

**IS BETTER HOUSING AN INCENTIVE FOR PEOPLE TO RELOCATE FROM DISASTER-PRONE AREAS? THE CASE OF POST-FLOOD OUTCOMES FROM SANTA FE, ARGENTINA**

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**Abstract**

Resettlement in post-disaster contexts is often based on a strong housing-centered focus aiming to improve the housing conditions and people's safety through improved building technologies. However, in spite of better housing conditions people are often reluctant to accept relocation. This paper attempts to analyze the role of housing and appropriate building technologies in resettlement projects. The importance of housing related aspects is then compared with other key variables such as location, lot size, land tenure, livelihoods or place attachment. Finally, family-specific factors such as gender, age, occupation or income are studied separately in order to understand if different categories of people diverge on resettlement attitudes and the importance ascribed to housing.

Field research was conducted in Santa Fé, Argentina, a city with vast population sectors located in highly flood-prone territories. Over the years, Santa Fe has carried out multiple resettlement projects, which offer valuable insights, and allows comparing different resettlement experiences.

The research evidences that both the resettled communities and at-risk population perceive good quality housing as a key factor that contributes significantly to successful resettlement outcomes. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that deficient housing conditions may still be voluntarily endured by certain categories of people if other variables match their needs and thus make up for the housing inconveniences. Resettlement initiatives with a strong housing need, thus, may be complemented with information on local circumstances and families' needs.

**Keywords:** Resettlement; Housing; Appropriate Building Technologies; Livelihoods.

**Introduction**

The relocation of communities is very complex concerning contexts, circumstances, scale and available resources. While resettlement affected for many decades principally rural communities as a consequence of developmental infrastructure projects, more and more relocation is emerging in other contexts such as urban centers or post-disaster situations. Independent of the context, however, people are usually forced to involuntarily relocate to another place without being consulted or empowered to participate. In spite of these different factors and contexts, there is a general belief that good quality housing based on improved building technologies increases acceptance among the affected families and contributes to a significant improvement of resettlement outcomes.

While housing design and building technologies include multiple factors such as form, orientation, size, spatial organization of the house, building materials and access to facilities embedded in local socio-cultural contexts, the concept of a 'better house' in relocation is often associated

directly with modern, durable housing units which come to replace modest, self-built dwellings. Among the decision-makers' principal arguments in favor of such radical changes is the possibility to adapt technologies guaranteeing multi-hazard resistant buildings and thus to elevate the people's safety as well as improve protection for the infrastructure and livelihoods in future disasters. Furthermore, the shift from self-built dwellings towards modern formal housing units promises a more comfortable and convenient living environment often standing for a higher social status. Even aesthetically, these modern housing types enjoy usually more prestige and are thus preferred over local building types. Thus, the universal, permanent housing type symbolizes the inclusion in modern society and an upgrade of social status.

In spite of improved building technologies in terms of quality, safety and durability, relocation still remains complex leaving people often worse off than before; in fact, the majority of resettlement studies have emphasized the devastating resettlement impacts and long-term deteriorated living conditions (de Wet, 2006; Scudder and Colson, 1982) showing deficits and failures of the popular housing-centered relocation approach.

While for many years, the body of literature was predominantly made of case studies which social anthropologists had evidenced cohabiting with indigenous groups affected by resettlement, Cernea (1997) tried to systematize the observed impoverishment risks resettled communities had faced. He identified eight specific impoverishment risks related to relocation which are namely landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, increased morbidity and mortality, food insecurity, loss of access to common property, and social dysfunction. A general consensus on these impoverishment risks exists, referring not only to housing, but also to livelihoods and social aspects.

Downing (1996) explored further the phenomenon of social disarticulation by introducing the concept of 'social geometry'. According to Downing, social geometries consist of "*infinite intersections of socially constructed spaces, socially constructed times, and socially constructed personages*" (1996: 33). These answer primary ontological questions related to who and where we are. Thus, if spatial and temporal order gives a society predictability and meaning, its destruction may render social life chaotic, unpredictable and meaningless.

