

# SICHUAN QUAKE RELIEF 四川地震救援

## SQR's Summary of Interview Research Two Years After the 12 May 2008 Sichuan Earthquake

Work to rebuild the counties destroyed by the Sichuan earthquake is well under way, but a huge amount still needs to be done, and the grim reality for tens of thousands of the victims is that they will still be living in temporary shelters beyond the third anniversary.

Hundreds of interviews conducted recently by Sichuan Quake Relief across a wide range of affected areas with victims of the quake indicate that, while there is a high level of satisfaction with the reaction of the central authorities since the earthquake, at a local level many fundamental problems persist.

A prevalent theme of the SQR findings was the somewhat inconsistent nature of the recovery efforts. Some villages were just about complete, looking extremely well organised, with housing, retail and commercial complexes taking shape and a lot of new infrastructure in place. In these, the locals and officials could rightly say, "mission just about accomplished." But then it could happen that the next village down the road would look in comparative disarray, with rubble-strewn streets, infrastructure projects in the early stages, temporary dwellings and roads in poor condition and not protected from landslide threats, and permanent housing still a distant dream for most.

Various factors may account for these differences, among them local governance issues, geological factors, local economic conditions, the relative successes or weaknesses of the 'twinning system' etc., but for those who live there, for now, it's "mission far from accomplished".

Housing is still the key issue that is causing great concern all across the region. The rebuilding work of this vast reconstruction plan that involves more than 1,200 townships and in excess of 20 million people is now officially scheduled to be completed ahead of time on September 10, 2010, but many see this four-month time span as an unrealistic target given that in some towns construction has not begun, and in other cases the land for projects has not yet been officially assigned.

Work on the reconstruction of the 1.4 million rural homes in the area is often slow, and in many cases stagnated, as villagers cannot afford to make up the difference of the average 20,000 RMB subsidy they received with the 70,000 RMB it costs to build an average small home. Many families are consequently still living in homes that are unsafe and marked for demolition, or in unfinished housing open to the elements.

Adding to tensions is the convoluted and somewhat opaque subsidy system which can vary greatly depending on *hukou* status and other factors open to official interpretation. Towns and villages are rife with stories of favoured individuals getting more than they should have, and of others not getting what they deserved.



*Rainwater washes down this steep, unreinforced slope and collects at the base of unfinished housing in this village in northern Sichuan, permeating the concrete foundations and the floors inside. (May 2010)*



*New housing stands unfinished, in front of temporary accommodation. (May 2010)*



*Temporary accommodation, still occupied. (May 2010)*

Another related issue that is causing much concern is the matter of farmers being asked to give up their land and move into urban communities to make way for infrastructure development projects. Aside from the post-quake recovery effort in Sichuan, this is part of a wider national urban-rural integration involving the rationalisation of land use by concentrating rural residents and industries in designated settlements. In 2009, according to the Ministry of Land and Resources, nationwide land sale revenues reached 1.59 trillion RMB (US\$233 billion), up 63.4 per cent on the previous year. With such profits at stake, many farmers feel that local officials and developers are using the earthquake reconstruction efforts as a pretext to increase their holdings. Amid somewhat frantic and chaotic rebuilding and re-zoning, some allege they were asked to patriotically give up their land for community infrastructure projects, only to then witness it being sold to private business for a handsome profit.

These allegations of unfair compensation payments and land re-zoning projects pop up time and again throughout the region, causing a lot of anxiety exacerbated by what locals say is scarce opportunity to challenge decisions they find unfair. In interviews many said that their calls for meetings at a village or township level to discuss their concerns often went unanswered, and they are reluctant to bring their grievances to a regional or central level.

Regardless of whether the official decisions were fair or not, the fact there is little room for a challenge often leaves the individuals concerned feeling short-changed, and with little access to official sources of information, the community vacuums are often filled with rumour and speculation.

Good work has been done on the anti-corruption front from a central level, many said. Following a five-month audit, the National Audit Office said early this year that 230 million yuan of reconstruction funds had been misused, and Sichuan provincial sources reported that 350 officials were found violating laws or Party discipline during earthquake-relief or reconstruction in 2009. These are small percentages in the overall scheme of the mass recovery effort, and the fact they were publicly investigated last year and reported is laudable, but with community suspicions running deep it is important this work continues to be carried out under a spotlight and right down to the most local level.

Education and healthcare standards were, most interviewees said, generally now back up to pre-quake standards. Some reported that poor economic circumstances had meant that a small minority of families could not afford required healthcare or education for their children, and in some circumstances grassroot organisations and non-governmental organisations were helping to fill this gap.

In many areas water supplies are under strain. Sources have sometimes been altered by geological shifts, or by new layouts of villages concentrating too many people on too few sources. Often people walk long distances to fetch fresh water.

The quality of the water, and the air, is also of major concern. The huge level of construction and cement production in the area has inevitably led to a significant deterioration in air and water quality. In addition, there were many concerns raised that with the focus fixed on construction, factories and officials are turning a blind eye to fundamental environmental safety issues. Many people expressed extreme concern for the health of their children as a result of environmental degradation. None of



*This woman lost her only child in the earthquake. Now pregnant again, she stands in front of the temporary accommodation where she still lives. (May 2010)*

those interviewed had heard of any recent environmental impact assessments carried out in their communities. No doubt this type of work is being carried out, but again it seems information of this kind is not trickling down to the local communities.

To appease these and the other primary concerns mentioned here there were many calls at a grassroots level for a more obvious and accessible central government supervisory presence in the affected areas. And the government efforts at all levels should continue to be bolstered by the civil society initiatives, which were widely praised. Multiple grassroots organisations, as well as domestic and international non-governmental organisations, have been playing a solid role in the wider area of community recovery and development in the two years since the quake.

Similarly, media outlets, both domestic and international, have been granted wide access to the affected areas and have proved invaluable in increasing the wider level of understanding of the regional issues. Their work should be applauded and encouraged, particularly now, two years after the event, when the focus might be inclined to shift elsewhere.

In Sichuan, much great work has been done over the past 24 months, and many people have been able to rebuild their lives in a comparatively short space of time. But the fact remains that with such a huge number of people affected, even if a small percentage fall through the support net, that number could amount to tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of victims. Those that have the potential to fall through the net need to know they will not be forgotten two, three or more years after the disaster. They need all our support.

Sichuan Quake Relief  
7 May, 2010

*All photographs featured were taken by Sichuan Quake Relief within the last two weeks.*

### **Sichuan Quake Relief**

Sichuan Quake Relief (SQR) is a non-profit, humanitarian organisation dedicated to improving the lives of those affected by the 12 May 2008 Sichuan earthquake. On the morning of 13 May 2008, the day after the earthquake, SQR started coordinating emergency relief aid. Two years later, development projects are still on-going. SQR is committed to providing long-term support for those affected by the quake.

Sichuan Quake Relief operates under the auspices of Sichuan Development Foundation Limited, which is a nonprofit organisation registered in Hong Kong, granted tax-exemption under Section 88 of the Inland Revenue Ordinance (IR File No. 91/10304). The Mainland operation is a registered Representative's Office of the Hong Kong entity.

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