Truths and myths about community participation in post-disaster housing projects

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Abstract

It has been widely accepted by policy makers and commentators, funding bodies and NGOs that the key to performance in low-cost housing projects in developing countries lies in community participation. This paper proposes that this premise (extensively discussed in the theory and emphasized in grant applications) is not clearly reflected in the realities of reconstruction practice. In fact, there are many ways in which users/beneficiaries can participate in post-disaster reconstruction projects but not all types of participation ensure the best deployment of their capabilities. The systems approach shows that there is a continuum of possibilities for participation; at one extreme, users are involved in the projects only as the labour force, whereas at the other, they play an active role in decision-making and project management.

Four case studies of post-disaster housing reconstruction projects (one each in Colombia and in El Salvador, and two in Turkey) illustrate this continuum. A comparative analysis of the organisational designs of these projects highlights the different ways in which users can be and were involved. We show the impact of the different approaches to the “where”, the “when” and the “how”, regarding incorporating the users into the organisational and technical design processes. This study shows that the participation of users in up-front decision-making (within the project design and planning phases, including the capacity to make meaningful choices among a series of options offered to them) leads to positive results in terms of building process and outcomes. However, despite often-good intentions, this level of participation is rarely obtained and the capabilities of the users are often significantly wasted.

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Introduction

Housing projects for the poor in developing countries are bedevilled by a number of ingrained attitudes: (a) construction codes and standards have to be met (as a result, housing is too expensive for those who most

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need it), (b) projects have definite start and finish dates (yet informal low-cost housing is improved over decades or even generations), (c) the poor are usually in a vulnerable social situation.

The challenges of housing reconstruction projects in the post-disaster situation are similar to those challenges met in many low-cost housing projects in developing countries. However, in the post-disaster situation, there are some added challenges: (a) the scene is generally very chaotic and resources are in scarce supply, with simultaneous projects being launched by numerous local and international organisations for housing and infrastructure repairs, for livelihoods creation, and for a range of other social programmes, (b) projects must be completed as quickly as possible to foster recovery and to satisfy donors who want to see results and (c) the post-disaster period is generally seen as good opportunity to engage in activities that will increase the level of development and reduce vulnerability to future disasters, implying that projects must be implemented with sustainability in mind.1

Even within this context, contemporary literature about the performance of housing projects, including post-disaster reconstruction projects, hinges around a widely accepted paradigm: the value of community participation.2 Even though this single idea seems to be the subject of a consensus among academics and practitioners, community participation actually takes on many different forms in the field of housing. Indeed, different authors discuss it in different manners.

This paradigm—and the rhetoric around it—is used simultaneously to describe:

- **An approach to urban management and disaster recovery**: community participation accompanies various approaches at this macro-level: decentralization of urban management, local democratisation, spreading decision-making among local organisations, community involvement in the development of urban policies, civil society debate, etc. (Arnsen, 1969; Foret, 2001; Jalali, 2002; Post, 1997). According to UNCHS—Habitat “There has been an equal consensus in favour of the decentralization of responsibilities to lower levels of government, and, particularly to local authorities” (UNCHS, 2001). In the disaster situation, Maskrey (1989) finds that, “people were able, through community-based organisations (CBOs), to articulate strategies for recovery and reconstruction which responded to their real needs” (p. 84).

- **A policy for funding bodies**: it is usually a compulsory component for the funded organisations; it frequently includes ‘soft’ social intervention, community involvement, community building, empowerment, etc. This approach is usually accompanied by other social concerns such as a gender-based approach, reduction of social vulnerability, reduction of exclusions, etc (Zanetta, 2001). “The projects are therefore not only about bricks and mortar but increasing the capacity of communities, NGOs, worker unions, local governments, and the private sector to play key roles in the housing process” (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2001, p. 19).

- **A philosophy for housing provision**: according to this idealized approach, beneficiaries already have strong community ties, social cohesion, communal values, etc.; these need to be encouraged and may be utilized in housing and reconstruction projects (Choguill, 1996; El-Masri and Kellett, 2001; Pugh, 1997; Turner, 1972).