An additional factor interfering often in resettlement is place attachment. This emotional bond tied between the people and their place of residence involves "interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and belief, and behavior and actions in reference to a place" (Low and Altman, 1992:5). While place attachment arises between the person and the place, its impact exceeds the individual level of self-definition but contributes further to group definition and cultural integrity. Such symbolic or emotional connotations can further be observed as well in relation with the build environment. This is reflected, for instance, in the difference between 'house' and 'home' whose meaning as argued by various researchers (Mallet, 2004; Easthope, 2004; Kearns et al., 2000; Benjamin, 1995; Lawrence, 1987) distinguishes the material object 'house' from the socio-emotional construction 'home'. Yet intangible, the interrupt of place attachment can cause destabilization of community life that leads to crisis-laden insecurity and to a loss of sense of cultural identity.

Thus, while relocation approaches are often limited to simply replace houses (Jha et al., 2010), theoretical and practical evidences show that productive, socio-economic, emotional, demographic and symbolic dimensions converge and parallel interact influencing resettlement outcomes. This paper aims at providing information on the role of good quality housing compared with other factors such as settlement location, lot size or family specific factors. Are good quality houses perceived by the people as incentives to accept and cooperate with relocation? Do different categories of people (gender, age, income, occupation) perceive the relevance of good quality housing diversely?

## *The Context of Santa Fé, Argentina*

The city of Santa Fé is located 475 kilometers north-west of Buenos Aires on a peninsula in the confluence of the Salado and the Paraná River. With an estimated population of 383'000 people, Santa Fé belongs to the ten major cities of Argentina (Rico and Portillo, 2004), but is also among the country's poorest ones (Capotto, 2007; ISNSR, 2005; CEPAL, 2003).

Santa Fé is located in a region named 'El Litoral', which is known for its abundance of water and natural resources that have been critical for the city's demographic and economic development. Around 70% of the 26'800 hectares of the municipal territory consists of rivers, lagoons and creeks (Government Santa Fe, 2009). Whereas the region's rich water resources may be considered its natural capital, they are also the cause of frequent disasters.

Despite broad efforts to stabilize the situation and mitigate the flood risk, Santa Fé suffered a severe flood in 2003; 23 people lost their lives, over 100,000 people had to be evacuated and 28'000 houses were destroyed. Though less severely, the city was again flooded in 2007 and according to hydraulic experts the risk of floods will not decrease in the near or remote future due to metrological variability and global climate changing. Besides, anthropogenic processes further aggravate the situation whereby the socio-economically vulnerable urban poor communities currently live in the city's low-lying areas along the Salado River (Rico and Portillo, 2004; CEPAL, 2003).

In the aftermath of the devastating 2003 flood, the local government authorities agreed on partial relocation of flood-affected families. These resettlement projects were planned and executed both by public and private organizations concluding with very different results. However, not all families accepted relocation and the neighborhoods in the low-lying territories identically continue existing. Furthermore, the resettlement process is not concluded with relocations taking place at the time of field research.

### **Research Methods**

The field research took place in November 2009 within a research project funded by KFH<sup>1</sup> and carried out jointly with the local *Universidad Nacional del Litoral*. During three weeks, a field team of ten people explored closely two resettlement neighborhoods and two neighborhoods located in highly hazard prone areas in Santa Fe. Short appraisals were parallel conducted in additional past and present relocation neighborhoods giving further insights complementing the collected information.

