



Beyond One Size Fits All: Lessons From Indonesia's Shelter Response After Earthquake

Lessons Sharing from Indonesia for Myanmar and the Region

By Avianto Amri¹, Syahri Ramadhan²

When a powerful earthquake strikes, it doesn't just shake the ground — it reshapes lives. Homes are lost, communities scattered, and the journey toward recovery begins in uncertainty. In Indonesia, we know this story all too well.

From Aceh to Yogyakarta, Lombok to Palu, and most recently Cianjur, Indonesia has faced repeated major earthquakes over the past two decades. Each of these disasters has left behind immense destruction, but also important lessons. Among the most critical is this: **everyone's recovery journey is different** — and **shelter responses must reflect that reality**.

A Lesson in Diversity: Recovery Is Personal

No two families experience disaster the same way. Some may seek to rebuild quickly on their own land. Others may be displaced for months, living with relatives or in evacuation centres. Some have the means to self-recover; others are left with nothing.



Figure 1. Women groups were trained to learn about housing reconstruction in Central Sulawesi (Source: Kompas)

¹ Indonesian Society for Disaster Management

² Muhammadiyah Aid

This diversity of experience means that **a one-size-fits-all shelter solution is often ineffective, inefficient, and deeply inequitable.** Standardized designs or approaches, while administratively convenient, tend to overlook the needs of the most at-risk — such as elderly individuals, people with disabilities, female-headed households, or families with insecure land tenure.

In Indonesia, we've seen how rigid shelter responses can leave certain groups behind, deepen vulnerability, and delay recovery. We've also seen how **flexible, cost effectiveness, community-driven, and inclusive approaches** create not only better housing — but stronger communities.

What Works: Flexibility and Community Ownership

After the 2009 West Sumatra earthquake, for instance, many families transitioned gradually from emergency shelter to transitional shelters and then permanent homes. A study tracking this process over eight months emphasized the value of allowing people to shape their own recovery — choosing materials, layouts, and designs that matched their needs and culture.

Post-earthquake responses in Yogyakarta, West Sumatra and Central Sulawesi further demonstrated that **when communities are empowered to lead reconstruction or Self-recovery**, they rebuild faster with flexible timing, safer, durable and with more ownership of the outcome, of course with other benefits of scale of improved living conditions and cost effectiveness, Psychosocial well being and social cohesion and strengthen capacities and resilience, this is what humanitarian principles like dignity, participation, and accountability look like in practice.

The Challenge of Scale and The Means to Work Together

Of course, we must also be realistic. **Tailoring shelter solutions to every family is extremely challenging**, especially in large-scale disasters where tens of thousands are affected. Governments must work under immense pressure — limited by time, resources, and logistical capacity — to act quickly and at scale. This is why **collaboration across sectors is essential.**

Governments should aim to provide as **many diverse and inclusive shelter options** as possible — ranging from support for self-recovery, rental assistance, to transitional shelter and reconstruction aid. But they cannot and should not do this alone and moreover government should not create a rigid regulation except for the safety standards.

Civil society organisations (CSOs), humanitarian NGOs, foundations, and private sector actors play an indispensable role. These groups often have closer ties to affected communities, more agility to innovate, and better access to underserved or vulnerable populations.

Their role is to complement government efforts, focusing on:

- Households with specific vulnerabilities
- Communities in remote or marginalized locations
- Groups that may not qualify for or be able to access government shelter support- Consider families who are ineligible for housing assistance because they don't own land and only rent — without flexible support mechanisms, they may never have the opportunity to secure a home of their own

This kind of layered response — combining public leadership with civil society agility — ensures that no one is left behind.

A Call for a More Inclusive Shelter System

As Myanmar faces a devastating earthquake crisis, and as other countries prepare for future shocks, it is time to rethink shelter response strategies. Let us move away from rigid, top-down models and toward **adaptive, inclusive, and community-centered shelter responses**.

Indonesia's experience offers valuable lessons — not because we got everything right, but because we learned what matters most: **respecting the unique recovery paths of every family** and ensuring that systems are designed to serve everyone, especially those most at risk.

This is not just a technical matter. It is a matter of humanitarian imperative, dignity, and solidarity. And it is a responsibility we must carry together. Shelter is not just a cubicle structure, but a process.

We welcome your thoughts.

This article is part of a series reflecting on Indonesia's experience in disaster response, aimed at contributing to shared learning and regional dialogue — particularly in the context of the Myanmar earthquake response. We warmly invite others to share their perspectives, experiences, and ideas.

For comments or contributions, please contact the MPBI Secretariat at mpbi.sekretariat@gmail.com. To learn more about our work, visit www.mpbi.info.