

PRACTICE NOTE

Exploring Unintended Social Side Effects of Tent Distribution Practices in Post-Earthquake Haiti

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The January 2010 earthquake devastated Haiti's¹ social, economic and health infrastructure, leaving 2 million persons—one-fifth of Haiti's population—homeless. Internally displaced persons relocated to camps, where human rights remain compromised due to increased poverty, reduced security, and limited access to sanitation and clean water. This article draws on findings from 3 focus groups conducted with internally displaced young women and 3 focus groups with internally displaced young men (aged 18–24) in Leogane, Haiti to explore post-earthquake tent distribution practices. Focus group findings highlighted that community members were not engaged in developing tent distribution strategies. Practices that distributed tents to both children and parents, and linked food and tent distribution, inadvertently contributed to “chaos”, vulnerability to violence and family network breakdown. Moving forward we recommend tent distribution strategies in disaster contexts engage with community members, separate food and tent distribution, and support agency and strategies of self-protection among displaced persons.

It's the way the NGO's distributing the help, which is causing this increase [in violence]. They should be seeking out the head of the households; they shouldn't be offering it to children. The mother has a tent, the brother has a tent and everyone gets a tent. And once everyone has their own tent, they offer them each some food. So they're each grown-ups at this point. But in fact the distribution should go to the head of the home to avoid all of this chaos.

—Internally displaced, 18-year-old male, Leogane, Haiti

Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, was devastated by the January 2010 earthquake that led to the collapse of its fragile social, economic and health infrastructure (UNAIDS 2011; IOM 2013). One year following the earthquake, one million people were housed in tents (UNICEF 2011). Almost three years following the earthquake, approximately 350,000 people were still living in tents and required basic services and protection (IOM 2013). The collapse of social infrastructure and community networks, and increased poverty and sexual violence, have been reported as serious problems in Haiti's internally displaced persons (IDP) camps (IASC 2010; Madre 2011; UNAIDS 2011).

As indicated by the opening quotation, and corroborated in evaluations of the international response to Haiti's earthquake, there is a need to better account for context and

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engage communities in designing appropriate disaster interventions (IOM 2013; Patrick 2011). Another emerging lesson from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) humanitarian responses in Haiti is the need to examine the unplanned social side effects of disaster responses (Patrick 2011). Few studies have focused on the unintended social impacts of tent distribution approaches in post-earthquake Haiti. This practice note outlines qualitative findings from internally displaced youth in Leogane, Haiti regarding perceived social side effects of post-earthquake tent distribution practices and their implications for civilian protection.

Background

The January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti resulted in approximately 220,000 deaths and 300,000 people injured and left 2 million persons – 20 per cent of Haiti's population – homeless (Patrick 2011; UNAIDS 2011). As a result, more than one million IDPs relocated to spontaneous settlements or camps (IOM 2013; UNICEF 2011). Challenges with safety, sanitation, and access to safe and clean water in these IDP camps present serious health risks and compromise human rights (Schuller 2010; Human Rights Watch 2012). Human Rights Watch (2012) described the earthquake and cholera epidemics as humanitarian crises that exacerbated pre-existing human rights (and human security) concerns such as violence against women and girls.

The breakdown of the government and private sectors, in combination with the already fragile economic infrastructure, compromised Haiti's ability to lead and manage the earthquake response (Kristoff and Panarelli 2010; Patrick 2011). The international NGO emergency earthquake response was deemed largely successful, providing millions with food, water, and emergency shelter material (IOM 2013; Patrick 2011). Yet the response also faced serious critiques as the vast majority of donated aid was provided to – and remains with – international NGOs rather than the Haitian government and

local agencies (Kristoff and Panarelli 2010; Schuller 2010). Ideally new humanitarianism approaches to civilian protection *should* integrate both relief and development initiatives to promote self-protection, agency, and human rights. Yet often the sheer number of actors involved in relief and development work – as well as the multiplicity of approaches within and between these fields – may compromise the ability of humanitarian assistance to integrate effective violence mitigation strategies (Suarez and Black 2012). Challenges in providing both relief and violence prevention were evident in post-earthquake development responses in Haiti (Patrick 2011). As noted above, this paper aims to examine lessons learned from the unintended social side effects of NGO responses in order to inform practice and policy in future disaster response situations.

