

BUILDING PATHWAYS TO RECOVERY



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Supporting Shelter Self-Recovery Through the Humanitarian Reset

Proceedings of the Global Shelter, Land and Site Coordination Cluster Recovery Community of Practice Meeting, February 2026



GLOBAL SHELTER, LAND AND SITE COORDINATION CLUSTER



Acknowledgments

The online meeting “**Building Pathways to Recovery: supporting shelter self-recovery through the Humanitarian Reset**” was instigated and organised **by the Recovery Community of Practice (RCoP)**, one of the communities of practice of the Global Shelter, Land and Site Coordination Cluster. It was held on 3 February 2026.

The co-lead agencies of the RCoP are Catholic Relief Services (CRS), CARE UK International (CARE), CRAterre, and the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP), Oxford Brookes University.

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Context

A webinar on supporting Self-Recovery was held on 3 February 2026 hosted by the Global Shelter, Land and Site Coordination Cluster Recovery Community of Practice. The seminar had three aims:

1. Inform practitioners (what is the self-recovery approach?)
2. Disseminate best practice (lessons from practice, where to find guidelines and tools)
3. Inform progress (what to promote in future activities)



Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3, February 2026

The format of the webinar was designed to hear first from practitioners and academics who were involved in the creation of the concept of supporting self-recovery, and who developed evidence and guidance. This was followed by practitioners describing self-recovery in practice, and researchers reporting on the current state of the art. Finally, the workshop participants, humanitarian practitioners and academics, engaged in a collaborative exercise designed to inform future practices, agendas and actions.

Key Messages from the Webinar

These messages were the key outcomes of the meeting, and together they suggest an agenda for the future of self-recovery:

- Access to flexible financing mechanisms: direct cash assistance to affected populations can also empower households to lead their own recovery processes. Donor advocacy is needed on this.
- Flexibility in programme design and implementation emerged as critical, with an emphasis on iterative, adaptive approaches that respond to evolving needs and contexts.
- Strengthening relationships with local institutions and incorporating local knowledge were seen as essential to ensuring contextually appropriate and sustainable interventions.
- Participants also noted the importance of identifying strategic entry points for collaboration between humanitarian, reconstruction, and recovery actors, alongside establishing clear engagement pathways.
- Rethink safety standards by recognising that safety is context-specific and negotiated, rather than absolute.
- Greater emphasis is needed on adaptability and flexibility, supported by global strategies—such as within shelter coordination systems—that prioritise longer-term reconstruction and recovery.
- At the operational level, participants called for stronger field engagement with cluster teams and managers spending more time working directly with communities. Building staff capacity in community development skills is essential to support this shift. Humanitarian organisations should position themselves as allies to locally-led recovery processes, rather than primary drivers.
- Locally, establishing clear institutional leadership for long-term support, strengthening connections with key organisations, and developing advocacy tools for self-recovery were identified as priorities. Finally, further research is needed to better understand the impacts of enabling approaches compared to direct provision.
- Maintaining an active community of practice around self-recovery was highlighted as important for knowledge sharing, innovation, and sustained momentum.
- Situate self-recovery in the context of the humanitarian reset and clarify relationships to the new Shelter, Land and Site Coordination cluster.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

An introduction by **Eefje Hendriks**, Centre for Disaster Resilience, University of Twente.

The Humanitarian Reset

Funding has always been insufficient to cover the needs for investments in **shelter and settlement**. After 15 years of slowly upward financing, drastic funding cuts in the beginning of 2024 have severely impacted access to humanitarian support. In 2025 the funding gap was predicted to reach **46.2 billion USD** due to the excessive funding cuts in humanitarian aid as described in the Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) report 2025 (ALNAP 2025). This is called the Humanitarian Reset, which has devastating consequences for people affected by crises. The funding cuts by USAID could result in over 14 million additional deaths by 2030, among which 4.5 million deaths of children below 5 years (Cavalcanti 2025). The funding cuts demand redefinition of roles of local, international and governmental actors (KUNO 2025). There is a drastic change in power dynamics and funding flows due to stronger prioritisation, reorganisation and reform.