The in-depth field research was divided into two phases: the first phase focused on qualitative data which was thereafter crosschecked in phase two with quantitative information. For the qualitative phase tools such as unstructured interviews, neighborhood checklists, participant observation and neighborhood walks were applied. The quantitative work was based on this information aiming to respond the identified emerging issues. Thus, the household survey provided the socio-economic data, numbers about livelihood strategies, housing conditions and resettlement attitudes and was applied in both the resettled and flood-prone neighborhoods. This double approach allowed backing up qualitative information with quantitative data, to verify the informants' points of view and overall obtain a broader perception of the neighborhoods' situations. Besides, the flood-prone neighborhoods had a double function since in many cases the resettled families had lived there prior to relocation and thus were of particular interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Rector's Conference of the Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences

### **Research questions:**

- What is the role of housing, housing quality and appropriate building technologies compared with other variables such as location, tenure security or lot size in relocation processes?
- Are better houses a valid incentive for relocation?
- How differ the perceptions of distinct population categories (age, gender, income, occupation) regarding relocation and relocation incentives?

Complementary to the traditional housing-centered focus, the methodological approach was expanded integrating a livelihood approach to detect underlying links between relocation, housing and livelihood strategies. Looking back, this was highly opportune since, *“few rural or urban households, especially poor households in middle- and low-income countries, rely on a single income-generating activities (farming or wage employment) to support themselves”* (Rakodi, 2002).

The rich information was finally rounded up with further interviews conducted with other stakeholders involved in the subject of resettlement in Santa Fe, in particular local government authorities and civil society organizations, in order to give credit to a holistic approach.

### **Research Objectives:**

- Discover whether better houses are a valid incentive for resettlement.
- Studying the role and importance of housing, building technologies and materials in a relocation project compared with site-specific, livelihood or emotional variables.
- Analyze differences in resettlement attitudes and importance given to housing issues according to different population categories (gender, age, occupation, income etc.).

## **Research Results**

### *Socio-Economic and Demographic Situation in Flood-Prone and Resettled Neighborhoods*

In spite of an overwhelming diversity and heterogeneity within the four neighborhoods and between themselves, the majority of families belong to low-income categories. Families were either employed in the informal sector or unemployed depending on state subsidies. An elevated percentage of school dropouts were noticed and perspectives particularly for the adolescents were critical.

The neighborhoods located in flood-prone areas show for historical reasons a division into an older and a more recent sector entailing socio-economic differences. The consolidated, older part is situated close to the centre and was founded as part of a social housing program in the 60ties sponsored by Peron. Families living in this part usually have been living there for decades, are frequently advanced in years and enjoy a certain socio-economic stability; some families have even gained access to formal labor market and tertiary studies. The neighborhood consolidation is similarly noticed in view of infrastructure and organizational level.

The newer settlements of the neighborhoods in contrast started to emerge only a decade ago and continue growing as a consequence of immigrants arriving from rural parts.

The newcomers started initially to occupy the lots subsequent to the consolidated part approaching steadily towards the riverbanks. As a result, the neighborhoods are not only less consolidated, but lack urban planning, infrastructure and settlements are rather spontaneous; the living conditions in these *villas* are extremely adverse and harsh. In the relocated neighborhoods, finally, mainly young families have settled down originating from other neighborhoods in Santa Fe. The heterogeneity regarding socio-economic situations in the resettlement neighborhoods is overwhelming but the families tend to be more stable than the neighborhoods along the dike.

### *Current Housing Situation*

#### 1. Housing Conditions in the at-risk Neighborhoods

The housing conditions in the flood-prone neighborhoods vary according to the different levels of consolidation. In the historically older parts, the housing units are made of brick or cement, are often nicely painted and with a small front or back yard. Although the houses aren't extremely big, they offer comfort and security to its inhabitants. The houses are of durable materials and carefully maintained reflecting not only the social status the family has gained over the years and their stable socio-economic situation but also the affections towards their home.

The situation gradually changes the further one proceeds to the West, leaving behind the consolidated neighborhood parts approaching to the protection dike. Houses are of more rustic nature with a basic structure and lacking aesthetical details. A mix of materials is used and roofs are more and more made of corrugated iron. There is no sign of urban planning but rather a spontaneous occupation and permanent upgrading taking place according to available resources.

