

Disasters and professionals – part of the problem or the solution?

Notes for contribution by Geoff Payne at the meeting 'Life in between now and the next disaster: Global perspectives on preventing loss of life and livelihoods at the Nehru Centre, London. 15.03.2006.

I have just returned from contributing to an EU funded training programme on municipal urban development in Macedonia. In 1963, most of the capital, Skopje, was destroyed and many thousands killed in a major earthquake. Today, the city has been rebuilt and continues to expand. This is a major achievement but to what extent is the present city prepared to cope with another disaster? A significant proportion of development is illegal (not just housing, but also commercial and industrial buildings) and the proportion is thought by some to be increasing. Corners are being cut in the search for profits and to avoid the complex and time consuming process of obtaining official permissions. The enforcement of planning and building regulations is inconsistent to say the least.

Would Skopje cope with another earthquake better than it did last time? How would other cities and smaller settlements in Pakistan, India, Iran, USA and other countries cope if disasters struck twice in the same place? What lessons do previous disasters offer?

In addition to Macedonia, I have had the chance to work on research, training and consultancy projects in India, Peru, Cuba, Pakistan, Egypt and a number of other countries prone to natural disasters. In each case, professionals face major challenges – massive urban population increases, many of whom have low incomes, and modest municipal revenues to meet ever increasing needs for land, housing and services. The ability of conventional approaches to these challenges stretches resources to the point where illegal development is widespread. It also makes it difficult to enforce official standards, regulations and administrative procedures in formal developments. In other words, the regulatory framework for planning and building has not been able to cope with, or respond to, current pressures.

It has to be said that these regulatory frameworks often leave a lot to be desired. For example, in Lima, it can take 150 days to process a building application. This is a fast track arrangement compared to Tanzania where it can take over seven years to get full building permission! In work undertaken in India some years ago, we found a regulatory regime so complex that one had to be a lawyer in some states to understand what was required and as new regulations were introduced old ones were not necessarily replaced, creating an overlapping series of sometimes confusing and contradictory requirements. That was some time ago, so no doubt the present situation is much more efficient. However, the problem of creating and enforcing an appropriate regulatory framework remains.

However, whilst professionals may not be able to determine economic policy, they – we – do have a major say in creating and enforcing regulatory frameworks on urban planning and building. We recommend the standards, regulations and sometimes procedures which politicians pass into law or byelaws. We therefore cannot escape responsibility when things go wrong.

Part of the problem seems to me to be that we collectively seek to control too many things and in doing so run the risk of failing to control anything. The essential role of the state is to protect the public interest and in planning and building terms this means public health and safety, together with environmental safeguards. In this contexts, does it really matter exactly what the

minimum plot size is, what percentage of a residential plot is developed, or what the minimum ceiling height is? We need to review regulatory frameworks to ensure that we identify the minimum conditions which will protect all citizens from major hazards and ensure that we enforce these rigorously. After all, in Turkey, the official standards for earthquake resistance are similar to those in Japan, yet the lack of rigorous enforcement led to many contractors failing to meet norms and many buildings collapsing which should not have.

These experiences suggest that the professions involved in creating and managing the built environment need to work much more closely together in identifying and enforcing minimum standards for land development and building and that these should reflect cultural, social and economic conditions. At present, architects, planners, surveyors, engineers and urban designers, all tend to regard themselves as superior or independent of the others and there is a great need to improve co-ordination and collaboration between them – us!

This needs to be done at the initial educational levels at universities where the next generation of professionals are trained. It also needs to be done through the increasing adoption of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses for mid-career professionals. Conferences and working parties can also help. In the Tsunami Recovery Network, we are doing what we can to bring the British professional institutes together for international work and to see that courses in Commonwealth countries which may be validated by British institutes, all contain a suitable degree of coursework on disaster preparedness and an holistic professional approach. We hope that these efforts will contribute to improving the ability of national and local governments to ensure that regulatory frameworks for planning and building can improve the protection of communities and ensure that if disasters do hit, then their impact will be minimal.