



EVEN AFTER THE MOST  
IT'S UP TO PROJECT

HORRIFIC DISASTERS, ATTENTION INEVITABLY FADES.  
LEADERS **TO KEEP REBUILDING** EFFORTS RUNNING.

IN FOR  
THE  
**LONG**  
HAUL

BY SARAH FISTER GALE  
PHOTO BY RANDALL SCOTT

Andrew Robinson,  
ICF International,  
Fairfax, Virginia, USA

**W**orking on a disaster-recovery project in the hours right after a hurricane, earthquake or explosion is an adrenaline-pumping event. The spotlight shines on victims and dust-covered heroes as government leaders and everyday citizens dig deep to support the cause. But in the weeks, months and even years that follow, commitment often wanes. The excitement dies down and donations dry up, leaving a few stoic team members to the arduous process of rebuilding the community that was destroyed. The work is difficult—and often dangerous—requiring unswerving dedication from project managers willing to battle poverty, politics and the fickle attention of donors to help victims put their lives back in order.

“It gets a little lonely,” admits Kate Stohr, managing director and cofounder of San Francisco, California, USA-based Architecture For Humanity, a non-government organization that offers design services to communities in need. Among the dozens of post-disaster rebuilding efforts the group

has supported, one of the most emotional and challenging has been its work rebuilding U.S. communities hit by Hurricane Katrina.

“It has been two years and we still have 3,000 families living in FEMA [U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers,” she laments. “This is not a job for the weak at heart.”

As they first looked for community partners, the group’s project managers often ended up sleeping in rental cars or tents in parking lots. Later, they took up residence in temporary shelters while they worked to set up construction sites, funding programs and support networks for the victims.

Team members are also often seen as the community’s go-to persons whenever a problem arises. Recently, a project manager in Biloxi, Mississippi, USA, took a call at 2 a.m. from a single mother whose FEMA trailer had been broken into. “What struck me about that was not just how desperate someone would have to be to break into a FEMA trailer, but that this woman’s first instinct was to call her Architecture for Humanity project manager,” Ms. Stohr says. “We were there for

so long and so consistently that we became an anchor for residents in a way that many people—who come and go—aren’t. Even though we provide architecture services, she was calling for help, and by default we have become the advocate for these clients in ways that go way beyond architecture.”

That desperation is a common thread across disaster-recovery projects as managers juggle a barrage of physical and emotional needs—all while trying to cut through layer upon layer of red tape.

And the scope of such long-term efforts is usually massive. Consider the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA and the rest of the Gulf Coast: 1,024 lives lost, 123,000 homes with major or severe damage, and 18,000 businesses destroyed. In the six months after the storms, workers removed 25 times more debris from Louisiana than was hauled away from the World Trade Center site following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Andrew Robinson spent six months as the program manager for the Road Home program in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Designed to support and guide the rebuilding efforts after the hurricanes, the approximately \$12.5 billion program was launched through

ICF International, a global emergency-management firm headquartered in Fairfax, Virginia, USA. The initiative currently employs 2,300 full-time team members and will continue to operate for several more years.

As overseer of one of the largest grant programs in U.S. history, Mr. Robinson found himself supervising not just a construction project. “We built a micro-economy,” he says.

The massive effort required participation from the federal and state government, appraisal and real estate industries, banks and financial services organizations, and contractors. “It was an emergency room business environment where people wanted everything done yesterday,” says Mr. Robinson, senior vice president at ICF.

The company wasn’t brought in until a year after the hurricanes hit—and by then, citizens, the media, special-interest groups and government were eager for the program to start.

“From the beginning, we were constantly managing crises while we tried to lay down tracks to create a steady operational state,” Mr. Robinson says.

#### UNDER SCRUTINY

Unlike a commercial construction project, the Road Home and most any other

» **IT HAS BEEN two years and we still have 3,000 families living in FEMA [U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers. This is not a job for the weak at heart.**

—KATE STOHR, ARCHITECTURE FOR HUMANITY, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA, USA

**9**  
The number of Hurricane Katrina relief projects currently under way by Architecture for Humanity



» ONE OF THE SEVEN HOUSES DESIGNED BY STUDIO GANG ARCHITECTS, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA, TO BE BUILT THROUGH AN ARCHITECTURE FOR HUMANITY PROGRAM

