Between Hope and Despair

The Community of Cha das Caldeiras after the Fogo Volcano Eruption

Countries in Africa are usually better known for disasters arising from human causes and conflicts. It is therefore especially disheartening when one of the most democratic and politically stable African countries is affected by a natural disaster that similarly threatens livelihoods, tears apart the socioeconomic fabric, and dissolves entire communities' bonds to their homes and their land.

This is precisely what occurred on the Cape Verden Island of Fogo when, on the 23rd of November 2014, the Pico de Fogo (Peak of Fire) volcano erupted for the first time since 1995. The ensuing lava flow forced a community comprising over 1,000 inhabitants to evacuate from the Cha das Caldeiras area and find shelter in Red Cross evacuation centres scattered across the island. The crisis demonstrated Cape Verden authorities’ capacities to respond rapidly by mobilizing their civil protection forces and ability to coordinate this response with international partners, including the European Union.

The EU’s emergency aid, primarily through DG ECHO’s Emergency Response and Coordination Centre, provided for two experts to be embedded in a UN Disaster Coordination and Assistance team (UNDAC), a Portuguese naval vessel equipped with essential material supplies and technical advisors, two ambulances delivered by the Portuguese air force, and funding for transportation costs. The EU also provided substantial financial support to the Red Cross to fund the three evacuation centres. While damage to infrastructure and economic activities was severe, the
combined local, national and international efforts ensured that no casualties ensued from the eruptions and that physical injuries were kept to a minimum.

However, soon after the affected population had been evacuated successfully and international media coverage began to focus elsewhere, what was particularly sobering was the realization that disasters tend to receive attention proportionate to the number of casualties they cause.

Accordingly, what was lost upon the international community as a result of the lacking death toll was a wider recognition of the destruction of livelihoods for an entire community living above national income levels that depended almost entirely on agriculture and tourism, and deeply identified with their space at the foot of the volcano. Ostensibly, neither the capacity for responding to emergency situations and preventing the loss of life, nor the severe socioeconomic consequences merited attention in the broader global public domain.

Given a general lack of information emanating from the source, on Sunday December 14, after the situation had supposedly ‘calmed down’ and ‘stabilized’ according to various media reports, a team from the EU Delegation in Cape Verde deployed to the area on a mission to assess the extent of the damage and demonstrate the EU’s solidarity with those affected.
Upon reaching the area, however, the team led by EU Ambassador José Manuel Pinto Teixeira found everything but calm and stability. The team’s convoy, which included municipal authorities, the President of the National Civil Protection Service, a team from the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination, an EU seismological expert dispatched by DG ECHO, among others, was forced to stop as the only road to the community was cut off by a lava front vacillating between 4 and 8 meters in height.

The rest of the way had to be absolved by foot.

Immediately upon arriving at this point, the closest to the Cha das Caldeiras area accessible by car, the team already witnessed sadness, distress and despair. Scolding hot lava had just engulfed several more houses. The lava continued to literally melt away the foundations of remaining homes and, in turn, all remnants of what had once been Portela and Banagaeira, the two most populous and severely affected parts of Cha das Caldeiras.

On the trail, the team continued to encounter men, women and children carrying the few basic necessities they could salvage. Families had removed all of their modest belongings – primarily food, furniture and other basic household items – from their houses to elevated areas where the lava could not reach. Many were harvesting their crop yields until the heat being whipped onto their face by a howling wind became too much to bear.
While most were carrying large bags of congo beans, guava, rice, and other staples back to the evacuation sites, one man was carrying a door that he removed from his home as the temporary housing that his family had been evacuated to lacked one. The door was to provide the family with a basic sense of security and privacy, a small step on the way to restoring a sense of independence and dignity.

As the team continued walking, they came across more and more villagers whose last remaining hope that their house, property, and livelihoods would be spared destruction had now dissipated entirely.

Perhaps the most devastating experience; however, was witnessing the lava entirely consume what was left of the Cha cooperative winery. The winery, supported in part by an EU-funded development project, was the primary source of income and socioeconomic security that the community depended on prior to the lava flows. The wine produced here was one of Fogo's preeminent exports but now the cooperative’s headquarters were completely
destroyed and the last batch of wine under production, still in oak casks, probably ruined by the commotion and the immense heat of the surrounding environment.

As one resident who had just witnessed her home go up in flames and completely disintegrated by the scorching heat bemoaned: “This was my house, this was my life, now everything is gone.”

Nevertheless, what was perhaps more impressive and awe-inspiring than the sheer destructive capacity of the volcano, was the sense of resilience that the community displayed. Both on the trail and in the evacuation centres, the displaced demonstrated a level of solidarity that allowed them to collectively address the material and psychological challenges they are experiencing as a result of this natural disaster, thus bringing a penchant of order, calm and serenity back into their lives. Despite the trauma and the destruction of the physical space that they identify with so strongly and provided them with the agricultural produce they depended on, there was also a strong sense that it was only a matter of time until they could begin reconstructing their homes, schools, churches, businesses and, ultimately, the social bonds that underpinned their community beforehand.
This rebuilding phase in itself purports to pose substantial challenges for a community relying on agriculture and whose most fertile lands have just been completely engulfed by lava. Initially, successful reconstruction will depend significantly on assistance from local, national and international partners, both from the public and private sectors.

The EU will also have to play a significant role in this process. Fortunately for the displaced population, the EU has determined to live up to its role in the Special Partnership with Cape Verde by providing an additional 3 million Euros in Budget Support through DG DEVCO for the government’s reconstruction and resettlement program on Fogo Island. The program will help the community determine an adequate site to begin rebuilding and subsequently provide necessary expertise and material assistance.

Once the people of Cha are back up on their feet, the strength they have shown in the aftermath of the crisis will surely translate into renewed independence and self-sufficiency. However, until then, our assistance will be crucial.

Watch the EU Delegation's video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fqsVbWzigg

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