

# Shelter Self-Recovery

Subjects: Construction & Building Technology

Contributor: Iftekhar Ahmed, Charles Parrack

The term “self-recovery” is used in the humanitarian shelter and settlements sector to mean the process whereby disaster-affected households repair, build, or rebuild their homes using their own resources supplemented with assistance from humanitarian organizations.

Keywords: cyclones ; self-recovery ; shelter ; resilience

---

## 1. Introduction

The term “self-recovery” is used in the humanitarian shelter and settlements sector to mean the process whereby disaster-affected households repair, build, or rebuild their homes using their own resources <sup>[1][2]</sup> supplemented with assistance from humanitarian organizations. What is important about the process is that households are able to make their own choices and decisions about the reconstruction process <sup>[3]</sup>. It is an assisted self-help process, where organizations help people to help themselves, consistent with the concept suggested by Flinn et al. <sup>[4]</sup>.

Self-recovery exists on a continuum from those who recover by themselves with no external input and also from programs implemented by humanitarian agencies that provide assistance to support household choice and self-determination on their path to recovery. It is not self-recovery *per se*, but an assisted self-recovery process. This support enables a self-recovery process to be delivered to a much wider percentage of the affected population than typical reconstruction programs which focus on contractor-led construction or repair of damaged houses. The self-recovery approach is related to other recovery approaches such as owner-driven reconstruction, transitional shelter, and core shelter. The main difference is that the reconstruction work aims to assist the whole of the affected population, not just those who are supported by humanitarian agencies. Even in owner-driven reconstruction projects, transitional shelter projects, or the other forms of shelter recovery projects, the focus is on humanitarian agencies supporting the construction of complete dwelling units—that is, a product—whereas the self-recovery approach is more of a process that supports disaster-affected communities and households to rebuild their own homes more safely than before through the provision of good quality tools, technical back-up, and training. In that sense, it is a different paradigm than that more widely practiced.

There is little evidence for how shelter self-recovery has been implemented and even less on measuring outcomes for self-recovery programs <sup>[3][5]</sup>, and more understanding is needed. There is need for evidence of humanitarian experiences of supporting self-recovery in order to determine how self-recovery can be effective in the field, and what barriers will hamper the process. Humanitarian agencies’ experience in assisting self-recovery in urban communities is limited; little is known about how to support it in practice <sup>[6]</sup>. A knowledge gap is evident: there is a plethora of literature generated in the last few decades on the operational aspects, impacts, and outcomes of shelter recovery programs consisting of projects where humanitarian agencies support the reconstruction of complete houses, but in comparison, the shelter self-recovery approach is relatively new, and there is limited research on it.

## 2. Shelter Self-Recovery

The justification for a self-recovery approach comes from the realization that international aid agencies direct shelter support programs that reach at most 30% of affected households in need of shelter assistance, more often with 10–20% coverage <sup>[1]</sup>. This leaves the vast majority to rebuild on their own, and thus they face significant challenges in recovery, leaving them vulnerable to future disasters, as articulated by Flinn et al. <sup>[4]</sup> (p. 12): “With little or no outside support, these families will, in most cases, rebuild their houses with the same vulnerabilities and bad building practices that had been contributory factors to the damage, economic loss, injury or death”.

A study of the research priorities of expert informants <sup>[7]</sup> gives a rationale for the strong need for further research into shelter self-recovery. The expert informants identified 96 research needs which they then ranked according to a Delphi process (see for example <sup>[8]</sup> for information on this process). The issue of research into self-recovery was placed in the

top three research needs. In another study, the quality of research in this area was investigated by [3], and it was found that project reports and evaluations lack sufficient detail to be able to investigate the impact of self-recovery. What is notably lacking is information on the reporting of key project activities and how outcomes are assessed.

The self-recovery approach is gaining interest from practitioners, as the research is being disseminated through practitioner networks such as the Global Shelter Cluster and the regional Shelter Forums. Maynard et al. [5] comment that shelter programs to support self-recovery are being accepted as legitimate by practitioners and gaining momentum in the shelter sector. Twigg [9] records that global institutional endorsement was given to self-recovery methods when it was adopted as a working group of the Global Shelter Cluster (the Cluster System is the operational structure of the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) humanitarian coordination framework).

Characteristics influencing self-recovery [2] include the recovery context, enablers and barriers, household decision making, and humanitarian support for the process. The recovery context includes access to grants, the nature of the hazard or hazards, and access to resources and community organizations. Enablers or barriers determine progress according to livelihood pressures, household priorities on how to use scarce resources, the mental ability to deal with the aftermath of a disaster, and the level of technical knowledge and skills. Decision making by households involves a complex and possibly conflicting set of dilemmas on how to navigate the recovery process. Humanitarian support for self-recovery needs to integrate different disciplines and sectors to be effective.

