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## Article Title

# Natural Disasters and Built Environment: Reconstruction and Rehabilitation after the Earthquake (2005) in Balakot, Pakistan

## Abstract

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**Keywords:** Reconstruction, Earthquake Rehabilitation, Balakot, Disaster Management, Post-Disaster Urban Planning

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## Title

# Natural Disasters and Built Environment: Reconstruction and Rehabilitation after the Earthquake (2005) in Balakot, Pakistan

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## Contents



## Abstract

*After the earthquake and the loss of life and property, the reconstruction and rehabilitation process was challenging. It was also hotly debated and involved controversies. Large amounts of funds were used to help the victims of the earthquake. Some of these funds were made available immediately. Some funds were promised as pledges to be paid over time and were for the reconstruction, rebuilding, and rehabilitation of the people. On the other hand, the government, just as the area's people, found itself completely untrained and unprepared for a calamity of this size. The turning point in rebuilding and rehabilitation came in 2021 with a new plan from the government. While the project of New Balakot City remained intact, the new plan changed the nature and direction of the project by proposing the city be made a tourist destination. In the long run, the process of rebuilding and reconstruction failed.*

## Keywords:

Reconstruction, Earthquake Rehabilitation, Balakot, Disaster Management, Post-Disaster Urban Planning

## Introduction

According to a report published by the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank together, the human toll from the earthquake (2005) was approximately 73000 people who died, 70,000 were injured, and around 2.8 million people were displaced or left without shelter. They further reported that in addition to the human deaths, the earthquake and its aftermath posed a large cost to Pakistan, which is estimated at approximately US$5.2 billion. This includes the costs for relief, livelihood support for victims, and reconstruction (Pakistan 2005 Earthquake: Preliminary Damage and Needs Assessment, 2005, p. 2). According to a geological report, the level of destruction of the built environment in Balakot was calculated at level X, which means it was complete (Zaré et al., 2009, p. 333).

With the level of destruction caused by the earthquake in Balakot, the task of reconstruction

and rebuilding was huge. For this purpose, the government of Pakistan was unprepared and untrained. There was no specialized department that could deal with the multi-faceted task, which included relocation, reconstruction, redesigning architecture, provision of relief, streamlining of funds, and coordination with different levels of government and community organizations. The people were themselves neither prepared to deal with such a catastrophe nor were they expecting it. Then after the earthquake, they were faced with the choice of moving out or staying back in their ancestral towns and villages.

While the government made the promise of relocating and rehabilitating the people, not enough experience and homework had been done before. Though there were funds or a promise of funds, the much-needed skill, coordination, and expertise were missing. Theoretically speaking, the task of relocation and rehabilitation is faced with multi-faceted challenges, though it has not been totally unsuccessful. There are challenges in finding a safe site, including the availability of funds, the willingness of people to move, timely completion of the project, attention to people's specific socio-cultural and economic needs, and inclusiveness and transparency in carrying out the project. In this article, we discuss all these elements relating to reconstruction, relocation, and rehabilitation at two different sites, the old Balakot and the new proposed Balakot. We would narrate people's experiences, life stories, and suggestions that came up during our ethnographic fieldwork.

## Reconstruction and Rehabilitation

Geological disasters involve relocation and resettlement. They consist of a post-disaster strategy with the aim to move the affected people to safer locations where they are settled temporarily or permanently and when their original lands are no longer feasible for habilitation due to either the disappearance of the site or the existence of high-risk, and it cannot be reduced by alternative means (Chen & Tsai, 2021; Jamshed et al., 2019).

## New Balakot City Project

It is well established now that tectonic/geological hazards, like earthquakes, are amongst the most devastating hazards. They account for the most number of human fatalities caused in built environments (Degg, 2017, p. 94). People die or get injured in earthquakes in mountainous areas because their "built environments have been inadequately located, planned, designed and constructed to resist seismic ground motion" (Degg, 2017, p. 94). While the built environment in other hazards like flooding provides some degree of protection to people, in earthquakes it's the built environment that causes fatalities and injuries (and does not provide any protection against earthquakes) (Degg, 2017, p. 94). The reduction of vulnerability to tectonic hazards is possible through measures adopted in land use, construction technology, declaration of hazard zones, and early warning systems.

In the wake of the 2005 earthquake, the government of Pakistan declared the town of Balakot to be a red zone and inhabitable. Along with the Balakot union, administratively speaking, 3 union councils were declared to be inhabitable and constitute the red-zone area. These union councils, which constituted the red zone, were prohibited from rebuilding and construction. Consequently, the government decided to relocate and rehabilitate the people of the red zone to a new site nearby, a place called, Bakriyal. Bakriyal is a flat tract of land, a meadow, which was considered seismically safe. There the government decided to build a new town of Balakot. The new site is also located in the District of Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, at 34.4129° N, 73.2913° E, and an elevation of 1008 meters. Some scientists point out that the new Balakot town in the Building Codes of Pakistan (BCP-2007) was also marked as a high seismic zone with Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) greater than 0.32g (Hussain et al., 2009). The new Balakot town is located at a distance of 23 km from the Bagh-Balakot fault line, which ruptured during the earthquake. Other scientists point out that the new site of Bakriyal has low vulnerability to flash floods, earthquakes, and landslides (Ali et al., 2013, p. 29).

