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Hosting Support

An overlooked humanitarian shelter solution.

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When disasters or crises strike and homes are lost, people don’t always wait for governments and international humanitarian agencies to lend a hand, but instead often rely on those close to them: family and friends. Perhaps because this spontaneous sheltering of people doesn’t always entail four new walls and a roof, and is thus often difficult to see, the shelter that family, friends and neighbors provide to disaster or crisis survivors can be overlooked or even dismissed by some policymakers and shelter advisors as inappropriate, not “real” or not truly durable shelter. However, hosting by family and friends, or even by strangers, is socially defined, self-selected, culturally appropriate and typically provided before humanitarian actors arrive and—importantly—long after they leave. Hosting is, in fact, an effort to help, be it for social, family or even altruistic or nationalistic reasons, so how could it not be considered humanitarian in nature?

Humanitarian community actors have increasingly recognized in recent years the utility and acceptance of hosting as a form of spontaneous sheltering among affected populations. As a result, these actors have come to provide various types of basic support to ensure that hosting does not strain relations or host families’ pocketbooks, while also facilitating the role of hosting as a durable shelter solution. Such assistance can entail fuel, education or livelihood assistance, as well as provision of bedding, cooking and eating utensils, water/sanitation and shelter upgrades to support people living with host families.

Hosting was vital in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the 2009 conflict in Pakistan. These major events generated considerable media coverage and resource commitments to support conventional “four-walls-and-a-roof” shelter efforts. However, less attention has been given to the important role that hosting support has also served in overall humanitarian shelter and settlements sector assistance efforts.

Hosting in earthquake-affected Haiti

The devastating earthquake killed an estimated 316,000 people and affected approximately 3 million others, according to the government of Haiti, while damaging and destroying over 180,000 housing structures. The earthquake also generated a mass exodus of over 600,000 people from Port-au-Prince and other disaster-affected areas to seek shelter with family and friends in home towns in outlying areas that were not damaged by the earthquake. Although an unknown number of those who left the affected area have likely returned, many chose to remain in a

Program support by humanitarian agencies often supplements shelter that is provided spontaneously through friends and family, and sometimes strangers. In this picture, the new shelter for the displaced family is located next to the existing host family shelter in the same compound. In Haiti, this spontaneous assistance was often supplemented programmatically with livelihood, nonfood item (NFI), water/sanitation/hygiene (WASH) and other forms of humanitarian assistance to ensure that hosting arrangements were sustainable, and not burdensome.
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A willingness to help

Haiti and Pakistan present diverse settings, events and circumstances, but what is common in both countries is the willingness of people, whether compelled by family, friendship or community ties, or simply compassion for others, to help those in need by creating hosting arrangements. This activity occurred in both post-disaster and post-conflict settings, be they in urban or rural areas. It did, however, impose social, economic and other strains on the arrangements, making it important for humanitarian actors to support them wherever possible and feasible using a range of measures.

Hosting is not only on providing IDPs with assistance, but also on providing support to the families hosting them. Direct support to host families often included programs to alleviate crowded conditions by expanding living spaces, often through the construction of an additional room or stand-alone shelter. Some relief agencies also established mobile medical clinics that served multiple host communities and voucher programs that allowed IDPs to purchase additional food and household items, thereby reducing the strain on host families.

Other cash-for-work, cash grant, and rental assistance programs also allowed IDPs to pay for a portion of their host family’s household expenses. Nearly two-thirds—more than $75 million—of OFDA’s combined assistance for Pakistan’s conflict-affected individuals in our 2009 and 2010 fiscal years directly benefited IDPs and host families in KPk, supporting the kinds of activities promoted by the humanitarian community, with the remainder benefiting families returning to former conflict areas.

Hosting in conflict-affected Pakistan

During 2009, a complex emergency due to fighting between the Pakistani government and militants in the northwest caused more than 3 million people to flee the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPk) province for safer areas. Later that year, additional military operations in South Waziristan displaced another 380,000 people. The ongoing conflict resulted in a steady stream of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into KPk.

Between January 2009 and January 2011, more than 3.4 million people had been displaced from their homes, and nearly 90 percent of this total was hosted. Often, families hosted strangers and did not know how long they would be staying. However, thousands of host families readily provided shelter, food and water to IDPs for several months. Due to the overwhelming number of individuals living with host families for months or more at a time, the international community focused not only on providing IDPs with assistance, but also on providing support to the families hosting them. Direct support to host families often included programs to alleviate crowded conditions by expanding living spaces, often through the construction of an additional room or stand-alone shelter. Some relief agencies also established mobile medical clinics that served multiple host communities and voucher programs that allowed IDPs to purchase additional food and household items, thereby reducing the strain on host families.

Hosting in Haiti

During the post-earthquake period in Haiti, hosting arrangements included both formal and informal care where children were placed from their homes, and nearly 90 percent of this total was hosted. Often, families hosted strangers and did not know how long they would be staying. However, thousands of host families readily provided shelter, food and water to IDPs for several months. Due to the overwhelming number of individuals living with host families for months or more at a time, the international community focused not only on providing IDPs with assistance, but also on providing support to the families hosting them. Direct support to host families often included programs to alleviate crowded conditions by expanding living spaces, often through the construction of an additional room or stand-alone shelter. Some relief agencies also established mobile medical clinics that served multiple host communities and voucher programs that allowed IDPs to purchase additional food and household items, thereby reducing the strain on host families.

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