The general infrastructure situation is precarious and particularly the poor drainage system causes the water to remain often for days in the streets. The differences between the neighborhoods and housing types can be seen in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1. Houses in the Consolidated Neighborhood (left and centre) and Emerging Sector (right).**

The size of houses was in general found to be appropriate in both at-risk neighborhoods. Core families occupied the houses and sometimes with members from the extended family; crowding is not a problem and the families themselves were content with the size of their houses.

#### 2. Housing Conditions in the Resettlement Neighborhoods

The findings from the resettlement neighborhoods were very diverse. In the first case the agency in charge had opted to build high quality housing units made of brick and with excellent doors, windows, floors and roofs offering an over-average living comfort. With 75m<sup>2</sup> the living space is calculated generously and people are understandably satisfied with their new houses.

The housing outcomes from the second resettlement neighborhood were in contrast much more questioned. The municipality had transformed transitory shelter sponsored by an International Humanitarian Aid Organization into permanent housing units. The housing modules were made of

plastic, filled with iron and sand offering two rooms, bathroom and kitchen within 25m<sup>2</sup>; for families usually composed of three to five members this is not enough living space. In addition to the limited space, living conditions were aggravated by the absolutely inappropriate building material – plastic – which was found to lack sensitivity to local climate conditions intensifying heat and evaporation during Santa Fe’s extremely hot and humid day time and only insufficiently isolating the cold at night.



**Fig. 2. Houses in the Resettled Neighborhoods (Plastic house, left, and good quality house, right).**

In spite of the differences found between the two resettlement projects, the majority of families from both neighborhoods expressed even so their overall satisfaction with their current housing conditions and found their momentary housing situation improved compared with pre-resettlement.

#### *The Role of Housing as a Resettlement Incentive*

Housing was found to be a key factor influencing resettlement outcomes. In the flood-prone neighborhoods, one third of the families confirmed that better housing conditions would be a valid incentive to accept resettlement. Similarly, resettled families underlined as well the importance of housing. The research results show that families living in the high quality houses achieved to improve their living situations and stabilized the income. Beneficiaries expressed their thankfulness and indicated that such a house had strongly elevated their self-esteem. In conclusion, there are no doubts that high quality housing is a strong incentive for resettlement improving overall wellbeing of urban poor families.

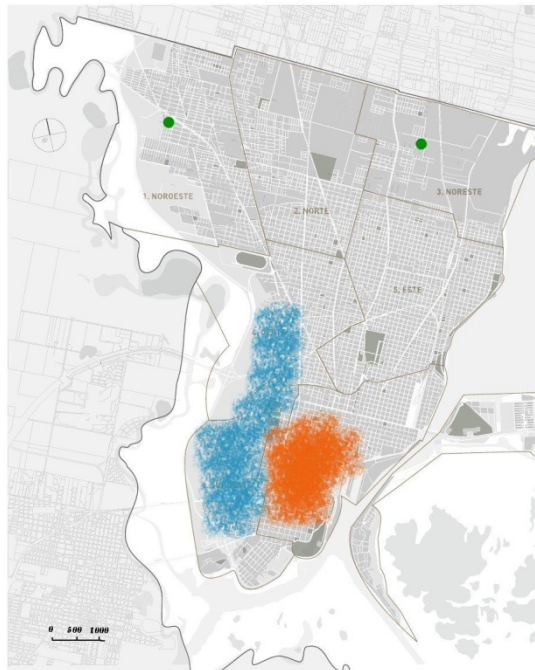
Even though the families living in the plastic modules were struggling with several constraints such as lack of space, unbearable climatic conditions and miserable overall housing quality, they still showed optimism and satisfaction with their housing situation. Particularly the young families indicated that the adverse situation hadn’t lost its desirability; the land tenure security was worth the sacrifice of enduring the housing inconveniences and would allow them to gradually increment the house and improve on the long run their living conditions.

