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Return of refugees - emergency or development

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Return of refugees – emergency or development

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THE RETURN OF refugees from Tanzania occurred after the refugees from Goma were repatriated. This gave all those involved in the repatriation of Kibungo some advance warning and enough time to plan a response. During a meeting with UN agencies and non governmental Organisations, the local Government assigned roles to the various agencies. Oxfam and 3 other agencies, were given the duty of supplying water along the route the refugees were to take.

By this stage the route had been reconnoitred and sites for water points already proposed. Water bladders were placed every 5 to 8 km along the road and were generally to be supplied by tankers.

Occasionally the bladders were connected up to an existing source of water, in this case agreements were made with the water committees who managed the source. If the water was pumped to the source then a one off payment was also normally agreed to cover the cost of diesel or electricity.

A rapid programme of repairing handpumps on or near the route was carried out, providing water points every 1km for a total distance of about 10km. Three pumping and treatment stations were set up to supply the tankers with portable water. Two of these stations were positioned on the route fairly close to the border. These, along with the handpumps, proved to be extremely effective as they provided a permanent water supply to the returnees during the most chaotic times when the route was so congested by walkers that the water tankers were not able to pass. The further away from the border, the more the people dispersed from the main route and the easier access became, allowing deliveries of water to the bladders.

Water bladders and food stocks were placed at Open Relief Centres at the Administrative Buildings in each Commune. The Government planned that the refugees would return to their home communes to be registered and to receive food before going to their homes. It was expected people would stay two or three days here, accustoming themselves to their return and finding out about their old communities and their houses.

The numbers crossing the border reached 40,000 a day. Trucking started soon after the refugees started coming across in large numbers. Put down and pick up points were positioned just before and after major junctions; people were dropped off before the junction and had to walk across it in the direction they wanted to go where they were picked up again and continued their journey by truck. These points became major centres for water and sanitation needs, rapidly filling and emptying as fleets of trucks came

and went. The way the Tanzanian camps were organised and then emptied meant that waves of refugees tended to come from the same area so that one day typically saw the majority of refugees being trucked North and then two days later most would be trucked West. This meant that water points needed to be set up one day and then moved to a new site the next; a situation that heavily favoured bladders for their ease of installation.

Each Commune provided sanitation teams, paid for by the Oxfam and others, to clean up each day after the refugees. Each team was provided with wheelbarrows, shovels and lime for disinfection and every team member with boots, gloves and a face mask.

This whole operation proved to be extremely successful the large majority of deaths seven, was caused by cars running people over as they walked along the road (UN High Commission for Human Rights figures). This in itself was kept low as the Authorities had prevented all but essential vehicles from getting close to the border during the height of the repatriation, a measure disputed by journalists and many aid agencies but proving extremely effective in reducing the number of accidents.

This emergency response was carried out successfully in a large part by the agencies who were already working in the region before the repatriation (transport of refugees was one main sector where a specialist body, International Organisation of Migration, IOM, came in to carry out a specific role). The impending influx attracted media attention followed closely by other NGOs wanting part of the action. They carried with them a sense of urgency and a general feeling of 'We don't want another Goma on our hands', referring to the huge loss of life due to lack or preparedness for such a large and rapid exodus in 1994. The Local Authorities kept to a minimum the number of people able to travel and therefore work along the route of the returnees, disappointing many NGOs but greatly reducing the number of deaths caused by vehicles hitting returnees on foot. Many NGOs left after the emergency having accomplished little but also with little wish to stay and take part in the resettlement of the refugees, there were also NGOs that came and went and provided a substantial contribution to the successful repatriation. These NGOs then changed the nature of the emergency, increasing the sense of urgency whose carryover could be felt after they left. In hindsight, most work could have been done without them. There are two reasons for this; the first should have been foreseen in that the refugees were returning in relatively good health and could survive the journey without

much support, the second was more fortuitous and unforeseen in that there was a delay of at least two weeks between the incidence of reliable indicators that the refugees would return en masse and their actual return, allowing an adequate time for planning and mobilisation. On balance the increase in the number of NGOs during the emergency was a necessary precaution but their presence changed and intensified the response to the emergency.

