. Commercial agents** are basically motivated by finding a taker for the item or idea they are pushing, working from very little actual knowledge of disaster situations. They had no genuine commitment to the victims' welfare, and their efforts were primarily devoted to developing arguments on the benefits and utility of their product or service. This category included agents selling things such as cardboard geodesic domes, manufactured building materials, sophisticated medical equipment, used mobile homes, etc. To a lesser degree, consultants and "instant experts" who tried to generate support for their particular solutions also fell in this category.

**C. Altruistic groups** comprise the most colorful and varied category of the disaster relief agencies. These groups were motivated by a genuine desire to help out, flavored in some cases with a religious orientation or other unique organizational characteristic. For many of these groups in Guatemala, this was the first time they launched disaster relief programs or operated in that country. A lack of experience in and knowledge of Guatemalan ways frequently caused extra problems for these groups. On the other hand, these problems were frequently minimized because due to limited budgets, they generally established smaller scale programs in well defined geographic areas. These groups often developed exceptionally good rapport with the communities where they worked, and were flexible and

adaptable to making changes and adjustments in their programs. This category includes groups such as Plenty, the Mennonites, missionary groups, the YMCA, *ad hoc* committees, service clubs, etc.

Local government agencies are the major exceptions to these general categories. They are treated under a separate heading below.

### **EMERGENCY VERSUS REHABILITATION PROGRAMS**

Two distinct phases of a disaster are the emergency phase and the rehabilitation phase. There is no precise moment at which the emergency ceases and rehabilitation begins, but each phase has certain definite characteristics which require specific and different programming.

The emergency is essentially a set of unforeseen circumstances that calls for immediate action. During this phase, life's normal activity ceases to function and people are suffering in the extreme. Basic human needs of food, clothing, and shelter are critically lacking. The victims are incapable of adequately helping themselves. In Guatemala, the emergency period was over within 3 to 4 weeks of the earthquake.

Emergency programs are a reaction to the immediate situation on a short-term basis. They address the symptoms and not the cause. Outside assistance intervention is almost blindly accepted by the victims because they are unable to satisfy basic needs themselves. There is little time for in-depth analysis and there is inadequate information available on which to make deliberative decisions. Responsibility for and success of emergency programs lie in the hands of those who are decisive and responsive in the moment.

The rehabilitation phase gets underway as conditions return to normal. Victims focus on the long-term situation and begin to see what solutions are available. Social and economic activities resume functioning and people

are able to fend for themselves. The situation in the wake of the disaster has stabilized, and there is no increased suffering or side effects such as starvation, migrations, epidemics and social unrest which are generally feared but rarely occur. The rehabilitation period can last an indefinite length of time, depending upon what was destroyed. It has been suggested that the Guatemalan reconstruction period will last 10 years, based on an assumed upgrading of the physical infrastructure. However, if rehabilitation is defined as construction of minimal shelter, the time period would be considerably less.

Rehabilitation programs address a grey area between emergency needs and developmental objectives. A rehabilitation program cannot deal with only the needs caused by the emergency, but must also take into consideration all relevant pre-existing conditions. By their nature, they resemble developmental programs carried out in a medium-term time frame. Problem solving processes follow procedures used in normal times. Issues are necessarily addressed in a slower and more methodical manner. Experts can be consulted and adequate information obtained on the situation. Most importantly, the disaster victim community can be incorporated in the planning and implementation of the rehabilitation program.

An agent responding to a disaster may initially be interested in addressing immediate emergency needs. If the problem is strictly undertaken as a short-term endeavor there is relatively high probability of success. When the emergency ceases to exist, so does the program. On the other hand, there is the danger that a program designed to meet emergency needs will continue into the rehabilitation phase. Due to rapidly changing conditions, the program can become inappropriate in terms of meeting the real needs of the victim since the original assumptions are no longer valid. This problem may be compounded if the agency's leadership is distant

and unresponsive to field perceptions, or if the program continues functioning primarily because funding and resources are available. The following two cases illustrate this point:

1. Hospital California was planned as an emergency medical center, under auspices of a group of Guatemalans living in the United States. Their initial objective was to provide immediate medical attention for disaster-related injuries in the town of Comalapa. However, during time it took to organize and establish the hospital, most of the earthquake emergency medical cases had been attended. So, after the hospital staff arrived, they found themselves treating the normal range of illnesses. Nevertheless, the program continued in order to utilize the resources provided, thereby upgrading the medical care available in the community. This subsequently created a serious problem of how to withdraw outside support while maintaining improved medical care which the community had come to depend upon.

