

IDP Camps – the least worst option for the earthquake’s homeless

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Abstract: *Based on a qualitative and quantitative study of 16 camps in Delma, this article identifies factors that tie the population to the camps and which need to be addressed if they are to be closed. Very low incomes that prevent access to rented accommodation, a preference for keeping children in school rather than paying for housing, and the importance of social ties as a means of leveraging cash are highlighted, as well as the undesirability of alternative forms of low income accommodation. Access to jobs or income-generating opportunities are preferred by camp residents to rental support because they are understood to be more sustainable and should be promoted as an essential element of any housing policy.*



Rezime: *Atik sa a baze sou yon etid kantitatif epi kalitatif pou 16 kan nan Delma. Atik la parèt ak plizyè faktè ki konekte popilasyon an ak kan yo. Si pou kan sa yo fèmen, yo dwe konsidere divès faktè ki nan atik la. Nan atik sa a, sa ki parèt se: sitiyasyon kote lajan moun yo touche a tèlman piti, yo pa kab peye kay pou yo rete, moun yo pito depanse lajan pou yo voye pitit yo lekòl tan pou yo peye kay pou yo rete, genyen tou, relasyon nan zanmitay kòm mwayen pou fè lajan, se menm jan an tou, genyen yon dezenteresman pou chèche lòt mwayen pou fè lajan. Moun nan kan yo plis vle jwenn travay oubyen chèche mwayen pou yo fè lajan tan pou yo ta rete tann pou èd pou yo peye lwaye yo, paske se sa ki ap pèmèt yo reponsab tèt yo. Sa pi enpòtan pou pase tout politik piblik ki ap fèt pou lojman.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Three years after the calamity of Haiti’s January 2010 earthquake, the camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) that sprung up immediately after the event are still home to 320,051 people [1]. Living conditions there are wretched. As well as being cramped, dirty and overcrowded, appalling sanitation ensures that the spectre of cholera hangs ever-present in the shadows, worn out shelters leave residents to cope with constant exposure to extremes of heat and damp, while the inhabitants are frequently plagued by hunger and infestations of rats. Flimsy dwellings provide no protection from theft or physical attacks, while women in particular suffer from being without the least vestige of any privacy. All this places enormous strain on people who live there, who were already victims of the tragedy that first made them homeless. A sense of discrimination by the wider population, combined with threats and harassment from land owners and vulnerability to hazards of various descriptions, add to the sense of ill-being. As such, the government and international community are justified in focusing their attention on eliminating them.

Nevertheless, it is a testimony to people’s resilience that they have adjusted to their new lives and try to make the best of a bad situation. Small initiatives have been taken to improve conditions: individuals planting a small vegetable plot here, for instance, or clubbing together to dig a new latrine there. In part, this adaptation has been possible because of a few small factors that anchor them to the location where they live and which are crucial in helping them survive even in such difficult

circumstances. A recent study identifies a number of these elements, which will need to be taken into consideration if a sustainable solution to the problem of camps and urban deprivation more generally is to be found.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study in question was undertaken on behalf of Oxfam-Quebec from April-June 2012¹. It sought to gain a better understanding of the profile of the population living in camps where the organisation had previously carried out emergency activities, and particularly their livelihood and coping strategies. The research focused on 16 smaller IDP camps in the upper Delma area of metropolitan Port-au-Prince, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. These encompassed a survey based on a representative sample of 279 household members, selected on a random basis from lists drawn up by Oxfam-Quebec’s WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) facilitators in each camp, combined with focus groups, observation and participatory workshops [2]. Interviews were conducted face-to-face by a team of specially trained research assistants using a pre-tested questionnaire, after seeking prior verbal consent from participants. Contingency tables were used to help analyse the resulting quantitative data, while qualitative ►

