

Looking Through an Environmental Lens

Case Study: The Shelter Cluster

The following includes a case study and technical guidance on mainstreaming environment in humanitarian modality selection systems for shelter. For a full discussion of research findings and recommendations, please refer to the full UNEP/OCHA Joint Unit report 'Looking through an Environmental Lens: Implications and opportunities for Cash Transfer Programming in humanitarian response' (2018).

I. Building the Environment into Modality Selection Criteria

The use of CTP raises some environmental concerns specific to the shelter sector that may impact beneficiary and environmental recovery. In fact, results from a small poll conducted for the 'Environmental Lens' report suggest that cash-based responses are perceived to present greater risk in the shelter sector than in either the food security or the WASH sectors (Blanco Ochoa et al., 2018). While the environment is notionally considered on an ad hoc basis in the field, and noted in some programmatic guidance, there is no systematic process to identify and respond to modality-driven environmental risks or to generate evidence on the environmental impact of shelter programmes (ibid., JEU, 2014). Three linkages between existing modality selection criteria and the environment—local contexts, local markets, and beneficiary protection—serve as a starting point to motivate a shelter-specific checklist to guide modality selection (ibid.; Levine and Bailey, 2015; World Bank, 2016).

II. Motivating the Checklist: Considerations of CTP

Different modalities of humanitarian assistance present different impacts on the environment. Motivated by these differential impacts and the growing trend towards CTP, the following synthesises some of the opportunities and implications—in terms of environmental resilience—of cash.

Opportunities

- CTP provides beneficiaries with greater choice, ownership and dignity over their own recovery and, with appropriate support and information, over the recovery of their local environment (WHS, 2016).
- Conditional and restricted cash transfers provide practitioners an opportunity to positively shape beneficiary behaviour, orienting shelter towards sustainable, certified and durable materials that 'do no harm' to both the local environment as well as their lives and livelihoods (ODI, 2015).
- When cash is combined with capacity building and technical assistance, as is often the case in shelter, sensitising reconstruction to environmental factors supports efforts to 'build back better', linking future preparedness and recovery to environmental management and resilience (Blanco Ochoa et al., 2018).
- From an environmental perspective, cash for work programmes such as clearing debris can enable the safe disposal of (potentially life threatening) hazardous materials while at the same time allowing for the collection and reuse of certain shelter materials that were not destroyed by the emergency (UN, 2010; UK Shelter Forum, 2016).
- Close monitoring and support of CTP-based reconstruction projects is essential and can offer a good balance between community decision-making, beneficiary choice and quality control, adhering to the principle to 'do no harm' (Brook and Kelly, 2015).



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Implications

- Unconditional, unrestricted or multipurpose cash grants give beneficiaries control over how they spend transferred funds and build their shelter regardless of environmental implications, such as the sustainable sourcing of materials (Harvey, 2007; Gentilini, 2016).
- When environmental risks are high, sourcing local materials for shelter may compromise fragile environmental conditions (e.g. deforestation, soil erosion, etc.), making local conditions worse and creating more risk than relief (Blanco Ochoa et al., 2018).
- When sourcing large volumes of construction materials for shelter programming in a market-based response, strong domestic regulatory policies are key to ensure the sustainability and quality of these inputs (ibid.).
- When the amount of cash transferred is insufficient to cover all shelter reconstruction demands, beneficiaries may opt for cheaper materials that are typically less environmentally sustainable and lower quality or they may source their own materials directly from the local environment (Ashmore et al., 2008).

III. Motivating the Checklist: Environmental Linkages to Modality Selection

Current criteria for modality selection broadly fall in three themes: context, markets and protection. While there are no standardised metrics tying these criteria to the environment, clear linkages across the themes highlight opportunities for mainstreaming environment in cash programmes for shelter.

Context

Pre-existing environmental conditions and post-crisis environmental impacts hold serious implications for the scale of shelter needs and feasibility of cash-based responses.