- **A management strategy at the policy level**: by stimulating local NGOs, encouraging CBOs and supporting local actors, it is possible—according to this approach—to reduce the influence of the state and the role of public organisations, leaving a number of tasks and responsibilities to local de-centralized organisations (Keivani & Werna, 2001; Wegelin & Borgman, 1995). “Governments should strive to decentralize shelter policies and their administration to subnational and local levels within the national framework, whenever possible and as appropriate” (UN Habitat, 1996).

- **A technical solution**: according to this approach, through the use of self-help, the local people (who, over the years, have already developed technical solutions well adapted to their own context) can exploit local know-how and traditional solutions, and therefore imported solutions (usually inadequate according to this approach) are not required (Pugh, 1997). “As housing action depends on the actors’ will and as the

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2 Due to the realities of low-cost housing projects, this paper considers users and beneficiaries as the same group of people and the terms users’ participation, beneficiaries’ participation and community participation are used interchangeably.
dominant actors in economies of scarcity are the people themselves, they must be free to make decisions which most concern them” (Turner, 1972). El-Masri and Kellett (2001) explain, “Top-down approaches to reconstruction too often ignore the complexity of the built environment, the local conditions and the users’ needs and potentials. Consequently, the outcomes in such ‘symbolic schemes’ rarely go beyond producing expensive and alien housing units and frequently result in abandonment or alterations to the dwellings” (p. 536).

- **A cost-reduction approach:** by using the community in the construction process, capital investment can be reduced allowing scarce available resources to be spread among more families (Ettouney and Abdel-Kader, 2003; Ferguson and Navarrete, 2003).

- **An informal strategy of survival:** it is recognized that—anyhow—slums are built in the first place (irrespective of the reconstruction situation) through community participation, self-help, and the resources of the informal sector (Ferguson and Navarrete, 2003). “Owner built housing—the earliest form of construction—is still the most common in the world today” (Abrams, 1964).

The idea of community participation has been so widely expressed that it does not seem to mean anything clear anymore. The term “Community” has been—often arbitrarily—used to refer to a neighbourhood, a slum, a group of local NGOs, a group of militant leaders, the residents of a small town, a workers’ union, a group of women, etc. In this sense, the term neither denotes what this group of people really have in common nor their differences. The term “Participation” is also randomly used to denote civil debate and communication, consultation, delegation of activities, partnership, self-help construction, communal meetings, political decentralization, etc. Probably the main difficulty in the application of this concept is that community participation has not been defined in terms of what it means in a project environment. This is crucial because housing in general and housing reconstruction in particular are carried out in a project-by-project mode. The consequence is that organizations would like to accomplish the goal of community participation, but very few know how to do so within the specific strictures of project-by-project interventions.

We suggest that the solution to this theoretical problem is not to try to determine the appropriate role of community participation alone, i.e. in isolation from a given context, since the users are only one of the many actors in a project. The solution is to tackle the organisational design of the project as a whole, changing from the traditional approach—which is too much concentrated on the panacea of community building—and broadening the perspective from a project management point of view. The advantages of this wider view of organisational design is that users’ participation is—in a systems approach—seen in terms of risk reduction, overall performance, results obtained vs. objectives, resource management, etc.

Research shows that the beneficiaries of a housing project—depending on how it is organized—can, with proper, disinterested guidance, intervene at the levels of design decisions, materials selection and preparation, construction, management and even financing (Roesch da Silva, 1980; Jorge Andrade, personal communication).

Participation in housing projects has also been found to play an important role in empowering beneficiaries or community members to become part of the general political process and to have a voice in decisions that shape the community. A “ladder of community participation,” defines a continuum of approaches for how organisations seek community involvement in housing projects. This ladder was originally proposed by Arnstein (1969) and was later modified to fit the context in developing countries by Choguill (1996). Adapted from these authors, the ladder of community participation shown here (Fig. 1) depicts that approaches at the top of the ladder empower people in important decision-making roles or offer collaboration with communities, thus promoting community control over the project. On the bottom end of the ladder, beneficiaries may be consulted about their needs and wants (with no assurance that these concerns will be taken into account), merely informed about the shape the housing project will take or even manipulated into taking part in the project. As Choguill (1996) and Arnstein (1969) argue, these cannot really be classified as ‘participation’ because the users will have little or no control over decision-making. However, as this research will show, consulting, and informing have often been passed off as legitimate forms of community participation in reconstruction, despite the users’ participation in decision-making being stifled.

