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Photo: Charles A. Setchell/USAID

◄ *Two-story transitional shelters in the Port-au-Prince neighborhood of Ravin Pintade.*

Under One Roof

▸ Promoting **transitional shelter** as both humanitarian response and permanent housing reconstruction.

By **Charles A. Setchell**, Senior Shelter, Settlements, and Hazard Mitigation Advisor, and **Eddie Argenal**, Shelter and Settlements Advisor, USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

WHEN A natural disaster damages communities, or when conflict forces people to flee their homes, housing is often the most visible loss suffered by affected populations, as well as a very tangible and all too often overlooked need. In these dire situations, humanitarians strive to respond with appropriate solutions to assist displaced people.

Transitional shelter, or *t-shelter*, has emerged in recent years as one of the most forward-looking humanitarian response sheltering options, typically using a combination of plastic sheeting and new and salvaged building materials to create functional covered living space. Once completed with the support of humanitarian actors, t-shelters have then been expanded and improved over time with more robust building materials (e.g., concrete floors, finished wood walls and windows), either through programmed activities or self-help efforts by residents. This process transforms t-shelters into permanent housing that reflect the needs and desires of the people who live in them. When these activities are also guided by community-wide efforts to plan for and provide services, infrastructure and disaster risk reduction measures, entire neighborhoods become safer and more habitable places to live and work.

T-shelters not only address immediate needs, but also serve as a cost- and time-effective approach to reengaging disaster-affected populations ... in developing a home.

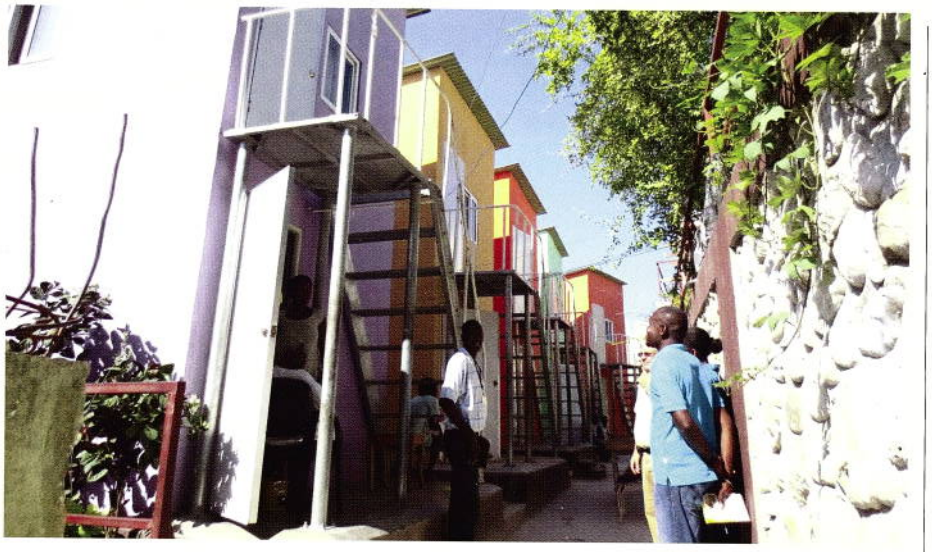
As a result, t-shelters not only address immediate needs, but also serve as a cost- and time-effective approach to reengaging disaster-affected populations in the longer-term process of developing a home. Indeed, t-shelters have performed so well in this regard that it is time to promote them as a substitute for the more conventional provision of permanent housing in post-disaster reconstruction efforts. This is especially important since efforts to provide permanent housing have been plagued with conceptual, resource, policy, and implementation challenges—all too often resulting in significant delays and cost overruns, and the provision of far fewer homes than planned.

Although donors have supported numerous t-shelter projects, three projects funded by USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) exemplify how t-shelters can respond to immediate shelter needs, while at the same time jump-starting the longer-term incremental housing development process. The following projects—constructed in different countries at different times and under divergent circumstances—demonstrate the utility of t-shelters in facilitating the recovery and reconstruction of disaster-affected communities.

DRC

USAID/OFDA's first intentionally conceived, designed and implemented t-shelter project followed the January 2002 eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano near Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Lava and ash fall damaged and destroyed housing across the city and left up to 105,000 people—many who were already vulnerable due to extreme poverty and conflict-related insecurity—in need of shelter.

With thousands of jobs lost and the economy devastated, humanitarian agencies mounted a rapid response in Goma. Responding to the security and economic concerns expressed by affected communities, and knowing that sufficient space ▸



▶ *Haiti transitional shelters upgraded to permanence in 2013.*

to accommodate residents was indeed available in Goma, USAID/OFDA provided funding to Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Concern International to combine t-shelter assistance and disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities to enhance self-sufficiency in disaster preparedness and strengthen resilience. Five thousand families received t-shelters within nine months of the eruption. Support from other donors who embraced the combined strategy assisted an additional 10,000 households. In total, USAID/OFDA contributed nearly $5 million for recovery assistance in Goma, nearly half of which supported the combined DRR and urban-based t-shelter program.

In 2012, a decade after the disaster, USAID/OFDA conducted an assessment of shelter conditions in Goma and found that approximately 90% of the 5,000 t-shelters provided in 2002 had evolved into permanent housing by 2004, and that nearly 100% of the t-shelters had become permanent housing by 2012. Almost all disaster-affected beneficiaries who continued to occupy their houses had transformed their t-shelters into permanent housing using their own funds—a substantial achievement that illustrates how t-shelters allow displaced populations to assume ownership of their housing recovery process.