However, not all families shared this attitude and were willed to bear the adversities. In fact, it must be emphasized that about 80% of the houses were abandoned a few years after resettlement. While it was not possible to identify the exact motives which encouraged the families to leave the resettlement site, it can be assumed that a type of rotation took place: families unsatisfied with their new housing situation left and others, being completely aware of the challenges, considered this deficient situation on the long-run as their best option occupying or buying the free houses.

This behavior of spending the scarce money for an extremely precarious house rises the question on what supplemental factors contribute to such an apparently irrational decision.

### Site-Specific Variables

Location: The findings from Santa Fé coincide with the widely recognized fact that large distances between original and resettlement sites affect negatively resettlement outcomes. However, particularly in urban contexts, vacant land is rarely found in immediate proximity to the at-risk neighborhoods. This was as well the case in Santa Fe, where the resettlement neighborhoods are located in the North about 40 minutes by bus from the city centre (see *Fig. 3. Location of Resettled Neighborhoods (green dots), at-risk Neighborhoods (blue) with Reference to the City Centre (orange)*).



**Fig. 3. Location of Resettled Neighborhoods (green dots), at-risk Neighborhoods (blue) with Reference to the City Centre (orange).**

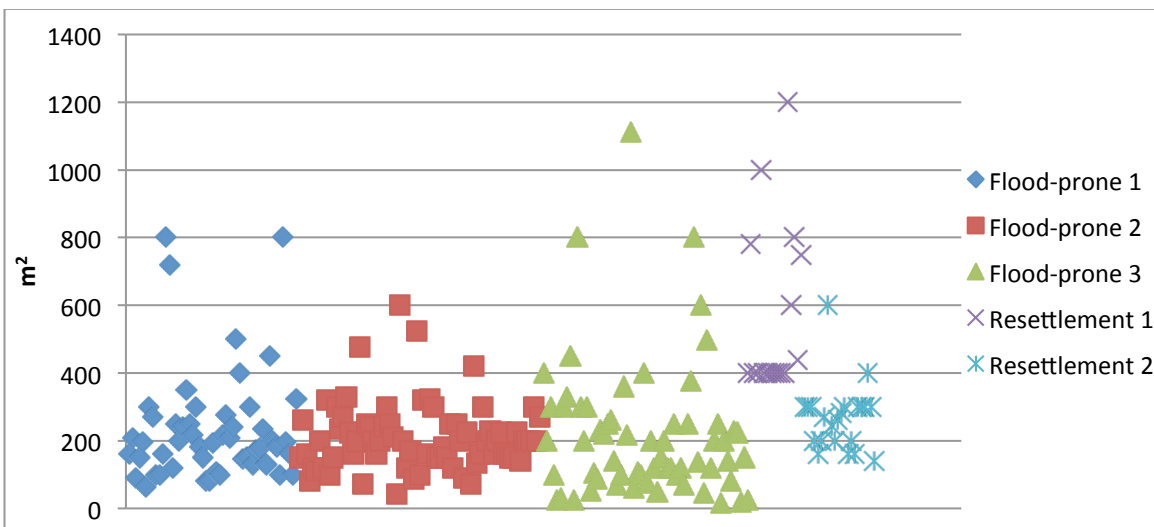
The contrast between the at-risk areas lying in immediate proximity to the centre where principal administrative, commercial and social activities take place, and the resettlement neighborhoods situated outside the urban downtown area in an almost rural environment was drastic and complicated in many cases the maintenance of the livelihood strategies. Despite the similar contexts, the outcomes between the two-resettlement processes varied strongly giving further insights into the role of location compared with housing conditions.

The families benefiting from the high quality houses overcame the difficulties caused by location and achieved either to adapt the livelihoods or develop new strategies. Whereas none of the families abandoned in this case the new site sticking to their high quality house, the mentioned rotation in the other resettlement site was probably not uniquely due to the precarious housing situation but also caused by livelihood problems; hence, the accumulation of negative outcomes potentially encouraged families to abandon the resettlement site. The vast majority of families, which had taken over the deserted houses, arrived prevalently from the immediate surroundings. This allows them, thus, to maintain their livelihoods without major modifications.