Decisions made in the emergency period affected decisions made in the medium term. An example of this was the decision to truck water to water points for the returnees. Three pumping and treatment stations were constructed and provided water to the population on the move. They continued to be used to provide water to the open relief centres, used to congregate and register the returnees at the treatment stations with trucks asking for water for construction purposes. By modifying the stations to allow them to pump untreated water for construction purposes as well as to pump treated water (with different pumps) the stations have been given a further 6 to 9 months operating life instead of the originally proposed 3 to 4 weeks. This deterred many agencies searching for closer, but not as easy to exploit, water sources and possibly encouraged construction on sites not suitable for habitation due to a lack of water.

The medium term

As everyone reached their homes the scale of the problem became apparent, the number of people whose houses had been destroyed or occupied or who just did not have a house were much greater than the woefully inadequate planning had accounted for. The Authorities had come up with a preliminary list of new resettlement sites for approximately 7,000 families. As the list had been compiled from lists made at each Commune, the quality of planning varied immensely. Many of these sites, at the time, were no more than a name, often not even on the map. In the mad scramble for donor money, agencies were committing themselves to build shelters on sites they had not seen.

Oxfam resolved to carry out an assessment of the sites to ensure that people could live sustainably. It was considered that there were four main sectors that would enable people to continue to live on these sites. These were:

- **shelter** - The site should provide adequate local materials to construct enough houses for the numbers to be settled there,
- **livelihood** - The site must allow the residents to practice a livelihood; in most cases this meant that the site would have to neighbour an adequate area of land that could be cultivated, other settlement sites were on main roads on the outskirts, of towns, specifically sited for traders.
- **water supply** - There must be an existing potable water supply close to the site that could cope with the increased demand or a viable and economic alternative source that must be able to be exploited.
- **sanitation** - The site must be suitable for the construction of adequate sanitation facilities. In addition to the soil being appropriate for pit latrines, the site slope must be adequate for drainage and nearby marshy areas should be avoided to reduce the incidence of malaria.

Of these four criteria, shelter was considered only in the availability of decent soil for constructing mud bricks, the ease of access to the site for bringing construction materials and the availability of water for construction purposes. It was reasoned that many other agencies would be involved in this sector and the technical difficulties posed would be small. Latrine construction was also a secondary criteria as most sanitation work would be carried out by the shelter construction agency. The assessment examined drainage and possible vector control problems when they were relevant to the site.

The assessment looked more specifically at the availability of potable water and the possibilities for land use. By concentrating on these two sectors Oxfam thought it could provide valuable information on the sustainability of the sites; if there was adequate water and people could create and continue a livelihood then it would be likely that they would remain on the sites. These two sectors had not been addressed in the original listing of sites and were also specific areas of expertise for Oxfam. It was considered then that this assessment would produce the most effective use of Oxfam's small but competent team of specialists. The information collected would be used to guide the Local Authorities and other humanitarian agencies in the sustainability and sizing of sites. It would also help determine the direction of Oxfam's programme in Kibungo in the longer term. As the assessment progressed it became clear that original expectations on sites were much too low; the number proposed and the population in them were increased. The assessment was carried out as much as possible in conjunction with the Local Authorities; the Bourgmestres (Commune Leaders) were contacted and visited sites with the Assessment Team, whenever feasible the Prefectorial Representatives of the Water Department in the Ministry of Public Works and of the Ministry of Agriculture also came along, providing local knowledge of spring sites and soil characteristics necessary to grow different crops.

At the same time as the assessment was being carried out, Oxfam was continuing its work in the existing resettlement sites, greatly increasing its emphasis on community mobilisation as the number of people living in the sites increased and the community strengthened. The staffing levels changed dramatically as the emergency phase finished. Oxfam reduced its expatriate engineers working in the Prefecture from four to two (reducing to one for the longer term work) and increased the number of local engineers from one to two, community mobilisation staff increased from one to six. Two of the three water pumping and treatment stations were modified and kept on in the short to medium term to

supply tankers providing water to resettlement sites. The uses the water was mainly put to changed from drinking to construction and drinking as more agencies started building shelters. This reduced the amount of water needing treatment. Again, this was an effective use of Oxfam's resources by running pumping and treatment stations and supplying trucking bladders for trucks hired and run by other agencies and the Local Authorities Oxfam was able to ensure an adequate supply of water for construction and drinking with a minimum management commitment.