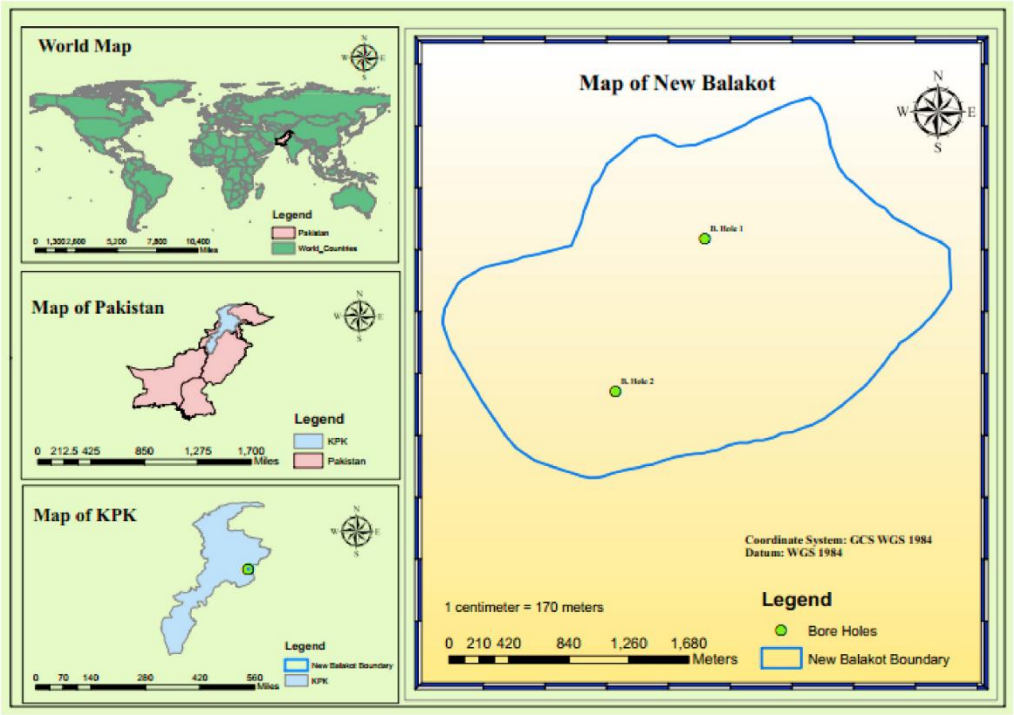
With this idea of relocation and rehabilitation, the government went on to design an urban development strategy with the slogan "Build Back Better." The aim was to rebuild the town of Balakot at a nearby new site away from high mountains and make it seismically safe and economically self-sustaining. It is about 5.7 square kilometers in area

and located about 22 kilometers south of the destroyed old Balakot town. The distance of this new site from the main city of Mansehra is 15 km. A master plan was prepared for mapping and drawing the urban design of the new town. An area of 1425 acres or approximately 11,500 canals was allocated to spread the new town. The allocated area in the master plan was divided into several zones including residential, commercial, public buildings, graveyards, roads, and parks. It is estimated to house 2.5 million people in 25 years (Ali et al., 2013, p. 29). The new town is located at the southwestern edge of the Kunhar valley. There is a link road that connects it with the Karakorum highway as well as with the Hazara University. The new town is located almost at the center of the larger valley and various towns in it. The project began in 2007 and was expected to be completed in a three-year time period. However, due to the so-called land acquisition challenge, it went on to drag.

In order to relocate and rebuild the town at the new site, the government estimated the cost at 225 million USD. The authorities declared the site safe from the earthquake hazard compared to the destroyed old Balakot town. However, to the date of writing this article (March 2025), this new site for rebuilding the town has no signs of construction going on, though, at certain places, land plotting is visible. In interviews with the local people living around the new site in Bakryal, the researchers came to know that for about a decade, no developments have taken place for rebuilding and reconstructing the new town.

**Figure 1**

*Map of the site of New Balakot (Mahmood et al., 2022, p. 3)*




Whether relocation and resettlement result in success depends on a number of aspects. There is a large literature of various case studies giving mixed results about success. Some survey studies of efforts at resettlement in different parts of the world have shown the process challenging, painstaking, and at times, unsuccessful. According to Asghari *et al* resettlement is carried out to minimize risks of hazards in the future to the exposed settlements before and after the disaster. They argue that as disasters due to environmental and climate change have been increasing worldwide, governments and humanitarian actors prioritize taking dignified and effective plans of resettlement to demonstrate their ability to do advanced urban planning. However, the success and effectiveness of the resettlement plans depend on the conduct of phase-wise plans, the culture and customs of affected populations,

social and economic activities, and the associated challenges, costs, and benefits (Asgary et al., 2024, p. 521).

