**Arch Insurance International Pursuing Better Together Podcast: Sanj Srikanthan**

**Arch Insurance International**

Hello and thank you for joining us for another episode of the Arch Insurance International Pursuing Better Together podcast series. With me today is Sanj Srikanthan, Chief Executive of ShelterBox, a charity which provides shelter, essential items and technical assistance to help some of the world's most vulnerable people recover and rebuild their homes after a disaster. Sanj joined the ShelterBox team in December 2019, having previously spent 10 years at the International Rescue Committee, where he was Senior Vice President for Europe and Executive Director for the UK. During his time at the IRC, Sanj managed responses in Mali, Syria, Liberia, Lebanon and Turkey. He has also worked for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and was previously a captain in the British Army. Sanj, first of all, thank you for finding the time in your incredibly busy schedule to speak to us today.

**Sanj Srikanthan**

Thank you for having me on. It's a great pleasure.

**Arch Insurance International**

Could I ask you to give a sense of what the organisation's overriding mission is and also how it originally came about?

**Sanj Srikanthan**Yes, so the mission of the organisation is ultimately to ensure that no one lacks shelter after a disaster, and we were set up in 2000 by a group of Rotarians, part of Rotary International, which is a huge global, voluntary body that does a lot of charity work around the world. And what they saw is when disasters were occurring in the '90s, that people were provided food and medicine, but the thing that was left to families affected by disaster to sort out for themselves was shelter. And often, the heartbreaking scenes of how people were living after famine and drought, after flooding, earthquakes, conflicts, were really tragic. And they set up ShelterBox to really address a very specific need, [which] is in the days and weeks after disaster, we can provide the kind of shelter that will provide safety, security, a home for families, and allow them to start to gather their things and rebuild their lives for the long term. And that's what we've been doing now for 22 years, and we've helped 2 million-plus people now. The last million we've helped since 2015, so we are getting busier, and the world is becoming more unpredictable, more dangerous, and hotter. And we can talk more about that.

**Arch Insurance International**

When you consider what ShelterBox is committed to doing it, it's incredibly hard to get your head around the immensity of that task. Can you try to give me an understanding of the scale of the humanitarian challenge that ShelterBox is helping to address?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Yes, at some point, we know in 2022, the number of people displaced around the world, i.e., made homeless by disaster or conflict crossed over 100 million. And we estimate that based on recent events, that it's currently at around 113 million. And the added tragedy of that number is that 83% of that number is hosted in lower and middle income countries, i.e., countries that are poorer than the UK, even as we're going through all the economic shocks and challenges of the last couple of months here in the UK. And in the vast majority of cases, the countries in which that 113 million are sheltering are neighbouring the country that had the disaster or the conflict. So, it's a very localised problem, but it is spreading out from these disasters and conflicts. And it has tripled since the '90s, in terms of that figure of over 100 million, so that's the scale of the crisis we're talking about. If it was a country that 100 million people made, it would be, I think, the 13th or 14th largest country in the world, and that figure is only going up. And so, for an organisation like us, it's about making choices about where emergency shelter can do the most good. But for every place we respond, there must be at least 10 or more that we could have responded if we have the resources. And so, we need to think about how do we get our hands around the wider problem and the causes of those problems?

**Arch Insurance International**

I wanted to just focus at this point on one of the recent disasters that ShelterBox has been responding to, which was the extensive flooding in Pakistan. An incredible event just given the actual scale of the flooding. Can you talk to me about the support that your teams are providing there at the moment?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Yes well, first of all, flooding is the most common type of climate-related disaster that we respond to. It's incredibly common, and becoming dangerously more unpredictable, more frequent and more severe. And Pakistan is probably one of the most significant cases in recent times of that. Essentially, Pakistan is an incredibly dry country, it's largely sort of almost desert arid, with this massive river that flows through called the Indus. And that provides life-giving water, fertile land and supports a population of over 220 million currently in Pakistan. And what happened is a combination of monsoons that were more severe than in recent memory, combined with melting glaciers, because of course, there are mountains to the northeast in Pakistan. And that combination caused this huge flooding that is reported to have affected a third of the country. It's actually a third of provinces in Pakistan that had declared an emergency, it's not that a third of the country was flooded. And in many cases, because around the Indus is where there's arable land, it's destroyed crops, it's destroyed homes, and of course, millions now have been displaced. And we estimate that that is going to continue for some months ahead. So ShelterBox's response is to get aid into the country as quickly as possible, because our shelter kit is pretty well tailored to most flooding situations, it's something we're familiar with, and then work out where are the most needy families and where can that emergency shelter do the most good. It will never meet all demand, but it certainly is a starting point to recovery for those who've had their homes flooded.