1. A full report of the findings is contained in *Viv Tankou Moun: une enquête dans 16 camps de déplacés dans la commune de Delmas*, which can be obtained from Oxfam-Québec. A summary in English and French can be found at <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/viv-tankou-moun-haiti-summary-101212-en.pdf>

information was analysed thematically and used to triangulate the findings. Given that the camps were selected because of their relationship with the commissioning organisation rather than on the basis of a probability sample taken from all of Haiti's IDP camps, the survey results cannot be generalised to all locations. They are nonetheless reasonably typical in certain respects, particularly of the smaller sites which constitute the majority of camps still open.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Camp residents are similar to other sectors of the urban poor

The camps in question have an estimated population of 3,625, among them a disproportionately high number of under-5s and young adults when compared with the wider population. Close to half the households with children are headed by single parents (44%), mostly women, adding to their vulnerability and limiting their ability to look for work. Educational attainment is low: more than half (57%) of the household heads have not got beyond primary level schooling.

The vast majority of the adult population are unemployed or work in the informal sector: two-thirds of the women in work are street traders (*machann*), with a smaller number employed as domestic labour, while the men are most frequently active in the construction industry, generally as casual labour, receiving only very irregular incomes. There is a striking absence of anyone with a stable job in the formal sector (only 3% work in the private sector; none are employed by the state). Only a small proportion, 12%, were home owners before the earthquake². Such a profile places the population squarely among the poorest of urban dwellers, with very few assets at their disposal other than their unskilled labour. The participants survive by sending their older children and elderly dependents to live elsewhere, by tightening their belts still further (54% say they ate only once the previous day, while a further 5% - 12 out of 15 of whom were women - had had no meal at all³), by sharing and reciprocity, and by borrowing, sometimes at exceedingly high interest rates⁴. Yet most of these characteristics are not unique to camps but are - at least to an extent - shared by many of the inhabitants of the capital's slums, who also endure unacceptably bad living conditions.

2. This figure, and other findings, tallies closely with those from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

3. Also of potential concern given the health risks involved is the fact that women state that they try to save money by economizing on the considerable expenditure that has to be made on water for household use.

4. A rate equivalent to 166% annually was said by participants to be common, in which case 'you work for the person who lends you the money, not for yourself'. As well as money, goods are offered up front to be repaid later from any earnings at similar rates of interest.

3.2 So what roots people in IDP camps in spite of the appalling conditions?

There is a lack of data that would help identify what distinguishes camp populations from those in other poor areas of the metropolitan area. Certainly, the camp residents have in the main been directly affected by the earthquake. As well as their homes, many of the study participants lost jobs or relatives who had previously provided them with financial support. This would seem to give the lie to the myth that people in camps are simply rent-seekers, keeping a stake in the settlements in order to benefit from handouts from the humanitarian community. But it seems unlikely that low incomes and the impact of the earthquake are the only factors.

3.2.1 Too poor to rent

The obvious and almost certainly the single most forceful answer - and one which has formed the basis of the government-backed 16/6 rental subsidy and neighbourhood improvement programme - is that they simply cannot afford other accommodation. Indeed, this was the reason most frequently cited in the study to explain why the participants still live in camps, and a small number (3%) of participants had actually joined the camps despite being unaffected by the earthquake precisely because they were unable to renew their rent. Clearly, for a group of people who were found to have already reduced the quality and quantity of their food intake and who regularly trade off expenditure on transport for medical care, the cost of housing in Port-au-Prince is too high and they have no acceptable alternative.

3.2.2 Education over housing

Yet it is noteworthy that a significant majority continue to send their children to school, despite the fact that education is also a serious burden on people with low incomes. It is therefore possible to interpret this as meaning that in some cases people prefer to forgo rental payments and continue to live in camps precisely *in order* to maintain their children's education (including the heavy costs of packed lunches that children take to school, which emerged as a major drain on incomes during the participatory exercises that were conducted).

