

Goma, DRC: Emergence of Urban-based DRR and Shelter and Settlements Activities

Charles A. Setchell

Senior Shelter, Settlements, and Hazard Mitigation Advisor, USAID/OFDA

In January 2002, the Nyiragongo volcano erupted near Goma in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, devastating a city of 450,000 people. In less than a day, lava covered 13 percent of the city, or nearly two square miles, and destroyed up to 15,000 houses. Thousands of jobs were lost, and the urban and regional economy was devastated. As part of the international community's response, the USAID Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) provided nearly \$5 million in assistance, including \$2.6 million for emergency relief and \$2.3 million for transitional shelter and disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities.

USAID/OFDA risk reduction activities included support of the Goma Volcano Observatory (GVO) to improve volcano hazard monitoring (e.g. provision of seismographs and telemetry equipment), train staff and provide technical assistance. Additionally, a two-year, community-based DRR program was supported to enhance early warning systems, upgrade evacuation routes, and improve community awareness of what to do and where to go during eruptions and earthquakes, i.e., to learn to live with their risks.

OFDA Promotes Transition to Reconstruction. After critical needs had been addressed, the humanitarian community paused and began to develop strategies for helping residents of Goma rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Shelter quickly emerged as the most pressing need for affected families. People displaced by the volcano needed a new place to call "home". Options for meeting this need included moving the entire city of Goma to a new site, dispersing people to different regions of the country, moving people into camps, and a "city-focused" option aimed at rehabilitating Goma itself and keeping as many people there as possible. These options were discussed at length among representatives of local authorities and associations, humanitarian organizations, and United Nations agencies.

Affecting any decision on shelter assistance were the perceived and real security and political conditions in the immediate region, which constrained relocation options to the east, north, and west of Goma. Furthermore, the city is located on the northern shore of Lake Kivu, making large-scale southern movement of the displaced impractical. There was also a local security consideration; many people wished to remain close to their former houses to prevent appropriation or looting.

OFDA'S Solution: City-focused Shelter and "M&M". Following consultations with affected communities and responsible authorities, OFDA devised a two-pronged solution that would both bring new life to Goma and to mitigate the impact of future disasters.

The first element of OFDA's plan was a city-focused transitional shelter program. OFDA and its partners determined that there was sufficient space in Goma to resettle residents there, and also that the existing social and economic infrastructure, even post-eruption, made it easier to house people there rather than elsewhere. Plus, as mentioned, many were reluctant to move permanently elsewhere. Under this program, OFDA would provide shelter in areas of Goma not inundated by lava through a grant to Catholic Relief Services, for the benefit of 5,000 families. Other donors saw the efficacy of OFDA's strategy, and provided similar levels of assistance.

OFDA assistance was used to expand or supplement host family homes, or build on underutilized and vacant private residential parcels. Shelter supplies provided through OFDA funding included plastic sheeting, zinc roof sheeting, wood framing, cement flooring, and a modest latrine. All of the shelters were completed by early October 2002.

In addition to providing much-needed shelter, OFDA's city-focused shelter program had a significant impact on the Goma economy, with results of a post-occupancy survey suggesting that:

- The program led to nearly 45,000 person-days of work supported through beneficiary family hiring;
- 270 jobs were created in the supply of building materials and household goods;
- 3,300 jobs were created through home-based enterprises;
- Each shelter, valued at \$445, stimulated an average additional community investment of \$164.

The second element of OFDA's plan became known as "M&M", or "Monitoring and Mitigation". OFDA supported improvements in volcano hazard *monitoring*, including provision of seismographs and telemetry equipment to the Goma Volcano Observatory (GVO), staff support and technical assistance to the GVO. OFDA is also sponsoring a two-year hazard *mitigation* program to enhance early warning systems, upgrade evacuation routes, and improve community awareness of what to do and where to go when eruptions and earthquakes happen. The investment in "M&M" was intended to strengthen the future resilience of Goma by lessening the impact of disasters yet to come.

In total, OFDA funded a \$2.6 million package featuring the "M&M" and transitional shelter component, in addition to the emergency assistance mentioned previously.

CONCLUSIONS

IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY TO START ADDRESSING SHELTER NEEDS: At least a month was lost before shelter specialists from the UN, NGOs, and donors began work on crafting the strategies that would enable displaced families to transition from emergency to more permanent shelter solutions. To be sure, emergency needs are and should be of primary importance during the early stages of a disaster. However, thinking on how to bridge the gap between emergency and reconstruction should begin during the crisis period, with the identification of key issues, agreement on common strategies, and commitments to act.

"DEVELOPMENTAL RELIEF" WORKS: Emergency relief saves lives and alleviates suffering over the short term. "Developmental relief", with its focus on leveraging short-term assistance into long-term benefit, can have an impact that stretches far beyond its original purpose. In the case of Goma, OFDA's emphasis on transitional shelter brought with it a wealth of peripheral benefits that gave new life to a ravaged economy.

URBAN PLANNING IS AN IMPORTANT FACET OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELIEF: Goma's recovery was dependent upon regenerating the urban economy. Providing transitional shelter in the city, rather than dispersing it elsewhere, maximized the economic benefits associated with humanitarian community investment. Encouraging settlement in Goma has allowed aid agencies to concentrate their assistance efforts. Residents have better access to jobs and public services in an urban context than in a remote camp. Also, the rehabilitated urban housing is proving to be more permanent than a tent camp would have been; most families in Goma are continuing to live in their reconstructed housing to the present day.

The OFDA strategy of following emergency relief aid with transitional housing and "M&M" has proven very successful. OFDA is proud to have contributed to a revitalized Goma, which is captured below:

"The central business district, buried under rock, is re-emerging; there is even a new Volcano Internet Café on the edge of the destruction. The camps set up for displaced residents are now mostly shuttered, and Goma is experiencing something of a housing boom."
(emphasis added)

New York Times, November 10, 2002

Incorporation of DRR into the 2002 disaster response aimed to strengthen the resilience of Goma's citizens by lessening the impact of future disasters. A recent assessment found that many of the OFDA-sponsored projects promoted the transition to recovery and reconstruction. However, vigilance will continue to be needed to maintain awareness of the hazards from the many volcanoes in the Goma area.