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"ACCOUNTABILITY AS A PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY"

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INTERTECT

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Introduction

This paper is an attempt to bring into perspective the issue of accountability to victims as it relates to relief and the provision of housing in disaster situations. It is implied herein that making post-disaster housing programs accountable to beneficiaries is a major departure from present modes of operation. I am further suggesting that accountability to victims should be both an operational method and a program philosophy. After defining accountability, we will examine how accountability relates to the practical aspects of disaster management, and will review guidelines and recommendations for making accountability to victims more than just a new cliché.

Beyond Good Intentions

It may have been with the best of intentions that relief agencies, governments and individuals assumed responsibility for the provision of shelter and housing after disasters in the last several years. Yet in spite of millions of dollars and man-years of effort by intervenors, the situation lives on to haunt those that listen to the people, study the effects, and look beyond the good intentions. Serious examination raises many questions about our past actions.

Quotes - Guatemala:

"We found that most outside groups working in the communities have established highly paternalistic ties with local officials and people. These outsiders are imposing their ideas on the people, however benignly, and usurping authority from local officials..." 1

"Relief officials from outside the area consistently failed to take account of indigenous knowledge, skills, building materials and social institutions...." 2

Turkey:

"The result is that the people of Oren are faced with a lower standard of housing than they were capable of supplying themselves...." ³

India:

"It remains to be seen, however, whether the short-term contribution will outweigh the long-term problems which the program has created." ⁴

Post-disaster programming in the interest of the victim demands more than good intentions. It demands that the product be evaluated with different criteria, and suggests that the process may be as important as the product. It raises questions about the structure of systems, how priorities are set, how funds are raised and used, and how projects are determined and carried out.

Analysis reveals that intervenors, particularly relief agencies, are not answerable to the victims whom they purport to serve. Victims have no voice in agency affairs and no vehicle for participating or expressing their views before their benefactors. It is the intervenor, not the victim, who has in the past designed the house; chosen the materials; decided how rubble is to be removed; decided on lot size and location of the house on the lot; how the house is to be constructed and financed; what the reconstruction strategy will be; whether emergency or temporary shelter will be built; how many people should live in a house; whether animals should be boarded near the house; etc., etc.

Past Basis for Action

I suggest that there are four primary influences which explain why intervenors have not adopted participatory-type housing projects after disasters.

1. Myths about Victims: Stereotypes and misconceptions continue to be major factors in post-disaster programming. The basis for most of these stereotypes and misconceptions in disasters can be found in the portrayal of victims as "helpless". This assumption of helplessness is reinforced in agency reports of post-disaster activity, by sensationalism in press coverage, and often even in disaster relief manuals such as the following:

"A disaster is a catastrophic situation in which the day-to-day patterns of life are in many instances

suddenly disrupted and people are plunged into helplessness and suffering..."⁵ [emphasis added]

Such definitions are used as the justification for autocratic decision-making and action independent of victim participation. Such descriptions belie the fact that in every disaster the major weight of search and rescue, relief and reconstruction, is carried by the victims themselves. This attitude negates the coping mechanisms that exist in every person, family, community and state.

Post-disaster housing programs are viewed as isolated projects in which proposed solutions are "done" to or for beneficiaries by external planners, acting on the belief that recipients are unable or unwilling to effectively participate in the solution of their own problems.

2. Assumption of Ignorance: The second major factor which influences decision-making by agency personnel is the assumption that the people affected are ignorant by virtue of being poor, rural, illiterate, or possibly of a minority class. This is never a malicious feeling but one rather of condescension, and is paralleled in the development field as indicated in the following quote:

"Indeed the origins of the current... foreign aid crisis may very well lie not only in the abuses, misuses, and ineffectiveness of past aid programs, but in the very source of all these: their underlying assumptions about people and the weaknesses patronizingly ascribed to them." 6

The assumption of ignorance often underlies the banner, "Disasters provide a platform for change". It is an oft-waved banner, accompanying changes which seldom improve the life of the people and are often against the will of the people. It is on this basis that intervenors feel justified in discounting the traditions, lifestyles and values of victims. Because of this assumption of ignorance, agencies justify making decisions about changes themselves.

3. Relief as Objects: The third major factor influencing the basis for decision-making by intervenors is the misconception that relief and the "alleviation of suffering" involves merely the provision of items or objects.