The choice of resettlement is also related to the fact that there has been an increase in disasters worldwide. Resettlement is thought to be the safest way out, especially to minimize casualties. According to the International Disaster Database, the total number of disasters has seen a relative increase globally by 214% since 1970. The data suggests over 26,000 major disasters worldwide since 1900 (Ritchie et al., 2022). Certain studies have further investigated this data to showcase that relative to earthquakes the number of floods has increased. However, the death toll from earthquakes (geological disasters) is higher than those from floods (hydrological disasters) (Correa et al., 2011). Disasters in general, whether natural or manmade, have also caused a significant number of forced temporary evacuations and resettlements as well as permanent internal and international displacement.

It is also worth mentioning that in certain cases the displaced population, after the disaster, can return to their original places. However, not all the time it is possible. Due to the immanent fear of the reoccurrence of the disaster, governments don't allow resettlement in the disaster-stricken sites. These populations get permanently displaced or resettled elsewhere in new settlements. Permanent resettlement of the population after the disaster or in expectation of a future disaster has been seen as a complex phenomenon for policymakers and the people (Badri et al., 2006). According to Asgary et al: "A successful resettlement (when necessary) requires careful planning and design, effective partnership and trust among the stakeholders, sufficient financial and human resources, and political supports. Knowledge of the upcoming challenges and complexities and examining possible solutions can greatly contribute to the success of resettlement initiatives" (Asgary et al., 2024, p. 452).

The challenges of relocation and resettlement from the point of view of disaster management have been studied extensively from different dynamics and approaches. For example, Balachandran *et al.* have compiled more than 500 case studies and presented their classification (Balachandran et al., 2022). These case studies can be divided into either post-disaster management or pre-disaster management. The studies that have focused on post-disaster management have also collected a significant number of case studies of relocation and resettlement from different dimensions of psychological, social, planning, and engineering challenges. These studies give insights into dimensions that lead to either success or failure of the resettlement plans (Correa, 2011; Correa et al., 2011; Jha et al., 2010; Planned Relocation, Disasters, and Climate Change: Consolidating Good Practices and Preparing for the Future, 2014). These and other studies broadly argue that in the post-disaster time period, there is the possibility of improving the chances of success of resettlement and mitigating the risks involved in relocation and resettlement as well as creating further developmental opportunities (Badri et al., 2006; Imura & Shaw, 2009).

Other studies have focused on pre-disaster relocation and resettlement also called pre-emptive relocation. This type aims at reducing the risks of disasters whether natural or manmade. They include disasters resulting from environmental and climate change (Petz, 2015). They include disasters resulting from developmental projects such as dams and industrial facilities (Cernea, 1988). Different studies have also demonstrated that a majority of the relocation and resettlement projects of the population are involuntary, and therefore, they are even more complicated than those of the post-disaster ones. These studies also critique the process of relocation and resettlement both before and after disasters because they suggest that the process involves making populations more vulnerable and marginalized. The people are deprived of their identity, geographic, social, and political (Jenkins, 2024; Simms et al., 2021).

Anthony Oliver-Smith has done case studies of certain post-disaster resettlements in different countries. The governments in these countries chose to resettle the populations. The decisions were hard, but their success depended on attending to certain factors. Oliver-Smith argues that failure is not a natural result of every resettlement plan. It rather depended on the site chosen for resettlement, its layout, the urban plan for housing, and popular input/support for the project. He gives the example of Iran and Peru where the plans for resettlement did not succeed because these

governments did not take care of these factors. On the other hand, the government of Turkey was successful in resettlement because it paid close attention to these factors. Similarly, he shows that voluntary, spontaneous resettlement in Guatemala became successful because of popular participation despite insufficient design and material input (Oliver-Smith, 1991).

Relocation and resettlement have recently gained interest as a disaster risk reduction strategy, especially when other options for reducing the risk are neither feasible nor effective (Correa et al., 2011). In the long-term disaster management, planned and preventive resettlement of populations at risk is increasingly gaining attention in academia and planners. Although more extensive work needs to be done to establish preventive and planned resettlement as a strong and viable strategy, it is so far a practical solution and it works well by evaluating potential losses to public and private infrastructure, livelihood, emotional and cultural affiliations with the land (Chen & Tsai, 2021).

Overall, relocating and resettling permanently is not an easy process. It can lead to physical and cultural crises (Oliver-Smith, 1991). Some scholars think that the process of relocation and resettlement permanently might lead to social fragmentation, loss of privacy of individuals or communities, political marginalization, and unemployment (Birkmann et al., 2013; Jamshed et al., 2019). Often the new sites are not of similar size to the ones they earlier lived and there is also a possibility of a lack of quality of life in the new place (Asgary et al., 2024, p. 524).

## New Balakot City: An Ethnography of Failure

Our ethnographic research interviewees revealed that there was some interest in the initial years of the making of the new Balakot city. For this purpose, the land was also acquired from the local people who had been encroaching on it. The land was also divided through plotting, though the number of plots was too less in number compared to the number of families estimated to be relocated. However, a few years after the earthquake when the government slowed down on the development of the city and the construction work halted, then the people began to rebuild their houses in the same places in the old Balakot town.

In our interviews, we were informed that those who lived in the red zone of Balakot and Garlat, which were destroyed and no rebuilding was allowed there, the people were given compensation amounts for their loss. They were also provided with tents and makeshift container houses. However, in those villages in the mountains around this red zone, the people were given compensation for their loss as well as provided with new architectural maps for rebuilding their houses. These maps of houses and other buildings were drawn with the view to resist earthquakes and also to minimize loss of life.

