JOHANNESBURG, 5 August 2013 (IRIN) - Tents have long played an essential role in the emergency phase of humanitarian responses to refugee influxes. They are relatively light and cheap, and they can be stockpiled, flown in and erected in a short timeframe. But as anyone who has slept in one can attest, tents also have major shortcomings - they provide minimal protection from climatic extremes, offer little space or comfort, and deteriorate quickly.

The average stay in a refugee camp is now 12 years, but at the beginning of a refugee crisis there is no way of knowing how soon refugees will be able to return home, and host governments are wary of shelters that suggest permanence. This presents a conundrum for the humanitarian sector, which has been trying for years to come up with a shelter that ticks off all the necessary boxes, including logistical concerns such as cost and ease of transport and assembly, as well as cultural, environmental and political considerations that vary from one country and refugee context to another.

“There is no one solution to [refugee] shelter; there’s no single tent or shelter that can answer all the needs,” said Tom Corsellis, who is the president and co-founder of the Geneva-based Shelter Centre and a pioneer in the field of developing shelter solutions for disasters and displacement.

While there has been no shortage of alternative refugee shelter designs, few have made it to the field-testing stage, and even fewer have had the financial and institutional backing to be brought to market.

It is not surprising then, that the launch of a prototype shelter resulting from a partnership between the IKEA Foundation, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Refugee Housing Unit (RHU), a subsidiary of the non-profit Swedish Industrial Design Foundation, has been met with intense interest.
The collaboration brings together UNHCR’s long experience in and access to the refugee sector, with the Swedish furnishing giant’s funding and management support and RHU’s design and manufacturing expertise. The result resembles a large garden shed; RHU project manager Johan Karlsson describes it as a modular design consisting of a light-weight steel frame onto which polymer panels can be attached to form vertical walls and a pitched roof. Karlsson explained that in an emergency situation, the steel frames could be distributed separately and used with plastic sheeting or locally available materials.

“One great challenge is the assembly. Basically it’s like an IKEA product, but it’s quite complex”

“It was very much a requirement from UNHCR that we start with a self-supporting frame that other materials could be added on to,” Karlsson told IRIN. “The panels would come into place when you have protracted situations and you know there’s a great chance the refugees will be staying for a longer period of time and you’re not allowed to build anything more permanent.”

The “full kit” also includes a shade net to reflect the sun during the day and to retain heat at night and a solar panel that provides the shelter with power. While the panels last up to three years, the steel frame can last for 10, if correctly assembled. This is an important caveat, according to Karlsson, and something that is about to be assessed as the prototype begins six months of field testing at Dollo Ado refugee camp in Ethiopia and at sites in northern Iraq and Lebanon.

“One great challenge is the assembly. Basically it’s like an IKEA product, but it’s quite complex. The idea is that we’ll provide training to a group of beneficiaries and then they’ll build the other houses… The ultimate goal is that a refugee family can do it themselves,” Karlsson said.

Using local materials, skill

Although the prototype has undergone extensive technical testing in Holland, it remains to be seen how the design will be received by refugees themselves. Karlsson anticipates that, following the field testing, modifications will have to be made before the shelter is ready for
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market.

The next step will be to find a company or companies willing to finance the shelter’s production and to secure sizeable orders from UNHCR or other agencies involved in the provision of temporary shelters. For now, the cost of the full kit comes in at around US$1,000, with the steel frame alone costing about $250.

"It is cost effective, especially if you just start with the frame and upgrade with local materials," said Karlsson. "Even if you ship in the full kit, this will last three years, and a tent will only last for six months to one year" and then have to be replaced.

Corsellis of the Shelter Centre said that in every refugee shelter operation, the goal is to build shelters using traditional designs and methods, using local materials, local skills and local tools in order to contribute to the local economy and minimize potential tensions with host communities.

"The only reason we ever use tents is if the refugee influx is so high or access to local materials is so poor that we’re unable to use them. When we do have to use tentage, it’s to buy time to be able to use local skills and resources, [but] the length of time existing tentage lasts for is often not long enough to return there and offer better shelter. The cost of those tents, as they degrade, is lost completely," Corsellis said.

The Shelter Centre has developed its own shelter prototype, with support from the UK and US governments. It also makes use of a metal frame in a rectangular plan, but without the semi-rigid panels. The frame could be flown in, together with a fly-sheet and covering liner, and eventually the shelter could be upgraded with mud or timber walls and corrugated iron roofing.

"This additional generation of shelters [is] far more suitable for winterization," said Corsellis, adding that the shelters would also fare better in environments such as Dadaab in northern Kenya, the largest refugee complex in the world, where high winds and intense sun shorten a tent’s lifespan.
Sensitivities

An initiative by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UNHCR to use a technology called Interlocking Stabilised Soil Blocks (ISSB) to build more durable shelters for refugees at Dadaab, many of whom have lived there for decades, was stopped by the Kenyan government in 2012 because it was viewed as too permanent.

In the context of such political sensitivities, shelters such as the IKEA and Shelter Centre prototypes - which could be taken down, moved or even taken with refugees when they return home for use while they rebuild permanent shelters - have obvious benefits.

Corsellis emphasized that tents or tent-like shelters are used for only a small proportion of refugees - about 10 percent of the total 10.4 million refugees of concern to UNHCR at the beginning of 2012. The majority of refugees make use of other options, such as staying with host families, renting in urban areas or self-settling in rural areas.

"We need to broaden our vocabulary of shelter options, and this IKEA prototype is a positive direction. And hopefully the final result will be a range of different options, understanding that any stockpiled shelter should be used for only a small percentage of people affected by conflicts and disasters, as part of humanitarian operations," he said.

Source link:  http://www.irinnews.org/report/98526/refugee-shelter-for-the-future