It is evidenced in post-disaster damage assessments which list only statistics, such as the number of houses affected. It is evidenced in disaster manuals in the pre-drafted questionnaires which have no spaces to indicate the plans or wishes of the homeowner or resident, nor even room for a description of what the affected people are doing to effectively meet and rectify the situation at hand. This orientation to objects rather than people is the basis for published reports which take credit for the distribution of unusable medicines by labeling them for the public as "Medicines Provided"; for culturally unsuitable, used clothing labeled "Clothes Distributed"; or for poorly constructed, unsuitable buildings labeled "Houses Built".

Houses, food, vaccines, tents, medicines -- these are the "things" to be shipped, moved, distributed, provided, injected. They are not seen as parts of a meaningful social milieu. For instance, there is little consideration on the part of intervenors for building practices that tradition may dictate: an eastern orientation, type of door, mango leaves hung from the rafters, auspicious building days, number of windows, village layout, etc. Even the wishes of the family and their ability to rebuild themselves may be overridden by intervenors who see their only goal as providing shelters.

The error lies in the assumption that housing can be treated as an artifact, devoid of social meanings. This is coupled with the practice by agencies of determining their program on the basis of object damage without consideration of contextual values. Relief programs have been based on damage assessments rather than on need assessments.

4. Agency Self-Interest: The major factor in the past performance of post-disaster housing programs has been the operating mandates of the intervenors. The basis for many of the decisions made is mirrored in the adage, "He who pays the piper calls the tune". It is on this basis that agencies have defined accountability in the past, viewing themselves as being primarily accountable to their sources of funding, rather than to the beneficiaries.

What is to be the basis for judging whether a program is successful? Is it speed, quantity, quality, visibility? What are the criteria used and the motivating forces that drive a program?

Often the impact of food aid in disasters, for instance, is less a consideration than is the mandate to distribute the food, because it has been donated or because it is advantageous for the intervenor. The pressure to construct houses within a certain time frame defined by donors, rather than according to victim needs and building customs, is a clear example of decisions made in the provision of houses in the interest of agency criteria. Analysis of the aid provided in disasters strongly suggests that it may be the donor rather than the victim whose needs are being met. The fact that intervenor response may be based on criteria other than victim need can be seen in many facets of relief, including the following:

- A. Different types of natural disasters attract different degrees of response according to their salability as horror stories to the donor public.
- B. Aid which can be easily portrayed in photographs, on film or television is particularly important for the public relations needs of the intervenor. Scenes of donations being made to representatives of the recipient community; of food being distributed to waiting lines of children; of medical staff (in uniform) giving injections to (usually naked) victims -- all enhance the salability of the relief operation to the donor public.
- C. Aid which is not capable of being photographed (advance planning, disaster impact studies or psychological counselling, for example) is inherently less attractive to the donor agency. In contrast, high technology capital-intensive items such as helicopters, field hospitals and experimental "emergency housing" provide convenient gimmicks which add visibility to the agency's mission.
- D. Donor orientation rather than recipient orientation is also seen in the fact that most foreign relief agencies focus their efforts on attempting to respond to what they believe are urgent but short-term needs, irrespective of a more realistic assessment of victim needs.

E. A fifth effect of donor orientation is that agencies find themselves competing with one another for social credit. There is therefore every incentive for agencies to refuse to collaborate with one another or to accept coordination, thereby minimizing the effectiveness of the aid. ⁷

The issue goes much deeper than whether the aid is oriented to victim needs; and the solution to more effectively meeting the needs of victims demands more than paying lip service to participation by designing systems which allow the beneficiary to work on a prefabrication team, for instance. Participation denotes much more than determining need by simplistically asking victims whether they would like to have the gift structure, or by offering a choice of two options designed by the agency.

Definition of Accountability

Accountability is the key, because it answers the question of who gets to make the decisions and it demands justification for the decisions made. Accountability also implies a relationship between parties, and as such can be defined in terms of participation.

Accountability may be defined as:

...the process of participation that insures, through both formal and informal means, that beneficiaries influence the content and direction of the activity with reasonable expectations of compliance by those in authoritative positions. ⁸

This paper suggests that the missing link in many post-disaster housing programs is the fact that agencies have not been accountable to victims. Beneficiaries have not participated in the decisions about what was to be "done to" them.

