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HOUSING RECONSTRUCTION IN A CONFLICT ZONE –LESSONS LEARNED FROM AWARAN, DISTRICT IN BALOCHISTAN, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Regions affected by conflict and violence become difficult locations for undertaking routine management and rebuilding. However conditions often arise where input from various stakeholders for relief, rehabilitation and institutional re-vamping become unavoidable. Research and experiences from different contexts inform that outcomes of such interventions have varied results due to unpredictability of contextual conditions, approaches and methodologies adopted for planning and implementations, capacity of personnel involved, available resources and interests of concerned institutions. Awaran district in Balochistan has been impacted by conflict and violence for many years. The impoverished region, apart from social and political turbulence, is recovering from a devastating earthquake that struck the district in September 2013. This paper examines two development interventions in the region; one undertaken by the district administration to streamline the development work through a state sponsored housing reconstruction project and the other by Urban Resource Centre (URC) in collaboration with local communities. Field research for this paper was done during 2014-2015 and comprised review of records, informal discussions with government staff, military officers, community members and working staff of NGOs in the area. After analysing the key findings of these two initiatives, it was found that government sponsored housing reconstruction projects experienced limited success due to usual bureaucratic hurdles and political uncertainties. The community led initiatives were more effective, simple and easy to apply.

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BACKGROUND

Awaran District is located in the south of Balochistan province, at a location of 1,095 km (aerial distance) south east (225 degrees bearing) of Pakistan's Capital Islamabad. It is a sparsely populated district, with an estimated population of around 174,350, as found in 2014, scattered over an area of more than 29,510 square kilometres (UNICEF, 2011). It comprises three sub districts (Tehsils) namely Mashkai, Awaran and Jhal Jhao. It was created as a separate district on 11 November 1992 and is considered the poorest district in the province, in spite of being the fourth largest district in terms of area. The area features lowest on all development indicators, be it education, health, food, economy and especially security. The district, alongside other locations in the region, is gravely impacted by insurgency and conflict since several years. Factions of local insurgent groups – that demand greater political rights and autonomy – resort to violence upon opponents and law enforcement agencies. Since many years, para military troops and army contingents are deployed to maintain peace and prevent conflict (PIPS, 2010; The Nation, 2015).

EARTHQUAKE 2013 AND AFTER

Earthquake Damage

On 24th September 2013, a 7.7 Richter magnitude earthquake hit the area followed by another one on 28th September 2013. The epicentre of earthquake was 66 km north-northwest of Awaran. The calamity killed around 500 people, affected approximately 27,000 households, 138,372 people and destroyed 19,688 houses in the area (Figure 1). However, owing to the security risks in the area, providing relief and following it up with rehabilitation became the most difficult task for the provincial administration as well as national and international NGOs. The overall situation resulted in people leaving Awaran for other areas. These people have been already hard pressed for food and aid, and were compelled by circumstances to leave their homes for they could neither accept aid from the security forces, due to fear of being categorized as traitors by the insurgents, while aid from the latter was being blocked by the security forces. To add to this, the government's refusal to allow INGOs from conducting relief work in the area, in light of their safety and security, further deprived the residents from any possible aid (UNOCHA, 2013).

Figure 1 Earthquake damages in Awaran during September 2013

Many households took the decision of leaving Awaran and re-locating in Karachi and other parts of the country. Discussions with community members revealed that possible danger of more earthquakes in the near future was one key reason to move out to other locations. The people were also unhappy about the prevailing security situation. Frequent rounding up of the youth by law enforcing agencies and alleged use of torture to extract information about insurgents were commonly cited reasons to leave the area. The extreme state of underdevelopment and poor response from government was another shared observation by the people. They were of the view that while some responses to disaster were being facilitated, the district had been neglected by administration in respect to provision of essential infrastructure and services. For example, no road worth the name existed between Gajjar sub district and Awaran. People travelling for emergency health care assistance had to hire special vans or jeeps to transport the sick, including expecting mothers, to a health care facility to the nearby districts. Travelling during night time was absolutely impossible due to poor road condition and fear of insurgents' attacks.