Photo: Charles A. Setchell/USAID

Photo: UN-HABITAT

Bangladesh

In 2007 and 2009, two major tropical cyclones hit Bangladesh, resulting in widespread destruction. In November 2007, Cyclone Sidr ravaged southern Bangladesh with winds close to 137 miles per hour affecting 8.9 million people in 31 of the country's 64 districts. The storm killed approximately 4,200 people and injured 55,000 others, while destroying nearly 564,000 homes and damaging 955,000 more. A year and a half later, Cyclone Aila struck Bangladesh with 75 mph winds, affecting approximately 3.9 million people in 11 of the same districts previously impacted by Sidr. In total, the storm killed 190 people, injured more than 7,000 and damaged or destroyed nearly 600,000 homes.

Numerous humanitarian agencies responded in the aftermath of the storms, including USAID/OFDA, which funded CRS and Caritas to provide approximately 4,000 transitional shelters, incorporating numerous flood- and wind-resistant mitigation measures. During a July 2013 assessment of the response, USAID/OFDA staff visited communities in Bangladesh's heavily affected Khulna Division and found that all assessed shelters constructed after Cyclone Sidr remained occupied by original recipients and sustained no structural damage as a result of Cyclone Aila. Many surveyed beneficiaries had gradually upgraded their shelters in the years after the cyclones by improving flooring, replacing bamboo mats in walls with corrugated iron sheets, and adding new living spaces such as kitchens and bedrooms. As in Goma, the assessment in Bangladesh confirmed the utility of transitional shelter as a platform for both promoting DRR and facilitating the longer-term, incremental housing recovery process.

Haiti

A major international disaster response was mounted after a devastating magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010. As one of the numerous donor agencies to respond, USAID/OFDA initiated a program

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Photo: UN-HABITAT

Urban Sheltering Approaches

▶ How moving from provider to enabler increased program impact in **Baghdad.**

By **Laura Heykoop** and **Fiona Kelling**, Consultants, Intarsia Ltd.

HUMANITARIAN practitioners know that working in urban areas is much more complicated than in rural settings. Population density, the higher number of stakeholders, integrated systems and an intricate web of social networks all make for a complex working environment, including for those trying to tackle shelter needs.

Conversations about urban humanitarian shelter response and recovery have moved forward considerably in recent years. However, much of the discourse has focused on adapting rural methodologies to urban contexts: for example, making greater use of cash programming or market interventions rather than undertaking more traditional material distribution or construction projects.

While adapting rural methodologies has increased the ability of organizations to provide assistance in urban areas, it has not addressed more fundamental questions about the role and approach of humanitarian actors. In a complex urban environment, how do humanitarian actors really add value?

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) program in Baghdad is an example of how a humanitarian organization has taken a wider view.

As a result of three decades of conflict and ongoing sectarian violence, the current situation in Iraq is marked by large-scale displacement, poor living conditions and increasing amounts of informal housing. ▶

Transitional Shelters

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that would ultimately become its largest-ever shelter and settlements endeavor. The office's total post-earthquake response to shelter needs exceeded $108 million, with humanitarian shelter interventions—such as hosting support, repairs to damaged houses and transitional shelter—benefitting more than 313,000 individuals. That amount equates to approximately one-fifth of the estimated 1.5 million people displaced by the earthquake. This total included the provision of more than 28,500 t-shelters, representing approximately 25% of the total population that received transitional shelters through the humanitarian community's collective efforts in Haiti.

In the densely populated and heavily damaged neighborhoods of metropolitan Port-au-Prince, innovative t-shelter activities helped initiate the rebuilding of the city in a way that accounted for community needs and environmental limitations. For example, in order to provide shelter, service improvements and risk reduction measures to the greatest number of people in the Ravin Pintade neighborhood, USAID/OFDA implementing partners CHF International and Project Concern International produced innovative two-story t-shelters that used scarce land efficiently and better reflected the reality of the teeming city. In other cases, some humanitarian community actors designed t-shelters as attached units with common walls, permitting higher densities in crowded neighborhoods.

USAID/OFDA continues to learn from its experiences with t-shelters in Haiti by engaging implementing partners on post-project evaluations, assessing performance and conducting research on earthquake- and hurricane-resistant shelter design. A September 2013 assessment of numerous completed t-shelter projects found that a significant number of t-shelters had been upgraded to permanence, either through self-recovery efforts or programmed activities. The result is far greater output than permanent housing reconstruction efforts, at greater speed, and at much lower cost. These findings are consistent with those from Goma and Bangladesh. Transitional shelter can respond to immediate sheltering needs, and it can also facilitate longer-term recovery, even in highly diverse circumstances.

The future of transitional shelter

A key challenge confronting the rapid transformation of transitional shelter to permanent housing is creating appropriate guidance and training for humanitarian actors that result in safer structures and more resilient settlements. To accomplish this, the humanitarian community must bridge the gap from traditional humanitarian relief to more permanent development activities. As the three project experiences above demonstrate, transitional shelter can bridge this gap and do it well. It can transform rapidly and offers an effective alternative to the costly and time-consuming establishment of permanent housing. Transitional shelter can, therefore, empower people to develop their shelters into permanent homes over time, in a manner that is quite familiar to them and billions of others around the world.

The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the official views of the United States Agency for International Development.

1984 and Today

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victims. We don't listen to them. Aid often arrives late. These analyses of what is wrong are the same as they were in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. … We remain good at analysis yet bad at [actual] change."

Still, Walker finds hope in truly transformative areas—such as electronic cash transfers to disaster survivors, and the use of digital tools that preclude humanitarian groups from effectively claiming "we don't know what people want." In one telling example, he notes that "Khartoum has better Internet band-width than Boston." In other words, the Global North can no longer claim the tools don't exist to hear what those in the Global South need or want.

If the momentum of the past 30 years continues, he believes the notion of improved local capacity could actually become more of a reality. The main job of Northern NGOs might eventually become one of simply "filling in the gaps."