



Houses or Habitats: Challenges in Housing in Post Tsunami Reconstruction in Sri Lanka

Housing can be termed the single most important issue in post tsunami reconstruction (PTR) in the country with over 125,000 houses totally damaged and approximately another 75,000 partially destroyed. With the scale and magnitude of the damage, formulating appropriate housing strategies has become a key challenge. Some key issues that arise in housing in PTR can be understood in terms of housing as habitats.

Housing as Habitats

The large majority who lost their housing comes from communities where housing (the housing unit and its environs) plays a central role in their economic and social life. The house and the household act as the nucleus and the principal building block of the fishing, micro and small trading farming and other enterprises and home based tourism related businesses that form the bulk of the communities along the affected coastal strip. It is underscored by a number of key features such as

- (a) almost all who lost their housing due to tsunami in these communities have lost their livelihoods as well
- (b) as livelihoods depend and thrive on the specific “informal” economic and socio spatial network, instead of mobility from social housing to middle class housing (as in developed countries) people stay in same “housing settings” (habitats), improving housing units as they become prosperous or fall back on the same informal network when they are on decline

This demands formulating strategies that address housing as an issue that goes beyond providing “housing complexes” or “townships”. With the observation that housing and the economic and socio spatial network play a central role in their livelihoods, it becomes evident that along with providing shelter, enabling the revival and improving the livelihoods of the affected communities stand out as a key objective in housing.

A housing strategy focusing on both these objectives can be evolved by approaching housing as habitats. The term habitats here identifies two key aspects, namely

- (a) housing includes associated social (places of learning , places of worship, parks and other public gathering places) and physical (utilities, roads, public transport) infrastructure to enable the revival and improvement of livelihoods of the beneficiary communities and
- (b) both housing units and associated social and physical infrastructure to be matching with needs and aspirations of the beneficiary communities in keeping with the meaning of the term habitat in its broadest sense.

It becomes evident that housing strategy that seeks to strengthen livelihoods by creating habitats need to focus on doing that at different scales, namely family and community level. A useful approach would be to build on the close interrelationship between social institutions – the household and the community - and the corresponding socio spatial entities – the housing unit, the village, the neighborhood and the township.

Viewed in this context, it becomes clear that the issue is not whether professionals and decision makers should focus on enabling creating habitats or not, rather how to do they assist and whom do they assist? In this, understanding issues through international experience in housing, especially the aspect of housing commonly referred to as public housing becomes useful. It has been well established that enabling communities to become integral part of housing process is a key prerequisite in creating housing habitats. Many public housing projects that build housing complexes and townships aim to provide social and physical infrastructure facilities for the community. It can be argued that while providing the households with individual housing units, enabling the beneficiaries to make their own choices that enable them create their economic and socio spatial network, within a broad framework of options, building up a sense of ownership and obtaining their commitment makes the difference between housing habitats and housing complexes and townships. It is expected that the habitats in PTR will be built upon taking into consideration the specific needs and aspirations of the local communities, specially enabling them to rebuild their economic and socio spatial networks essential for reviving and improving their livelihoods.

This can be understood in terms of experience in other disciplines and fields as well. In industry, many success stories in the corporate sector are closely related to developing a sense of community or team spirit cutting through hierarchies and layers. Enabling free flow of ideas within those teams who are keenly aware of the own strengths, weaknesses and aspirations , instead of “outside experts and senior managers” formulating strategy and “presenting” to the team to follow can be termed as a common factor in many of those success stories. Similarly, in creating housing habitats, enabling the communities to become key members in the housing process can be identified as a key prerequisite for success.

The Role of Decision Makers & Professionals in Creating Habitats

The issue arises then, what are the roles planners, architects and engineers and other officials and decision makers will assume, in this context? Their roles can be broadly defined as facilitators and enablers. In this, the technical professionals such as planners, architects, engineers and building economists assume the role of facilitators, assisting the stakeholders to identify (a) the key challenges, namely, addressing safety issues (100m reservation etc;) and what their needs and aspirations in the short and long terms and (b) options and choices in formulating solutions such as locations of housing, the nature and extent of housing and other facilities and their costs so that they can make their collective choices in a participatory process. The decision makers and officials, including those of the NGO and the corporate sectors as enablers assume the role of organising the

resources, guiding through the administrative processes ensuring transparency and other best practices.

In order to fulfill these tasks, both facilitators and enablers need to have additional skills and instruments beyond their conventional expertise. In the case of success stories in industry, successful teams have been built around leaders who have not been afraid to come out of conventional thinking, “I have to be smarter than my team” and to take the entire team as partners in thinking and action. Similarly, the facilitating professionals and enabling decision makers need to understand that their professional knowledge and political or official powers are primarily there to assist and guide the communities in deciding their own future in creating their own housing habitats. In this, integrating specific instruments such as participatory planning in housing into conventional physical planning, architecture and engineering expertise can be identified as key steps in enabling the professionals and decision makers to assume these tasks.

This raises the issue whether it is practicable to adopt such approaches in PTR, with time and other delivery issues dominating the agenda and in complex urban contexts. The consultative approach outlined above has already been adopted in (a) integrated urban management programming by UNESCO in Galle World Heritage City (in 2004) and (b) in creating housing habitats for 800 families as part of PTR in Valachchenai with the support of German Development Cooperation (GTZ). Considering that housing needs extend well beyond those of the tsunami affected communities (with over 6m lacking access to minimum accepted housing), it can be argued that these approaches would have relevance in other contexts such as assisting war affected IDPs and the rural and urban poor as well, as poverty reduction through improving livelihoods is an overall development goal of the country.

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