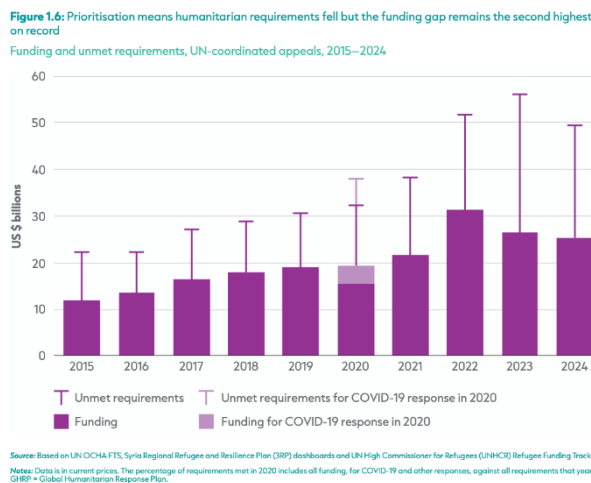


Image taken from the Global Humanitarian Assistance report, ALNAP 2025

Steep increase of self-recovery

Simultaneously, the increasing frequency, severity and impact of hazards and conflicts has shown a rise of people in need for assistance. With the funding cuts, more people than ever before are left without lifesaving support. The humanitarian reset impacts the whole humanitarian sector but disproportionately disrupts attention for long-term recovery and resilience building. In 2014, an estimate showed that the global percentage of people left without shelter and settlement assistance after crises was around 80 to 90% annually (Morel 2018). With the funding cuts, it is expected that even more are now left without support to (re)construct or repair houses and settlements, protecting vulnerable groups from future hazards. The need for supporting self-recovery has never been greater: how can the sector ramp-up its support for this majority?

CHAPTER 2

Where does supporting self-recovery fit into the Humanitarian Reset?

A word from **Pablo Medina**, Global Cluster Coordinator, Shelter, Land and Site Coordination Cluster.

Where does recovery fit in the world of the Humanitarian Reset? The Reset can feel like it is narrowing the humanitarian scope, with more emphasis exclusively on humanitarian action, sharper life-saving focus, quicker exits. And if you are part of the Recovery Community of Practice, it's fair to wonder whether the space for "recovery" is shrinking.

Here is a paradox and perhaps also an opportunity for us all.

The humanitarian reset is currently doubling-down on something that should feel very familiar: community-led response. The idea that people affected by crisis are not passive recipients of aid, but active agents of their own recovery. The most meaningful outcomes don't start with us. They start with the households, the neighbours, the masons, the carpenters, the renters, the landlords, the communities making decisions about how they rebuild their own lives.

It sounds like self-recovery, because it is. So perhaps the question is where does recovery still belong in this new landscape of the Humanitarian Reset; is it actually becoming more central, just expressed slightly differently, practised a little bit more humbly, and led more deliberately from the ground up. The Recovery Community of Practice isn't about expanding mandates or defending turf. It's about offering tools, methods, evidence, and ways of working that help the system do exactly what it claims it wants to do: be lighter, be more local, be more accountable and more honest about what people already do for themselves. The Recovery Community of Practice has a role beyond producing guidance: it's about being a bridge between humanitarian and recovery thinking, between coordination and practice, and between ambition and reality.

The space may be tighter, the language might be shifting, but the relevance of supporting self-recovery, the relevance of the Community of Practice has never been clearer. If we get it right, supporting self-recovery is not something that follows humanitarian response, it's what shapes it from day one.

Thank you to all of you who share and challenge us, and to those who quietly do this work in the background every day. Let's keep this Community of Practice exactly what it should be: practical, a little bit disruptive, deeply grounded, and just uncomfortable enough to keep us honest.

CHAPTER 3

What is self-recovery?

Charles Parrack explains self-recovery.

The self-recovery approach has become an increasingly common model within humanitarian shelter response. Rather than delivering complete shelters to affected populations, this approach recognises that the majority of households actively repair, rebuild, or adapt their own homes using available resources. Humanitarian actors therefore seek to support these efforts by enabling safer, faster, and more dignified recovery processes that build on people's own capacities and priorities.

Self-recovery is defined as a continuum of practices whereby disaster-affected households repair, build, or rebuild with little to no formal assistance from humanitarian or governmental organisations, primarily using their own resources.

Self-recovery places affected households at the centre of decision-making and acknowledges their agency, skills, and knowledge of local construction practices. Recovery is understood as an incremental process, occurring over time and shaped by access to materials, finances, land tenure, and livelihoods. By supporting what communities are already doing, humanitarian shelter interventions can reach a greater number of people while remaining flexible to diverse needs and contexts.

Humanitarian support for self-recovery typically focuses on providing enabling assistance rather than direct construction. This may include technical guidance on safer building techniques, training for local artisans and households, cash or voucher assistance to access materials and labor, and the provision of tools or critical construction inputs where markets are constrained. Together, these forms of support aim to improve the safety, quality, and resilience of self-built shelter solutions.

The self-recovery approach offers several advantages, including increased scale, cost-effectiveness, and respect for household choice and dignity. By strengthening local markets and construction capacities, it also contributes to longer-term resilience beyond the immediate humanitarian response. However, the approach requires careful risk management, particularly to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups, address land and tenure constraints, and mitigate the potential for unsafe construction practices.

