

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL SECTORS: ACCOMMODATION, FOOD VOUCHERS AND EDUCATION

5.1 Accommodation

5.1 The relocation of nine-tenths of Montserrat's pre-eruption population, and three-quarters of those still on the island, created severe socio-economic problems: most obviously the need to accommodate and provide social assistance for those who had lost their homes, their livelihoods, their savings, and were struggling to survive and sustain a community and a way of life. Accommodation is generally recognised as the central social issue, because of the unacceptability of people continuing to live in temporary public shelters.

5.2 Three issues are highlighted in the International Development Committee's first report and have been the subject of much concern. First, the conditions and length of time that people have had to endure living in public shelters have been regarded as unacceptable in terms of British and industrial country standards of social well-being. Second, the provision of public housing is considered to have moved too slowly and to have been inappropriate to the needs of the people being re-housed. Third, there is the alleged inadequacy and slowness of actions to facilitate and support 'self-building' or private housing development in the safer northern zone.

5.3 The evaluation's investigations broadly confirm the findings and conclusions of the Select Committee for the period up to September 1997. It explores two further aspects that have current and future policy relevance. First, there is the problem of providing appropriate, immediate, temporary shelter during a natural disaster. Second, this chapter and, from a civil engineering perspective, Chapter 6, examine the performance of the direct-build housing programme and measures to support private housing initiatives, since these were jointly confirmed as priorities in September 1997. There is a fuller assessment of these accommodation issues in Annex 5, Sections 2-4.

5.2 Public shelter for displaced people

5.4 The first large evacuation of Plymouth involved emergency shelters in public buildings – schools and churches – and encouraging people to make private arrangements. However, because of the numbers involved, tents were also provided in a temporary encampment at Gerald's Park. Tents are not particularly appropriate for civilian evacuees in humid tropical environments but the scale and speed of the evacuation and GoM's refusal to consider off-island accommodation seem to have precluded any alternative in August 1995. Most of the tents were flown in from US second-hand stockpiles in the Cayman Islands and proved to be unsatisfactory, suggesting that attempts to cut costs prevailed over a need to ensure adequate standards. Sanitation was provided by pit latrines. At that initial stage, there

was little appreciation that longer-term relocation might be necessary, and that this would require different, higher standard temporary shelter including the provision of sanitation, public utilities and access.

5.5 After the first temporary evacuation of Plymouth, the need to provide more substantial shelter was accepted. Progress however, was slow, partly because of differences of opinion on appropriate temporary shelters, and little was achieved before the second evacuation of Plymouth in December 1995.

5.6 At the time of the second Plymouth evacuation, the Public Works Department (PWD) proposed demountable timber 'chalets' accommodating about 20 people, which could be built by the MDF using readily available materials at a unit cost of under £7,000 and within 5 days. Initially these were rejected by the Chief Minister as 'not good enough for Montserratians'. In fact they were the most cost-effective and flexible temporary shelter solution on the basis of costing comparisons. Later this type of building was used extensively as barracks, classrooms and, with modifications, dormitory accommodation. A project to provide aluminium shelters was approved on the basis of unrealistic costings and involved unsatisfactory contracting practice and supply chains. They turned out to be inflexible and very hot. This undermined HMG's confidence in GoM's capacity to act efficiently in emergency off-island procurement.

5.7 The public shelter programme was basically successful in providing everyone with immediate shelter, but was unsatisfactory in providing for more extended occupation. Between September 1995 and April 1996, GoM bears considerable responsibility for the failure to prepare quickly and adequately against the eventuality of further mass evacuations. The lack of agreement on technical choices reflects a fragmentation of responsibility. Tents and plastic-covered frame structures, as well as metal shell shelters, were imposed solutions. The attempt to combine immediate emergency and longer-term uses succeeded only in compromising the emergency need for timely, flexible-use buildings. Finally, the failure to agree on an immediate programme for the longer term, condemned many of those wishing to remain on, or unable to leave, the island to what were, by local or British standards, wholly unacceptable living conditions. There were still 427 people in 22 temporary shelters in October 1998, and even a year later there were still 322 people resident in shelters.

5.3 Emergency housing

5.8 The International Development Committee wrote critically in October 1997 that 'confusion plaguing the delivery of aid' was evident in the provision of emergency housing. It went on to ask:

'With the resources and expertise at the disposal of the United Kingdom Government, we must ask why, nearly two and a half years after the eruption began, there is not a single person in emergency housing.' (IDC, 1997: para 50 – see footnote 1)

5.9 This evaluation supports the findings of the IDC on the reasons for the delay in providing emergency housing prior to July 1997. In autumn 1995, only the Governor took a lead in proposing an Emergency Housing Programme in the north. At the time the GoM did not regard housing provision in the north as a priority, preferring to develop Salem as a temporary centre for administration and commerce. Following the third and final evacuation of Plymouth in April 1996, HMG began to favour a public housing initiative. But GoM did not seek UK assistance for this as part of the £25m aid package agreed in August 1996, hoping to secure housing from other aid sources. In fact very limited help came from other sources and in November 1996 the new GoM requested HMG support for housing and an initiative to fund a land bank to make land available for development in the north. HMG argued for an immediate housing initiative for 50 houses on Crown land close to Little Bay. GoM preferred HMG to fund compulsory acquisition of land so that the Crown land could remain available for future commercial development and an administrative centre. The matter remained unresolved in June 1997. The acquisition and availability of land for direct-build housing has remained a constraint.