## ERRA's Structural and Capacity Shortcomings

The immediate policy response of the federal government under President Pervaiz Musharraf was the creation of the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority. An administrative structure of the Authority was provided on a typical model followed in the country. It was headed by a military high-ranking official, and a number of higher offices were also given to military officers. However, civilian bureaucracy and members of civil society were also introduced in it, though on lower ranks. However, the administrative setup did not include experts in disaster management or people with specialized training for the same purpose.

The central office of ERRA was made in the capital city of Islamabad. Its field offices were created in KP and Kashmir. Because the Authority was created in an emergency, there couldn't be a plan to study the need for a number of offices, administrative staff, technical staff, and transport facilities. The result was the making of an elaborate structure whose administrative, coordinating, and logistical costs became a burden. When the progress of the Authority was questioned in the Supreme Court, there came an explanation for costs spent on the administrative staff. The representative of the Authority confirmed to the court that an enormous portion of funds was being drawn. He said that Rs 5.3 billion was spent on the ERRA administration, with more than 1,100 employees ("Earthquake 2005," 2018). Kamran Shariff, a human affairs official at the UN Office for

the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), who oversaw the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation says: "ERRA's approach is considered too process-oriented, too time-consuming, too much bureaucracy. That's the biggest hurdle in replicating ERRA's model" ("PAKISTAN," 2010).

The ERRA was assigned with functions that were technical in nature. These functions included carrying out surveys to assess damages and needs, making planned settlements and housing, environmental rebuilding and interventions to restore the ecosystems, preparation of a resettlement plan, identification and preparation of projects for these purposes, prescribing cost-effective technology for reconstruction, architectural designs, and building codes, reviewing and maintaining building standards, and reconstruction of industrial facilities. These functions were of a technical nature requiring the understanding and training of disaster management, scientific knowledge of seismology, and urban planning. ERRA's core members and staff were based in military and civil bureaucracy, along with contractual technocrats, and less on specialized and dedicated technical staff.

The structural and technical capacity of the Authority was wanting. A UN officer from humanitarian affairs at the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Kamran Shariff, remarked that ERRA started with "zero capacity." However, it could do the role of harmonizing the various stakeholders involved in disaster management ("PAKISTAN," 2010). Maggie Stephenson, a technical adviser at the UN, involved in overseeing the process of disaster management said: "There wasn't enough information in the field. There wasn't enough capacity in the field and people were starting to build quickly before advice" ("PAKISTAN," 2010). She also pointed out that the model developed for rural rebuilding in mountain communities took years and was not without mistakes ("PAKISTAN," 2010). In this regard, Kamran Shariff says: "In rural housing, they have gone through lots and lots of trial and error. The initial houses that were made were based on inputs from consultants who had no idea of local needs. So they wasted a lot of time - and I'm sure money and effort - in coming up with a design that was cost-effective and earthquake-resistant as well. And they ended up re-inventing the wheel and coming up with a design very close to the traditional house designs of that area" ("PAKISTAN," 2010). In my own interviews with the local mountain communities, I was informed that the ERRA did not take care of victims' extended families' needs in the house architecture. It also couldn't give them a better architecture to safeguard us from extreme weather. Moreover, we couldn't plan well enough to give them installments on time or in such a sequence that we could finish rebuilding our houses.

The role and function of ERRA became complicated with the creation of more secondary authorities. In Azad Jammu and Kashmir, an authority was created by the name of State Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (SERRA). In the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, an authority was created at the provincial level with the name of Provincial Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (PERRA). In the rest of the country, another authority was created by the name of National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). With the passage of time, friction began to develop among these authorities and it slowed down the process of coordination among them distribution of resources, and performance of tasks. After the 18$^{th}$ Amendment, jurisdictional issues began to surface, and the struggle over funds and recourses increased.

## Ambitious Plan

The proposed New Balakot City was an ambitious plan. The kind of housing it projected for the victims of the earthquake was new to the people. In our interviews, we came to know that people were given the imagery of Islamabad's urban plan for the new Balakot. The people recalled that President Musharraf promised in his meetings with the victims that the new housing scheme for them would be even more advanced than Islamabad. This might be a political statement on the part of the President, also partly to mitigate their misery, but the people took him for his words. They still believed after 15 years that if Musharraf had remained in power for a few years after the earthquake he might have completed the project.

The New Balakot City was projected to have a modern urban plan. A master plan was prepared for it, which used state-of-the-art urban technology in

it. An area of 1425 acres or approximately 11,500 canals was allocated to spread the new town. The allocated area in the master plan was divided into several zones including residential, commercial, public buildings, graveyards, roads, and parks. Initially, it was projected to provide housing for 5000 families of earthquake victims. As mentioned above it is estimated to house 2.5 million people in 25 years. The city was to provide all facilities of modern housing. It was also to be equipped with all utilities.