Self-recovery represents a shift in humanitarian shelter assistance from delivering physical structures toward facilitating processes that enable people to rebuild their homes more safely and sustainably. When appropriately designed and contextually adapted, this approach can form a critical component of effective early recovery and longer-term shelter strategies.



Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

History of self-recovery

Bill Flinn explains how the notion of supporting self-recovery gained traction.

The journey from the first mention of “self-recovery” to where we are now has been a collaborative effort over many years. The Recovery Community of Practice is now co-led by CARE, CRAterre, Cendep and CRS. However, the roots of self-recovery go back primarily to Oxford Brookes where the first “Building for Safety” workshops was hosted and to CARE UK for believing in the concept and finding the capacity to support the initial push to obtain funding for research and development.



Photo credit: Bill Flinn/CARE UK

And special thanks to the Shelter Cluster that has always given its support, most recently through the Community of Practice.

The first mention of the word self-recovery was during Cyclone Sidr in 2007. In 2012, the first “Building for Safety” workshop was convened; for the first time it was recognised and discussed that most families affected by storms, earthquakes and other disasters were inevitably rebuilding their homes themselves, with little or no support from the international community. With only 10% of the shelter need being met by the international community in a typical disaster response, it is evident that 90% self-recover, potentially rebuilding with the same vulnerabilities that caused so much damage and devastation in the first place.

By 2014, when a paper called Getting the Message Across was published, the term was in common use. Around that time, the Promoting Safer Building Working Group was initiated that has now become the Shelter Cluster’s Recovery Community of Practice. Of course, all along, the concepts and ideas were building on the pioneering work of practitioners who had gone before.

There have been several major research initiatives in the intervening years that have helped to build up the evidence for self-recovery and the effectiveness of supporting it. Some of these are indicated on the timeline. However, guidance for supporting self-recovery was a clear gap and it wasn’t until 2022 that Pathways Home was published.

With increasing need and decreasing resource, we face the inevitability of communities and families leading their own recoveries and forging their own pathways. The need to support that self-recovery process has become more of an imperative, even though the parameters of what is defined as humanitarian have become narrower.

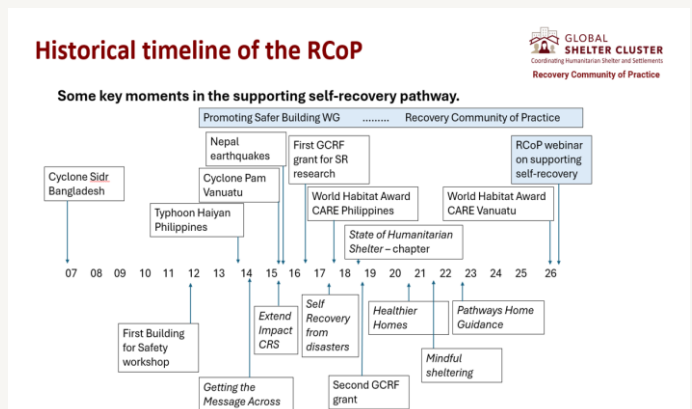


Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

Self-Recovery Guidance - Pathways Home

Cecilia Schmoelzer and Sonia Molina, lead authors of Pathways Home explain guidance for supporting self-recovery.

Pathways Home is guidance for supporting self-recovery. It is divided into two parts.

Part A covers the theoretical underpinnings, the rationale, and general principles. This section is for decision-takers, policy-makers and academics. It explains why this approach makes sense, when and where it is most useful or can be applied most effectively. It challenges the perspective or mindset that is needed for a different approach. Well-known principles like “build back better”, “do no harm” or “leave no one behind” are interrogated with a new perspective. New principles are proposed such as “as good as possible” or “going beyond participation towards accompaniment” as the way forward to support a truly locally-led response.

The guidance lays out the benefits of supporting self-recovery, both for the affected people and the supporting humanitarian organisation. It does not duck the challenges that can come with this approach and proposes ways obstacles and barriers can be overcome.

Part B is the practical guidance, explaining how to support shelter self-recovery programming. It compiles and organises practical tools, guidelines and experiences that have been developed to support this process. It is intended to provide practical guidance to practitioners in order to design and implement such an approach. This is based on years of experience in shelter programming practice. Specifically, it elaborates the elements of shelter self-recovery support that are different from conventional programming.

This part is divided into 6 chapters trying to cover all the elements and steps that are needed to implement a shelter self-recovery approach. It begins with chapters on preparedness and context analysis that emphasises the need for a continuous and holistic approach building on capacities and local planning. The following chapters introduce the notion of accompaniment as a re-definition of participation. No longer do we ensure that the community participates in our programme; now we recognise that it is we who are participating in their recovery. This aligns with the current discourse on community-led, and the need to fully understand the likely recovery trajectory and find ways to support and enable that pathway. The final chapters focus on how to establish a shelter self-recovery programme; how to mobilise the resources and capacity; how to insist on the need for flexible and adaptive programming; and how to measure success.

