

Assisting displaced people: a shared responsibility

Iwuoha Chima Iwuoha

Enyimba kwe nu. When we work together, we achieve more.

My name is Iwuoha Chima Iwuoha, and I live in Aba, in Abia State, Nigeria.

During the Nigerian civil war of 1967–70, malnutrition was widespread in eastern Nigeria (then known as Biafra) and many children died of kwashiorkor, a severe form of malnutrition. In 1969, I and four of my brothers had kwashiorkor but we survived, thanks to the food relief provided by international organisations. I was 13 at the time, and when I heard my mother praising God for the food provided by the relief organisations, I told her that when I grew up, I too would supply relief to people in need.

In 1994 I set up Refugee Relief Workers International (ReRWI), a non-governmental organisation to help refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria. The first assistance we provided was to local people who had been displaced by communal violence. Houses, churches and schools had been destroyed, many had been killed, and many more people had fled in the night. We wrote to the local government chairman about the plight of the displaced. With his support, we undertook a needs assessment of some 2,000 displaced people and helped them to appoint their own leaders. The primary need that we identified, in consultation with them, was rebuilding homes. We wrote letters to advocate for support for this rebuilding programme, and the publicity we generated triggered offers of assistance from churches, displaced people's relatives and other civil society organisations.

Twenty-four years later, we are currently working with the Umunneato Obuzo community which comprises people displaced by communal conflict, who are now in temporary shelters (not in camps) and in need of food and better shelter, schooling and employment. We entered into partnership with Abia State Agency

for Community and Social Development which obtained a World Bank grant to help us provide improved shelter for the IDPs and to help them organise themselves into an IDP community association.

ReRWI participates in the Coalition of Non-Governmental Organisations in Abia State, working together to support the State government in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.¹ We face difficulties in securing grants, however,² and also suffer from the lack of training (and participation in the wider assistance community) available to local organisations like ours.

At ReRWI we have six employees, including myself, and an independent consultant. We also have 68 registered volunteers who use their various professional training and skills to serve humanity. My children and my wife

also are involved in our work. Some of our youth volunteers have now 'graduated' from ReRWI and are employed by agencies overseas. One works in a refugee camp in Germany, for example, and another is employed by an agency in the United States.

I have learned over the years that humanitarian assistance is a shared responsibility, never to be carried by one person or one agency, no matter how rich or powerful. We need networking, collaboration, partnership. And when I am too old, younger people will take my place and continue in the same spirit of working together to help others.

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1. bit.ly/NigerianVoice-AbiaStateNGOs

2. We are currently seeking support for the Umunneato community rehabilitation project and for a nationwide mapping exercise of out-of-camp IDPs.

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