We conducted a qualitative investigation in partnership between researchers in Canada, the United States and a community-based organization in Leogane, Haiti. We held 6 focus groups: 3 with internally displaced young men (age 18–19: n=10; age 20–21: n=10; age 22–24: n=10) and internally displaced young women (age 18–19: n=10; age 20–21: n=10; age 22–24: n=10). Participants were purposively sampled by six peer research assistants, three men and three women, selected from internally displaced youth in the same age range (Mertens 2005; Trochim and Donnelly 2008).² We used a semi-structured focus group interview guide to explore social and structural contexts of violence.³ This practice note examines responses from the focus groups regarding internally displaced youth's perception of tent distribution practices, with the aim of enhancing understanding the processes and conditions that can produce harmful and unintended social side effects.

What Happened?

Emerging lessons from the Haiti disaster response included the need to (a) meaningfully engage with communities and community leaders, (b) customize responses to local

contexts and socio-political dynamics and (c) foster strong community relationships, norms and values (IOM 2013; Patrick 2011). Focus group findings revealed that the tent distribution practices failed to address these factors. As a result a number of problems with deleterious consequences for the community emerged. These included: (i) failure to engage with community members and leaders; (ii) “chaos” and the unintended effects of increased violence; and (iii) breakdown of family networks. Each of these three points is elaborated below.

First, there was a clear absence of community consultation regarding how many tents were appropriate for families. As outlined in the opening quote, an internally displaced young man noted that NGOs should have sought out guidance and consulted the “head of the households”; providing children with tents may have shifted the power away from parents to best determine the needs of their family. Also, linking food distribution for families with the number of tents could be problematic, as families may have sought additional tents to receive much needed food supplies. Food distribution practices in post-earthquake Haiti have been critiqued as unorganized and operating from a top-down approach, at times resulting in people going to multiple camps in order to acquire sufficient food supplies (INURED 2010; Schuller 2010).

Second, “chaos” and violence were attributed to practices in which multiple tents were provided per family. The opening quotation directly relates the increased violence among IDP to “the way the NGO’s are distributing the help”. This increased violence appeared to be exacerbated for girls and women, corroborating recommendations to apply a gender analysis to disaster responses (Patrick 2011). As one 20-to-21-year-old internally displaced woman stated:

There is more violence. The family is living in camps and are somewhat separated. The kids make their own little house and then the parents have

no control, this now opens the door for rape and violence.

The preceding discussion suggests that recommendations to ensure that post-earthquake humanitarian interventions were gender sensitive (Patrick 2011) did not appear to have been integrated into tent distribution policies, as participants described a lack of security within the IDP camps and vulnerability of girls and women to sexual violence. Researchers have long drawn attention to the need for gender-specific considerations in IDP camps; for example, although gender segregated toilets were recommended they were not implemented in the majority of Haiti’s IDP camps (Schuller 2010).

Third, the separation of family members resulted in a lack of supervision of parents over youth. This lack of parental supervision compromised the ability to protect the youth from violence, as well as control other activities, such as adolescent sexual engagement. As one internally displaced young man between the ages of 18 and 19 noted:

Since the earthquake people are having more sex due to lack of supervision. Families living in two or three tents instead of under the same roof as their parents and so more sexual activity is happening, whether it is consensual or rape.

The opening quotation illustrates that this lack of supervision resulted in children becoming “grown-ups” because they were provided with their own tents. Unaccompanied children and youth in Haiti’s IDP camps are particularly vulnerable to forced labor and trafficking, highlighting the importance of maintaining family unity where possible (Human Rights Watch 2012; IOM 2013).

Going Forward

This study highlights the deleterious impacts of tent distribution practices in post-earthquake Haiti that provided multiple tents per family without community consultation.

Participant narratives revealed that NGO tent distribution practices inadvertently contributed to violence and a sense of chaos by separating families and reducing the control that parents had over their children. Interventions should focus on protecting internally displaced children and youth from violence, and in the case of post-earthquake Haiti, this could have been better realized by practices that (a) maintained family unity rather than separating families into separate tents and (b) enhanced safety and security measures, particularly to benefit the most vulnerable populations, such as children, girls and women, within IDP camps.