Accountability is rooted first in the philosophical assumption that people are not objects to acted upon by others, but have the right to determine their own lives, their culture, traditions, values, lifestyle and even house style. The second basis for advocating a post-disaster housing philosophy wherein agencies become accountable to victims is the practical observation that

programs for (rather than by) people have repeatedly proven not only to be unsuccessful in meeting their needs, but also to have serious negative impact on the lives of the people "helped".

Indicators of accountability to the victims include:

"A mechanism by which beneficiaries had articulated their demands prior to the commencement of the project activities.

"A structure whereby the beneficiaries can on a regular basis take the initiative and make their desires known to the project's management.

"In the course of the project there is an explicit transfer of control from management to beneficiaries." 9

Accountability in Pre-disaster Planning

The following quote is unfortunately representative of much of the work presently being done in pre-disaster planning:

"What is required, then, is an international convention to establish the principle of international responsibility for disasters and to provide for the instrumentalities necessary to effect that responsibility." 10

Most of the work in pre-disaster planning assumes that the responsibility lies outside the community. Plans usually focus on broad international concepts or guidelines for the distribution of relief on a national scale. These broad solutions are to percolate down through regional plans to useful local plans. Unfortunately, it has not worked that way because, all too often, the establishment of pre-disaster planning has meant merely the consolidation of decision-making power by a few agencies or groups outside the community. This orientation is evident in relief agency disaster manuals which provide little to no information about how people will probably respond (other than "helplessness"), how people can protect themselves in the advent of a disaster, or how to support the efforts of the victims themselves.

Pre-disaster planning is viewed as a top-down planning process, with emphasis on how major forces outside the community can be focused on the community in the event of crisis. It will not be effective until it is the community who is participating in assessing vulnerability, making recommendations for stockpiling, teaching search and rescue, developing methods of reducing vulnera-

bility, and providing people with more information about disaster probability and what to do in the event of a disaster. From search and rescue to the provision of shelter, victims play a major role and ultimately are responsible. The goal of pre-disaster planning should be to improve the coping mechanisms of local communities rather than to make them dependent on outside relief agencies -- be they foreign or national agencies.

Accountability in Decision-Making

Both the decisions made, and the process of decision-making, reflect the philosophy and operating assumptions of an agency. Accountability is the key to such decisions as what roofing material is needed, desired, available; whether temporary shelter built by outside labor is the most constructive approach; and what house size is the most suitable. Such decisions will not be positive if the criteria are not established by the people. They must participate in the decision-making process. Decisions about housing cannot be made in national offices, London, Geneva or Washington (even if a representative has made a field visit); they cannot be made by intermediaries for the people.

Studies of several disasters reveal that agencies often make far-reaching decisions about housing programs within the first several weeks post-disaster. One of the most common conclusions by field personnel is that decisions were made too hastily. With very little information, intervenors have often committed themselves to long-range programs, large purchases and pledges to communities which must then be implemented in spite of the fact that additional information may indicate that the decisions were made on the basis of false or misleading assumptions.

Participatory involvement in post-disaster relief must be based on a working relationship before the disaster. Aid which is provided by agencies with no pre-disaster community role usually amount to a "dump job". Victim accountability must begin long before the disaster.

Staffing for Relief Programs

Agencies which are committed to accountability must reassess their staff-

ing patterns, because new skills will be required. Research by INTERTECT indicates that disaster relief agency personnel view themselves primarily as logistics specialists. They are commissioned to transport, build, count, and make arrangements for the many relief items, including housing. Seldom are people brought to the disasters with skills to analyze rationale for decision-making, to reinforce victim accountability, to make an analysis of impact, or to evaluate the result. Too often, this is made a part of a "post mortem" when it should be part of planning.

The skills most needed are the skills of relating to people, of perceiving the local social structure and being able to enhance coping mechanisms and values of the community. It requires concern and ability to calculate impact. It requires technicians who respect the skills that exist and have the ability to build on technologies that are available and understood.

The involvement of anthropologists and sociologists can be very important. Their function, however, must not be to merely analyze the situation for the good of the agency. They must be key advocates of the beneficiaries by determining ways for the existing coping mechanisms to be supported rather than replaced.