Planning and Development Initiatives by Government of Balochistan

The Balochistan government launched a rehabilitation and redevelopment project in Awaran in October 2013. The project comprised the redevelopment of the disaster stricken areas in the wake of the 2013 Earthquake, and was initiated after the then Deputy Commissioner of Awaran, Mr Aziz Ahmad Jamali approached NED University to take up the task of conducting research and contribute to rehabilitation works in the identified sites in the district. The partnership began in March 2014, when the Government of Balochistan invited the Earthquake Engineering Department of NED University and Provincial Disaster Management Authority Balochistan to venture into seismic resistant construction to avoid damages due to future earthquakes in the area.

The tasks included understanding the existing profile of Gajjar and its documentation to determine the possible planning interventions for Gajjar redevelopment. Gajjar had faced extensive damage in the wake of the earthquake

and although reconstruction had already begun, the pace was extremely slow, and majority of the amenities and important structures are currently non-functional.

For an extensive survey of the area, NED University engaged a survey team that visited the area several times to accurately document all existing plots, constructions, building functions, damage assessment and conduct observational studies. A team from the Department of Architecture and Planning, NED University and Technical Training Resource Centre (TTRC) (a community oriented support organization) also joined in and visited the place to carry out photographic documentation, conducted interviews with the residents and other stakeholders to expand understanding about the current context and gain first-hand experience of the area. Analysis of these studies and surveys provided a basis for redevelopment plan of Gajjar area.

House Re-Construction in Awaran (HRA)

After the September 2013 earthquake in Awaran, efforts began to initiate housing reconstruction works in the affected parts of the district. Federal government and Balochistan administration jointly prepared a housing reconstruction project for the district. Rs. 4 billion (US$ 42,105,263) were allocated to reconstruct 16,000 houses at an estimated cost of Rs. 250,000 (US$ 2,631) per house. Federal government agreed to provide Rs. 2 billion (US$ 21,052,631) to the project. The project was designed to promote owner driven construction. It may be noted that owner driven housing reconstruction works were done earlier in the country after 2005 earthquake in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and Pakistani Administered Kashmir on similar patterns.

A total financial assistance of Rs. 220,000 (US$ 2,315) was kept to be paid in three instalments through the percentage ratio of 40:30:30. The project also undertook to provide solar panels to all the completed houses as electricity was marginally available in the district. Model units were designed and tested for seismic performance at the shake table facility in NED University. Till January 2015, housing grants were released to 12,600 beneficiaries. 1,334 were issued second tranche while 81 were released third and final instalment. Field visits to the locations informed that 3,501 houses were under construction. 25 model houses were also constructed by project administration for those beneficiaries who requested for construction assistance. The people complained about the limited availability of construction material in shops / warehouses / sale points in the district. They were also unhappy about the long and cumbersome process of beneficiary verification and banking procedures. As bulk of Awaran district was an under developed territory with limited economic activities, very few bank branches operated in the region. Due to the chaos of earthquake, most of the people lost / misplaced their computerised national identity cards (CNICs). Therefore, verification of beneficiaries had several procedural delays that caused inconvenience to the people (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Housing Re-construction in Awaran

The project administration team, under the administration of Deputy Commissioner Aziz Ahmed Jamali, made efforts to improve the design and delivery of the project components. Based upon the proposed designs prepared by architects and engineers from the university, the project team prepared visual material and brochures for improved construction. A field team was constituted to visit the homes under construction and offer technical guidance and help. Documentation was explained to house owners and facilitation was extended to assist in different stages of construction. Village development councils (VDCs) were formed to oversee the development work in coordination with the government functionaries. The house owners were given options to decide upon the design and material of construction, after extending full guidance and support to estimate prospective costs and potential benefits. It was found that majority of houses were done in cement concrete blocks with steel reinforcement. Masons were trained and connected to home grant beneficiaries for enhancing the quality of construction. Inspection visits by architects and engineers from the university were done to help identify emerging problems and to seek remedial actions. The project slowed down after March 2015 when the project administration team was changed by Balochistan government, apparently under the influence of local politicians who intended to exercise control on the allocation and spending of resources. (Figure 3).