Previous reviews of Haiti earthquake responses have highlighted the immense pressures that international humanitarian agencies felt following the earthquake, and the urgency to act that may have presented barriers from consulting with communities regarding appropriate responses (Patrick 2011). We acknowledge the complexity and challenge of quickly responding to disaster situations, and provide this practice note to add to this ongoing dialog and draw further attention to the unintended social side effects of aid.

The gender-specific impacts of the humanitarian responses in post-earthquake Haiti have largely been overlooked (Patrick 2011; Schuller 2010) and women have been under-represented in reconstruction decision-making processes (Human Rights Watch 2012). Patrick (2011) reviewed post-earthquake humanitarian reports and evaluations and noted: "The sample of reports had relatively little to say about the effectiveness of the international response in terms of addressing women's empowerment and the specific needs of Haitian women, men, girls and boys" (11). Our findings clearly highlight the vulnerability of internally displaced youth in Haiti, with particular implications for understanding social contexts of gender-based sexual violence among girls and women in IDP camps. It is essential to involve grassroots organizations in planning and delivery strategies to reduce sexual violence and to ensure

their success (MADRE 2011). The Integrated Strategic Framework for the United Nations in Haiti supports social rebuilding strategies to protect vulnerable groups – such as internally displaced children and women – from violence, abuse and exploitation (IOM 2013).

Following the humanitarian NGO response to Haiti's 2010 earthquake, researchers have made numerous recommendations, including: building the capacity and expertise of Haiti's government and local agencies (IOM 2013; Kristoff and Panarelli 2010; Patrick 2011); fostering collaboration between NGOs and Haiti's local authorities (IOM 2013; Kristoff and Panarelli 2010; Schuller 2010); having international NGOs sign the internationally recognized NGO Code of Conduct⁴ (Health Alliance International 2009; Schuller 2010); and establishing guidelines to protect displaced persons from sexual exploitation and abuse (IASC 2010). Including communities most affected by disasters in assessing, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating disaster responses are central to the Sphere Project's (2011) Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee's (2010) global review of protection from sexual exploitation and abuse for displaced persons includes community engagement strategies such as raising community awareness and establishing effective community complaint mechanisms. These documents may serve as important guides for NGOs engaging in tent distribution to IDPs.

These approaches also reflect the latest dialogue on civilian protection that acknowledges that to survive in disaster contexts people "rely on a sophisticated knowledge and assessment of their environment while simultaneously deploying and adapting their coping strategies" (Suarez and Black, 2012: 1). Recognizing and building on these survival resources and strategies is key to facilitating social and structural processes that foster civilian agency and self-protection.

We recommend that NGOs consult with local community leaders and families regarding tent distribution policies in disaster con-

texts such as post-earthquake Haiti. There are over 27 million IDPs globally (IDMC 2011), so our findings can potentially inform tent distribution and other humanitarian relief practices in other contexts. Specifically, we recommend that: (a) community leaders and heads of households (including men and women) are consulted with and educated about tent distribution practices and the potential social side effects for children and youth and have a meaningful role in determining the number of tents appropriate for their family; (b) food distribution should not be dependent on the number of tents per family; and (c) further attention is given to understanding and supporting agency and strategies of self-protection among displaced persons.

We do not suggest that forcing a large family to live under one tent is a panacea to violence or family breakdown, and we recognize there could be diverse detrimental impacts of too many persons living in one tent. Rather, we encourage thoughtful and creative responses in disasters that promote family unity and child protection, such as providing families with larger tents and enhancing security in IDP camps. These practice recommendations should be integrated into a larger movement towards meaningful community engagement and consultation in NGO practices in disaster contexts to ensure that social side effects are not only minimized but also prevented where possible.

Notes

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- ² All participants provided informed consent. Research Ethics Board approval was attained from Women's College Research Institute at the University of Toronto and Adelphi University.
- ³ Focus groups were conducted in Kreyol, digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim,

translated into English, entered into NVivo 8 qualitative analysis software and examined using thematic analysis to identify, analyze and report themes in the data (Braun and Clark 2006; Creswell 1998).

- ⁴ The NGO Code of Conduct includes community engagement in priority setting and capacity building as well as working with oppressed populations to enhance safety and protection (Health Alliance International 2009).

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