5.10 Between July and September 1997, HMG took the initiative in proceeding with a £6.5m direct-build "Immediate" Housing Programme to provide 250 houses (see paras 6.3-6.7). The programme was subsequently increased to 255 houses as well as providing land and infrastructure for 30 houses to be funded by CARICOM. An additional £1.5m was earmarked to support a self-build housing scheme of 200 new and 31 completed or repaired houses. In September a commitment was made to a Soft Mortgage Scheme to fund construction of 65 houses to be launched before the end of 1997 (see para 7.14). There was also provision for 3 homes for the elderly to accommodate over 150 individuals.

5.11 Progress in implementing key aspects of the highest priority housing has continued to be slow since the IDC's first report. The emergency housing initiatives have so far provided housing for only a minority of the displaced persons on Montserrat and there have been unacceptable delays, which have, in turn, prolonged the time spent in shelters and overcrowded private accommodation. By November 1998, only 105 of the 255 planned houses had been occupied, accommodating 338 people (Figure 5-page 38). The facilities for the elderly were completed. The self-build project funds were fully committed and a second project had been started, but the Soft Mortgage Scheme had yet to be launched.

5.12 Although an important aim of the housing programmes was to provide for people living in shelters, the new housing has often not gone to shelter residents. The self-build materials schemes that began as a relatively rapid emergency response are providing assistance to a significant number (370) of applicants and their families. But because applicants were required to have access to land and the capacity for completing construction, the majority of shelter residents and others among the poor and needy have been ruled out of the Self-Build schemes. Of the direct-build housing, the initial tranche of 50 houses targeted the shelter population, but very few of the second tranche of houses were allocated to shelter residents. Pressures of numbers on minimal space has meant that single-person households who constituted the bulk of the shelter population were excluded from consideration.

5.4 The social safety net: from relief rations to income support

5.13 Following the evacuations of December 1995 and April 1996, relief rations, intended to supply one main meal a day, were distributed to between 3,500 and 4,600 people. Ration distribution was well organised but its focus was too narrow to act as a continuing safety net for people requiring support covering a wider range of expenditure. The administrative costs of direct distribution were also very high. From September 1996 to November 1997, GoM introduced a Food Voucher scheme covering all foods and basic toiletries and exchangeable in local shops. It was available to evacuees outside shelters and to safe zone residents who had lost their jobs because of the emergency. In December 1997, food vouchers were replaced by cheques to the same value. This was a pragmatic response to pressure from participants wanting more flexibility to use income support to meet other expenses (such as rents); and also to the heavy administrative burden of the voucher scheme. The Select Committee's criticisms, published in November 1997, may also have been a factor. During 1997 it was decided that there would be a DFID-funded social welfare review to move to more targeted forms of benefit based on means testing. This was still incomplete in September 1999.

5.14 The switch to a voucher system in 1996 was a practical and probably an appropriate development when it became clear that people would be remaining in the north of the island indefinitely and that large numbers were in need of assistance. It was also a transfer from the over-stretched public sector to using and supporting the fragile private sector. However, the introduction of an exchangeable voucher was used to extend the categories of people receiving support. In view of the subsequent problems of targeting, a more rapid move to some form of income support might perhaps have been more appropriate. The availability of British bilateral financial support facilitated the switch from direct assistance, with high transaction costs, to vouchers and then financial assistance. Administrative constraints, and perhaps a lack of political will on the GoM side, have impeded a move to a more effectively targeted and more efficient system. A difficult-to-quantify negative impact has been the growth of a welfare dependency culture amongst many remaining on-island.

5.5 Education

5.15 Prior to the volcanic emergency the GoM operated a comprehensive and good quality education system for primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Since the emergency began there have been massive reductions in the numbers of teachers, children and school buildings. By September 1998, education enrolment overall had dropped by over 80% and staffing by over 70%. (Table 5.1.)