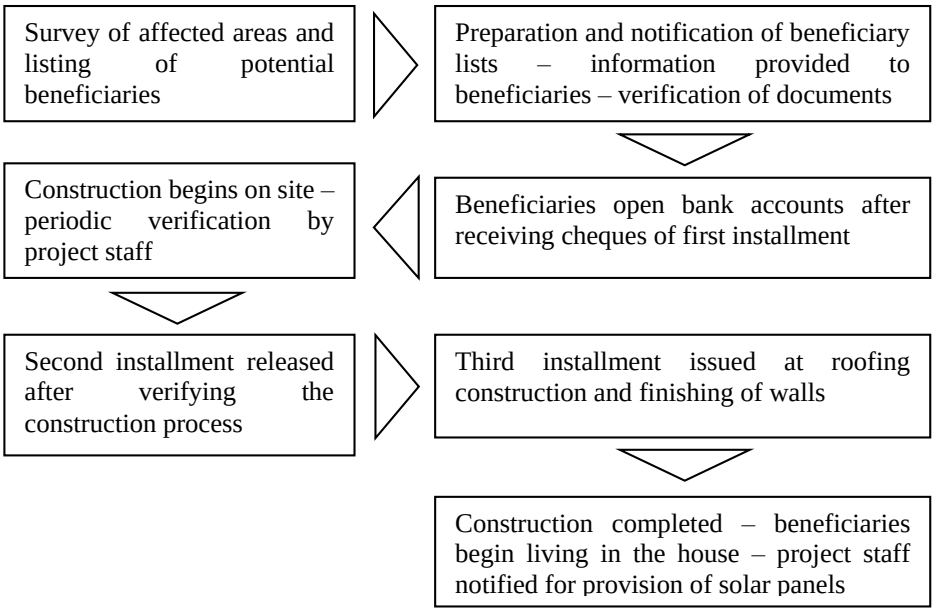

Figure 3 Process diagram – housing reconstruction in Awaran
(HRA Project by Government of Balochistan)

Awaran Earthquake Rehabilitation Support Project

The Urban Resource Centre (URC), with the assistance of Asian Coalition of Housing Rights (ACHR) and Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) launched a rehabilitation project in the aftermath of September 2013 earthquake. Several visits were made by URC team to Awaran and meetings were held with the affected communities. An assessment of the damage was done with an objective to design an appropriate project to effectively benefit the impacted communities (URC,2015). From the situation reviews conducted by URC volunteers, it was found that basic construction material was in short supply. People possessed the willingness to contribute labour and needed basic training in construction trade. It was found that bulk of the damaged houses collapsed as there was neither a frame to support the roof nor a proper foundation. Mud, stone and palm leaves were abundantly available which were used as common construction material. The earthquake had also destroyed the water supply infrastructure that required instant rehabilitation (Figure 4).

