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Choice in shelter solutions in Somalia

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Giving future residents of shelters a choice in the style of building and getting them involved in the construction is empowering and builds capacity.

The complex, inter-linked and multi-dimensional humanitarian challenges in Somalia require equally complex responses in order to be able to bolster the resilience of Somali people. The Somalia Shelter Cluster (SSC) and its partners have historically provided emergency assistance to newly displaced people; however, since the beginning of 2013 the overall security situation has progressively improved, allowing the SSC members to place more emphasis on more durable and sustainable shelter solutions for persons who have been displaced for protracted periods. The SSC identified land tenure, urban planning and livelihood development, private sector engagement, and sustainable solutions as the four key elements to consider.

Land tenure is the most problematic of these, with more than 1.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Somalia, often living in makeshift shelters and at significant risk of forcible eviction. In the urban centres to which many are attracted, humanitarian and development actors have begun engagement with government counterparts on planning initiatives to avoid environmental degradation and the creation of slums.

SSC partners have recognised the importance of investing in shelter solutions for refugee returns too and have embarked on exercises to avoid tensions between returnees and the existing local urban poor and IDP groups. This involves integrated programming with strong linkages with water and sanitation infrastructure, and with the education, health, protection and livelihood sectors. There are in addition strong opportunities to engage with the private construction sector to support a sustainable approach for the urban poor and displaced populations.

The Dollow experience

In Dollow, where IDPs continue to arrive, extensive and lengthy consultation and engagement with the local authorities, community elders and IDP camp managers have allowed identification of the most vulnerable households – drawn from both the IDP camps and the host community in order to foster social cohesion. The local authorities have ensured that land will be made available to the selected IDP beneficiaries and the land tenure arrangements will safeguard against eviction, although they do not allow sale or transfer of the property.

In one programme run by an SSC member, prototypes of shelters of different types were constructed to similar budgets and the beneficiaries were given the information on the different aspects of each type. They were then allowed to choose a shelter type based on their needs and preferences. The three different prototypes were made of cement blocks, stabilised soil blocks and corrugated iron sheets. Less than 20% of the beneficiaries opted for the cement house;



An IDP family with their new shelter in Dollow, Somalia. "I selected the cement-block house because the size is good for my family and it is cool inside."



Somalia Humanitarian Fund shelter project, Somalia.

the rest opted for the larger corrugated iron sheet house, with adequate space and privacy being the main determining factors for their selection. It would be useful to do further research to better understand the choices that the beneficiaries made.

With a view to empowerment, community members were engaged in the building of their own houses, which enabled them to learn important skills (and thereby to increase their livelihood opportunities) and to have a greater sense of ownership.

The Kismaayo experience

Another project undertaken by SSC partners was in the city of Kismaayo, where in 2013 most IDPs lived in former government buildings, or were making settlements on government land. A wave of evictions to free up a number of these public facilities greatly exacerbated an already dire situation. From 2014, the local government counterparts worked closely with the SSC and its member organisations in securing longer-term land tenure solutions. An initial allocation of permanent land was deemed too far away and dangerous by the IDPs but at the end of 2015 the administration was able to find permanent

suitable land on the outskirts of the city.

To promote an informed choice, two model types were piloted in the area based on local building culture which takes into account locally available resources, and adapted to social constraints, local climate and natural risks. The potential of local building culture is often not sufficiently considered in construction programmes, even though solutions based on local culture

help to put beneficiaries at the centre of the decision-making process. After soil testing and looking at the quality of the stabilised soil blocks, a pilot soil-block house was built in one of the communities surrounding the relocation site. Another model made from plywood was also made at a similar cost in order to provide the beneficiaries with choices.

Community leaders from both the host and IDP communities were invited to visit the project and give their views. The communities overwhelmingly chose the soil-block house over the plywood structure and have subsequently been involved in the construction of their houses. The associated training and capacity building have resulted in several small businesses being set up and other members of the community employing these trained people to build new housing and extensions to existing housing in the area.

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