- In addition to policies around land ownership and tenure, the physical landscape informs and constrains decisions for shelter siting.
- The scale of beneficiary need dictates the volume of programme inputs, and subsequent demand on markets and natural resources.
- The availability of local natural resources, including timber and sand, shape material use and beneficiary interaction with their physical surroundings. The ability for inputs to be sourced locally may be altered by the crisis context.

Markets

Markets define the viability of local supply chains to support cash-based responses. The volume of construction and sustainability of inputs holds significant implications for the physical environment and future resilience as the sourcing of construction materials responds to post-crisis demand.

- Where markets function effectively and are appropriately regulated, the environmental burden of local demand for shelter materials may be controlled. However, sustainability of inputs remains a concern, as harvesting may still be done unsustainably and environmental impacts may be displaced to the broader region.
- Any limitations of markets displaces material sourcing to the immediate area, straining available natural resources, particularly if local infrastructure and beneficiary mobility are compromised.

Protection

In the context of modality selection, protection broadly refers to a mandate to 'do no harm'. While this challenge already looms large for shelter programming, it should extend to the physical environment as well.

- As shelter CTP is often subject to funding shortfalls, beneficiary interaction with the physical environment, through the self-sourcing of lower quality materials or less sustainable building techniques, may undermine environmental protection and resilience.

- More actively, ‘building back better’ for the environment presents opportunities to improve community environmental management and resilience by mainstreaming environmental considerations in technical assistance and guidance for shelter.

Table 1. Checklist for Determining Modality in Shelter Programming

This checklist can be used to guide the determination of whether CTP is operationally feasible for a shelter program with respect to the environment. With its emphasis on the sustainable sourcing of materials in supply chains, the checklist could be implemented alongside existing guidance, including Emergency Market Mapping and Analysis (EMMA). Bolded items specifically address environmental considerations; non-bolded items address CTP feasibility more broadly.

Selection Criteria	Sample Questions
Context	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Is the distribution of cash operationally feasible in the post-disaster context? 2. Do beneficiaries have physical access to markets and/or cash distribution points? 3. Is the domestic policy context able to govern supply-chain standards and ensure that construction materials are sustainably sourced?
Markets	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are local markets for construction materials functioning? 2. Will the local supply of the needed construction materials be able to meet the volume of local demand? 3. Will the local market be able to supply the needed shelter materials at an appropriate quality and price? 4. Do the construction materials found in local markets come from sustainable sources? 5. Will suppliers continue to use sustainable sources while attempting to meet increased demand?
Protection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If beneficiaries are expected to finance relief expenses out of pocket, will they turn to their immediate environment or low-quality cheap alternatives to source necessary construction materials? 2. Do opportunities to source construction materials locally present minimal risk to how beneficiaries interact with their environment? 3. Is appropriate technical support available to ensure shelter programmes using CTP meet necessary quality standards to ensure beneficiary protection? 4. Are anticipated operational impacts of a shelter programme (such as local timber sourcing) expected to negatively interact with the direct impacts of the disaster (such as deforestation)?

IV. Recommendations for Incorporating Environment in Shelter Programme Modality Selection

- The Global Shelter Cluster must coordinate efforts to **standardise environmental considerations in the modality selection process**, linking to criteria of context, markets and protection through checklists such as that provided above.
- Implementing organisations should **conduct environmental assessments** regarding the appropriate modality for all inputs in order to choose a modality based on anticipated environmental impact. These may be free-standing, or link explicitly to existing market and/or value-chain analyses.

- Implementing organisations should **strengthen the use of programmatic features of CTP**—including technical guidance, restrictions and conditions—where some but not all local sources of materials present environmental risk to ensure that only materials of appropriate quality and sustainability are used in shelter construction and to strengthen beneficiary ownership and awareness of the recovery process.
- Implementing organisations must **incorporate environmental considerations into monitoring systems** to allow for changes in modality over the course of a programme as contexts and the sourcing of inputs also change.
- Implementing organisations should **include environmental impact content in programme evaluations** in order to build out a better evidence base for the linkages between shelter programming, modality choice and environmental outcomes.

References

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