**Arch Insurance International**

When you're dealing with a disaster at that level, how do you start the process? And you also talked there about the fact that this isn't something that has a clear start and a finish. How do you also maintain that kind of support for the duration of time required for people to recover effectively?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Yeah, it's a tough question, because we have to stay disciplined, in that we provide emergency shelter - we don't do housing rebuilding and longer-term projects. But often the period of disaster is longer than it has been in the past, because often they are still recovering from the previous disaster. So, it's not as though flooding happens once a decade, it actually happened several times a year. It just doesn't occur at this level. So, we have to recognise when are we getting them back to a liveable point in terms of emergency shelter assistance, and when do we need to leave. And there's never a good time, we could stay for the next decade and keep providing shelter. But the reality is that there are always going to be places that are worse off. So, we usually set ourselves criteria as to when we think the situation is starting to normalise. When families are starting to think about either returning home or rebuilding their homes. And the point at which the kind of shelter we provide, which is transitional at best - it's really high-quality tents and tarpaulins, but it is still only that - the point at which that no longer suits the needs of the people, and therefore it's time to move on to the next disaster. And there's always another disaster.

**Arch Insurance International**

Depending on the communities that you're dealing with, and the environment that you're operating in, I suppose the type of peril that you're facing, or that the people have been affected or impacted by, affect the type of support that you're able to provide. Just in that context, how important is it to tailor that support to the unique demands of that particular community?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
It's absolutely vital and there's been a real shift in the humanitarian community in the last 10 years, around putting communities affected at the centre of what we do. So don't assume what they need, but actually have that conversation through a process called a needs assessment to see what they need. Now, of course, we can't provide everything that they need, but within the menu of assistance modalities that we can offer, we should really have that conversation. And there are several examples of this in terms of mosquito nets if we're in Pakistan, but not in Ukraine. Something called the iron net, which is an enhanced shelter in Yemen that we're distributing that provides that resilience against the desert winds and weather in that country. If we just gave a tent, it would last weeks, whereas the iron net is for years. So, this kind of evolution adaption is really informed by what the community needs within the emergency shelter space. And I think the biggest shift, and we're doing this in Pakistan, is in addition to shelter, can we give a small cash grant, to help families to buy essential items that may not be exactly within our offering of aid items, but can make a world of difference and the efficacy of cash within the humanitarian sector is well proven. It isn't wasted, it is used incredibly effective[ly] by people below the poverty line, to help them recover and make choices about what to prioritise in their recovery.

**Arch Insurance International**

It's interesting, and you touched upon this earlier that the fact that the issues that we're dealing with and the scale of the challenge that we're dealing with here is only going to increase and obviously a key driver in that is the growing impact of climate change. which will obviously significantly increase levels of exposure to natural catastrophes in the coming decades. What are some of the new challenges that climate change is bringing to those communities most exposed, particularly in terms of the support that you're providing?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Climate change - how it's impacting communities we serve - is really that the weather patterns that we've come to rely on actually for agricultural needs are no longer reliable. And at the same time as we're talking about flooding in Pakistan, we're talking about probably the most severe drought we've seen in certainly two decades in Somalia. And this is what is not only causing livelihoods to fail, but is driving this mass migration, global displacement and we have yet to see the true scale and extent of what it will be like at the time when over a billion people will be severely affected by climate change. If you look at preparedness for that climate shift, the global south and generally the poorest countries in the world are least prepared to cope with it. The issue for us is we're not dealing now with one event; we're dealing with 10 events in the same part of the same country in a year. And that's not sustainable, when there are so many other places. And just to say, the places that we are responding in are not the places that are causing emissions around the world. Eastern Africa, for example, is producing about 1.6% of global emissions, but they are dealing with around 70% of the world's food-insecure people across eastern Africa. They are dealing with the drought that I described in Somalia, and it keeps occurring again and again. A refugee camp of 30,000 in Africa produces as much carbon emission as 60 homes in Europe. So, there is a great inequality as to the cause of the climate shift relating to the impact, which is definitely in parts of the world that are not causing it.