The process of developing the city halted after a year. For more than a decade not much development took place on it. Later, a meeting on the project took place on June 10, 2021, under the KP Chief Minister Mahmoud Khan. It turned out that the land required for setting up New Balakot City was acquired and payment to 90 percent of landowners. An official statement said that the estimated cost of the project had increased to about Rs15 billion. According to the proposed master plan, New Balakot was being established over an area of 8440 kanals of land. There were 6753 residential plots that were to be developed. A total of 4273 were reserved for the victims of the earthquake. While 700 were reserved for the residents of Bakriyal. This was a new addition and it was not there in the original plan. These so-called residents were actually the illegal occupants or owners of some parts of the land that were to be included in the New Balakot City. All the plots were to be handed over to the victims free of cost. Apart from these plots, the master plan envisioned 575 commercial plots, which were to be sold to raise money ("DAWN," 2021).

## Federal versus Provincial Government

With the creation of several institutions on federal and provincial levels to take care of the role of assisting the people suffering from the disaster of the earthquake, there arose the problem of coordination, the distribution of functions, roles, and authority, and the utilization of funds. A particular issue that marred the developmental activities of the New Balakot City was the acquisition of land and utilization of funds. While the land belonged to the province of KP, its forest department, and parts to local landowners whose land registration and revenue records were with the KP province, the foreign donor funds were in the treasury of the federal government. ERRA working under the federal government held on to funds. It was initially planned that ERRA would be responsible for the macro planning, strategy making, financing, monitoring, and evaluation of the development of the city. However, the land was to be acquired and furnished by the provincial government, as well as the practical implementation of the development project was also to be carried out by it. Therefore, the problem of slow coordination, mistrust, and low efficiency developed between the two governments. According to the Director of the New Balakot Development Authority, Col (rtd) Abrar Ismail, "The (New Balakot City) project was scheduled to be completed by 2010, but lack of cooperation on the part of the provincial government in failing to get the ERRA possession of land from illegal occupants and paucity of funds has delayed it for five years," (Sadaqat, 2015).

## Change of Political Power/Governments

Related to the problem of lack of coordination and mistrust that developed between the federal and provincial governments, there also arose the problem of change of political governments in the center and provinces. The project was the brainchild of General (ret) President Pervaiz Musharraf. But by 2008, he had to step down and leave the political government to new civilian parties. The next election was won by the Peoples Party in the center and a mix of parties in the KP, though ANP was able to make a coalition government. With the new governments in power who also immediately (2009) faced flood disasters in the country, they couldn't give enough attention to the New Balakot City project. After their tenure in 2013, there came two different parties in the center and the province of KP, Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz Sharif, and Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf respectively. These parties did not get along well and therefore the problem of the coordinator only further aggravated them. In 2018, when the same party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, came into power in both the center and the province, it chalked out a new strategy for the building of the new city. Its vision was to promote tourism and hydro-power generation more than facilitating the victims of the earthquake.

## Diversion of Funds

By 2010, the fears that the government was diverting the funds became evident when a British newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, broke the story. The report published by the newspaper said that the Zardari government was involved in diverting the funds. The British government had given 300 million pounds to the Pakistani government for the victims of the earthquake, but about 90 million were feared to have been diverted by March 2009. The next year the government further stopped the funds from ERRA from 43 billion to just 10 billion. This caused the fear that the funds have been again diverted to other projects ("The Express Tribune for 2010 Pakistan Quake Spent Elsewhere," 2010).

## Sponsors' Withdrawal

As the developmental work, including the relocation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation, slowed down within a couple of years of the earthquake, and finally came to a complete halt, many donors became skeptical of the project and put off their donation plans. Saudi Arabia later withdrew its support for providing funds for the making of the New Balakot City for rehabilitation of the victims. This led to a censure remark by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for the bureaucracy involved in the process.

## Local Politics and People's Divided Response

In my fieldwork, a number of reasons came up that local people furnish that led directly or indirectly to the incomplete status or failure of the project. Among these reasons, one highly referred to aspect related to the lack of engagement and involvement of the locals in the project from the very beginning. A number of respondents had the opinion that the project was designed on a very high level of government and private companies without involving the local people, victims of the earthquake, or their representatives. That is why the project was imagined, designed, and projected from the point of view of the elite, civil and military bureaucracy, and contractors. Because it did not involve feedback from the local people, their needs and demands were not reflected in the master plan. The people were told, said a number of respondents that they would eventually get fully furnished houses similar to ones in Islamabad. Some said we became so curious to know what these houses would look like and therefore we'd call our relatives in Islamabad and Karachi to know what urban houses look like. My respondents say that when the master plan began to receive attention in newspapers, people became enthralled by it and couldn't wait to see it come to life. However, soon they could also see that they lived a rural social life, and these houses didn't suit their needs. For example, some say that we keep cattle in our houses or need a stable for storing agrarian produce, but in modern houses, these needs are not seen. Some people also gave the reason for big versus small houses. The rural houses they had were quite big in size, with front yards and back yards. The new houses didn't have these or open land for agricultural or social purposes.

Second, the society had different socio-economic classes most notably those with land and those without land. The propertied class could see that though their houses were damaged or destroyed, their land fields were intact. Their economic life was tied to their land fields. Some had their shops, halls, or other business centers, which though affected by the earthquake could be rebuilt. These propertied people in the society showed less interest in moving to the new city. They could see that their socio-economic status and their earning could not be made in the same way as in the old place where many generations' efforts had played a role in making them well-off.