Lot size: Lot size is a fundamental factor for low-income families since they rarely use their lot exclusively for residential purposes but often realize at least a part of their livelihood activities on it. Activities may range from waste storage, reparation of cars or electro domestics, to small gardens, keeping animals or running of a small neighborhood shop. These activities not necessarily represent the primary income source but complement and stabilize the economic

situation in emergency cases. As a consequence, lot size is a relevant factor apart from the mere housing conditions.

The comparison of the lot sizes in the flood-prone neighborhoods with the ones from the resettlement sites shows that there are no major differences (see Figure 4). In all cases, the lot size was adequate and the vast majority of the people indicated their satisfaction with the available space.



**Fig. 4. Lot Sizes in Flood-Prone and Resettled Neighborhoods in m2.**

Place attachment: Beside the merely material, technological or spatial aspects of resettlement, emotional and often symbolic dimensions must be considered. In Santa Fe, place attachment was found to be strong, especially in the consolidated parts of the at-risk neighborhoods where 40% of the population indicated to be living for more than 20 years in their current place of residence. As a consequence of this long-term emotional relationship with the place, 6% of the families living in these highly flood-prone areas ensured that due to place attachment they'd reject resettlement independently of specific conditions or benefits.

Talking about the motives of the families, which had abandoned the resettlement neighborhoods, nostalgia and a type of homesickness were mentioned in multiple occasions, referring clearly to place attachment. Thus, even though place attachment is not visible at first sight, its impact often becomes apparent and potentially even outweighs other incentives including appropriate housing solutions.

#### *Socio-Economic and Demographic Factors*

The importance given to improved housing in resettlement projects may vary among different social categories. The specific influence of gender, age, occupation and income was investigated in order to understand different resettlement attitudes and importance given to housing.

Gender: While men and women had similar resettlement attitudes, a higher percentage of women considered better housing conditions to be a valid incentive to accept resettlement. It is, indeed, reasonable that women pay more attention to good housing conditions since they often spend most of their time at home, while men pursue their jobs, other activities and sometimes even leisure time outside the home. The traditional association of women-private space and men-public space is to a certain level still applied. Men in contrast respond rather to incentives such as general improvement of living conditions, reduction and eradication of flooding risks or better locations.



Age: Independently of possible incentives, age was found to be a key factor influencing resettlement attitudes with different age categories responding diametrically opposed to relocation plans. While the young and in particular young families tend to perceive resettlement as an opportunity to own something and improve their overall living conditions in the long run, the elderly reject categorically resettlement due to motives such as well established livelihood strategies and strong place attachment due to years of living in the same place. Besides, they often feel their energy fading which causes fear and immediate discomfort when thinking of moving to another place. This is to say, while the young search possibilities and perspectives to progress in the future, the elderly usually have accepted their situation and developed strategies to make the best of even adverse situations and are in general uneager to whatever change. Improved housing solutions don't have a significant influence on this tendency. Indistinctively, the young and the elderly perceive improved housing conditions as an incentive to resettle. However, housing as an incentive was not found to have an impact strong enough to change the mind of the elderly.

Occupation: Occupation should be analyzed in view of the working place. While certain categories of employment activities are linked to a specific working place, other activities are more flexible and resist to changes for instance caused by resettlement. In Santa Fé, many working activities are directly depending on the city center be it because of the type of employment (public sector, bank, shops etc.) or the resources found (waster pickers, beggars). Independently of incentives, these people will hardly accept resettlement projects removing them from their principal income resources upon which often the entire livelihood strategies are built. Depending on natural resources such as the water from the river, another occupational group is also not pleased to relocate to an inland neighborhood. Finally, families with neighborhood businesses are often neither very responsive to resettlement since their income resource is closely linked to the social network they have established over the years and in case of relocation would be needed to rebuilt.