2. In another case, a major international relief agency began a massive program for the construction of small temporary shelters of *lámina* (galvanized metal roofing) and wood. However, due to an international bureaucracy which was unresponsive to field perceptions and the large size of the program, a momentum was created which continued operations beyond the period when temporary housing was a critical need. In this instance, temporary shelters were still being constructed more than a year after the earthquake when most victims were attempting to reconstruct permanent housing. In fact, within three months after the earthquake, some form of temporary shelter had been constructed by most victims.

While it is possible to begin organizing a rehabilitation program during the emergency phase, there are factors which inhibit effective programming. During the emergency, issues are confused and priorities frequently change suddenly. Resources are difficult to identify, and communications and logistical capabilities

are limited. Moreover, it is difficult to anticipate the emergency/rehabilitation phase transition.

The transition between phases does eventually occur in the minds and actions of all agencies at some point. Generally, smaller groups can make the change easily because they are flexible and close to the action. Other agencies developed programs which could address both the emergency needs and long-term rehabilitation, such as through the distribution of building materials (*lámina*) for both temporary shelter and permanent house construction. Still others consciously avoided becoming involved in the emergency phase but instead initiated programs which addressed permanent reconstruction needs from the start.

#### IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The major issue which came into play in programming the Guatemalan post-disaster rehabilitation concerns alternatives in timing, in attitudes, decision-making procedures and levels of commitment. The success or failure of a program depends more often on these factors than on specifically material details. One point is whether to adopt a short-term or a long-term disaster assistance commitment. The agency may, because of limited resources, undertake a creative short-term endeavor which yields the most aid with the least amount of investment. In contrast, others may inappropriately perceive the devastation a purely physical problem and limit their program to the delivery of material aid over a longer time period.

The author contends the most effective disaster rehabilitation programs are those that develop slowly and incorporate goals beyond merely improving physical conditions. They can embody characteristics which closely resemble developmental programs based on a long-term commitment to solving a specific problem. These programs represent a more

dedicated and sensitive approach which deals with the complexities of human factors. Disaster rehabilitation program goals which incorporate long-term development concepts are defined in terms of both the primary and secondary effects the program may obtain. For example, in Guatemala a primary goal for many agencies was the provision of shelter — adequate dwellings for a rural, agrarian, subsistence level population. Beyond this, however, there were a number of agencies which consciously incorporated additional program elements, which involved the victim in the decision-making process, of designing and executing the program, and in organizing community groups to address vital issues. This process reinforced self-sufficiency and enhanced certain aspects of their socio-economic fabric.

#### SHELTER RECONSTRUCTION — TEMPORARY VERSUS PERMANENT

What size house do the victims need? How soon? What materials? How much will it cost? Should shelter be replaced as it existed beforehand? How should seismic-resistant design be incorporated? Does shelter also imply public utilities? These and other similar questions were considered by the agencies in designing their programs, and represent innumerable variables upon which decisions were made.

Temporary shelter has several specific attributes. More units can be provided at the lowest cost per beneficiary. Generally, it is technically easier to construct, and a large number of shelters can be mass produced quickly. In Guatemala, temporary shelter construction fell in three distinct categories:

1. Essential construction materials such as *lámina* (galvanized metal roofing) were distributed to the victims in order that the individual could construct his or her own shelter. This was particularly effective in isolated rural areas where people traditionally build their own homes and housing is dispersed. If these

materials were of high quality, they could be used once for a temporary shelter, and then reused in constructing the eventual permanent home.

2. Temporary shelters were also constructed for the disaster victims by assistance organizations. These addressed the barest shelter needs, were small, often poorly suited to the climate, and allowed little opportunity for the recipient to modify or incorporate his or her own materials or design. In some instances, basic utilities such as community latrines and water taps were included. On the whole, this approach represented a larger cost-per-beneficiary investment than category 1, and carried with it a certain assumed responsibility for the people's welfare.