On the other hand, the people who didn't own any land or business in the old Balakot town were interested in moving to the New Balakot city. These people included those who did daily wage labor, whose businesses were not successful, and who had no land fields. There are people who live in rented houses. I interviewed a widow who lived in a small makeshift house in Garland. Her house had come into the landslide area after the earthquake and became a dangerous place to live. She complained that she had been waiting to move to the new city, but by then she had become completely frustrated. She said she had lost family members in the earthquake and her house was also endangered. She hadn't had a source of living and lived on charities and dishwashing for neighbors. From her interview, I could then identify other helpless people who really deserved long-term assistance after the earthquake because their lives had been

destroyed in such a way that it had become difficult for them to stand up again on their own. The people who had been rendered poor and helpless due to the earthquake, because their sole breadwinners died, or their long investments were destroyed, did wanted to move to the new city and believed that they could restart their lives.

These landless victims of the earthquake also requested the government to give them plots of land, if furnishing houses was not feasible then. This demand, along with others, has often been raised on the anniversary of the victims of the earthquake on October 8 every year. Some of these desperate people have been those who never owned a house but lived in rented houses. When their rented houses collapsed there emerged another sort of tension between them and the landlords over who should claim a house in the new scheme. While they were paid money for the physical loss of their beloveds or in case of injury the question of whether they could be given a house was a complex one and the government hadn't thought about it. The government had not paid attention to their demand for houses or land plots. The grassroots-level demands and suggestions didn't reach the higher level on which urban planning and policy-making were designed.

When asked why their demands and suggestions were not heeded by the government, some respondents blamed their political leaders and bureaucracy. Sardar Yousaf, a member of the Parliament, for instance, is said to not playing the role he should be playing for them. He is rather said to play politics between the people of old Balakot and Bakriyal (the new site of Balakot). When he comes to old Balakot, he tells the victims that he will get their rightful demands accepted and they will soon get their new houses. When he goes back to Bakriyal there he tells people that nothing less than a fair price for the acquisition of their land by the government would be acceptable. My respondents suspected his politics and said he does that for his own benefit of getting votes from both sides. They also had to say that because he comes from the Gujjar ethnic group and the people in Bakriyal are mostly Gujjar therefore he couldn't let them down and lose their votes. He instead pursues a politics of ethnicity for elections.

Another reason mentioned by some respondents was the love of their ancestral lands. They would mention that we have memories attached to these houses, land fields, and community places. Some said that they have graveyards here where their forefathers are buried and they cannot think of leaving them behind here. They said they go to the graveyard every Thursday and whenever there are anniversaries. Some also said that these graveyards are made on the land fields that their families have donated and others could erase them. Some even said that they wanted to be buried here with their forefathers as their last wish. They don't want to be separated from them.

There also circulated fear among the people that the government might have plans for their ancestral lands. They said that they have not been told what will be the status of their lands, villages, or towns that will be taken over by the government. They had made a living in these parts of the valley because these were fertile lands alongside the river with an abundance of fresh water for agrarian life. They said the government wanted to take their lands for free and that these might be handed over to new businesses with the passage of time. Therefore, they demanded that its status should also be cleared in writing and agreements of ownership be made with them.

It is also interesting to mention here that the victims of the earthquake who lived in the area that was later declared the red zone didn't get the money to rebuild their houses. While those living in the mountains and around the red zone got initial funding to rebuild their houses and also got urban seismically safe maps for rebuilding the people in the red zone were not allowed to rebuild their houses. They were told that they'd be shifted to the new site of Bakriyal where they'd get fully furnished houses. They kept on waiting and in the end, they neither got the initial funds for rebuilding their houses on the old site nor did they get a new house on the new site.

## Judicial Intervention: Supreme Court's Suo Moto and the Prolonged Suit

In April 2018, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Saqib Nisar visited the earthquake site and met with the people in tents. Chief Justice Nisar responded to their request and also took a suo

moto notice of the project. On June 26th, 2018, the Supreme Court of Pakistan constituted a commission to probe into constructing the New Balakot City. The court assigned this task to the commission to see how much funding was generated, how it was utilized, and how successful the rehabilitation process has been. In January 2022, social activist Sheraz Mahmood Qureshi filed a suit for contempt of court in the Supreme Court through his attorney Munir Hussain Lughmani. Qureshi went to the court with a plea to issue contempt against the concerned departments. ("The News International t," 2022).

Next year, on February 9, 2023, the Supreme Court once again asked the government to submit a detailed report on the rehabilitation of earthquake victims in New Balakot City ("Dawn," 2023). A year later, on February 26, 2024, the affected people by the earthquake, especially those from the red zone, organized a large protest. At the beginning of 2025, on January 22, the Supreme Court once again ordered the Federal and Provincial governments to submit their reports. The court also instructed the Auditor General of Pakistan to submit a report of the audit. ("Associated Press of Pakistan," 2025).