The full *Pathways Home* guidance is a long read at 140 pages although it has been made easy to navigate and is well-illustrated with over 70 case-studies and many photographs. However, with the busy field-practitioner in mind we have also produced a 16-page *Pathways Home: the fast track*. This is available in Spanish, French and Arabic as well as English.

In summary, *Pathways Home* promotes supporting what people are already doing, and will inevitably do, in a way that is most useful to them. This will accelerate people's efforts to repair and rebuild in a way that strengthens resilience and reduces vulnerability and risk for the entire community and not only the most vulnerable.



Participatory assessment of local habitat

Enrique Sevillano Gutiérrez, CRAterre.

How can we provide effective shelter responses that go beyond urgent needs and have an impact on the 80 to 90% of the population who rebuild through this process of self-recovery.

At CRAterre we believe the focus should be on adapting to the environment, to the culture, to the social, technical and financial capacities of people.

That's why we need to systematically undertake an assessment of habitat and local building cultures. Here we will find many, many answers in people's practices and in the intelligence of local solutions.

We need to open our eyes, we need to open our ears, we need to open our minds and be open to changing practice. Understanding the context related to habitat is a key first step. CRAterre has created a methodology and a toolbox to facilitate the collection of information and to promote the participation of the affected communities. What are the living patterns in a given place? What are the risks? What are the services - access to water, sanitation, hygiene? What are the skills and know how? What are the available materials?

Of course, there may be weaknesses in local practice, but above all, we need to appreciate the strengths? First, we understand. By understanding we recognise and by recognising we will also be able to strengthen when necessary.

This methodology has been trialled with many partners in many countries and the tools are continuously being tested and adapted and refined. They are not static at all and the approach should be iterative as the environment will constantly change.

CRAterre has identified three stages. First preparation: a review of existing information, contact with local stakeholders and training. This is followed by collective production of knowledge through focus groups, observation and mapping. Finally, this information has to be processed and validated.

CRAterre has created tools to support this process with a strong cross-cutting gender perspective – currently only in French but soon to be translated into English and Spanish. Guides and tools can be viewed and downloaded here (in French for now, soon in English and Spanish): <https://craterre.hypotheses.org/7048>

Rather than seeking so-called "appropriate", or imported, ready-made solutions or techniques, the focus should be on **adapting to the environment, the culture, and the social, technical, and financial capacities of people**



Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

CHAPTER 4

Why self-recovery is now more important than ever?

Understanding self-recovery has become increasingly important in the context of the humanitarian reset and significant reductions in overseas aid spending. As global humanitarian needs continue to rise while available funding contracts, the traditional model of resource-intensive, agency-led shelter delivery has become progressively less viable at scale. This shift has compelled humanitarian actors to reassess how assistance can reach the greatest number of people with limited resources, while still meeting minimum standards of safety, dignity, and accountability.

The humanitarian reset emphasizes prioritisation, efficiency, and impact, placing greater focus on approaches that are adaptable, cost-effective, and capable of leveraging existing capacities. Within this context, self-recovery aligns closely with emerging strategic directions by supporting crisis-affected households to lead their own shelter recovery processes, rather than relying on externally constructed solutions. By enabling households to rebuild incrementally using local materials, labour, and knowledge, self-recovery allows humanitarian assistance to extend further and respond more flexibly to diverse and rapidly changing contexts.

Reductions in overseas aid spending have also increased the importance of approaches that strengthen local systems and markets rather than substitute for them. Self-recovery interventions—such as cash assistance, technical guidance, and training—can stimulate local economies, reinforce construction skills, and reduce dependency on international supply chains. This not only improves cost efficiency but also contributes to more sustainable recovery outcomes, particularly in protracted crises where repeated cycles of displacement and return are common.

At the same time, the shift toward self-recovery places greater responsibility on humanitarian actors to understand and manage associated risks. Ensuring safe construction practices, addressing barriers faced by vulnerable groups, and navigating land and tenure constraints require robust technical expertise, strong community engagement, and effective coordination. As funding decreases, the need for well-designed, evidence-based self-recovery programming becomes critical to avoid unintended harm while maximizing impact.

In summary, in an era defined by constrained resources and increasing needs, self-recovery is no longer a complementary shelter option but a central strategic approach. A deeper understanding of self-recovery is essential for humanitarian actors seeking to deliver scalable, dignified, and sustainable shelter assistance that aligns with the principles of the humanitarian reset and the realities of reduced overseas aid budgets.