PHOTO COURTESY OF ARCHITECTURE FOR HUMANITY

#### THE AFTERMATH

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita cut a wide swath of damage along the U.S. Gulf Coast:

**\$32 billion**

Estimated cost of housing repair

**\$25 billion**

Amount of insured losses

**1,024**

Number of people killed

**780,000**

Number of Louisianians temporarily displaced from their homes

**123,000**

Number of homes that suffered major or severe damage (2005 estimate)

**82,000**

Number of rental units that suffered major or severe damage (2005 estimate)

**18,000**

Number of businesses destroyed

**The level of scrutiny is extraordinary, and that creates a huge amount of pressure.**

—DOUGLAS BECK, Ph.D., ICF INTERNATIONAL, FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA, USA



post-disaster rebuilding efforts are closely watched by the media, politicians and government agencies.

“The level of scrutiny is extraordinary, and that creates a huge amount of pressure,” says Douglas Beck, Ph.D., senior vice president of corporate development for ICF.

“It is of major importance to have a good relationship with press representatives during the first weeks after the disaster,” adds Luc Wijns, PMP, program manager at Fortis, Brussels, Belgium, and a volunteer for PMI’s project to develop a post-disaster rebuild methodology. “This makes it possible to rein-vite [the press] after some weeks or months in order to report for the public on progress made and the difficulties [the team is] still facing.”

He notes, however, that this tactic is only successful for a couple of return visits, while major disasters may require a rebuild effort that takes years.

Adding to the pressure is the fact that multiple stakeholders make competing demands for the way funds are managed, requiring constant changes and adjustments to the program. “That’s the No. 1 risk in this kind

of project,” Mr. Robinson says. “In the first six months of this project, changes to the program were made daily.”

#### ALL PART OF THE JOB

Every disaster-recovery project presents a unique set of challenges, ranging from the mundane to the gruesome. And most of those tasks will tax even the most devout project manager, Mr. Wijns says.

“If your assignment is about the removal of debris shortly after an earthquake, you may be confronted with dead bodies and the risk for gas explosions,” he points out. “Your equipment or food may also be very attractive

to local people with strong needs, even if they would be very honest under normal circumstances.”

Other challenges include administrative burdens, funding issues and scope definition.

“When accepting a responsibility as a project manager for such a project, one should also consider that conflicts and exceptions are part of the standard, requiring high levels of stress resistance and creativity,” Mr. Wijns says.

Along with all the usual tasks, project leaders on recovery projects may be called on to:

- Foster a network with other volunteer organizations to coordinate efforts
- Interface with political or military leaders, both to gain permission to carry out the project and to ensure security for workers
- Organize and train local citizens to participate in the rebuilding
- Woo donors
- Establish a program management system that can function even if all communication technology in the region breaks down.

“So much of the project manager’s job is about risk management and

emergency planning,” says Mark Bradby, an in-country project manager working on a post-earthquake relief and development project in Islamabad, Pakistan for Shelter for Life. “But instead of a change order for a bigger room, the risk is that the government will be overthrown, and your teams will need to be evacuated.”

Following the recent political upheaval in Pakistan, for example, the group had to suspend one of its projects, but proceeded with its other efforts, albeit with heightened security.

Deciding whether a disaster zone is safe to work in is one of the most important first steps to a reconstruction project, says Craig Williams, founder and director of Architects Without Borders (AWB), a non-governmental relief organization based in Sebastopol, California, USA.

“Pre-existing problems, including economic and political instability, disenfranchised populations and medical epidemics, make risk management difficult, and in some cases impossible,” he says.

He recalls the Belgian chapter of Architectes Sans Frontières (ASF) engaged in a project in Kosovo around 2000 to provide winterized housing to those left homeless by the violence and political instability that continued to wreak havoc around them.

Early in the project, the security forces ASF had hired to protect its workers demanded more money for their services. And when there was none to give, they stole all of the tools and supplies and left in the night with the project teams’ vehicles. In the absence of security, gunfire began to occur in the area.

“We realized that we couldn’t leave volunteers in that unstable and unsafe environment, so ASF had to remove their volunteers from the project,” he says. The team worked to support the

continuation of the project by using in-country local resources.

#### A BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

Once the decision has been made that it’s safe to help a community, it’s up to the project manager to create a working strategy that directly involves the local leaders and citizens.