On the other hand, families with permanently changing employment situations, sometimes looking for work even on a daily basis, are better responding to resettlement since the relationship between place of residence and working activity is less rigid. Beside these general resettlement attitudes, it was not possible to find out about possible preferences regarding specific incentives such as housing.

Income: The investigation results didn't show any signs of income (defined as total income divided by number of family members) influencing resettlement attitudes nor preferences regarding resettlement incentives. While the work force (income divided by persons contributing to the total income) had influence on the general resettlement attitudes in the sense that weak work force families are clearly more receptive to resettlement, there were no preferences observed regarding incentives.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The research findings showed that improved housing is overall highly appreciated. About one third of the at-risk population considers the improvement of housing conditions as a strong incentive to accept resettlement. On the other hand, families which had already been resettled confirmed the strong impact good housing has had on their overall well-being improving significantly their living conditions and stabilizing their livelihoods.

Particularly the success of the resettlement project with focus on high quality housing was stunning. Nevertheless, the application of such projects is often not feasible due to exaggerated costs or lack of vacant urban space. On the other hand, the fact that tiny abandoned plastic modules were reoccupied shows that other factors such as land tenure security, lot size but also safety (absence of violence), overall living conditions, hazard resistance, access to facilities, or family members living close by can make up for precarious and extremely deficient housing

conditions. Each family according to their needs and objectives will then identify the factors of particular importance to them and try based on these priorities to optimize permanently their living conditions. For this reason, minimum housing conditions may be acceptable either because the family disposes of the required skills and materials to improve on their own the house or other factors preponderate and make up the housing deficiency. While such decisions to accept precarious housing conditions might surprise an outsider, they are rarely irrational. Rather, they are a consequence of the fact that different social groups evaluate and weight factors differently according to their needs and priorities. This is, because such needs and priorities depend to a good part as well on the family's situation in life and in society, which was verified by the fact that different age, gender or occupational categories make different demands on resettlement. Housing is certainly often a highly ranked and prioritized variable, but it's not the only one and sometimes not even the most important one.

Last but not least, the link between housing, resettlement and social integration requires some final reflections. Usually it's rather the antagonism of integration – marginalization – which is mentioned in relation with resettlement for instance as a key impoverishment risk (Cernea, 1997). In contrast, Santa Fe's local government authorities started to use resettlement as a way to re-integrate families into society. In November 2009, for instance, 50 families who had been physically living at the edge of the city on a flood-prone, steep hillside and suffering from social marginalization due to their extreme poverty were re-integrated into the city and society. Similarly, beneficiaries from the high quality resettlement project expressed their satisfaction of living in a decent house representing somewhat their simultaneously gained social status. The replacement of their self-built shacks with good quality housing was highly appreciated and allowed the urban poor families to leave behind their degrading conditions.

In conclusion, while improved housing certainly belongs to the key factors for resettlement outcome, the previously presented research findings indicate that other variables according to family-specific situations may similarly influence or even exceed importance. For this reason, resettlement projects should overcome a merely housing-focused approach but use a holistic and differentiated perspective responding to the particular needs of the targeted families.

**Key Lessons Learned:**

- Appropriate housing and building technologies is certainly a key factor contributing significantly to successful resettlement outcomes.
- The particular needs of the affected families may make them opt for poor housing quality if other variables such as lot size, location or land tenure security are guaranteed and given more priority.
- Different categories of people develop diverse resettlement attitudes and evaluate key variables differently according to their particular needs provoked by their situation in life and position in society.

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## Author's Biography



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After her graduation 2008 from the *Universidad Politécnica Salesiana* de Quito, Ecuador, she began working at the WHRC and is today involved in research projects analyzing socio-economic and cultural dimensions of resettlement. Besides, she has collaborated with the handbook about post-disaster reconstruction and was involved in further projects about the sustainability of the built environment.