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Research approach

Our four case histories [post-earthquake reconstruction in: (a) Colombia, (b) El Salvador, (c) temporary and (d) permanent housing in Turkey] illustrate different organisational designs and different roles for the users-beneficiaries. Information for each of the case studies was obtained by several extended periods of observation in the field, by interviews with key project or program administrators, and by direct or indirect surveys designed to yield information about the beneficiaries’ reactions to the outcomes. More detailed information about the methodology for each case study is described in related footnotes. Careful evaluation procedures were developed, adapted from the “LogFrame” (Gasper, 2000; Wiggins and Shields, 1995) generally used by international aid agencies.

Case 1: Beneficiaries’ participation in reconstruction in rural Colombia by the Coffee Growers Organisation

Context, start-up and objectives

The program came as an immediate response to the destruction caused by the 6.2 Richter scale earthquake that occurred on January 25, 1999 in the Colombian coffee-growing region called “Eje cafetero”. The reconstruction project was developed by the Coffee Growers Organisations (CGOs) in response to a preliminary master program of reconstruction launched by the Presidency and managed by a fund specially created for this purpose (FOREC: Fondo para la reconstruccion del eje cafetero). In joining the master plan initiative procured by the central government, the network of coffee growing organisations (a grassroots organisation) assumed the responsibility for conducting reconstruction in the rural areas and small towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants), specifically to help with the recovery of the affected coffee industry. Organized around an existing network of local, regional and national committees and a central Federation (a guild) of coffee growers, the CGOs already had personnel and resources at different levels and in almost all the territory in which they had to intervene (including the departments of Risaralda, Caldas, Antioquia and Valle). Fig. 2A illustrates the composition of participants in this initiative.

Project organisation

Having long experience working in the area and with local residents, the CGOs started a few days after the disaster with the collection of data about the needs and priorities of the coffee growers. This included

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3Information for this case study was part of a research on project management of post-disaster housing. Data were collected in two field visits in 1999 and 2002 in the region of Armenia and Pereira. Sources of information include interviews with residents, project managers and officers of construction companies involved, as well as site observations and published documents. More information about this case can be found in Lizaralde (2002).

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spreading an existing staff of 11 engineers around the area in order to conduct an evaluation of affected buildings and to collect information about the existing situation (the number of houses and coffee-preparation infrastructure-related buildings destroyed, affected or partially damaged, etc.).

Fig. 2. (A) Colombian case history: organigram of the participants, including the beneficiaries; (B) Indication of the lead participants for each phase of the project.

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The CGOs recognized that reconstruction projects easily suffer from what is called in Spanish “asistencialismo”, that is to say, the environment often created by NGOs in their wish to help affected families by assuming the role of “help-giver” while the beneficiaries assume the passive role of “help-receiver”. Consequently, as shown in Fig. 2B, the CGOs designed the organisation of their project in a way which avoided the traditional scheme of help. Instead of being an organisation that makes all the choices and then approaches a community to provide help, the CGOs prepared a plan in which beneficiaries had to approach the local CGO branches in order to participate in the project and to receive the help they needed (obviously this was easy, since the coffee growers had long-standing relations with the CGOs). The central Federation of coffee growers administered the subsidies provided by the government, complemented by additional subsidies provided by the CGOs’ national fund and by complementary loans. A financial institution working in partnership with the CGOs then managed financing issues.

The coffee-grower community was offered a wide range of services (loans, subsidies, technical aid, information, etc.) from which they could choose and use according to their individual needs, priorities and expectations. Under this scheme, the beneficiaries had the control and responsibility of their own decisions (type of house to be built, type of technology to be used, contribution in self-help, hired activities, etc); however these decisions were framed by contractual clauses that attempted to guarantee that the resources offered were efficiently and properly used.

