

USAID/OFDA HAITI ONE-YEAR SHELTER AND SETTLEMENTS OVERVIEW – JANUARY 12, 2011

Immediately following the January 12, 2010, earthquake, USAID developed an emergency shelter and settlements strategy, issued on January 25, which influenced the development of a joint Shelter Cluster and Government of Haiti (GoH) strategy. The cluster strategy, released on February 10, prioritized providing emergency shelter materials, including plastic sheeting and fixing materials, to displaced individuals in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and prior to the onset of hurricane season. A subsequent strategy developed in March outlined five possible interventions in order of preference, stating that relief organizations were able to assist displaced families in returning to their original safe houses, returning to plots near former houses, residing with host families, remaining in spontaneous settlements made safer through engineering improvements, or moving to planned resettlement sites identified by the GoH.



*A worker assembles a USAID/OFDA-funded t-shelter.
(Kendra Helmer, USAID)*

EMERGENCY SHELTER

Shelter Cluster partners, supported in large measure with USAID/OFDA-provided relief supplies, achieved the international goal of providing an estimated 300,000 earthquake-affected households with basic shelter assistance, primarily two pieces of plastic sheeting per household, by May 1.

HOST FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

In the first days and weeks after the earthquake, approximately 140,000 families left affected areas to reside primarily with friends and families in departments that were not directly impacted by the disaster, according to the GoH. In the past year, USAID/OFDA provided support, including livelihood interventions, for 19,550 hosted households to alleviate the strain that accommodating extra individuals places on host families and communities, increase stability for displaced families, and encourage families to remain outside Port-au-Prince, where overcrowding might exacerbate the earthquake's effects. While hosting arrangements traditionally represent a solution to humanitarian shelter needs for families like the 19,550 households that received USAID/OFDA support in Haiti, USAID/OFDA field surveys suggest that an estimated 40 to 50 percent of the hosting arrangements could evolve into permanent shelter solutions, nearly double the rate seen in any recent disaster response. Livelihood opportunities in host communities, personal and financial loss among hosted families, and preferences for remaining with family and friends may be driving decisions to continue living with host families.

HABITABILITY ASSESSMENT AND REPAIRS

USAID/OFDA has been a major supporter of a habitability assessment of buildings in affected areas. The project was designed to provide displaced families with information regarding the structural conditions of former residences and encourage returns to safe homes. To date, trained engineers have assessed more than 380,000 of 400,000 targeted structures, tagging 54 percent green, or safe to inhabit, 26 percent yellow due to the need for minor repairs, and 20 percent red, indicating a need for major repairs or demolition. In addition, as of January 6, USAID/OFDA partners completed repairs to yellow-tagged structures sufficient to accommodate 1,875 households. Although the habitability assessment is nearing

completion, USAID/OFDA will consider expansion of existing repair activities after analysis of available technical and logistical capacity to undertake repairs in an appropriate, safe, and expeditious manner.

TRANSITIONAL SHELTER

Transitional shelter (t-shelter) is a form of humanitarian shelter designed to jump-start or accelerate recovery by re-engaging affected populations in the incremental and longer-term housing development process present in nearly all countries where USAID/OFDA deploys. To do so, t-shelter often features a mix of both emergency shelter inputs, like plastic sheeting, and salvaged and new building materials, like bricks and wood. T-shelter, more than tents or tarps—conventional symbols of emergency shelter—but far less than permanent housing, has been a primary output of the Shelter Cluster for the past several months. As of January 10, international humanitarian agencies had constructed 39,219 t-shelters, including 13,662 completed by USAID/OFDA grantees. USAID/OFDA-funded t-shelters represent approximately 35 percent of the total. Further, the January 10 USAID/OFDA total was 18 percent greater than the December 15 grantee total of 11,570 t-shelters, indicating an ability to provide assistance even while confronting such significant obstacles as poor weather, the recent cholera outbreak, post-election unrest, and delays in customs clearances. USAID/OFDA grantees plan to continue to produce needed t-shelters at a high level of output in the coming weeks and months.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Rubble continues as a major impediment to recovery in earthquake-affected areas, with most reports suggesting that only a small percentage rubble has been removed and disposed to date. Rubble obstructs physical access to neighborhoods and prevents use of land for t-shelters. In addition, it reduces opportunities to repair “yellow” houses and limits the ability to return to green-tagged structures. Some landowners may be contributing to delays in removing rubble due to concerns regarding the future use of their property. Rubble also impedes access for heavy machinery to demolish unsafe buildings; prevents residents from returning to safe houses, particularly those imperiled by unstable buildings in close proximity; and creates hazards by blocking drainage, roads, and other infrastructure. Rubble removal thus requires balancing the need to remove debris quickly with the importance of active community involvement in the removal and neighborhood improvement process. USAID is primarily utilizing cash-for-work programs for rubble removal but is incorporating the use of heavy equipment to increase the speed and quantity of rubble removed.

USAID/OFDA grantees are guiding rubble removal efforts and the recovery of affected areas through a neighborhood-based approach featuring an incremental process of building confidence among neighborhood residents to participate in the recovery of their communities, working with residents to map land holdings, and mediating tenure-related conflicts, when necessary. In the interest of “building back better,” grantees also engaged with communities to reconfigure neighborhoods, thereby improving pre-earthquake conditions and reducing vulnerability to future disasters. The neighborhood approach is being supported, in part, by a larger project featuring Haitian Diaspora planning, architecture, and engineering professionals to assist both implementing partners and the GoH to formulate neighborhood-level and city-wide plans that can facilitate increased shelter production in new and innovative ways.

Recent data indicate that the January 2011 population of spontaneous settlements throughout the earthquake-affected area is approximately 810,000 people, a decline of approximately 690,000 people since July. Although it is not yet clear where people have gone, or if their shelter situation has improved, emerging anecdotal evidence suggests that returns to green-tagged structures are increasing in areas where rubble has been removed, services are beginning to be restored, and other shelter activity—hosting support, transitional shelter construction, and “yellow” structure repairs—is occurring. Rubble removal thus appears to be a prime motivator for returns, and returns are a key factor in promoting recovery. As such, international community support of additional rubble removal and disposal efforts is a critical priority. Finally, the benefits of such efforts will be enhanced if they are guided by the neighborhood-based approach being implemented by USAID/OFDA and other donors.