3.2.3 A place of your own

An additional factor against which camp residents assess their options is the unattractiveness of alternative forms of accommodation. Prior to the earthquake, 11% of survey respondents had been staying with friends or relatives (*ladesant*), indicating that they already had a pre-existing housing problem. An unknown number of IDPs have been taken in by host families since the earthquake, as has been the case during previous and subsequent emergencies, but their situation has never attracted much attention or resources [3]. While sheltering relatives at times of crisis acts as an important coping mechanism in Haiti, it is often an unpopular one for those who are obliged to use this option



Figure 1 Eking out a hand-to-mouth existence in Didine Camp

over an extended period. Several study participants emphasised that by living in a camp they are able to avoid having to adopt this strategy. They are uncomfortable with such arrangements because of the dependency it creates in a situation where extra mouths to feed become a serious burden on already poor families, generating conflicts within the extended household.

3.2.4 Proximity to social networks and markets

The exact location of a given camp also brings certain non-negligible advantages to its inhabitants which they are unwilling to jeopardise by moving to other locations, where the quality of housing may be only marginally better. The vast majority of study participants (82%) live in camps close to their former place of residence and a number attribute a value to remaining close to schools. Although they may well have previously lived in informal housing, the residents of the camps in this study have tended to live in better-off areas, away from the main slums. The *machann* (women street traders) rely on proximity to commercial centres where they can find buyers, so that living close to the Route de Delma (a major road axis) has strategic significance for them.

Moreover, remaining on familiar territory, where people are known to one another, is an additional factor to which people attach considerable importance. Given the meagre human,

physical, financial and political capital that study participants possess, social networks play a tremendously important role in their survival. Mutual exchanges and loans, whether from fellow camp residents or acquaintances from their former lives, are one of the key resources that enable the IDPs in this study to make ends meet. Without other forms of income, they cannot afford to leave these contacts behind by moving to a different location in search of cheap accommodation. In this respect, the 'consolidation' of camps that has been mooted in official circles would also be highly damaging, tearing people away from a vital resource.

3.2.5 Behind closed walls

Paradoxically, although camps can be violent and their residents undoubtedly feel acutely vulnerable, smaller camps, that are surrounded by walls, where the population knows each other, offer a level of protection that their inhabitants are unwilling to exchange for reputedly insecure neighbourhoods where they would have to live without the support they gain from close social ties. 'I don't want to save myself from the river only to find that I fall into the sea' said one participant in response to questions about living elsewhere. In other words, there are other scenarios that can be envisaged by camp residents involved in this study that they perceive to be worse than their current situation, however intolerable that might be. ►

It is worth noting that several camps have a strong church presence that is a source of strength but which also spreads a highly conservative message, and this may contribute to reducing mobility. Residents from one camp were reluctant to engage in participatory planning because of their belief in the imminent return of Christ. In addition, camp leaders tend to be aware of the political leverage that can potentially be obtained from the relative visibility of camps in the more prominent locations, and attempt to play this card for both personal and collective benefit.

3.2.6 *Urban ties*

Despite the desire in some quarters to reverse the consequences of the urban drift experienced over recent decades, few participants are interested in moving back to rural areas. For them, any ties they had to other parts of the country have largely broken down after having spent the greater part of their lifetimes living in the city. Those who are prepared to consider a return to their place of origin tend to be older and stress that they cannot do so in the absence of any resources to sustain them.

3.2.7 *Household structures adjust to circumstances*

The study provides evidence to corroborate IOM's finding [4] that the household structure in the camps is gradually thinning out. There is a notable absence of some of the weakest groups of society – the elderly and the handicapped – as well as, to an extent, older children. Restructuring is one way that families find to cope with the shocks to which they are subjected, and it would appear that they have been able to find alternatives for their weakest members and for children who no longer rely on their mothers' care, leaving the economically active able to focus their energies on searching for an income. We do not know enough about the circumstances in which these other family members are living, but we can presume that they have not escaped serious disadvantage even though it is outside a camp setting. Once again, the link with broader poverty points to the need to look for answers to more structural problems rather than seeking a quick fix to the camps alone.