This contract between each family and the CGOs included that the partial payments of subsidies and loans for housing reconstruction (4000 US$ per family as a subsidy and additional 1000 US$ per family as a loan) were attached to the requirement of periodically demonstrating the proper use of the funds in the construction of disaster-resistant structures. Inspected by the staff of engineers, all the individual projects had to follow earthquake-resistant, environmental and regional planning standards (including standards about the use of land, of wood and water, etc.).

The freedom to choose the type of project to invest the resources in, and to choose the characteristics of each individual project, favoured the development of a range of different solutions. Not all residents used the resources for building a new house. In fact most of them reconstructed damaged dwellings or built a new one by recycling existing components from their affected units (toilets, sinks, roof tiles, doors, windows, etc.) plus buying new ones. Others chose to rebuild structures related to income-generation (small shops, structures related to the processing of coffee, etc.). Many invested the resources in infrastructure and finally a minority of them bought pre-fabricated finished units.

Also being responsible for managing the grants and loans for their own projects, the beneficiaries sought for other sources of funding (matching funds from private loans, their savings, other subsidies, etc). The residents that had knowledge in construction used that know-how to reduce costs related to labour; those that required help hired contractors. Each family designed its own project and, in the end, more than 8000 micro-projects related to housing were built (all were fundamentally different from each other according to individual needs).

The majority of the beneficiaries had a low level of education; however, officers of the CGOs claim that this did not prevent them from taking full responsibility for their own projects. Most of the residents drafted a basic plan of what they wanted (by pencil and in a school-type notebook) while professional engineers provided advice for the design of the structural components for these customized solutions. The double role of supervision and advice provided by the engineers created an appropriate relationship for coping with the variety of solutions; it also enabled order and control to be achieved at a low cost.

The CGOs did not have any interest in becoming associated with a particular technological, architectural or urban solution; they were concerned with a quick recovery of the coffee industry. By their approach, the CGOs achieved: (i) increased user satisfaction: users built what they required in the way they needed it and according to their own timetable and resources; and (ii) total user participation in which the users had full responsibility of their own choices. It meant that beneficiaries were not passive “victims” receiving humanitarian aid; they became the ones responsible for their own projects.

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Case 2: Participatory reconstruction in post-disaster El Salvador: the case of La Hermandad

Context, start-up and objectives

On January 13, 2001, an earthquake of magnitude 7.6 on the Richter scale shook El Salvador. Lamaria, one of the municipalities severely affected by the quake, is located in the western department of Sonsonate. Prior to the events, Lamaria had seldom been visited by international NGOs because it was not considered to be one of the poorer municipalities of the country. About 3000 homes were completely destroyed in Lamaria, and 13,440 people were affected.

The project, called La Hermandad, was headed by a European Red Cross agency, which took over the management of this and two other temporary shelter projects. However, La Hermandad was part of a larger initiative, bringing together three international NGOs on two adjacent building sites, with the aim of creating a “model community” for 300 poor and homeless families. Hence the objective of this project was to lay the physical basis of a new semi-rural housing development. The selection of the construction site was done in coordination with Lamaria’s mayor’s office as well as with the Salvadorian Red Cross, since all foreign Red Cross agencies must work in partnership with their national counterpart. In May–June 2001, La Hermandad was presented to potential project beneficiaries (50 eligible families) as a participatory housing reconstruction project, namely a “food for work” project.

Project organisation

The majority of selected beneficiaries were living in temporary shelters. The main selection criteria were as follows: families must earn no more than two minimum salaries and never have owned a house or a plot of land in their life. Some were of rural origin, others from town; some had experience in masonry construction, many did not. Overall, beneficiaries’ input in project design was limited, even if project leaders said that the beneficiaries had been involved in project design at the earliest stage. In fact, their input was limited to endorsing the housing design proposed by the NGO but with one extra demand: to add a wall around each individual plot of land.