## PTI's Provincial Government's New Plan

In 2021, the government gave a new direction to the project of building a new city of Balakot. A meeting of the Planning and Development Department of the KP government was chaired by the then Prime Minister Imran Khan (thus involving both the federal and provincial governments) to develop the city "as a tourist destination." The department released a news feed saying: "The government is building new tourist destinations in the mountains to boost tourism in the country. To achieve this end, prominent private investors in the tourism and hospitality sectors are being attracted to the public-private partnership mode." The Prime Minister is said to have directed "the KP government to complete the project from IRA as a tourist destination." In this meeting, the Prime Minister was informed that NESPAK and KPMG had prepared a feasibility report to build the New Balakot City as a tourist hub in Design-Build-Finance-Operate and Transfer (DBFOT) mode. The report projected the cost at Rs. 19.5 billion. The news also said that the provincial government of KP would be responsible for building this new city or housing scheme for which it had already acquired land. It also said that 63% of the total 6753 residential plots would be allotted to local victims, while the remaining 2480 residential and 575 commercial plots and 800 apartments would be auctioned to raise funds for the implementation of the project. The project would include a youth hostel, a theme park, a camping ground, and a three-star hotel. The government projected that it would result in reducing pressure on existing tourist destinations, and generate revenue of more than PKR 7 billion (*Meeting to Establish New Balakot City to Promote Tourism*, 2021).

## Reconstruction and Rehabilitation in Old Balakot:

### From Tents to Camp (Neeli Bastian)

Just after the earthquake, Balakot was filled with tents. The area that was later to be declared a red zone was packed with tents. Apart from houses, shops and government buildings had also collapsed; therefore the businesses and public affairs were being run in tents. Balakot became a town of tents for almost a year. Because the earthquake occurred in October, the winter was setting in. Thus the winter of 2005-2006 had to be spent in tents by thousands of people. Tents were good for providing immediate shelter to people, especially to people who cared for the Islamic code of observing purdah, but they were not good enough to protect them from cold weather, rain, and winds.

The tents were not designed for the weather of the mountain areas of Balakot and Kashmir. They were also not strong enough to withstand wind gushes and rain and hail storms, especially for those living up in the mountains. In the winter, there came complaints about their ineffectivity to snow. As snow began to pile up on the tents they became not only soggy and wet but also very cold. So when wind would pass through them it would feel freezing. Another issue was that when tents were torn in due to weather or other reasons, there spread piles of canvas which could be seen everywhere. People also hadn't had training on how to set up a tent. So for many their tents would fill up with water from rain. Keeping rainwater out from tents needed proper drainage to be built around the tents. At times tents would collapse because they would not find firm ground to fix

poles. In some places, the ground was too loose or rocky. Out of frustration, some people began to make caves inside the mountains and used tent canvas to only gate their caves.

Gradually, the government started to provide the people with shelters with metallic rooftops and containers with metal bodies. These new shelters had blue color rooftops and they gave a new look to the town. It was a look of disaster-stricken area and looked conspicuously different from the old town. In the local language, people usually call it *Neeli Bastian* (blue villages). The old town became a large camp with shelters having thousands of people living there. After ten years, a large number of victims in the red zone and other parts lived in containers and prefabricated houses. These houses are sized about 20x20 feet with two bedrooms. They were told to be good for only three years. They couldn't accommodate large families, who were living there despite immense hardship.

## Reconstruction in the Old Town

From the ethnographic fieldwork, we could observe that the process of reconstruction and rehabilitation was neither slow nor delayed. First came the clearing of the rubble and debris, which people did themselves without waiting for government machinery to come and help them. The roads were already blocked at several places and people couldn't see how government could provide machinery to the entire population. In our interviews, we heard people boasting about their selflessness and self-help nature. However, they accepted that many volunteers from local social and religious fraternities came along to help them. Some even said that their houses were sacred to them and they wanted to do everything themselves. There was also fear of stealing. Most of my respondents said that they did not wait for the government to come and help them start the work. They rather started themselves, even through harsh winters.

Once they cleared the debris, they began to put up their houses. There was social and family pressure to rebuild their houses. There was a requirement for purdah to be observed. Many Muslim families, especially those of the Swatis, observed high standards of purdah for their women. The families that were well off in the town started to remake their houses or parts of them immediately for family protection. Those people who didn't believe in the rhetoric of the government also didn't wait and started rebuilding their houses. The difference in the remaking was that the people focused on making concrete houses. The old houses were thought to be weak and dangerous.

As the people restarted making their houses, there came pressure on the government and ERRA to provide them with new maps and funds. While the well-off would not care for these, most of the other people needed some help to come from the government. And as the government had shown to distribute the aid that was coming from all parts of the country and abroad the people desperately waited for it. We came to know in my interviews that as rebuilding started, there came in lots of masons from other parts of the region and country as they could see work and job opportunities. Then as the roads cleared up there also came in lots of construction materials. Though the rates of masonry and materials were high, the reconstruction process kept on increasing. ERRA began to give new maps and funds in installments. Most people did not like the new maps, as they were not designed to satisfy local needs. New maps were later given to accommodate these needs and the reconstruction and rehabilitation process went on.

The bazaar slowly came to life in the main town of old Balakot. The new construction of shops is of mixed type. It has concrete walls but tin roof top. However, new plazas, and hotels have also been rebuilt with the use of heavy concrete and steel. The government also rebuilt a number of its buildings. For example, the PTDC hotel was rebuilt within a couple of years with concrete materials, but this time on the other side of the road and away from the river.

