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Hosting the Displaced – and Being Hosted

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Hosting the displaced – and being hosted

Cynthia Caron

A local family hosting a displaced family in their home is becoming a well-recognised form of shelter for families in displacement. Understanding how displaced persons and their hosts experience hosting can help governments and humanitarian agencies design programme activities to promote its success and sustainability.

Hosting of displaced families by local families might be spontaneous or planned, a first or an intermediate step in a multi-stage process of accommodating the displaced, and often starts before humanitarian actors arrive and lasts long after they leave. The reasons why people host others – without expectation of payment – include cultural norms about hospitality, normative expectations to help those in need, or reciprocation of assistance once received. Sri Lankan families who spontaneously hosted families displaced by the war indicated that their decision to host was based on their lack of certainty about their own future: “If the same situation happens to us? ... we should accept them.” Hosting has proved indispensable after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, in conflicts in The Gambia, Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and most recently for displaced Syrians living in northern Lebanon.

Hosting takes a variety of forms including: allowing the displaced family to build a shelter on the host family's property; allocating space in the house for a family; sharing the same house or room with a family; allowing people to occupy an outbuilding on the host's property; and allowing people to use another home owned by the host. However, despite evidence of the growing role of hosting, there is little systematic writing about how persons in hosting relationships

experience them. Interactions in an environment where two families must learn to live together in a hosting relationship are very different from social interactions in camps.

The three prominent factors that shape the hosting experience – length of stay, presence of children, and the need to share – do not exist in isolation. They inform one another, potentially influencing how long the two families can live together and the quality of the hosting relationship.

Length of stay

How long a displaced family will need to stay with its hosts is usually unknown, making it difficult to fix a date for hosting to end. Negotiating a length of stay can be an awkward conversation, as status and generosity are at stake. In Sri Lanka, hosted families normally said that “we promised that once the clashes are over we would go home.” In Haiti, duration of hosting was rarely discussed. Approximately half of Lebanese host families interviewed had hosted a refugee family for over one year with no indication of when hosting would end.

Uncertainty regarding the length of stay and potentially overstaying their welcome create anxiety for both families. Agencies such as the Red Cross recommend that length of stay should be agreed upon by the host family, the hosted family and an authority of the host community, and last

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www.fmreview.org/shelter



Syrian refugee children who are being hosted by a Lebanese family do their homework and play together.

for a duration of one to three years. Other guidelines suggest a four-party agreement between host, hosted, implementing agency and local authority. Yet no independent research has been conducted that shows the extent to which an agreed-upon end date reduces anxiety, and its influence on the quality or experience of hosting.

The 'problem' of children

The presence of children can threaten the stability of the hosting relationship. People being hosted noted the challenge of children, saying, "We can only stay one or two months with relatives, otherwise the children will fight. The host families have more money and our children get upset because they see other children eating or getting things that we can't provide for them. They are too small to understand." Another woman stated, "The children are small and they disturb the older children in our relative's family. We don't feel good when our children disturb others." While manuals suggest that hosting is a preferable option for keeping the family together, case studies from around the world show this is not always what happens. Displaced families in Sri Lanka and eastern DRC claim that they send children to different host families. Separation should

raise concerns, as child-parent separation is a recognised stressor for displaced and refugee children as well as parents.

The need to share

Whether spontaneous or organised through an agency, neither host nor hosted can know how well they will get along on a daily basis. What is apparent is that hosting entails complicated social dynamics of sharing in three particular areas: space, resources and activities.

Sharing space: A Danish Refugee Council assessment in 2012 of Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon found that a significant percentage of hosted families had left their host family and moved into separate rented accommodation either because of the unsustainability of the relationship or because the house was too small. Sri Lankan families who were asked if they would host a family in the future said that they would do so only if the hosted family "would be obligated under our rules and regulations" and "live under our control".

Sharing resources: Even if living in a separate shelter on the host family's property, in the political economy of displacement and

its scarcities sharing resources might be a source of conflict between hosts and hosted. One woman explained, "Our relatives are not making much so when we ask to share milk powder, they grumble that we have too many children."¹ Sri Lankan host families noted, "We are sharing the toilet and the well but there is no electricity... we have to use more kerosene now that there are more children studying. It is difficult."

Sharing activities: Cooking meals, domestic chores and studying together are activities that host and hosted family members do together. Hosted family members also help with household chores such as laundry, childcare and gardening. Assisting in household chores helps hosted family members feel useful and reduces feelings of indebtedness.

Defraying the cost of hosting or being hosted

While hosted families worry about being a burden to their hosts, they also express gratitude. One Sri Lankan woman stated, "At their own expense our relatives have been looking after us for the past two months." Host families also may be poor and might need assistance in order to accommodate a hosted family. There are six common financial assistance packages that can support hosting arrangements:

- cash incentives to host families to shelter displaced families
- in-kind assistance of construction materials to extend the host family's house
- retrospective reimbursement to host families for housing improvements made to shelter a family
- cash transfers to hosted families to, for example, pay rent or utility bills
- cash-for-work or other income-generation schemes for hosted families to help defray the costs of hosting
- assistance to both the host and hosted family as 'solidarity families': The solidarity family model treats the host and hosted families as one family unit and as

one single recipient for aid.² It also uses a mutually agreed upon, written contractual agreement describing what support the host and the hosted family will receive for the hosting period and how it will be divided between the two families.

Thinking ahead about supporting hosting

Hosting as both a short- and longer-term shelter option is expanding in practice, and current shelter standards and guidelines provide practical steps for implementing hosting arrangements.³ They acknowledge that aid distribution might create resentment between hosts and hosted or that host or hosted family members might exploit or abuse one another; yet there is no evidence showing whether or not this happens, under what conditions it is most likely to occur and how to avoid it. While guidelines provide detailed descriptions of selection criteria for hosting assistance, an understanding of the extent to which assistance packages have any effect on the well-being of hosts and those being hosted is neglected.

Hosting is often credited with providing displaced persons with opportunities to socialise and interact with the wider host community but the emotional costs of living in a hosting relationship can be high, especially if combined with being told directly or indirectly that one is a burden. To increase the sustainability of hosting as a shelter option, how host and hosted 'experience' the relationship must be explored further.

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