The consideration of local housing characteristics is critical for improved living conditions, sustainable development and an effective fight against poverty. It is therefore essential that development partners agree upon a shared vision and adopt clear strategies in order to make better choices when intervening in post-emergency contexts, and also to favour risk reduction and prevention.

**CENTURIES OF LOCAL EXPERIENCES WORTH ENHANCING**

The history of construction shows that builders have always been able to evolve their habitat taking into account locally available resources to meet their needs, while adapting to social constraints, local climatic and natural risks.

Societies all over the world have developed specific local building cultures, resulting in the establishment of recognisable “situated” architectures and building systems respectful of their local environment that “sustainable development” seeks to replicate today.

Unfortunately, under the influence of globalisation, this knowledge is gradually disregarded. In addition, research and training programmes on building cultures are almost non-existent, which hinders their development, the invention of new models allowing for a better integration of new technologies, and their dissemination where necessary.

The remarkable potential of local building cultures is not sufficiently considered in (re) construction programmes, even though, in spite of foreign aid, more than 90% of post-emergency efforts are supported locally. This results in the following consequences:

- Local traditional knowledge depreciates in favour of imported models, which are often inappropriate;
- Over-investment in housing models that cannot be duplicated, as they are either too expensive or too sophisticated;
- Low-quality imitations or ill-calculated technological adaptations with a low resistance to natural hazards, which are inferior compared to fully local options;
- Beneficiaries are not at the centre of the decision making process, yet this is essential if the desired goal is to empower the local population.

Despite a growing awareness of these facts, an increasing number of catastrophes - combined with media pressure - often results in quantity being chosen over quality, with the application of so-called “universal” or “ready made” solutions. Those bring short-term answers that become less efficient or even counter-productive in the middle to long term. Attention should also be paid to avoid implementing inappropriate standards, or creating false hope that cannot be fulfilled.
To fully integrate local resources in the context of housing programmes, it is suggested to:

- Put the local populations at the centre of the needs assessment and the evaluation of local capacities: adopt a participatory approach, support the bearers of local knowledge and know-how, strengthen social ties, thus enable a return of individual dignity;
- Identify local know-how and methods of organisation, adaptation and housing protection strategies, and integrate these elements in the development of the programmes to be implemented;
- Implement successful pilot projects that enhance and demonstrate the potential of local materials for building quality housing;
- Get involved in the improvement of local housing, integrating local capacities, modern technologies and major risk prevention awareness;
- Pay attention to economic accessibility issues, so that duplication is possible for a great number “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime”
- Reinforcing the follow-up and evaluation of their programmes, documenting and sharing their experiences;
- Re-examining the quality criteria and the success indicators in ongoing projects;
- Widely disseminating their results;
- Sensitizing their partners and the media so that they spread a positive image of local building cultures and those who practice them.

1 Confucius

The organisations involved in this initiative are committed to promoting and disseminating approaches based on the development and application of local resources and building cultures in reconstruction programmes.

In order to act diligently and to perpetuate these approaches both locally and globally, these organisations will work towards:

- Implementing pilot projects;
- Coordinating their actions and creating synergies to achieve a better sharing of the necessary investments to implement this new approach;
- Re-examining the quality criteria and the success indicators in ongoing projects;
- Widely disseminating their results;
- Sensitizing their partners and the media so that they spread a positive image of local building cultures and those who practice them.

This document is the result of the work accomplished during the scientific seminar DSA-Earth, Local Building Cultures and Housing improvement that was held at GAIA (Great Workshops of l’Isle d’Abeau), May 21 - 22, 2010. We wish to thank all participants for their contribution.