## Reconstruction in the Mountain Villages

The process of reconstruction and rehabilitation also started immediately after the earthquake. The people didn't wait for the government to send help. They also expected this helplessness because they were living far-flung and they knew that if any help would come it would come to the main town of Balakot first. Secondly, the people living in the

mountains have lived a culture of community helping and they helped each other in rebuilding. However, they were provided with money for the physical loss of their loved ones and for rebuilding their houses on new architectural maps.

The reconstruction began in the mountain areas under SRSDP project. Under the project, the guidelines and instructions were formulated, and the residents of the mountains were made sure to follow the guidelines in the reconstruction of houses. The project aimed at safe and earthquake-resistant rebuilding.

From our field observation and interviews, it came up that most of the reconstructions were once again designed on local house architectural understanding. Though people had made small new plots and 4-foot walls on them to show their effort in making new types of houses, they had mostly done this to get funds. In some villages, the people got the full amount that was promised and in others, they had gotten the first installment, and the later one either got delayed or not paid at all. There was also the problem of demanding more houses than there already were. But the people would say that they did that because the cost of making a house up on maintenance was higher than what the government was paying. The government was making equal payments regardless of the different hardships in different areas.

The newly built environment is much more vulnerable than the previous one. In the mountains, although the SRSP made remunerations to the affectees, conditional on adaptations in the given maps. The people followed it to the extent that they only built one room on the given instructions, only to secure the funds in installments. Once they got funds from the government they built their homes with concrete cement, sand, and gravel known as pukka ghar. Surprisingly, now there are more double-storey houses in the mountains as compared to the pre-earthquake time period. Double-story buildings were quite rare in the mountains, but now they are being made. Now almost all houses are pukka construction in the mountains. When asked why people go for pukka houses in the mountains, one participant replied, "In order to make these houses strong against earthquakes, we now do a strong DPC that was not before the earthquake." He also said that the ERRA map and guidelines were not compatible with our needs. However, there is no evidence that DPC makes construction strong and resistant to earthquakes. We observed being a researcher and a resident of the mountains people now prefer to have pukka ghar as against mud and timber houses due to status consciousness, less maintenance, and aesthetics. *Kachi* construction can only be seen in *Mali* areas in higher mountains. These areas are mostly pastoral lands, farms, and meadows. However, in the Balakot surrounding mountains, concrete and cement have covered the pastoral lands, meadows, and farms.

## Conclusion

After the earthquake and the loss of life and property, the reconstruction and rehabilitation process was challenging. It was also hotly debated and involved controversies. Large amounts of funds were used to help the victims of the earthquake. Some of these funds were made available immediately. Some funds were promised as pledges to be paid over time and were for the reconstruction, rebuilding, and rehabilitation of the people. On the other hand, the government, just as the area's people, found itself completely untrained and unprepared for a calamity of this size.

Some of the big challenges for reconstruction and rehabilitation included relocation of the most affected population to another site, provision of immediate shelters, designing and furnishing new earthquake-resistant architecture, and channelizing of the funds. Because it was a new exercise for the government, the process got bogged down in several hurdles. The government wished to make a new housing scheme for the most affected and poor people, but the project could not materialize in the long run. The federal and provincial governments began to develop issues on their roles and utilization of funds. Then the people themselves were divided in their opinion on whether they should be moved to a new place. While the well-off and landlords did not want to move out, the poor and landless wanted to go. The local politicians also cashed on these divisions and differences, rather to get the best deal for their people from the federal and provincial governments.

The turning point in the process of rebuilding and rehabilitation came in 2021 with yet a new plan from PTI's government. While the project of New Balakot City remained intact in the new plan the

government changed the nature and direction of the project by making it a tourist destination. The government declared that the new city would now be developed on public-private partnership, hinting toward the fact that much of the donors' money had been spent and there was then a lack of funds and therefore to involve the private sector. The new city would be a tourist destination, rather than primarily a victims' housing scheme. Thus the number of plots and houses for victims was further reduced, a large number of houses were allocated to local residents of Bakriyal to appease them for their opposition to the project, and a sizeable number of plots and houses would be given in open sale to anyone with money, a big number of commercial plots were made available for open sale, and the plan to include parks and hotels for attracting tourists were included. With the new plan envisioned by the PTI's government in the federal and province of KP, the new plan was implemented without any opposition.

However, our latest field interviews at the beginning of 2025 brought more information to light. The local politicians and social activists say that the current government of PML(N) intends to make the new site of the proposed New Balakot city for making it a dry port for CPEC. They say that, at present, it is being guarded by the armed forces. They say that the old plan of PTI's government is not liked by its rival party PML(N) and the armed forces and the current provincial government of PTI in KP seem weak enough to fight against the center, therefore, there is a good deal of chances that it will be turned into a dry port. They fear that in that case, it will neither be a housing for the victims of the earthquake nor a tourist city. But they also think that there can be an opportunity in disguise for the victims of the earthquake if they are given housing here then they could provide human resources and labor for the dry port. It seems that in any case, the housing project for the victims of the earthquake seems to be an appendage of the capitalist projects.

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