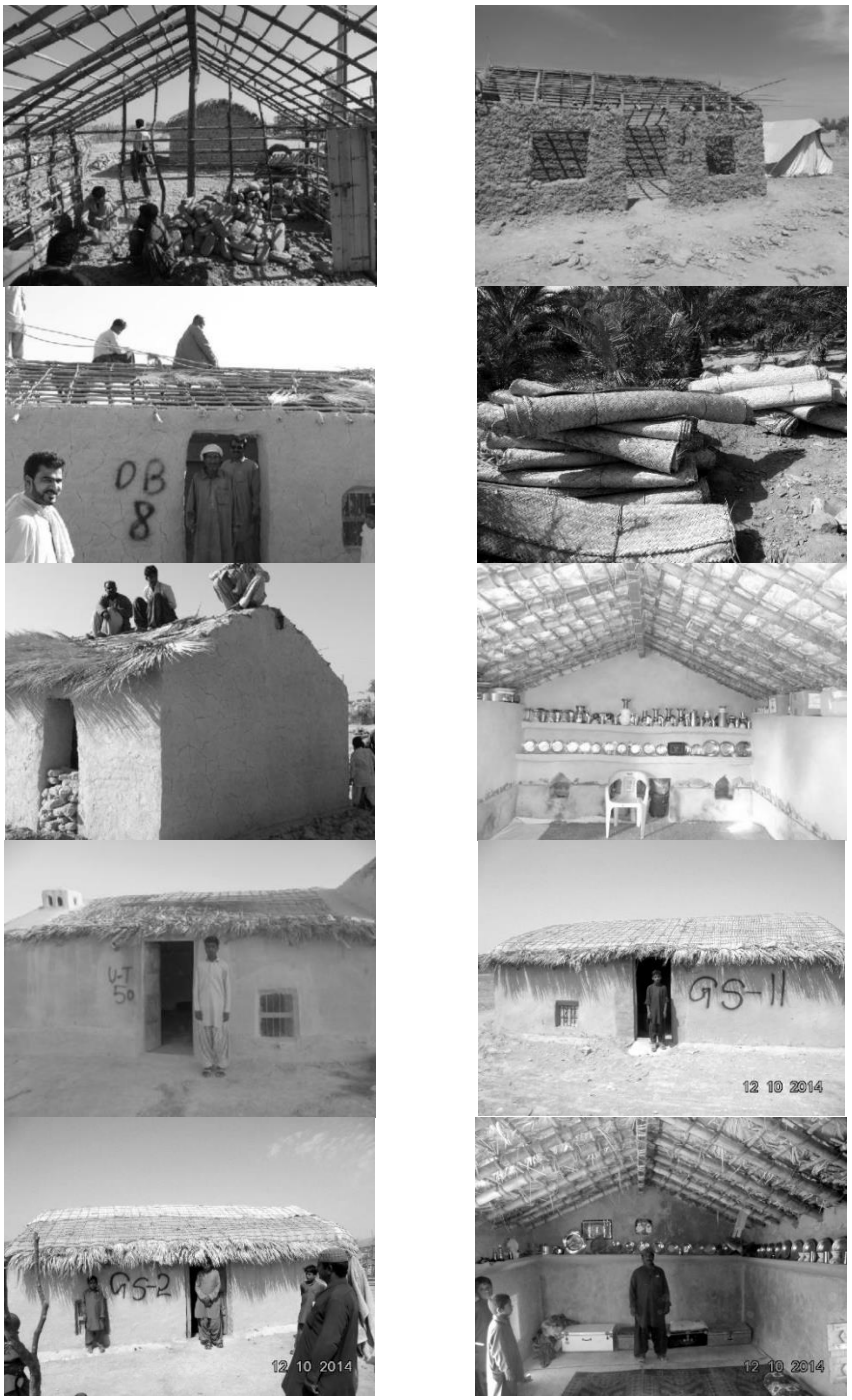

Figure 4 Awaran Rehabilitation Support Project

URC team visited many villages and had dialogues and discussions about the planning and execution of the project. Local school teachers, and other literate and aware folks, came forward and mobilised the community effort to manage the project in a scientific manner. URC team procured truckloads of roofing materials and tools from Karachi and periodically transported it to the designated locations. Bamboos for main support and cross ties, steel beams, plastic sheets, palm leaf mats for roof and ropes were the main items used in the house construction. Survey of affected houses / clusters were done by the community groups with technical assistance from URC. Households were mobilised to undertake construction after receiving roofing material from central distribution point within the chosen location. Household members transported the material to the site of construction on their own and began construction. Community groups monitored the process and prepared evaluation reports for onward transmission to URC. They also kept record of the supplied material and future needs. Documentation of construction process, completed houses and problem faced were done. URC team continued to visit to provide technical backstopping that was needed from time to time. In addition to the support in construction of these one room houses, URC team provided assistance in rehabilitating and constructing new tube wells to address the problem of water supply. Tools such as mono wheel trolleys; implements for cutting, digging and mixing; water pump machines, water storage tanks, pipes and other spare parts were also provided by URC. With the average investment of US$ 200/= per house, a total of 1,125 houses were constructed, 40 hand pumps repaired and 29 tube wells installed. The mobilised community groups continue to oversee and maintain water supply infrastructure and extend assistance to house owners in need of any follow up repair (Figure 5).

