

B.4 Supporting host families as shelter options

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The vast majority of the people left homeless after a crisis, before they are assisted by local governments and humanitarian actors, frequently stay with friends, relatives and even strangers, in order to cope. The assistance provided by generous individuals and families who open their homes and hearts to stranded individuals has come to be known as host family support. Host family support is rooted in the willingness of people, whether compelled by family, friendship or community ties, or simply compassion for others, to help those in need. Hosted households rarely pay for support they receive; however, when they do they usually pay at a discounted rate.

Host family support plays a critical role in humanitarian assistance by temporarily making access available to a space where displaced households sleep, eat, play, rest, relax, and engage in social and economic activities, until they secure more permanent housing solution. Unfortunately, the failure to support host family arrangements in times of crisis often leads to poor living conditions, erosion of livelihoods, assets and savings for both the hosted and the hosting families, abuse and exploitation, strained relationships and social stigma.

Few families and their communities are able to support hosted households for long periods of time if unassisted. Host families share not only their personal space but also frequently their food, income, and livelihoods with displaced individuals. This sharing of limited resources may hinder the host family's own resilience to future shocks. Communities share their (often limited) access to basic services such as schools or health services which can reduce, in the short-term at least, the quality of those services and undermine the welfare of the community.

This pressure on host families and their communities explains why most hosting support arrangements, especially those that are not supported by humanitarian organisations and other actors, tend to be short-lived and may hinder the capacity of the affected population to recover from the crisis.

Supporting host family arrangements has become increasingly popular in recent years. Hosting arrangements have been supported by governments, non-governmental organisations, and, more recently, by the private sector and the public to meet urgent shelter needs, post-crisis. The support provided to host family arrangements has included:

- Housing upgrades to improve comfort, safety and privacy.



Numerous forms of hosting were supported in Kosovo in 1999-2000, including conversion of outbuildings such as this farm storage shed.

Photo: Charles Setchell, USAID/OFDA

- Distribution of household items (e.g. toiletries and bedding).
- Rent-subsidies or cash-assistance to compensate for increased utility fees or for lost income-generating assets.
- Upgrading basic services in host communities including schools, clinics, and water and sanitation systems.
- Providing vocational training, remedial classes, and other forms of livelihoods support to increase access to income-generating opportunities.

Potential problems with hosting

Support to host family arrangements, similarly to other sheltering options, has its drawbacks.

In addition to being a burden to those involved, host family arrangements are difficult to identify and target, especially in urban areas. The assistance provided has to be, to a great extent, tailored to the needs of each household, which makes shelter projects heavily reliant on large numbers of survey staff and community mobilisers, which may make delivery of assistance time-consuming.

Host family arrangements can also expose vulnerable individuals, especially women and children, to abuse and exploitation. It is also hard to separate disaster-induced needs from chronic needs, as hosting arrangements may not be used exclusively to cope with disasters and conflict.

Hosting arrangements are vulnerable to informal eviction and have proven to last longer only when family and friends are involved.

When hosting works

Support to host family arrangements can, however, be beneficial for both the organisation providing the assistance and the people receiving the assistance. Hosting support is one of the most cost-efficient and effective ways to assist large displaced populations over extended periods of time, especially when compared with other sheltering alternatives such as the construction of transitional shelters or the upgrading of buildings.

Hosting arrangements have the potential to evolve into permanent housing, especially for displaced female-headed households, orphans and the elderly. Hosting support prevents further displacement and the associated creation of camps, which are known to be costly and difficult to upgrade, operate, and decommission.

Finally, hosting support reduces the demand for housing, thus making shelter affordable for households unable or ineligible to access humanitarian or other types of assistance.

Examples

The examples below help illustrate how host family arrangements can be supported or undermined:

Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

The Syrian crisis, which began in March 2011, has resulted in a large internal population displacement and a large flow of refugees to neighbouring countries (see case studies A.8-15 in this book). According to the UNHCR, over 3 million Syrians have found refuge in other countries. In Lebanon, a country of close to 4.2 million people, UNCHR has registered over 1,150,000 refugees as of October 2014.

In response to the refugee influx, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) allowed Syrian households to enter the country and permitted their unrestricted internal movement. The GoL has tried to prevent the establishment of refugee camps, a response that has been common in neighbouring countries.

As a result, most Syrian refugees are living in rental accommodation (of varying quality) in Lebanese communities, while only a small percentage of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon have settled in the 1,000 spontaneous camps spread throughout the country.

The US Government responded to the crisis by providing to its partners close to \$83 million to support hosting arrangements from the onset of the conflict to May 2013. A large portion of that has benefitted Syrian refugees as well as their host Lebanese families and communities. The assistance provided included rent subsidies, essential household items, vouchers, and medical and psychosocial care. More importantly, the assistance provided contributed to tackling shelter shortages in Lebanon by

rehabilitating substandard housing, and assisting host families to upgrade their homes in order to better accommodate the refugees.

New York City - Hurricane Sandy

Tropical Storm Sandy hit the United States in late October 2012, wreaking havoc in coastal areas from Florida to Maine. In New York City, the storm damaged the subway system, cut access to the city by flooding most tunnels, and disrupted the supply of electricity, running water and flooded housing in many neighbourhoods. Consequently, thousands of households were left with no place to stay.

In the aftermath of the disaster, generous households made available extra space in their homes to stranded families for free or at discounted rate through a website service normally used to facilitate people to privately rent out their homes to travellers. The website company, taking cues from its users, set up a network to connect households in need of shelter assistance with those willing to assist them. According to the company's own website, 1,400 rooms were made available to households and individuals in need of shelter in the aftermath of the storm in New York City.

Post-war Georgia, a missed opportunity

In Georgia, after the conflict with Russian in 2008, 192,000 individuals (38,400 households) were displaced. At the onset of the crisis a large share of the displaced population was hosted in cities and towns outside the conflict area. Unfortunately, few humanitarian organisations supported host family arrangements during the crisis, targeting instead families that were living in vacant buildings or collective shelters.

This acted a pull-factor for hosted families, and the few collective shelters that existed and were suitable for living in quickly became overcrowded. This in turn forced most displaced households to stay in unfinished locations which often had limited or no access to drinking water, sanitation, heating, or electricity.

The cold temperatures only worsened the living conditions of the displaced families, and humanitarian agencies rushed to make collective shelters habitable, spending a large share of their limited budgets and time in doing so.

Unfortunately, despite the improvements performed to collective shelters, the living conditions in those locations only marginally improved. Many displaced households endured tough living conditions in collective shelters for several months. If host families had been supported at the beginning of the project, the story may have been very different.