Longer term objectives

The assessment concluded that almost all the sites were habitable, some needed the proposed number of inhabitants to be reduced, nearly every one needed improvements to the water supply. These improvements took a diverse number of forms shallow wells and spring protection, boreholes with handpumps, gravity and pumped systems, extensions to existing systems and rainwater catchment. The underlying premise was that wherever possible, especially for small villages, a low technology and hence more cost effective and sustainable system would be promoted. For some sites the only solution would have been a system that would have required a technology too advanced to be paid for and maintained by a small rural village. Rwanda has a long history of failed water supply systems and Oxfam did not want to continue this tradition. This requirement for finding sites with the possibility of easily sustainable water supplies had to be balanced though with the very pressing need for resettlement sites in a country with very little free land.

The information collected was spread as far as possible, allowing other agencies to prioritise their work towards sites that were likely to be more sustainable. The Local Authorities were able to use the information to upgrade or minimise the sites as well as a basis on which they could ask for aid from the International Community. Oxfam made it clear that it would carry out projects leading from the assessment only at the request of the Authorities.

The role Oxfam envisaged for itself was generally of technical supervision and community mobilisation. Its small team of engineers and larger team of community mobilisers were well suited for this. It would also strengthen a small but rapidly expanding sector of private contractors. An exception to this was in drilling boreholes where Oxfam had unrivalled in-country experience and facilities and in several areas there was no other alternative to provide potable water. The rainwater catchment programme also diverges from this role. Although rainwater catchment is seen by many as an important tool in the opening up of marginal lands in Rwanda, there have been a few small scale projects to construct rainwater tanks. Therefore, Oxfam is to set up a pilot project with two main functions; the first would be to test various systems and to train masons in the construction and repair of the tanks, the second would be to mobilise the community to use and carry out maintenance of the rainwater catchment systems. At the completion of the pilot project,

the tank construction programme and the trained masons would be taken on by agencies carrying out the construction of shelters. Oxfam's role would then be one of quality control, training of further masons and possibly continued community mobilisation if the shelter agency does not have a mobilisation programme itself. The management of the rainwater catchment construction by others allows Oxfam to spread its resources and expertise further.

Mass repatriation - emergency or development

The overarching paradox of a mass repatriation is that although the needs are immediate and must be addressed immediately, the solutions need to be sustainable and therefore attained over a long time period.

It is evident that such a large scale and sudden repatriation requires an emergency response to the immediate needs of the returnees. These needs are health care and transport for the vulnerable, water and possibly food for the journey and temporary shelter until more permanent accommodation can be arranged (i.e. one or two days in a communal shelter until people are assured they can return to their intact and unoccupied houses or can find themselves some other temporary solution until they can find permanent accommodation). This emergency aid is provided during the journey until people reach their homes.

As people return to their homes or move to resettlement sites the need to establish a developmental approach as soon as possible to promote sustainability is obvious. But there are major constraints that slow the process of moving away from an emergency strategy. By far the biggest is the scale of the repatriation and the need to provide the resettlers the basics of shelter, clean water and the means to make a livelihood such as cultivable land. Development strategies generally start small scale and are timely a process that leaves out the participatory component produces faster results and has a larger geographical impact but the longer term results are invariably poor. As the apparent needs in the repatriation are seen and obvious many implementing agencies were tempted to bypass the process of allowing communities to communicate their actual needs both at the planning and the implementation phases.