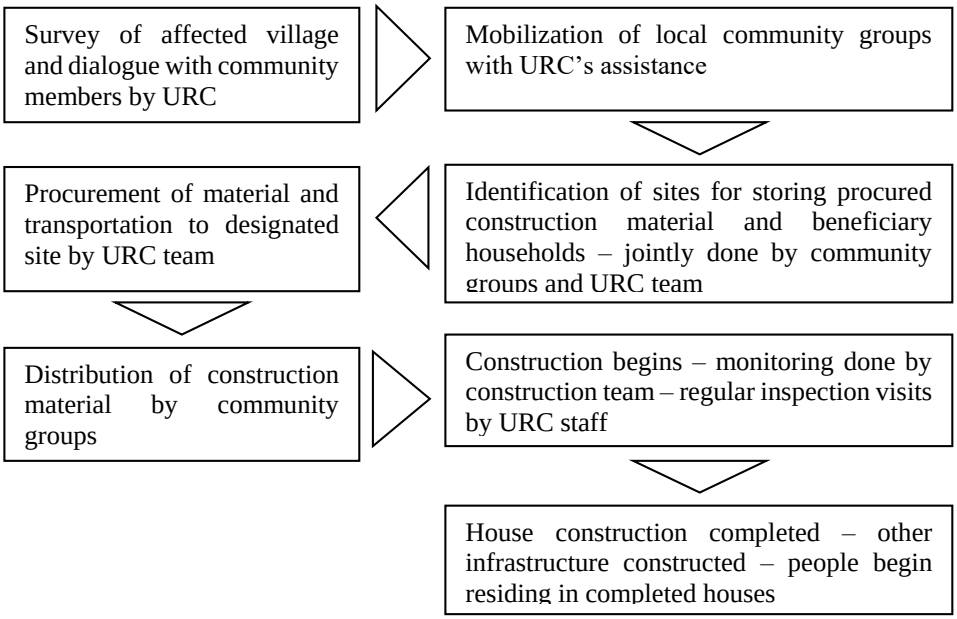

Figure 5 Process diagram – Awaran Earth Quake Rehabilitation Project by URC

ANALYSIS

Institutional Arrangements for Rehabilitation

The review of documents, feedback from community and members of civil and security administration revealed many important points. There was a feeling of mutual distrust among the three categories of stakeholders that caused suspicious around HRA design and delivery work. The security agencies were interested to strongly scan each and every potential beneficiary of the assistance before the project implementation could take off. They were of the view that many members of the community had clandestine links with the lurking insurgents. To maintain peace in the area and to enable them enforce the write of the state, such folks must not be entertained in the housing reconstruction work.

The district administration had the objective to complete the rehabilitation work in the stipulated time and in follow up of the general conditions. They were generally satisfied if and when the communities cooperated with them in swift facilitation of rehabilitation work. The district administration also attempted to resolve procedural problems such as loss of CNICs, quick opening of bank accounts and extending services of masons. It may be noted that for many locals, the interface with a bank was the first in lifetime experience. It caused problems when the people were not able to abide by the pre-requisites of banking procedures and documentation. The design and delivery of 16,000 houses in the allocated time, with measures of improved design and

construction, were the main focus of district administration. Some of their staff was of the view that it would be impossible to objectively ascertain the alleged connections of the community youth with the insurgents. Porous and spread out geographical terrains, intertwined social relationships and use of coercive power by insurgents to win over informers and sympathizers were some of the reasons in this regard.

The community members, especially those who were to receive relief through the project, were generally receptive to approaches of rehabilitation. However, they were concerned about the precarious law and order conditions that prevailed in the area. The people believed that conflicts between insurgents and security agencies needed a quick and effective resolution for the success and sustainability of the house reconstruction programme. Community blamed that since they are the only stakeholder who are permanently stationed in the territory, they receive undesirable treatment from both the conflicting parties. Many young people had gone missing, believed to be taken into custody by the security agencies or kidnapped by insurgents. The environment of unpredictability and fear was unsuitable for any rehabilitation effort to deliver sustainable results.

Technology of Re-building

The government led programme relied on the orthodox construction in cement concrete block with proper reinforcement added to make the structures seismically safe. The options generated by university staff also include reinforced mud construction, but the general inclination of government functionaries and field teams were more towards cement construction. This option was dependent upon material that was to be procured from outside Awaran, and required input of trained masons and supervisors for proper construction. Cement construction was also found to be not climate friendly. However, as believed by some community members, cement concrete house was perceived as a higher value social and economic asset compared to the mud houses.

