Hosting Support in Haiti: An Overlooked Humanitarian Shelter Solution

Background. 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 so-called stealth shelter doesn't involve four new walls and a roof and is thus often difficult to see, the shelter that family or friends (as well as neighbors) provide to disaster or crisis survivors is often dismissed by some policy-makers and shelter advisors as inappropriate or not "real" 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.

USAID/OFDA and other humanitarian agencies have increasingly recognized in recent years the utility and acceptance of hosting as a form of spontaneous sheltering among affected populations. As a result, USAID/OFDA provides various types of basic support to ensure that hosting doesn't strain relations or host families' pocketbooks, while also facilitating its role 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 additional people living with host families. USAID/OFDA provided many such forms of assistance to host communities in Haiti as part of larger post-earthquake shelter and settlements sector activities.

Hosting in Haiti. After the devastating January 12, 2010, earthquake, USAID/OFDA initiated what became its largest-ever shelter and settlements sector program. Eventual spending exceeded $108 million to support a range of humanitarian shelter "solutions." As of November 15, 2011, USAID/OFDA shelter solutions benefited 62,648 households—or more than 313,000 people—a total equal to approximately one-fifth of the 1.5 million people estimated to have been displaced by the earthquake. Included in the total is:

- Transitional shelter (t-shelter) assistance to 28,524 households,
- House repairs benefitting 7,601 households, and

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- Hosting support to 26,523 households.

In part due to the mass exodus of over 600,000 people from Port-au-Prince and other disaster-affected areas after the earthquake, as well as to displaced residents' strong ties to family, friends, and hometowns in outlying areas, USAID/OFDA's hosting support total was actually 36 percent greater than the objective of 19,550 hosting arrangements established in 2010. Further, an estimated 95 percent of hosting families were either related to, or friends of, the hosted families.

The level of hosting support has been notable, resulting in the provision of humanitarian shelter for thousands of earthquake-affected families. However, what is even more notable is the apparent evolution of 18,492 hosting arrangements, or 70 percent of USAID/OFDA's hosting total, into *permanent* housing solutions for those families, as they have decided to stay in hosting arrangements for the foreseeable future. Moreover, many families have stated in post-project interviews that they never want to return to the disaster-affected area. Hosting is thus not only an important humanitarian shelter solution, but also appears in Haiti to be helping address longer-term housing needs at a cost far below housing reconstruction efforts, and long before those efforts even commence.

Finally, although USAID/OFDA assistance in support of hosting arrangements was located in communities away from Port-au-Prince, final project reports for t-shelter efforts suggest that up to 20 percent of t-shelters constructed by USAID/OFDA grantees in Port-au-Prince were built on land provided by host families. This finding is consistent with experience in other countries that hosting support can occur in both rural and urban settings.

Prepared by: Charles A. Setchell, Senior Shelter, Settlements, and Hazard Mitigation Advisor, USAID/OFDA
(csetchell@usaid.gov)

Information on USAID/OFDA Shelter and Settlements sector activities is available at:
http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/sectors/shelter.html