

THINKING OUTSIDE THE TENT: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SHELTER SECTOR ACTIVITIES

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Good morning to all, and thank you for the opportunity to speak among peers and colleagues.

I don't get to do much leisure reading these days, but I've been reading about evolution of late.

And, along with millions of other Americans, I had the opportunity to watch a special public television program on our Civil War this past week.

Why do I talk of these two seemingly unrelated topics, and why do I mention them in this forum?

Throughout the Civil War special, several pictures were shown of tent camps. It became clear to me rather quickly that we have not—and here's where the evolution comes in—**evolved** much in 140 years, for the refugee and IDP camps of today look all too similar to the Civil War camps of yesteryear. True, the materials have no doubt improved, but the form of the camp, and the size and shape of the tents, have not evolved in any significant way in at least 140 years.

We need to think outside the tent, as we know it, and do a much better job of providing families with shelter.

I'll tell you another story: I worked as an urban planning consultant in Asia for eight years before assuming my current position at OFDA nearly five years ago. My last project as a consultant was undertaking the economic analysis, environmental assessment, and urban design for a new city of 45,000 people in Indonesia.

¹ Affiliation is for identification purposes only. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The link between:

- Creating a new city
- Those Civil War tent camps of long ago, and the
- Refugee and IDP camps of today

reveals something that the development community has known for some time, but the humanitarian community somehow remains largely ignorant of:

Basic site planning can reduce development and operations costs by 30 to 35 percent.

That the humanitarian community has not embraced this fact over the past 20 years has resulted in the loss of millions of dollars.

During our time here, and in subsequent discussions and reviews of papers, I'd like to think that we are evolving with regard to:

- New shelter products
- New thinking on how those products are applied in the field, and
- More importantly, how shelter sector activities can be informed by basic and commonplace design and economic analysis that has been occurring in the development community for at least several years

I'd like to think, for example, that we can **look at settlements as markets** that, with a bit of analysis, can reveal needs, impacts, resources, and opportunities, and hopefully forestall the formulaic application of tents and tent camps, when in fact those products are not always needed. The point here is that **context is important, and intervening in settlements must be informed by developmental thinking.**

All too often, the humanitarian community acts like ambulance chasers, running to the rubble, and bypassing all the shelter resources and opportunities needed to provide disaster-affected people with shelter. For example, in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where I worked earlier this year, roughly 20 percent of the housing stock was destroyed by a volcanic eruption, but few recalled that 80 percent of stock was undamaged. This portion of stock became the focal point for a successful transitional shelter program.

I'm not a free market capitalist by any stretch, so why this orientation?

Unlike almost every other humanitarian sector output, shelter is a tangible, **private** good, and thus subject to all the uses and abuses of private goods. Who, then, becomes a "beneficiary" of shelter programs, and who doesn't, is something akin to winning or losing the lottery.

Furthermore, what the humanitarian community provides in terms of the private goods we call shelter should be driven by simple guidelines—not standards, but guidelines—that are:

- Reasonable
- Appropriate, and
- Universally-recognized

These guidelines should be understandable to generalists, should be frameworks for action, rather than inert blueprints, and should seek to provide a **transition** from whatever passes as emergency shelter to more permanent housing solutions. I think it's almost arrogant that the humanitarian community claims to provide emergency shelter, for those who are directly affected by disasters and crises do that well before we typically show up, if we do show up. At its best, then, the provision of transitional shelter can more expeditiously facilitate the movement toward the recovery and regeneration of people and settlements. Transitional shelter can thus provide a powerful—and I'd argue, heretofore highly underutilized—economic stimulus to recovery and regeneration.

If this is the case, we shouldn't wait; it's never too early to start thinking and acting on shelter issues. Unfortunately, the humanitarian community does wait, all too often. After all, people:

- Are displaced from what?
- Want to go back to what?
- Provide for most, if not all, of their basic needs, however modest, in what?

That we don't ask these three questions more often is one big reason why shelter is considered such a low priority in the humanitarian community.

I hope we can change that, starting here, and starting now.

Thank you for listening. Let's get to work.