The project logic was as follows. Each family would receive an 80 m² brick house (brick is a housing material produced in the area, culturally more appreciated than cement blocks) on a 200 m² plot. Houses were identical and consisted of two 20 m² “bedrooms” and a 40 m² “living room”. Unlike the other two projects forming this new “urbanization”, no construction equipment was hired, as the entire process relied on manual labour. In La Hermandad, one adult per nuclear family had to work 150 h each month; family members were to reside full-time on the construction site and had to respect a series of regulations. As shown in Fig. 3A, all workers received training from 17 professional masons hired from Lamaria, and were under the authority of a supervisor and an engineer. A social worker was also hired for 6 months in order to develop “community” activities on the site. What is of significance here is that in order to have access to a new anti-seismic house, 80% of the beneficiaries had to abandon their other remunerated activities in order to comply with the mandatory working hours. This entailed a major or total loss of income for the entire duration of the reconstruction process.

In exchange of their manual labour, participants received food rations on a monthly basis (distributed by the World Food Program) and—at the end of the process—became the recognized owners of a house they could legally claim as their own.

The project began in June 2001 and was supposed to end in early February 2002. However, due to various problems such as an overall increase in physical fatigue and health problems, the latter in part due to

4Names of places and of the project have been changed in order to respect confidentiality and the anonymity of informers. Data for this case study were collected during 10 month of participant-observation fieldwork in El Salvador in 2001–2002. Methodologies included extensive on-site observation, formal and semi structured interviews with project managers, municipal officials, NGO representatives and other local institutions involved in the reconstruction process.

5The minimum salary in 2002 was US$ 97.00 per person per month.
irregularity in food distribution and an unbalanced diet, project completion was delayed until the end of June 2002.

Throughout the entire process, participants had very little input in decision-making, both in terms of the physical aspects of construction and the more social components of the project, namely the creation of six “social committees” organized by the social worker who mainly recruited the women (committees on food distribution, hygiene, environment, education, etc). The purpose behind this initiative was to foster a sense of community in La Hermandad, an objective which was regularly insisted upon during the monthly general assemblies, where project supervisors would encourage beneficiaries to get along better, work harder (as the project was lagging behind) and realize that they were now forming part of a “new community”. This communitarian ideal is not new in both development and reconstruction projects but cannot be taken as self-evident. In fact, the communitarian ideal remained precisely that, an ideal; the social committees remained

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ineffective, divisions between beneficiaries increased over time as lack of income and physical exhaustion became difficult to endure, while at the same time workers were asked to perform harder and faster. Furthermore, in March 2002, project leaders halted a participants’ initiative to form a local representative body with official legal status, so long as the construction process was still underway. In other words, they did not wish to see their authority undermined by an initiative, which could have indeed enhanced a sense of social cohesion among the beneficiaries.

Our extended research in La Hermandad reveals a series of critical points. First, project management followed a strictly top-down approach (see Fig. 3B), where the lines of command remained hierarchical throughout the entire duration of the process; this, in turn, could not sustain the communitarian ideal, which was promoted in all public discourses. Second, the contradiction between discourse and practice shows a lack of understanding of people’s motivation to participate in the project; indeed, beneficiaries were not there to form a community but first and foremost to have access to a new house they would eventually claim as their individual property. In this sort of situation, motivations are better explained in individualistic and utilitarian terms rather than according to an idealized concept of community building. Third, even if in the end the users’ perception of the physical qualities of the houses was positive, their participation in the process remained quite limited; they did not have any impact on the technical aspects of construction and were disinclined to engage themselves in any social components and/or activities organized from above.

Case 3: Temporary housing in the Marmara region, Turkey

Context, start-up and objectives

In the latter half of 1999 two massive earthquakes devastated the northwestern Marmara and Bolu regions of Turkey. The Marmara region, which was heavily damaged by the first earthquake, is an area supporting heavy industry and therefore an important economic centre for Turkey. The earthquakes completely destroyed around 109,000 homes and businesses and damaged to varying degrees another 249,000. Up to 600,000 people were forced to leave their homes in the wake of the earthquakes, either temporarily or permanently (World Bank, 1999).