**Arch Insurance International**

When we think about ShelterBox, and obviously we think about the support that you are providing on the front line, but also it has a considerable role to play in trying to encourage world leaders to take action. You have very specific actions that you are encouraging or calling upon world leaders to actually take. Can you talk us through some of those actions?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Yeah, absolutely. Firstly, we have got to fund response and the work that we do to respond, as we have to so many climate related disasters. We've also got to recognise that we have to do better preparedness and resilience in these communities. There's an institute called the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, that's done some excellent research to show that in terms of preparedness for climate change, the top five countries are all in Europe - Norway, Finland, Switzerland, etc. The bottom five are all in Africa - the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, CAR and others. And that tells you what you need to know in terms of the inequality, not just in the ability to respond to disasters when they occur, but actually to build resilience within communities in the areas of the world that are most affected by climate change. So, we need to do both of those things. And of course, that does take funding, but we have to recognise that that funding is really part of our responsibility around making the planet liveable for all of us, because ultimately, a problem halfway around the world, or at the bottom of the world, isn't going to stay there. We are all globally connected, and it will ultimately impact us as well. So that's really important for us to make that call. And that's part of what is ShelterBox's new strategy, because at the moment we are not keeping up with just responding. If we don't highlight the causes, and the actions we need to take to be more resilient to those causes, as well as of course, reducing those causes, we're not going to get our heads around this problem. And in fact, we're going to be further away from that mission for ShelterBox of no one without shelter after disaster. On a deeply moral level, we have a duty to do this. Ironically, if I were to talk to the average person that we have assisted in one of our projects, I'm not sure they would be talking about climate change ruining their lives. I think they would just view it as just yet another bad year, that was worse than the last year and the year before, and on top of every other problem that they confront, including disease and COVID and other things. Africa has less than 5% vaccinated against COVID - it's just another thing. But for me, that only makes it more imperative that we do speak for them, because whether they know it or not, we are causing, to a large extent, this climate shift in countries that are producing the carbon emissions that's resulting in that heating and the flooding and the drought. And so, we have to articulate on their behalf that we will do better to reduce this in the future, but also provide them the assistance to recover, but also become more resilient.

**Arch Insurance International**

I wanted to take a bit of a step back from the frontline of ShelterBox's work to look at the foundations upon which the charity itself is built. I wondered if you could just give me an idea of what those values are and explain why they are so fundamental to what ShelterBox is trying to achieve?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Our values are more than just words, in that they really embody our approach to delivering our strategy and our day to day actions. So, if you're looking at words like flexibility, learning, integrity, and participation, they sound like the right things to say. But actually, they very much integrate with how we deliver. We fundamentally believe in the importance of relationships and partnerships, and the fact that we can't do this alone. That's one of the phrases we often use. That communities affected by disaster, but also local NGOs, often are the ones who after the emergency and ShelterBox has gone will continue to deliver, to identify the need, make communities more resilient. That we are not perfect - we have constantly learned and adapted. The things that go into our kit now are fundamentally different to 22 years ago, as you would expect. The new water filter can purify 200,000 litres, it's a new innovation compared to a traditional water filter, which does 1000 litres. That was through learning and recognising drought is more frequent. People will drink dirty polluted water, if they are that thirsty that they are going to die and they will then get cholera and get into a very bad situation. So, we are learning and adapting to the changing world and to the communities we serve. So, that's where these words are really coming in. And I think when we talk about integrity, of course we have integrity, we all have integrity, but it's not just the easy choices around integrity. It's holding true to the mission. So one of the most gut wrenching roles of our response team is deciding who is getting aid and who isn't, because with all the money in the world we're not going to meet global needs as ShelterBox and therefore, it is often difficult to choose between a single woman living in a bombed-out house, with rain pouring into her kitchen, versus another family that has five children, and is perhaps in a similar situation. Those trade-offs are really difficult, and we have to have integrity and make difficult choices. So, the ability to think also flexibly is important. Is it cash that families need? Is it shelter? Is it a specific item? Is there something we can procure locally, versus from our warehousing, that would be more cost effective So, the thought process behind our values was really embodied in a delivery model and a culture around doing the best we can. So, for me, it's on our wall, but it's actually lived every day.

**Arch Insurance International**And I suppose this links into the theme of this podcast series, which is this idea of Pursuing Better Together. Undoubtedly, what you do requires a huge amount of collaboration with other parties. And I just wanted to ask if you could explain how you're working with those bodies, how you're working with those organisations - both organisations within the affected communities, and also external bodies - that you can bring to these communities to help them?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Yeah, absolutely. In relation to Arch, I think one of the things we can note is the vast, vast majority of the communities that we serve don't have disaster risk insurance, or pandemic insurance, or any of those sorts of things that increasingly is available in severely affected areas in the north to climate change. And that's something that we want to explore in terms of the potential for making those communities more resilient. We're not the only ones doing it. But more immediately, our current partners, increasingly, are local partners, and that's a conscious choice in our strategy, to recognise that we have to hand something over when we do our short-term emergency relief projects. We also need to do it in a way that does no harm, that's a really important humanitarian principle. So, based on conversations with our partners, we're also investing in getting to net zero, but also removing plastics from our kits. Currently, over a quarter of a million items of plastic have been removed - single use plastics, problem plastics - have been removed from our kits. And it's our partners who really help us think through what the impact ShelterBox is is having in their communities when we respond - not just in terms of keeping families safe, but also making their country cleaner, and more environmentally friendly as well. So, these are the kinds of really informed discussions that partnerships give us. But more most importantly, it's recognising that those local partners are often the ones who have seen this disaster before, before we were there, and will be there after and can tell us, actually, this is the kind of shelter, or this is the kind of item or assistance that communities need that will build a much more lasting recovery.