3. A third form of temporary housing was provided by other than assistance agencies. Instead, displaced families invaded open spaces and established squatter settlements, particularly in Guatemala City. These shelters were the result of individual initiative and were constructed of materials salvaged from numerous sources. At this writing these settlements lack legal rights, living conditions are very poor, and services remain non-existent except what the people are able to provide themselves.

From the point of view of the victims, permanent housing is the desired alternative. However, given the magnitude of the need (an estimated 250,000 homes were destroyed) it was a practical impossibility for the government and assisting agencies to provide the necessary resources within any reasonable time frame. The extent to which these programs could be implemented depended upon such issues as: size of the structure, quality of the design, cost versus the ability to pay, all of which limited access to the poorest victims and created complications due to greater infrastructure requirements.

Inevitably an unfilled gap exists between providing permanent homes or temporary shelter. Because resources are insufficient, neither alternative will meet all the minimum

basic housing needs and yet satisfy the existing demand completely. Furthermore, both alternatives can create serious secondary complications. For example, the construction of low-cost permanent urban housing can stimulate immigration of rural peasants, and thereby aggravate the social and economic problems in the cities. Low-cost permanent housing competes with resources of land and building materials, which are more profitably invested in commercial buildings or middle-to upper-class housing. Temporary housing, in contrast, more often than not refers to the durability of the materials used rather than the length of duration of the settlement. Other post-earthquake temporary housing experiences in Guatemala, Nicaragua and elsewhere corroborate that temporary shelter programs in urban areas generally become permanent settlements. However, lack of title, and no initiatives to invest in improvements and maintenance results in temporary housing rapidly deteriorating to substandard living conditions. Once the temporary shelters have *de facto* become permanent, it is doubly more expensive and difficult to install public utilities, or to improve the structures with people living on site.

It is clear that the rehabilitation process in Guatemala, as particularly applied to housing, is not a short-term matter because the present situation is aggravated by and reflects pre-existing conditions. A realistic examination of construction rates indicates that the demand for new housing created by demographic growth and natural obsolescence in addition to the deficit created by the earthquake is scarcely being met. According to some expert sources the total number of housing units needed per annum in 1978 is 75,000; in 1983 this figure will reach 85,000. Nevertheless, the present rate of construction is approximately 50,000 units per year in 1977, or 66% of the 1978 demand. However 20,000 of these units constructed in 1977 were built by special one-time programs which will not con-

tinue functioning in the future. It is impossible to address only the problems created by the disaster. Furthermore speed in post-disaster assistance delivery may not be as critical as actually finding the means which do indeed address the complete issue.

### **OUTSIDERS VERSUS LOCALS – WHO DOES THE WORK?**

The outside agency must determine the degree of direct involvement it wants in carrying out its program's objectives. Decisions focus on whether to become completely involved in the details of the field operation or whether to remain removed from the field and channel resources through local organizations. The agency gauges the amount of public exposure it wants in relation to sensitivities aroused by a high foreign profile. Some feel it is necessary to maintain strict control over the deployment of assistance resources to avoid loss, pilferage, etc. Often the experience of directly being involved in the field and seeing first hand results of efforts is of utmost importance. On the whole, the outside agency must determine whether it is the most capable and appropriate vehicle for executing the program at the community level, with the attendant need to address cultural and language barriers.

Although it is difficult to develop specific guidelines, the author's opinion is that there are considerable advantages to channeling as much assistance as possible through local organizations. Because rehabilitation and not emergency programs are undertaken, there is time to search out, incorporate or even create local groups. The principal benefits to using local groups over foreign is their knowledge of the area, customs, traditions, taboos, resources, etc. Incorporating the victims in the planning process for a program helps to insure that the assistance is acceptable and is something they want, as opposed to what the outsider feels they need. Local

groups are excellent brokers between the agency and the disaster affected community at large. They translate and incorporate assistance resources on terms which effectively compliment local assets. They are responsive to local needs because they identify more closely with the community. Locally staffed operations are less expensive than foreign staffed programs, and provide the secondary benefits of employment and experience to the community itself. In general, if the program is appropriate to the situation, the capability potentially exists among the local people to execute it, even though an institution or specific experience may be lacking.