CHAPTER 5

What is already known about self-recovery? Case Studies and research

Vanuatu

Step Haiselden, CARE International shelter team leader.

The work of CARE Vanuatu has recently been recognised by a Bronze Award from World Habitat. In response to multiple cyclones and other natural hazards that impact this South Pacific nation, Care Vanuatu has developed a 'Build Back Safer' approach firmly rooted in supporting self-recovery.

CARE Vanuatu has trained a network of community members as shelter focal points (SFPs) to disseminate key Build Back Safer messages throughout rural communities. The six steps to better shelters are explained in this [video](#).

In response to the 2020 Tropical Cyclone Harold CARE Vanuatu adopted the SFP approach and included the training of chainsaw operators to salvage timber blown down by the storm. They also facilitated the sharing of skills between the residents of different islands.



Somalia

Marta Guilera, IOM and **Enrique Sevillano**, CRAterre.

The presentation “An example of the application of Self-Recovery: Somalia” developed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and CRAterre illustrates a collaborative approach (2022–2025) aimed at improving emergency shelter solutions in contexts of protracted displacement. Focusing on Somalia, where more than three million internally displaced people live in precarious conditions, the initiative explores how minimal technical upgrades to emergency shelters can enable progressive, owner-led housing improvements. Through community-based analysis, training in mudbrick production and construction, prototype construction and environmental assessments, the project seeks to promote locally available materials, reduce reliance on imported resources and strengthen technical and community capacities. The presentation highlighted the role of incremental design in bridging emergency response and recovery, while integrating environmental considerations such as carbon footprint analysis and broader social and cultural criteria for sustainable shelter.



Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

Chad

Olivier Moles, CRAterre.

In a context marked by a prolonged crisis and a massive influx of refugees and returnees to eastern Chad, current accommodation approaches that are based on emergency kits (wood and plastic sheeting) are proving inadequate. They do not respond to extreme climatic conditions or local cultural norms and cause a negative environmental impact through deforestation and the generation of non-biodegradable waste.

It is essential that shelters provide a minimum of comfort in the medium term, while also taking into account the impact on the local environment, local ways of living, revenue generation for host populations, and the technical capacities of refugee populations.

An analysis of the construction typologies of host populations, populations displaced populations since 2003, and self-construction initiatives of recently displaced populations, identifies some shelter models that are "what people will produce by themselves anyway" to meet their shelter needs.

This local knowledge - technically validated over time and mastered by the local populations, culturally and socially accepted by the inhabitants, positively impacting local economies - that inspired the CRLUX shelter model they offer to displaced populations. The positive contributions proposed by CRLUX ultimately benefit all local populations, hosts, long-term displaced, or newly displaced.



Typical local architecture within host communities, Hangar type.



Typical local architecture within refugees communities, Hangar type.

Research on self-recovery

Eefje Hendriks, Centre for Disaster Resilience, University of Twente.

There are very few resources available for research in the humanitarian sector, let alone research on people who do not receive humanitarian assistance. Nonetheless, there is a lot of potential in understanding how people make, or struggle to make, reconstruction decisions. This understanding can lead to the design of effective assistance for different types of disasters, and eventually to supporting overall resilience. Through research we can find effective ways to have a positive impact on people who struggle during self-recovery.

We already know that self-recovery outcomes depend strongly on the context. We know that outcomes are not always positive and not always negative. Humanitarian assistance is not always able to have a positive influence

on people's recovery. One study shows that self-recovery can enable households to achieve normality faster than with humanitarian assistance (Vahanvati & Rafliana 2019). Several studies have shown that humanitarian and governmental assistance can slow down reconstruction as people wait for materials or funding.

We have repeatedly seen in different contexts that technical knowledge to build back hazard-resistant housing does not reach everyone, especially those with limited access to the internet, or people unaccustomed to reading and writing and who struggle to understand abstract 3D drawings. However, a comparative study in Nepal showed that, humanitarian technical assistance does not always lead to safer or more desirable housing (Hendriks and Opdyke 2021). In the absence of humanitarian support, other actors could play an important role in reconstruction decisions. Support networks of self-recovering communities can show more knowledge and decision dependency on local construction workers than those communities supported by humanitarian technical assistance (Hendriks & Opdyke 2020, Hendriks et al 2021, Chmutina et al 2018). Conditional governmental funding for seismic resistant housing can also play a crucial role in the successful application of safety features (Saputra et al 2026). Yet, low satisfaction on housing designs enforced on homeowners can