Under the Turkish Disasters Law in 1999, affected families qualified to receive a new house from the government. Due to the massive numbers of homeless people, the fast approaching winter, the time needed for permanent rebuilding and the strategic importance of the affected area, the government decided to employ a three stage re-housing strategy of immediate shelter, temporary housing and then later permanent housing.

Project organisation

In the days after the first earthquake, once the immediate relief activities were underway, the Prime Minister’s office and the Ministry of Public Works and Settlements decided to provide 32,000 prefabricated temporary housing units of 30 m\(^2\) through a tender process. (In parallel, NGOs and private donors provided 12,000 units through their own processes). All units were built on government-owned land or vacant private rented lots within and around the affected cities. For the government projects, out of the 95 private prefabricating companies that responded to the call for bids, 25 were chosen to provide the temporary housing units (Auditor Chief, 2003). As can be seen in Fig. 4A, state-owned entities prepared the land and provided the infrastructure necessary for all the housing units. Within 6 months after the first earthquake, the majority of temporary housing units had been completed by the Ministry of Public Works and by the NGOs.

Apart from a few small NGO-sponsored projects (totalling a few hundred houses) that tried to incorporate beneficiaries as labour, there was very little beneficiary participation in the temporary housing projects. However, there was a limited amount of consultation before the temporary housing program was decided.

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Information for this case study was part of research on strategic planning for temporary housing after disasters. Data were collected over a series of field visits from 2000 to 2004 to the Marmara region in Turkey. Sources of information include: interviews with residents, project managers, municipal planners and ministry officials, as well as site observations and published government documents. For more information about this case study see: Johnson et al. (2006) and Johnson (2006).

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upon—in the days following the earthquake the affected population living in tent camps was consulted about their general physical and financial needs, and their opinions about reconstruction, including those related to receiving prefabricated temporary houses from the government. Generally, people were in favour of getting a temporary prefabricated house, as it would be provided for free by the government and would be a rapid improvement to their current situation of tent dwelling. The temporary housing project then went ahead, planned by the government with some involvement from NGOs.

As illustrated in Fig. 4B, there was no further input or collaboration from the beneficiaries. Families were assigned a temporary house by the authorities, and they moved in, most residing there between 1.5 and 3 years. However, families had some control over the projects once they moved in. Many families modified their dwellings, as they felt necessary, to make them comfortable, usually adding an entrance vestibule or a veranda, and in some cases, another room if the settlement authorities allowed it. People were also involved in promoting the life of the settlements; some were employed in managing the facility, others took an active part in community work, and some opened small businesses to serve the community.

Overall, as reported by the Auditor Chief (2003), the settlements had a 98.5% occupancy rate, meaning either that residents had few other choices for housing, or were satisfied enough with the results to stay in the
temporary housing, making the best of it. There were both positive and negative impacts following from the overall lack of user participation in this project. On the one hand, the highly centralized management and lack of user participation enabled the process to be rapid, the responsible authority took decisions quickly and work was carried out with little delay so that all of the houses were available within a few months, as mentioned. Yet on the other hand, the designs and locations of the houses did not always correspond to the people’s needs. Many people complained of problems with the suitability of designs and low-quality finishes, and about the settlements being too far from the city and work opportunities. A more serious problem arises from the top-down approach, namely that little was done to foster any awareness about methods for seismically safe building.

Case 4: Housing reconstruction in the villages of the Çankiri region, Turkey

Context, start-up and objectives

On 6th of June 2000 an earthquake of magnitude 5.9 on the Richter Scale shook the Orta district in Çankırı, which is a province of Central Anatolian Region of Turkey with a population of 270,355 and many of the surrounding villages. According to the damage assessment done by the General Directorate of Disaster Affairs (GDDA), 1892 rural houses were demolished or heavily damaged, 184 were moderately and 2440 houses were slightly damaged by the earthquake. It should be noted that rural areas suffer more from earthquakes because most of the rural houses in Turkey are constructed by their owners or by local craftsmen, without any professional assistance regarding choice of materials and construction techniques.

