

THE JOURNAL

OF ERW AND MINE ACTION

Issue 17.3 | Fall 2013



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IKEA's Solar-powered Refugee Shelter

Innumerable refugees in many countries lack sustainable, economic housing. In response, Swedish furniture company IKEA collaborated with the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (the U.N. Refugee Agency or UNHCR) to develop a reliable, pop-up refugee shelter as an alternative to traditional refugee tents. Whereas excessive shipping costs have prevented Western countries from shipping complex housing alternatives globally in the past, advances in the field of logistics, along with new building materials, allow companies to transport easily collapsible products in compact packages.

The IKEA Foundation stated that "refugees are probably one of the most marginalized groups in the world; they don't attract a lot of interest from the private sector."¹ Poverty, corruption, natural disasters, and war currently displace more than 23,000 people per day. In a recent speech the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Gutierrez noted that since the Syrian conflict began, the U.N. has registered 600,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon; 160,000 in Iraq; 90,000 in Egypt; and one million in Turkey and Jordan. (For more information, see Special Report, "Aiding Victims of the Syrian Crisis" by Elizabeth MacNairn, Molly Feltner and Tom Shelton.)² Moreover, 10 percent of the world's refugee population lives in tents.³

IKEA's shelters have an average lifespan of three years, while current canvas tents supplied to refugees deteriorate within a few months.³

Additionally, the shelters are compact, durable and portable. They will be best utilized in camps serving refugees who need protection from harsh environments. Each shelter employs solar panels that provide electricity for an internal light, and the "walls and roof are composed of a laminated material that offers UV protection and insulation."³ In addition to providing a cool, comfortable environment during the day, the shelters retain heat in the evening. Notably, these shelters are large enough to allow someone to stand comfortably inside.³


After two years of research and investing 4.8 million US dollars, the IKEA Foundation and UNCHR are testing these shelters in Ethiopia, Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia.^{1,3,4,5} Currently, the shelters have been sent to crisis regions in Syria for refugees in lieu of the Syrian conflict.⁵ Based on the information gathered from the tests, improvements to the



IKEA's shelters have an average lifespan of three years.
Photo courtesy of IKEA Foundation.

shelter's design will be made before the shelters are sold.³ After testing, the IKEA shelters are expected to be commercially available and may be suitable for deminer camps as well.

Currently, the cost of producing a single shelter is US\$7,500, but once mass production begins the price is predicted to drop to \$1,000.⁴ The tents that UNHCR now provides only last six months and cost \$500 each, yet most refugees live in the camps for several years.^{3,4} Different from the IKEA shelter, these tents cannot be repackaged and reused when a refugee is relocated.

Organizations such as UNHCR are beginning to coordinate with the private sector, which can provide valuable resources and expertise needed by humanitarian communities.¹ Due to the state of the global economy, assistance for international humanitarian projects has become increasingly difficult to obtain. The collaboration between UNHCR and the IKEA Foundation is one example of how companies can apply their resources, skills, knowledge and technologies to humanitarian issues beyond simple monetary donations.¹ 

~ Alexandra Berkowitz, CISR staff

Endnotes

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ISSN 2154-1485

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