The Government, both at a national and a local level was not as clear as it could have been in its setting of goals for the repatriation. There were several good reasons for this, mainly due to the newness of the Government and its need to establish Governance with people who had never governed before and with resources that had been totally looted and destroyed by the previous Government. This meant that there was still a lot of confusion in the roles of Government Departments and that many of the people in decision-making positions were temporary, pending a reorganisation of their Department or Ministry, reducing their effectiveness. Looting by the previous Government resulted in the position of the majority of International NGOs being better

equipped that the Government at both national and local levels. Ministry roles overlapped and although the repatriation was directed by the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration (MINIREISO) there were occasional differences of opinion between other Ministries and MINIREISO, especially on technical issues.

Although it was known that the refugees would return to Rwanda at some time and the Government voiced its approval of this, there was little concrete planning for their return at a local level. Lists of resettlement sites, were drawn up no more than three weeks before the refugees started returning en masse. NGOs, from combined experience from similar events, should have pushed more for the preplanning of sites and should have been more imaginative and sensitive in their aid to the Government. Suggestions within NGOs that they should bring in experts from other African countries that had carried out similar land reallocations were not taken further by the NGOs themselves.

In most of the resettlement sites there were no communities at the start of the construction of the shelters, making community participation invalid. Even as the sites grew shape there were little signs of occupancy, this is starting to change as the pressure to resettle people increases. Even with people living in the shelters or temporary accommodation of the sites there is often little sense of community especially if people have been moved from several places to be settled on the site. Previous leaders from before the genocide have often either been discredited or killed although new leaders came forward quickly enough with the guidance of the Local Administration to represent the community. Much information can be gleaned by talking to existing neighbouring communities about the problems they face and their methods of solving them.

One other obstruction to a development inclined programme was the level of insecurity throughout the country. As the refugees returned en masse it was suspected that many of the ex-Government forces and the Interhamwe (Hutu militia) entered Rwanda with weapons. After their return there was an increase in security incidents with several expatriates and local staff from NGOs and the UN being attacked and killed. This stopped and then altered severely limited the movements of humanitarian agencies: some agencies went with military escorts and very few warned communities or Local Authorities of their visits to reduce the likelihood of ambush. This then, made links based on trust, necessary for all the shallowest of community involvement, extremely difficult. As many NGO workers commented at the time "It's difficult for communities to express their needs to you when you are being protected by an armed soldier"

Conclusions and recommendations

Oxfam's staged response proved to be generally successful. The actual repatriation required a fast reaction with a large technical input. That complete, the assessment provided valuable information to many organisations

and provided a means to evaluate the resettlement sites for their suitability. The modification of the water treatment stations and the handling over of the management of the water trucking were the start of Oxfam's reduction in operationality. The various options for water supply to the resettlement sites and the expansion of the community participation role in the longer term were an indication of Oxfam's realisation of the complexity of the situation and its commitment to sustainable solutions. By targeting its involvement towards areas specific to its specialist expertise, such as training masons for other agencies in rainwater tank construction, its influence was much greater than would have otherwise been. Oxfam's change in its manner of working was reflected in its staffing levels as the programme became more development-oriented the number of staff actually increased but the emphasis moved away from expatriate emergency technical staff to a much higher proportion of local, community mobilisation experts.

The lack of timely and adequate planning and positioning of the sites proved to be one of the main obstructions to the smooth running of the response to the repatriation. It was always known that the refugees would return at some point. The choosing and assessment of sites could have happened 6 months or a year before they did, producing a much greater impact and enabling a much better organised response. The UN and NGO's should have pressed the Government at local and national level to produce definite plans and they should have pledged more resources to helping the Government in this.

Agencies that were already working in Kibungo had a distinct advantage over ones that came in especially to respond to the repatriation. Although the newly arrived agencies did provide useful and needed assistance, their impact on the whole situation changed the response into a more frantic and emergency-led one.

Staff at all levels should always keep in mind the impact that their decisions make in the long term. Decisions made in the emergency phase are often difficult to change at a later date.

Communities should be engaged at the earliest possible moment. Even when the resettlement site is empty, neighbouring communities can be a useful source of information.

The success of the repatriation depends to a great extent on the Home Government and the Government that hosted the refugees. Their decisions normally affect the return of the refugees more than the aid given by the International Community. The role of the UN and NGOs can never be more than to try to influence the Governments' decisions and to provide aid within the framework set up by the Governments.

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