“You have to help the community help itself or you create a deeper dependence and sense of hopelessness,” Mr. Williams says. That means community members must be involved with the decision-making and the rebuilding effort, even if there are many skilled volunteers ready to come to the community’s aid.

“The goal is for citizens to achieve their aspirations through vision and a practical plan, one we might help them with, remembering it is their vision, not ours,” he says.

The idea is to ease the transition from victims to survivors.

“If you are going to help a community with sustainable recovery, you can’t just think about the bricks and mortar,” Mr. Williams says. “You must create partnerships for empowerment and buy-in, and help to diminish the sense of profound vulnerability that a disaster can cause. The process is as much about building relationships of trust as it is about building schools, clinics and shelter. Strong communities, like buildings, are structured on strong bonds.”

David Fukutomi, vice president at ICF, begins by finding or creating a plan for what the citizens want their community to look like. “Those towns that have a vision for the future will have a more successful rebuilding effort,” he says. “They may not get more money, but it lets them funnel the funds in the right direction and it helps us help them get the money to do what they want.”

**6**  
months

The longest any team member should spend working on a disaster response or recovery project, according to Andrew Robinson



### THE DONOR DANCE

It's almost inevitable for interest to fade on long-term reconstruction efforts. And it often falls on the project manager to maintain support—and funding—for the project, says Mustafa Omar, PMP, project development manager at Maple Grove, Minnesota, USA-based Shelter for Life International. He is also project manager for a post-earthquake reconstruction and community development program in Tajikistan.

Sustaining interest isn't an easy task, however, especially given the high-stakes competition for contributions.

"Securing money to support the project is the more difficult part," he says. Many of the organization's project managers spend much of their time writing grants or networking to secure additional funds.

When a project relies on donations, project managers must be ready to woo donors with success stories and demonstrate how and why money will be spent. "Each donor has their own criteria, and it's a constant struggle to keep funds coming in," Mr. Omar admits. "The most challenging part of our work is that our customers are not loyal."

Once the money is donated, it must be closely tracked to prove it was justly spent, adds Mr. Robinson. The Road Home team uses an online portal, which now contains more than 8,500 indexed documents the team used for planning, financial and IT issues. "It showed that we were making good financial decisions and created an audit trail that could be immediately available to the public," he says.

That audit trail also helps the Road Home leaders manage publicity and public scrutiny as citizens grow frustrated at the slow pace of change. Mr. Robinson declares it "the most heavily audited program in history."

Indeed, the company was audited by seven different entities within its first month of operation—and passed with flying colors.

### TAKE A BREAK

Tackling so many tasks, often while in isolation from friends or family, can take its toll on project leaders. Making matters worse, frustrated victims often lash out at those helping them, leaving the people in charge feeling overwhelmed and under-appreciated.

"It's a stressful position," Ms. Stohr says. "In New Orleans particularly, a lot of project managers are feeling the burn."

To prevent her team from burning out completely, she limits the time project managers stay on one project and reminds them that their work—and the situation they're in—is temporary. "This is a moment in time in which they are giving back," she says. "It's not forever."

Project management teams also take part in lectures and speeches, giving them the opportunity to hear their peers congratulate them on their work, Ms. Stohr says.

And she makes sure project managers take breaks from the daily routine and she encourages them to celebrate even the smallest victories. That can cover anything from getting a phone line set up or clearing debris from a site. "If you don't celebrate successes, you don't see the change," she says. "All you see is a very long road with no end in sight." PM

EXPLORE MORE ON  
DISASTER-RELIEF PROJECTS  
IN A CLOSER LOOK»

8

The number of countries where Shelter for Life crews are currently working on relief projects

Most cities don't have a redevelopment plan in place. So it's up to relief organizations to help officials identify any documents that can define the previous state of city infrastructure and develop a blueprint for the rebuilding effort. That includes inspection reports, road and bridge surveys, and anything else that can chronicle the true extent of the damages.

Having as much information as possible about the previous state of the city also helps project managers who find themselves having to qualify funds appropriated to rebuilding effort, Mr. Fukutomi says.

"It can sometimes be difficult to get communities to put this information on the table because of an initial lack of trust," he admits, adding that project leaders must be clear about how they'll be using the data.

"[Communities] have to understand that they have nothing to lose by sharing this information and putting their ideas or goals out there. It guarantees them a better outcome," Mr. Fukutomi says. "When we can paint a picture of what a city wants and back it up with documentation, we can get the maximum dollars for the effort."