**Arch Insurance International**

Yes, and of course, it's very much a learning process. I would assume when you're interacting with these different organisations, that it's a two-way process. So, they're learning from I suppose the actions that ShelterBox is taking that they can then carry forward.

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Absolutely. It is a learning, sharing relationship. So, the vast majority of aid that is given to organisations responding to humanitarian disasters goes to international organisations like ShelterBox, or the UN, or to governments. Only a tiny percentage, less than 1%, will go to local NGOs. And it's partly a language barrier, partly it's compliance and regulation, partly their unfamiliarity with how to get funding. And we pass on some of the essential skills and governance and financial training that enables those really reliable, committed local organisations that will stay for years ahead in those communities to access funding. And success for us is not just being able to leave a community better off but leaving a civil society around them that is stronger and more capable of supporting them in the future. And so if we can get to a point where we don't need to respond, because we've empowered local organizations and partners to do that the next time, that is mission success.

**Arch Insurance International**

For those listening, how can they become more involved in supporting the work of ShelterBox?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
Well, we were founded by volunteers, they weren't staff, they didn't create ShelterBox as an entity, they, they just volunteered their time at weekends and increasingly, as the workload grew, they became more professional. But we've retained a really important link with volunteers and so, there are numerous ways to volunteer. We have ShelterBox Response Teams that are often deployed to disasters, and they also include volunteers. We have a mixture of volunteers and staff who deploy, and they go through a one-year recruitment process and training to be part of that team. But if that's not your thing, and that does take a time commitment to responses of up to six weeks, there's also becoming a ShelterBox Ambassador. We do trainings for you, give you a chance to explore what it is to deploy out in the Cornish countryside and run through some scenarios. And then we ask you to go out and communicate what ShelterBox is about to your supporters, your community, and at events. And these ambassadors are vital, because there's something very genuine in the way that our supporters and our volunteers can engage and really communicate who we are. That's better than the CEO doing it. And we really want to build a sort of community around our volunteers. So, there's numerous ways, not just fundraising, but also in terms of advocacy, but also understanding the causes of disaster, not just describing what I think is the much more simple story of disaster occurs, and we respond. So that's where we hope to really educate our supporters through our website, and through a monthly newsletter that you can sign up to as well, that really gives you that background to disasters and conflicts - and all of that is on shelterbox.org.

**Arch Insurance International**

Fantastic - well hopefully, as I say, some of our listeners will access shelterbox.org and you will see more volunteers and more ambassadors coming to the group. I had a final question for you, Sanj. What does this idea of Pursuing Better Together means to you, and perhaps in a ShelterBox context?

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
I think it's a really important phrase if you take it and really think about what it is, and I very much agree with Arch in terms of the intent behind the nature of together and partnership being trusting and respectful and responsive. And I think what that means, if you get it right, is really understanding what each of us contributes to this picture. And I think historically, there's been a tendency to think of organisations like ShelterBox, and others from the UK, as having all the answers. And that real shift towards partnership has opened the world to the reality that actually local organisations using local adaptions and techniques, know better how to work after a disaster. And so, we are being more effective, we are being better by being more inclusive in who we work with. The tent we use in West Africa, just a small example, is the Sahel tent, which is better ventilated - something we hadn't even heard of in 2000 when ShelterBox was created, but is now the dominant form of shelter in West Africa. That wasn't through us, that was through our partners working together better to think through what exactly the right liveable condition for families is there. So that's just a small example. But I think it gives you a sense of, if you really take that phrase and apply it to your work, you will be more effective. And for us, inclusion is really vital, not just in the workplace, but in how we work around the world as well.

**Arch Insurance International**

I hope our conversation has provided our listeners with a real understanding of the immensity of the humanitarian challenge that ShelterBox is helping to address it, and how the dedication of the charity to helping those left homeless is making a real difference in these incredibly vulnerable communities. At this point, all that is left for me to do is to thank you on behalf of Arch for taking the time to speak to us today.

**Sanj Srikanthan**   
No, thank you for making the time because I think getting the message out and communicating why this is important and the causes of conflict and disaster is really important if we're going to change the narrative in the years ahead.