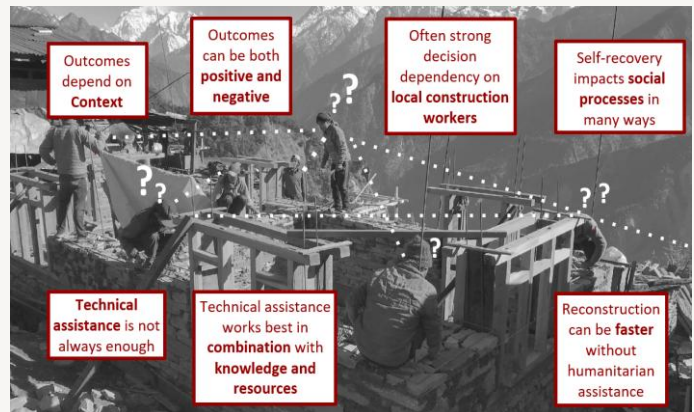


Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

Outcomes depend on Context

Outcomes can be both positive and negative

Often strong decision dependency on local construction workers

Self-recovery impacts social processes in many ways

Technical assistance is not always enough

Technical assistance works best in combination with knowledge and resources

Reconstruction can be faster without humanitarian assistance

be problematic on the long term due to the desire to make adaptations to the designs that might harm the hazard resistance (Hendriks & Opdyke 2021). We have learned that assistance mechanisms work together. For example, technical assistance was found to have most impact on feelings of safety when provided in combination with funding (Hendriks & Opdyke 2022).

Studies have repeatedly shown that people left without humanitarian assistance are often aware of steps to enhance their resilience and are highly motivated to improve the safety of their own house (Hendriks et al 2021). For example, both in the Philippines and Nepal, people were strongly motivated to protect their family, but experienced limited opportunities to do so. Without financial or technical support to rebuild a safer home, for many a safe house is not always a priority as they experience competing needs. For example, in the Philippines, boats were lost or damaged due to a hurricane while many people depend on fishery as a livelihood. New boats and boat landings were an essential as a starting point in their recovery. In addition, clean drinking water was indicated as a crucial aspect for the resilience of communities (Hendriks, & Opdyke 2020).

We also have seen that self-recovery impacts social processes in many ways. The body of research on the impact on social processes is by far the largest and shows mixed outcomes. For example, social capital can accelerate self-recovery for some households, while excluding others (Pooyan & Hokugo 2025).

Navigating relief to recovery

Aaron Opdyke, University of Sydney.

Moving from short-term relief to supporting recovery remains a persistent challenge for the humanitarian shelter and settlements sector. In 2022, 92% of all humanitarian funding was directed toward protracted crises yet mandates and funding cycles remain stubbornly short-term. Drawing on interviews with experienced practitioners and participatory workshops with humanitarian stakeholders, recent research examined how practitioners conceptualise recovery, finding that it is understood not as a fixed endpoint but as a dynamic, non-linear trajectory between emergency response and longer-term development. Three dimensions define this understanding: durable shelter solutions as a platform for dignity and stability; cross-sectoral connections linking shelter to livelihoods, health, and social cohesion; and recognition that recovery is an evolving and adaptive process shaped by politics, funding, and community priorities (Opdyke et al 2026, Babister et al 2023).



Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

Three principal strategies were identified that practitioners employ to navigate barriers to recovery. Incremental schemes of assistance allow agencies to design interventions that work today but can be built upon tomorrow, as illustrated by small-scale building repairs in Gaza prior to October 2023 and the core house approach in Malawi, where families received training in stabilised earth block production and an extendable design. Flexible modalities of sheltering enable practitioners to tailor support to diverse contexts, such as the upgrading of unfinished buildings for refugee housing in Jordan and the integration of displaced households into host communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The third strategy is constructive ambiguity - the deliberate use of flexible language, funding negotiations, and technical design - allows practitioners to navigate competing interests and restrictive mandates, as demonstrated by the use of the term "dignified shelter" in Syria to bypass restrictions on permanent construction and the registration of shelters as temporary structures in Haiti to enable occupancy while tenure disputes continued.

These findings reinforce the importance of self-recovery by demonstrating that the most effective strategies align institutional assistance with household agency and priorities rather than prescribing uniform solutions. If significant barriers to recovery are products of policy rather than environment, they are also open to change - through multi-year flexible financing, revised mandates that better integrate humanitarian and development aims, and stronger engagement with local capacity.

What evidence is still needed and research directions?

Isaac Besarra, University of Twente

Recent literature on housing and livelihoods in post-disaster contexts, particularly where self-recovery is already underway, reveals several persistent research gaps. First, self-recovery is framed differently across the humanitarian literature. In many cases, it refers to households that still receive external support, such as financial, material, or technical assistance. However, far less attention has been paid to households that recover entirely without formal shelter or settlement assistance. Second, there remains limited evidence on the broader and longer-term impacts of humanitarian shelter interventions, particularly regarding livelihoods, resilience, and recovery pathways over time. Finally, these gaps point to the need for a deeper understanding of household-level decision-making processes, including how households balance livelihood needs, housing quality, and exposure to hazard risks, and how these trade-offs influence longer-term



Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

recovery outcomes. Together, these gaps highlight emerging research directions at the intersection of housing reconstruction and livelihoods in post-disaster recovery.