Guatemala assistance programs varied in terms of sensitivity to these factors. In some, outsiders did practically all the work at the local level. Various organizations sent groups of volunteers to build churches and homes without any significant local input. The most common scheme was one where the outsiders held the principal leadership and decision-making roles, and the local groups had various levels of responsibility for implementation. Another variation was where a large number of locals were directly hired into the program. Their responsibility was very high in these programs where they were given fiscal responsibility for building materials distribution, determining program parameters, and managing funds for small infrastructure projects.

### **PATERNALISM**

The question of paternalism was a heatedly discussed topic concerning disaster relief programming in Guatemala. Some agencies embarked upon programs with the well-intended traditional attitude of taking charge and doing as much for the victims as possible. In contrast, other agencies recognized there were better approaches which rejected the idea that charity and good will are sufficient justification for a program. Instead of assuming the full responsibility for remedying the situation

for the incapable victims, the non-paternalistic outlook intentionally left responsibility for rehabilitation with the victims themselves.

A non-paternalistic approach assumes the victims are the most interested parties in their rehabilitation process, that they are motivated and capable of finding solutions to their own dilemma. It basically assumes that people are responsible for their own lives. In terms of disaster assistance, it is defined as providing resources which are lacking to the victims, while maximizing self-help initiatives and the victims' own resourcefulness. Attention is paid to avoid disrupting delicate social or economic patterns.

There are various examples which demonstrate how this philosophy was incorporated in the relief programs in Guatemala. One policy was to provide construction materials or housing at a subsidized price, rather than giving it away free of charge. This policy was based on the belief that free hand-outs have serious negative effects. Charity makes a person doubt his self-reliance and discourages self-initiatives. It raises expectations that other things should be free. Give-aways distributed in an arbitrary fashion cause resentment in those who did not receive them which is further compounded by the perception that some people not in need of assistance, unnecessarily participated. In general, doling out welfare puts the recipient in a passive and subservient role which is counterproductive to almost any improvement plan.

Paternalistic orientations were successfully avoided in programs in which responsibility for construction was left with each family. People contributed real and substantial portions of the resources necessary for the reconstruction process including raw building materials, labor and construction skills. Program decision-making included an equal voice for the beneficiaries, particularly on matters related to types of materials, how to equitably distribute the assistance, and when and how to construct to best suit the individual family.

This strategy provides experiences which accrue to the community and create new awareness of methods and problems related to project administration and social organization.

#### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE**

In any disaster situation the local government has an automatic mandate to assume the principal role in assisting the victims. The local authority has final responsibility for any actions within its domain, so therefore should determine policy and programs, not international agencies. Several important factors determine the effectiveness of the government's role, which are the following:

1. Whether or not the disaster has affected the government's operational capabilities;
2. What resources are available to the government in comparison to the magnitude of the disaster;
3. The degree to which the government is willing to take extraordinary measures to increase its resources;
4. The influence and wishes of outside agencies who are interested in seeing the most effective use of their resources; and
5. The extent to which government agencies are willing and able to incorporate the disaster-stricken community into the assistance delivery mechanism.

An important role the Guatemalan Government assumed was to coordinate incoming assistance provided by the foreign agencies and national organizations. The National Reconstruction Committee (NRC) was especially formed to facilitate programs and formulate policy, but did not finance or execute reconstruction programs. Emphasis was given to assuring equitable coverage and avoiding duplicated efforts. The NRC established guidelines for reconstruction, such as: rebuilding only permanent shelters and buildings, avoiding paternalistic approaches (i.e., give-aways) and promoting self-help initiatives. These pre-



cepts were largely ignored by government agencies carrying out reconstruction activities, as the traditional top down directive methods were employed by these bureaucracies. Clearly, there remains a large untapped potential for more fully utilizing community initiatives and capabilities for the long-term reconstruction process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Success in disaster relief programming depends less on resources or size of program but more on sensitivity to culture and economic structure, the levels of integration and community participation, and leaving the responsibility for rehabilitation with the affected

people themselves. Understanding the differences between emergency and rehabilitation phases, programs should embody many of the same concepts applied to long-range development activities. The Guatemalan experience illustrates this thesis. Many international and national agencies had enough foresight to adopt integrated disaster relief programs which go beyond physical reconstructions to include developing permanent human resources, strengthening community level social organization, bolstering self-reliance and reinforcing normal local economic structure. Many agencies have remained to continue longer-term development programs, capitalizing on their successful disaster programs and positive involvement in the communities.