Tangentially, IOM [4] has recently found an increase in the proportion of younger men living in the camps as compared with 2010. This tendency is sometimes interpreted pejoratively as a deliberate strategy to take advantage of any handouts to be gained from a foothold in the camps, but in reality there has been little material gain for the inhabitants of most of the sites. Instead, it is important to understand the legitimate aspirations of a growing sector of the population who otherwise have few prospects. It hardly seems unreasonable for youth to wish to lead independent adult lives, as in the case of one young man who lives in a camp while his family of 7 live in a single room near by. Once again, people accept the risks and discomfort of living in camps because it is the least bad option available to them.

4. CONCLUSION - A CHANCE TO EARN A LIVING

Thus, three years after the earthquake, camps are fairly deeply entrenched. Both the Oxfam-Quebec study [2] and IOM [4] indicate that the overwhelming majority of the camp population have been living in the same environment since 2010. Numbers may be falling, but without further outside intervention this is likely to be just a trickle and there is the potential for the trend to be reversed, particularly if economic conditions deteriorate any further. Camp living has become a survival strategy for those who are already close to rock bottom, and forced closure, as is widely threatened – sometimes violently – by the private landowners of most of the remaining sites, can only exacerbate hardship without resolving the underlying issues. Indeed, 7% of the population surveyed in the study reported here had come to the camp in question following the closure of another.

Current policy prescriptions are focused on rental support but the success of this strategy has yet to be proven over the longer-term. In a recent evaluation of housing cash grants [5], at least 60% of recipients moved out of the accommodation found with this assistance, mostly to cheaper, sub-standard alternatives. Such subsidies leave no permanent trace and there appears to be a serious shortfall in the number of suitable units available⁵, even if adequate funding were to be secured. While they may stimulate improvements to housing stock, there is a danger that the benefits will ultimately accrue to sectors that are better off as the urban population continues to grow and demand for housing rises. Study participants stated categorically that whereas they want to leave the discomfort of the camps, and while they would be ready to accept such an offer if it were available to them, it does not constitute a lasting solution. A year soon passes, as several participants emphasised, and unless they are given a means to establish a viable way of making a living, they fear they will end up back at square one. Thus, the programme seems unlikely to reach all the IDPs and a return to the camps for those who have benefited once the rental period comes to an end cannot be ruled out.

Instead, research participants repeatedly pointed to their desire to secure a more regular source of income that would enable them to cover their living expenses, including accommodation, as the best way of overcoming their plight. This would give them the sense of dignity that they feel so acutely they have lost in their present circumstances. More resources should therefore probably be directed towards training, sustainable job creation and support for micro-enterprises, targeting camp residents and others drawn from groups of the extremely poor. Investment in construction and urban regeneration in earthquake-affected areas would reap benefits since they employ many of the population in question.

5. Estimates give the number at 19,000 with a further 46,000 'yellow' graded houses that could be repaired [6], compared to 87,000 households still believed to be living in camps (IOM/CCCM Cluster 2013a)

Without such measures, most IDPs in camps are likely to remain where they are because this environment is the best way they have of defending what few advantages they possess, no matter how vulnerable and how precarious they are. This does not make the conditions in camps acceptable or constitute an argument for letting the camp population fester but instead points to the need to put greater emphasis on holistic solutions. Sustainable settlements require more than addressing housing needs in isolation from other complementary sectors: they also require social bonds to be maintained intact, access to basic services, security and, above all, opportunities for making a living. These must all be taken into consideration in developing policies to tackle urban deprivation, and camps in particular. Camps are not so much a qualitatively different issue to that of urban slums and other forms of low-quality housing as a new face on an older problem with a highly visible and somewhat darker hue. Some targeting may be necessary but the best formula for global improvements to the urban environment will benefit not just IDPs but other sectors of the city's dispossessed. ■

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