For instance, it is known that housing plays a central role in post-disaster recovery, and humanitarian interventions often emphasise the principle of “building back safer.” However, what constitutes safer housing is not always clearly defined. In practice, safety may refer to physically stronger structures, climate-resilient construction, or faster rebuilding processes that allow households to resume their daily lives. These priorities, however, may vary significantly depending on local context and household circumstances. While physical housing attributes remain important, they are not necessarily the only factors shaping rebuilding decisions. Households must also consider a range of livelihood-related factors, including financial capacity, access to social networks, availability of water and basic services, and opportunities for education or employment. Understanding how households weigh these competing priorities is therefore essential to better understand the decision-making processes that shape reconstruction outcomes.

These observations point to several important directions for future research. First, many households recover outside the formal humanitarian system, yet there remains a limited understanding of how these informal self-recovery pathways develop in practice. Second, the completion of shelter interventions is often treated as a marker of success, despite limited evidence on their longer-term impacts on livelihoods and household resilience. Third, recovery should be understood not as a single outcome but as a trajectory that unfolds unevenly across households. Finally, there is a need to critically examine when self-recovery approaches are appropriate and when they may inadvertently shift responsibility onto households, particularly within humanitarian systems shaped by short-term funding cycles.

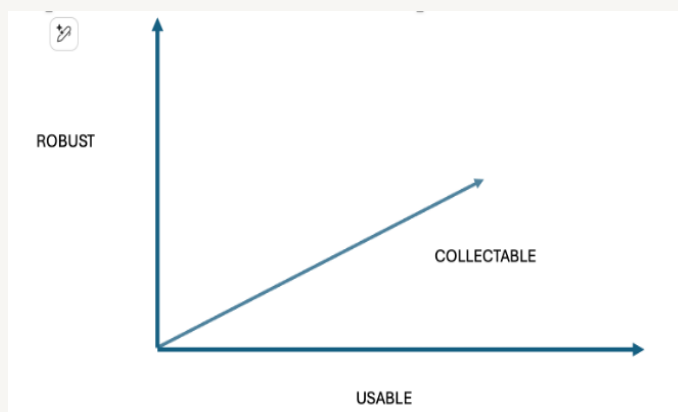
Evidence and self-recovery

Jim Kennedy, focal point for research for the GSLSCC.

A persistent challenge in the collection and analysis of evidence for Shelter & Settlements programming and advocacy has been to create a guidance framework for evidence collection & analysis, to ensure that the evidence is:

1. Strong and clear enough so that humanitarian practitioners have confidence in using it, to both plan programming and for advocacy.
2. Presentable in ways which are clearly understandable and clearly usable by a wide range of partners and readers.
3. Realistically collectable (and analyse-able) in a time-frame which would make the evidence useful, during an ongoing humanitarian response.

One potential visual way of framing these three aspects is the graph here:



Graphic produced by Jim Kennedy

As well as the challenges outlined above, there are some additional key practical challenges to the collection and analysis of data in the field:

- How to balance any collecting evidence with actually doing effective humanitarian programming, especially during the first phase of sudden-onset events? (Logistical/resource challenges, but also ethical?)
- For self-recovery – how to measure things which humanitarian shelter actors might not “see” or engage with?
- How to have clear guidance for identifying different factors and different influences, during research or evidence collection?

CHAPTER 6

The future of self-recovery

The workshop participants engaged in a collaborative exercise designed to inform the future practices, agendas and actions. First, barriers to supporting self-recovery were identified, then current opportunities to support self-recovery were determined, stakeholders were mapped, and finally the question was asked as to what global and local support is needed to move forward.

What are the barriers to supporting Self-Recovery through humanitarian assistance?

Participants identified a range of structural, financial, and operational barriers to the effective support of self-recovery approaches. A primary constraint is limited and inflexible funding, including the absence of dedicated resources and strict, outdated donor accountability requirements. Donors are often perceived as lacking understanding of self-recovery, favouring conventional emergency responses and requiring easily measurable outputs, which do not align well with the less tangible outcomes of self-recovery processes.

Organisational challenges were also highlighted, including siloed thinking and limited collaboration between humanitarian and recovery actors. Weak coordination with local partners and insufficient organisational linkages further hinder implementation. Additionally, teams are often overly technical in composition, which can lead to inadequate appreciation of local knowledge and context, as well as concerns over technical risks and perceived loss of control.