The houses constructed with URC's assistance made use of an improved version of design and construction at the lowest possible cost. The introduction of bamboo and steel brace beams added firmness and strength to the structure. The frame was so devised that it could blend well with mud wall construction. The time taken for construction was about 4 – 6 weeks. It was believed to be reasonable and helped utilize community energies in an effective way. Materials had to be procured from outside Awaran but the process was smooth and time efficient as no government procedural work was involved in the process. The project had the potential to reach out to large number of affected areas with very low cost. It also generated a modified option of new construction wherever needed.

Re-visiting Pre-requisites

The sustenance of rehabilitation projects and initiatives depends upon a functioning administration, availability of essential services such as water supply and electricity, basic security, and the hope that a post rehabilitation situation shall offer a loveable option to stay in the area. Awaran offered a very challenging context in respect to essential living conditions. The surrounding episode of insurgency and the linear response of security forces of nabbing and whom they considered 'suspicious' or 'collaborators of insurgents', left little room for a livable option. Despite the fact that Awaran was extremely underdeveloped, the pre requisite to any kind of physical development remained elusive in official debates of social and strategic issues.

A usual political process, capable of representing the views and voices of local people is a fundamental pre-requisite in sustaining the initiatives in rehabilitation. The people demand the presence of a 'government' that is able to listen to their day to day grievances and is able to devise a timely solution to their immediate problems. Functional absence of a capable and potent local government is also a major hurdle in the smooth management of the area affairs. People question whether Awaran will continue to benefit from any governmental input, once the execution of projects or other efforts related to earthquake rehabilitation were concluded.

Lessons Learnt

Awaran presents a complex case for initiating and sustaining rehabilitation and development efforts. There are a number of fundamental social, political and administrative issues that must be settled before any planning and development effort is launched by the government and other stakeholders. From the review of literature and dialogue with the people, it was evident that the concerns that caused insurgency and civil disobedience can be resolved through a constitutionally mandated political process. In the present situation, this initiative was found missing, replaced by a military option. It is believed that a valid political process has greater likelihood to restore peace and order that shall enable rehabilitation process to germinate firmly, since the ownership and responsibility of the same shall be proudly held by the people of the area.

The two development and rehabilitation interventions had their respective potentials and constraints. By nature, government approaches are stereo typical, less innovative, system and procedure driven and expensive. The HRA project was no exception. There also remained possibilities of getting influenced by external actors, security forces operational in this area being an example. The relative efficiency can be only acquired if and when a sincere and capable administrator is at the helm of affairs. This was exactly the case. When an efficient and result oriented Deputy Commissioner continued to supervise the project, the effort moved on fast. Sadly, the transfer of the incumbent officer led

to a near complete retardation of the project since mid-2015. Very little progress could be seen on the designated sites. The input of design innovation from the university professors and scholars made headway when there was an appreciation by the deputy commissioner. This very useful tie was instantly severed after the officer got transferred.

The URC driven effort was a useful effort of a non-governmental actor that understood the context and dynamics of the area well. The project was able to articulate the target group well due to deeper interaction with the community. The targets were successfully met as there was no red tape in the process. Procurement of material, imparting of essential training, management of construction process, quality control, reporting and record keeping were done due to constant vigilance of URC team and community activists. However the project was entirely dependent upon the received financial grant from URC's donors. While the community was willing to extend the project to more households, the availability of funds, on the same terms and conditions, was not possible. Also the government is generally not willing to adopt and replicate such projects due to stark differences from bureaucratic norms. The absence of public tendering of works, lack of subscription to official designs and nonexistence of official oversight were some reasons that prevented this effort from being adopted by the government. But perhaps, this freedom exercised by the URC team, was the key to the successful planning and implementation of the project. The project may consider revisiting its own success to devise the ways and means to transform the project into a sustainable initiative in the area. A core lesson for similar contexts across the world is to rely on community led re-development processes – as demonstrated by URC – for greater outreach as well as time and resource efficient outputs.

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