There are some indications of the positive aspects of agency programs that support self-recovery [4]. The training of local artisans in safer building techniques ensures that the technical knowledge for building disaster-resilient housing stays in the community and can contribute to longer-term disaster risk reduction. Each household makes decisions about where to spend the resources and design according to their specific needs, which reduces the negative effects of the imposed design of a humanitarian aid shelter program. Control over design can have the added advantage of using the shelter reconstruction to support outcomes in other sectors. An example of this process is enabling the design of the house to incorporate spaces to support livelihood activities. Speed is another positive aspect of self-recovery programming, where cash support can be delivered to large numbers of households in a short space of time. A key negative includes inconsistent technical quality. If households are recovering by themselves, they may not have the technical knowledge or the skills to be able to incorporate build-back-safer components into the reconstruction, or may not even know about safer building messages, if the dissemination of these does not reach the affected communities.

In one of the early studies of self-recovery [6], cases in the Philippines (Typhoon Haiyan response 2013) and Nepal (Gorkha earthquake response 2015) were investigated. It was found that significant barriers to self-recovery were created by local and national government policy decisions, creating an environment that did not support self-recovery. Displacing households from their livelihoods had a negative impact; it meant that although they may have had safer shelter, there was little opportunity to earn a living where they were newly located. The proposal made by [6] is that, for self-recovery to be effective, the housing need must be integrated with other needs such as including access to livelihoods, water, sanitation, hygiene, health, and food security. Cash assistance was found to have a specific negative effect on self-recovery: the most vulnerable households were not able to access the formal support systems.

In an evidence review of safety aspects of self-recovery shelter programs [3], there were only a small number of studies that reported findings in this area. The evidence was generally of poor quality, so the results need to be interpreted with caution. In [3], the authors determined three areas of relevance where self-recovery programs reported findings on the safety of the reconstructed housing: technical support, adaptation of local construction techniques, and knowledge transfer. Each of the issues are detailed below.

Technical support was very commonly used to support self-recovery through training programs, but whether this leads to safer construction seems to be related to monitoring of the construction process. Organizations supporting self-recovery programs need to have the capacity to provide technical assistance, which can be complicated if householders are given choice on which materials to use and how to fix them together.

Support for self-recovery commonly uses the adaptation of local construction techniques. The benefits of this approach are that materials are easily accessible and commonly free and can be replicated easily due to existing skills in the community, although the supply scarcity of local materials is also becoming evident. Communities are more likely to continue using these methods if they are easy to modify, so there is more chance of sustainability using these construction techniques. The main drawback of this approach is that it is time-consuming to investigate local techniques and work with the community to adapt and refine them. This time commitment may not fit easily into humanitarian reconstruction or donor financing timetables.

There is some evidence <sup>[3]</sup>, although weakly presented, that indicates that knowledge transfer about safer construction can spread throughout the community to households who are self-recovering completely by themselves and do not receive any support for their recovery process. It is likely that this happens through awareness of training programs being given to households who are humanitarian program beneficiaries, or through local artisans who have received training and are then employed by households to assist with reconstruction.

An evidence review of the impact of self-recovery programs <sup>[5]</sup> similarly found only a small number of relevant and reliable reports. The review found the following ways in which shelter self-recovery can make an impact on the affected population at household level: dignity and self-reliance, perception of safety and security, income or livelihoods, assets or debts, physical and mental health, and knowledge about safer construction. The study found good support in the evidence for positive effects of self-recovery programs on dignity and self-reliance due to people taking ownership of the rebuilding process. It also found good support for the perception of better safety and security. This was as a result of reduced overcrowding, integration into host communities, and awareness of what constitutes reliable materials and good construction quality. The evidence for the other factors was inconsistent or unclear and needs more research to explore.

---

## References

1. Parrack, C.; Flinn, B.; Passey, M. Getting the message across for safer self-recovery. *Open House Int.* 2014, 39, 47–58.
2. Twigg, J.; Lovell, E.; Schofield, H.; Miranda, M.L.; Flinn, B.; Sargeant, S.; Finlayson, A.; Dijkstra, T.; Stephenson, V.; Albuerne, A.; et al. *Self-Recovery from Disasters: An Interdisciplinary Perspective (Working Paper 523)*; Overseas Development Institute: London, UK, 2017.
3. Harriss, L.; Parrack, C.; Jordan, Z. Building safety in humanitarian programmes that support post—Disaster shelter self-recovery: An evidence review. *Disasters* 2020, 44, 307–335.
4. Flinn, B.; Schofield, H.; Morel, L.M. The case for self-recovery. *Forc. Mig. Rev.* 2017, 55, 12–14.
5. Maynard, V.; Parker, E.; Twigg, J. *The Effectiveness and Efficiency of Interventions Supporting Shelter Self-Recovery Following Humanitarian Crises*; Oxfam: Oxford, UK, 2017.
6. Schofield, H.; Lovell, E.; Flinn, B.; Twigg, J. Barriers to urban shelter self-recovery in Philippines and Nepal: Lessons for humanitarian policy and practice. *J. Brit. Acad.* 2019, 7, 83–107.
7. Opdyke, A.; Goldwyn, B.; Javernick-Will, A. Defining a humanitarian shelter and settlements research agenda. *Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduct.* 2021, 52, 101950.
8. Twin, A. Delphi Method. Available online: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/d/delphi-method.asp> (accessed on 17 March 2022).
9. Twigg, J. The evolution of shelter “self-recovery”: Adapting thinking and practice for post-disaster resilience. *J. Brit. Acad.* 2021, 9, 5–22.

---

Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/history/show/59666>