Capacity gaps among partners, including the need for training and technical support, present further obstacles. Monitoring self-recovery processes is also seen as complex, particularly given time constraints and the less standardised nature of interventions. Contextual challenges such as pre-existing social tensions and trust issues within communities can complicate delivery, underscoring the need for more inclusive, flexible, and context-sensitive approaches.

Active conflicts were identified as very challenging contexts within which to consider supporting self-recovery. This would be a valuable area for further research and development.

What are current opportunities for supporting self-recovery?

Participants highlighted several practical opportunities to strengthen support for self-recovery approaches. Access to flexible financing mechanisms, such as mid-level grants or loans for small and medium-sized enterprises—particularly in the construction sector—was identified as a key enabler. Direct cash assistance to affected populations can also empower households to lead their own recovery processes.

Flexibility in programme design and implementation emerged as critical, with an emphasis on iterative, adaptive approaches that respond to evolving needs and contexts. Learning from existing practices and practitioner experience can help refine approaches and avoid repeating past mistakes.

Strengthening relationships with local institutions and incorporating local knowledge were seen as essential to ensuring contextually appropriate and sustainable interventions. Participants also noted the importance of identifying strategic entry points for collaboration between humanitarian, reconstruction, and recovery actors, alongside establishing clear engagement pathways.

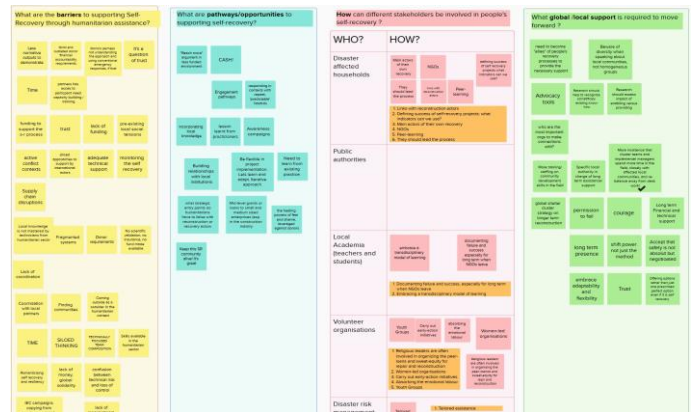


Image taken from presentation at Self-Recovery Webinar 3 February 2026

Awareness-raising efforts can help promote understanding and acceptance of self-recovery among stakeholders, including donors and communities. Opportunities are particularly strong in contexts affected by recurrent or predictable hazards, where lessons can be applied over time.

Finally, maintaining an active community of practice around self-recovery was highlighted as important for knowledge sharing, innovation, and sustained momentum.

How can different stakeholders be involved in people's self-recovery?

Participants were clear that the priority was to place affected households at the centre of the process. These households should be recognised as the primary actors in their own recovery, leading decision-making and defining what success looks like through locally relevant indicators. Their efforts can be strengthened through links with reconstruction actors, engagement with NGOs, and opportunities for peer-learning, which enable communities to share knowledge and build resilience collectively.

Local academia, including teachers and students, can contribute by documenting both successes and failures—particularly over the long term when external organisations withdraw—ensuring that lessons are captured and inform future responses.

Volunteer organisations also play a vital role by embracing transdisciplinary approaches to learning and action. This includes the involvement of religious leaders, who often help organise peer-loans and sweat-equity schemes for reconstruction, as well as women-led organisations and youth groups that drive inclusive, community-based initiatives and early-action efforts.

Disaster risk management authorities further support self-recovery by providing tailored assistance that reflects the specific needs and contexts of affected populations.

The private sector can contribute through funding, tools, capacity-building, and skills development, while also facilitating connections to markets and promoting safer building practices.

What global /local support is required to move forward?

Participants emphasised the need for a fundamental shift in how humanitarian support is conceptualised and delivered. At a global level, this includes rethinking safety standards by recognising that safety is context-specific and negotiated, rather than absolute. Approaches should offer multiple recovery options rather than prescribing a single “ideal” solution, alongside a broader shift in power towards affected communities.

Long-term commitment is critical, with sustained financial and technical support and a continued presence in affected areas. Greater emphasis is needed on adaptability and flexibility, supported by global strategies—such as within shelter coordination systems—that prioritise longer-term reconstruction and recovery.

At the operational level, participants called for stronger field engagement, with cluster teams and managers spending more time working directly with communities. Building staff capacity in community development skills is essential to support this shift. Humanitarian organisations should position themselves as allies to locally-led recovery processes, rather than primary drivers.

Locally, establishing clear institutional leadership for long-term support, strengthening connections with key organisations, and developing advocacy tools for self-recovery were identified as priorities. Finally, further research is needed to better understand the impacts of enabling approaches compared to direct provision.

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