After the initial aid consisting of tent and food distribution, the Ministry of Public Works and Settlements initiated a reconstruction project in the disaster stricken area; it was decided to provide permanent post-disaster housing loans for the people whose houses were demolished or heavily damaged. In 2000, nearly 3731 US$ (5000 YTL) of housing loans per beneficiary were provided to the victims with an interest-free payback period of 20 years. Furthermore, in 2001 nearly 4478 US$ (6000 YTL) of housing loans per beneficiary were provided to the victims who did not get a loan the year before, with an interest-free payback of the same period. According to this system, 1221 permanent post-disaster houses (PDHs) were constructed in five districts of Çankırı. Besides seven new settlements, some of the PDHs were constructed in the existing villages. The construction began in the year 2000 and most of the beneficiaries started living in the houses by 2002.

Project organisation

As shown in Fig. 5A, the reconstruction project was implemented under the aegis of the Ministry of Public Works and Settlements. The project was organised by Government authorities: GDDA, Directorate of Public Works and Settlements, Governor’s Office and GDDA Construction Supervision Unit in Orta, which was established for the project only and thereafter disbanded. In addition, a private architecture firm worked on the project during the design phase.

Three different designs of permanent post-disaster housing, henceforth to be referred to as “typical designs”, were prepared for the area by the private architectural firm hired by the Ministry of Public Works and Settlements: 75.68 m² one-bedroom units, 84.81 m² two-bedroom units and 103.75 m² three-bedroom units. All were single story brick masonry buildings, designed with no adaptations for local site requirements. The beneficiaries who did not like one of the three typical designs had the option to have professionals prepare new designs, which then had to be approved by the GDDA Construction Supervision Unit in Orta. Research revealed that beneficiaries who chose to construct typical designs did not like them after they started to live in them.

Once the house design had been chosen or approved, beneficiaries were responsible for hiring contractors to build the house. Since the loan provided by the Government was not enough for constructing a house, the

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7Information for this case study was part of research on design and provision of permanent post-disaster houses. Data were collected through two field surveys in 2004 and 2005 in the Çankırı Region, Turkey. Sources of information include: interviews with residents, project managers, and ministry officials, as well as site observations and published documents.

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beneficiaries covered the rest of the costs out of their own pockets. Before and during the construction phase the beneficiaries did not get any guidance from the Government on how to hire a contractor. Instead, the GDDA Construction Supervision Unit in Orta periodically checked the various stages of ongoing construction works in the area and paid out the loan instalments to the beneficiaries accordingly. This lack of guidance created problems for the beneficiaries; since most of the victims are illiterate and they did not know how to draw up contracts, some contractors got money from the beneficiaries and absconded before finishing the construction process (there were many unfinished houses in the region at the time of the research). Nonetheless, the beneficiaries have to pay the loan back to the Government.

The research revealed that a large number of the PDHs with typical designs are unoccupied while some are seasonally occupied. The reasons beneficiaries refused to move into the new settlements were: the new settlements were difficult to reach due to the distance from the villages and/or lack of proper roads, there was...
not enough space for a cattle shed and a straw shed on the lot, beneficiaries cannot afford to construct such
sheds and new settlements are not suitable for the animals, because they were established on top of hills.

Generally in Turkey, disaster-stricken rural settlements are relocated to a different location; since there are
more than one owner of the damaged property it is difficult to provide large enough lots to the beneficiaries
and it is not easy to allot one PDH to multiple claimants. Usually there are multiple owners because the
siblings in a family inherit these houses or there are extended families in a traditional house, each eligible for
getting a PDH. The criteria for new sites for relocation are: low disaster risk, closeness to infrastructure
facilities and government ownership of land. In the case of Çankırı the Government decided to move seven
villages to new locations for these reasons. However, inadequate selection criteria and lack of user
participation in the decision-making process lead to the rejection of the new settlements.

As mentioned above, the houses do not meet the needs of the users. In the design phase there was little
consideration of the needs of the users and the local requirements in the region. Nearly all of those PDHs with
typical designs which are being used permanently have been modified by their users in order to adapt them to
their way of life, by changing the planning of the house during the construction phase, the functions of the
rooms, and/or by adding new rooms.