Summary Statement

A recent study on emergency shelter undertaken for UNDRO suggests that emergency shelter has been viewed predominately from the standpoint of the intervenors rather than of the victims who are affected by the shelter programs. The same must be said of post-disaster reconstruction and relief aid of other kinds.

As outlined in the UNDRO study,

The primary objective of disaster relief should be to meet the needs of the disaster victims, rather than to respond to the pressures of the intervenors. ¹¹

This can only be accomplished when accountability is understood to rest with the affected peoples rather than with the intervenors.

Conclusions

1. Disasters and the role of outside intervenors must be redefined to more factually represent the rights and coping mechanisms in the affected community. The role of an aid organization must be understood to be that of participant with the affected community.
2. Disaster relief and the provision of shelter must be based on need assessment rather than damage assessment. Needs must be determined from the victims' perspective rather than from donors' interests.
3. Accountability in decision-making demands that decision-making mechanisms be restructured and decentralized to the local level. This will require flexibility and will result in programs that are diverse (specific to individual needs), based on time frames, technology and materials appropriate to the victims.
4. Effective disaster relief programs are based on pre-disaster coping mechanisms existing within the affected community. Accountable aid programs must be built on pre-disaster and ongoing participatory working relationships, and cannot be effectively established in the crisis situation.
5. Agencies concerned with accountability in post-disaster housing and relief must be committed to an understanding of the long-range effects of aid. Personnel should be required to draft impact statements before launching a program and to initiate in-depth evaluations after a program. Both impact statements and evaluations should be based on participation of all involved.
6. Staffing patterns of relief and reconstruction programs must be reassessed. The skills most required are the ability to understand the social and economic constraints of affected communities, and the ability to establish working relationships that support rather than destroy local coping mechanisms. The staff must be as adept at understanding impact as they presently are at understanding logistics. As examples, it may mean hiring people from the affected community rather than outsiders, or seeking the support of sociologists rather than prefabrication experts.

7. Project analysis should take into account whether or not the project's objectives and criteria are indeed community priorities. The criteria for determining the success of a program -- speed, quality, suitability, justice of distribution, safety, technology, benefit to economy, etc. -- must be established by the victims.
8. If the goal of disaster assistance is the reduction of human suffering, assistance to pre-disaster planning is the most effective means of reaching that goal.
9. Pre-disaster planning should be done by local authorities. It should represent local priorities and be presented to the public in an easily understood form. Public education must be actively supported.
10. Agencies involved in post-disaster relief and reconstruction should initiate and support research which may help to answer more fully the questions that exist in the field of disaster aid.
11. Agencies which repeatedly respond to disasters should establish on-going training programs for staff to ensure that there exists a philosophical understanding and a programmatical base, prior to the disaster situation. These should also be reflected in the disaster relief manuals and standard operating procedures.

FOOTNOTES

1. From statement by Robert M. Cormack in his report to U.S.A.I.D.; quote taken from "Housing and Shelter Provision Following the Earthquakes of February 4 and 6, 1976", paper presented by Ian Davis at Symposium on Guatemala; p. 15.
2. Alan J. Taylor, "Style in Aid-Giving: Relief Versus Development in Guatemala", INTERTECT, April, 1978; p. 7.
3. Frederick Krimgold, The Role of International Aid for Pre-Disaster Planning in Developing Countries, Stockholm, 1974; p. 53.
4. Frederick C. Cuny, Unpublished evaluation of the CARE housing project in Andhra Pradesh following the cyclone of November 1977, INTERTECT, Dallas, 1978; p. 5.
5. League of Red Cross Societies, Red Cross Disaster Relief Handbook, Geneva, 1976; p. 13.
6. Inter-American Foundation, They Know How...An Experiment in Development Assistance, Washington, D.C., 1977; p. 2.
7. Alan J. Taylor, "Relief, Development and the Foreign Voluntary Aid Organization", INTERTECT, Dallas, 1978; p. 16.
8. Paraphrase of definition found on p. 88, They Know How..., Inter-American Foundation.
9. Ibid., pp. 88-89.
10. Stephen Green, International Disaster Relief: Toward a Responsive System, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1977; p. 64.
11. From Issues 1-3, Volume I of the study on the provision of emergency shelter and post-disaster housing, undertaken by Cuny, Davis and Krimgold for UNDRO (pre-publication draft, 1977).

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