

Hosting ‘the enemy’

Harry Jeene and Angela Rouse

In 2009 in Goma town, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), CARE International supported conflict-displaced families who were being hosted in the houses of resident families. The assistance was for both the host and the displaced families.

We noted that, in line with previous experience, most families were hosted by relatives or friends, albeit sometimes distant. A pre-existing relationship formed the basis for the hosting relationship. However, we also found a number of cases of hosting of complete strangers. Most were within the same ethnic group but we identified five cases of hosting across ethnic and linguistic barriers. The story below is one such example:

“I had been to the kiosk just before dark to buy some palm oil and flour. I met some people who asked the way to a refugee camp. They looked very tired and frightened. I told them it was still a long way and to be careful, because there was shooting going on.”

“Then I just said: “Come with me. You can stay at my house, and go to the camp tomorrow.” I came to Goma in the war of 1996, and I was displaced again in 2002 by the volcano so I guess that’s why I said it.”

“When we got home there turned out to be 18 of them in all. One of my sons grumbled about sharing the little food we had with so many but I told him to be quiet. The next day our neighbours brought food and water, and even some clothes, so our guests stayed for a few more days.”

“Well, that was nine months ago, and they are still here. It is not easy; the house is very crowded, they speak a different language and do things differently, food is expensive and work is hard to find, but what can you do?”

We thought this quite remarkable, as the longstanding conflict in the area is largely fought along ethnic and linguistic lines, with horrendous abuse of civilians by all parties.

This form of positive deviant behaviour, of ‘hosting the enemy’, might help us understand more about the dynamics of urban displacement during conflict, and possibly provide us with a new way of building peace from the bottom up. We would be very keen to hear from others who have observed a similar situation.

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Claude Mumbere fled the fighting in Rutshuru in November 2008 and found refuge with a family in Goma. He carries out odd jobs such as carpentry to contribute to his family’s upkeep with his hosts. He became one of the key members of the committee of community representatives who worked with CARE to design and implement the assistance programme for host and displaced families. His daughter Angela was born a few months into the project.



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