Fig. 5B outlines user participation in this reconstruction project, which took the form of:

1. Choosing one of the three designs offered or having new designs custom made,
2. Choosing the contractor/builder,
3. Assuming responsibility for managing the finance,
4. Management of the construction phase,
5. Settling the terms of the contract (mostly verbal).

The participation of the beneficiaries at these stages took place too late in the decision-making process for
them to have a positive effect on the project. The lack of user participation in early decision-making process
caused a high level of dissatisfaction with the design of the PDH and some of the beneficiaries even refused to
move into the new settlements because they claimed that the new location was inaccessible. On the other hand,
when the beneficiaries were given the chance to make decisions about the choice of contractor, financing and
construction management they had to do so with little guidance from the government.

Discussion and conclusions

Regarding post-disaster reconstruction projects in developing countries, the United Nations’ publication
“Shelter After Disaster” (UNDRO, 1982) stated “the key to success ultimately lies in the participation of the
local community—the survivors—in reconstruction”.

As we have already mentioned, community participation is widely encouraged by NGOs, policy makers,
and scholars. However, very little knowledge really exists about how to apply this principle at the project level.
The project-related dimension of both “community” and “participation” seem to be neglected in current
literature. The case studies of post-disaster reconstruction projects demonstrate that the ideal of community
participation: (i) takes on a number of forms and (ii) in the majority of cases, does not really reach
reconstruction in the field; this suggests that there is a big gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, it
would be foolish to propose a single theoretical model for participation and to imply that it results in “better”
projects, since there as many notions of what is better as there are participants and as there are contexts.

When user participation occurs at late stages (either as sweat labour for constructing standardized houses or
assuming responsibility—for construction procurement, financial management and contracting), there are frequent problems either with the project process, as was observed in the La
Hermadad (El Salvador) and Çankırı (Turkey) case studies or with the project outcomes, as was observed in
the Marmara (Turkey) and Çankırı (Turkey) case studies. When the beneficiaries are integrated into the up-
front stages, as in the CGO (Colombia) case—implying their participation in appropriate designing of the
processes and their organization—then they can have an important impact on the project with long-term
advantages to them and to the other stakeholders.

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Using the terminology of Fig. 1, the case studies illustrate various degrees of user participation in reconstruction projects. Indeed, Fig. 6 shows that the Colombian case study represents the highest level of user participation, *empowerment*, where members have a genuine power in up-front decision-making processes. In contrast, the Salvadorian case falls in the *informing* category since users had no involvement in the formal decision-making process, even if users had a positive opinion of the project’s outcomes. The temporary shelter project in Marmara exemplifies a case of minimal *consultation* in a top-down approach to project management. Finally, the Çankırı situation falls into *informing*; even though beneficiaries did have a role in project management, they had little choice but to cope—without guidance—with the few options offered to them.

Against this background, it seems to be pointless to try to determine once and for all the optimum nature and role of community participation—per se—in a reconstruction project. There is obviously no single “best” approach for user participation, since construction in general and reconstruction in particular are rooted in their socio-politico-economic contexts. There are, however, some principles that should guide strategic planning in establishing the balance between short-term project goals and long-term outcomes. These principles can be described by the term “organizational design”.

The case studies suggest that a better understanding of the overall organisational design of the reconstruction projects is required. This organisational design has—of course—to include the role of users (one of the key actors of the housing process and often with the least power); but this role can only be defined in terms of interactions and interrelationships with and between the other members of the project team. While the rhetoric of community participation is still far from being proved to be a key aspect in the performance of the projects, organisational design seems to be at the centre of this search for improved project performance.
However, the question immediately arises: who is responsible for this organisational design and at what moment does it occur?

In response to the first part of this question, we have argued elsewhere (Johnson et al., 2005) that “procurement” is the activity that sets up the framework within which participating organisations (including the community) are mobilized and relations between them established, that is to say, the project’s organization is designed. In response to the second part of the question, in a disaster-prone area, the principles governing procurement (meta-procurement, in our terminology) should be established before a disaster occurs so that in the chaos following the disaster, there is a framework for taking the applicable procurement decisions coherently and for involving the beneficiaries as much as possible in active decision making.

References


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