Table 5.1 Educational Provision in Montserrat, June 1995-September 1998

	June 1995	May 1997	Sep 1998	Sep 1998 as a % of June 1995
	(no. of enrolments, institutions and teaching staff)			
Nursery School	336	N.A	66	20
Primary School	1437	N.A	304	21
Secondary School	899	N.A	251	28
School Population	2672	1774	620	23
Education Institutions	25	13	5	20
Teaching Staff	200	168	54	27

Source: Government of Montserrat, Ministry of Education

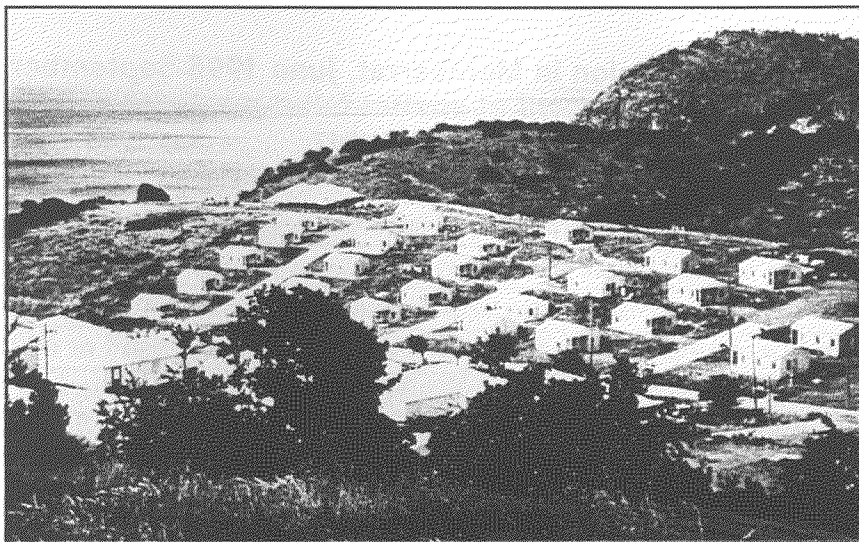
5.16 Despite recognition that the future of education will be a critical component of the development strategy for the island's future, education was given relatively low priority during the first 3 years of the emergency. A major problem has been the unavailability of buildings in the north suitable for use as school premises, but more significant is the continued use of school buildings for shelters and as a hospital compound. New purpose-built classrooms were used for shelters. This situation persisted up to the time of the evaluation and is inextricably linked to the delays in the provision of housing.

5.17 HMG's response has been almost entirely in terms of funding the construction of new and alternative school space. This has been largely appropriate. By April 1998 DFID had funded purpose-built classrooms at 2 primary and 2 secondary schools, as well as a portacabin and wooden classrooms at the new Look Out Secondary School and Blake's Primary School.

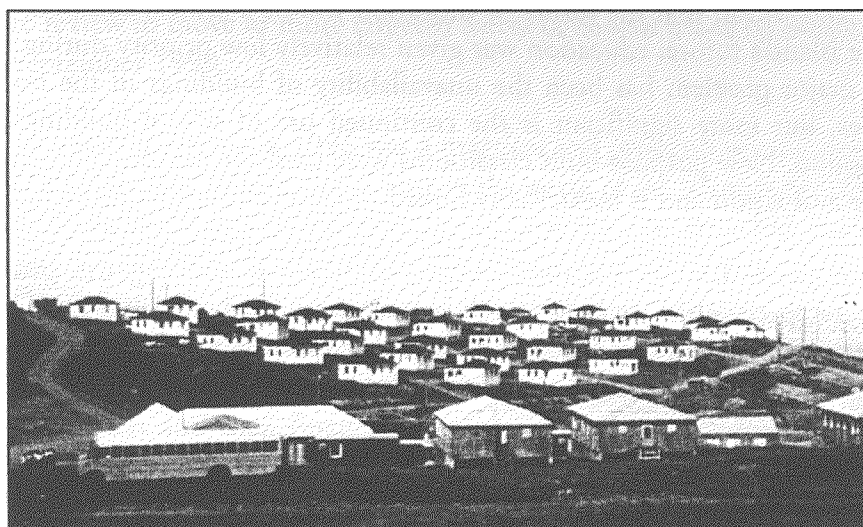
5.18 Public communication and consultation with educational professionals has been a less satisfactory aspect of the emergency response. Teaching professionals were overburdened and under stress. Many felt they had been operating in isolation and without adequate support. There appears to have been little communication on plans for the immediate future and, in particular, the implications of the EOC's continuing requisition of buildings for shelter. The major concern reported to the evaluation was the continuing appropriation of purpose-built classrooms as shelter space on an indefinite basis, whilst classes were conducted in makeshift temporary buildings.

5.19 Parents also appear not to have been kept well informed during the crisis. In mid-1997 the lack of official information led many to assume that schools would not re-open on time and, as a consequence, to leave the island with their children to seek provision elsewhere.

5.20 Finally there is the difficult issue of rethinking educational objectives in the light of a substantially reduced school age population. So far DFID advisers have done little to consider with GoM the role of education in the process of social reconstruction and development. The resilience of education owes most to the extraordinary efforts of educational professionals and the commitment of Montserratians to education as a critical aspect of their private and social aspirations.



Davy Hill prefabricated houses with shelters in foreground



Lookout block built houses with school and 72 seater bus in foreground

Prefabricated housing at Shinn Lands showing road deterioration

