



Pre-Disaster Recovery Planning Workshop

Tuesday 29 January 2008

Speakers:

David Fisher - Senior Legal Research Officer International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles (IDRL) Programme, Legal Affairs Unit, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (www.ifrc.org).

John Mitchell - Head of Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and (ODI) (www.alnap.org)

Oisin Walton - Information Communications Director, Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF) (www.tsfi.org)

Moderator:

Kate Adie, BBC

Pre-Disaster Recovery Planning

The need for better disaster preparedness was widely recognised during this session, with an emphasis on monitoring and evaluating actions undertaken and strengthening legal preparedness for international disaster response. International actors are increasingly playing a role in disasters, but their efforts are often not well co-ordinated and often face obstacles from agencies where it would be logical to expect co-operation. In addition, the destruction of infrastructure creates huge problems with communications and exacerbates all of these issues.

Kate Adie (Chairperson) noted that the work done by the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) excluded conflict areas where disasters are even more likely to occur as a result of the conflict, or where a natural disaster is exacerbated by it. Governments have a right to expect a level of quality in the service of donors; however, in a conflict situation they are often part of the problem and present an even more complex issue in terms of planning prior to the event of a disaster.

David Fisher opened the session by recognising the widening role of international agencies in disasters, but noted that some organisations create more problems themselves by arriving inadequately prepared or trained for the environment and circumstances of the crisis. He also recognised the lack of international rules in disaster response and identified some common problem areas that are affected by this

absence of legal systems for disaster preparedness:

Entry and Operation

There is sometimes reluctance on the part of nation states to ask or even recognise their own need for assistance. In addition, there are often difficulties with getting actions authorised by the right authorities, as procedures are not set up for the speedy response that is often critical in the event of a disaster. An example cited was the common difficulty of acquiring visas for humanitarian workers; often they have to enter on tourist visas in order to avoid bureaucratic visa regulations for workers. However, in the extended project necessary for a fully recovery programme they may have repeatedly to leave the country in order to renew their permit to stay. This proves costly and inefficient to the donor organisations and naturally detracts from the programme funding.

Excess of rules

Sometimes huge sums of money are paid by aid organisations and donor governments in taxes for products imported for aid. There are rarely any established exceptions to these rules to make it easier for donor agencies or governments to give directly to the place where it is needed. For example, opening a Bank Account is often a lengthy procedure or one that cannot be easily done by foreigners. Therefore, donor organisations often have to work with large sums of money in cash, making accountability difficult and their staff vulnerable. In emergency situations accounts

are sometimes opened in the name of a local worker presenting other problems in terms of tracing and accountability.

Quality and Coordination

Mr. Fisher stated that the issues related to quality of work done by humanitarian actors working in a disaster event have been found to be particularly significant in the headquarters of large organisations.

There is no specific provision in domestic law in many areas that would help disaster recovery, including the provision for spending money. The case of hurricane Katrina was cited, where approximately a billion dollars were left unspent in an account for over a year because there was no provision for allocating and spending the money even in a country where one would expect that efficient financial procedures would exist or could be created quickly.

Guidelines regarding legal structures have been developed, but are not binding as a primary duty of governments. These guidelines have been developed in a series of forums held in Geneva in order to help government in non-conflict areas. Their scope is limited to recommendations to governments about what should be legally established within national legislation, with individual governments deciding on the establishment of minimum quality standards.

John Mitchell made a comparison between the Tsunami and the Earthquake in Bam, Pakistan, both of which had devastating impacts on hundreds of thousands of people, with heavy loss of life and major financial and physical damage to numerous communities.

The results of the joint multi-agency Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) focused on several key areas including:

Funding

There was an unprecedented level of funding following the Tsunami disaster which had a positive impact in that, for once, agencies were free from funding restraints. However, there were some negative effects, as there was a lack of financial accountability. In addition, as the funding was evenly split between relief and recovery it demonstrated a need for more awareness about the importance of post-disaster reconstruction and the longevity of such an operation.

In the Bam earthquake crisis the 'Flash' appeal was seen as a comparative failure, with a fraction of funds being raised per capita affected compared with the tsunami. This demonstrated the need for CERF (established relatively recently in Dec 2005) However Mr. Mitchell stated that this funding is currently not readily available to non-UN agencies.

There are problems with governments pledging money for a crisis, but then not fulfilling their pledge. There are no systems in place to ensure that governments meet the promises that they make to donate such funds.

Mr. Mitchell also identified a very significant informal stream of humanitarian assistance, from the Diaspora for example, but allocation of funding is still far from being impartial.

Staffing

There are issues with recruitment of experienced staff. In the Bam earthquake there were some improvements which drew heavily on prior knowledge. However, the benefits that may be brought to a disaster recovery team in terms of staffing can often be to the detriment of the organisation that they are drawn from.

Relationship between Military and Humanitarian Agencies

The military can play an essential part in the relief stage of a disaster. However, in the recovery period they often become an obstacle as the 'Command and Control' approach does not work in such situations and the military are rarely able to provide the interpersonal skills required for such a role.

The issue raises the question about who should fund the military in disaster operations. The Oslo Agreement states that the funding should not come from International Aid Agencies, however recently NATO has stated that it expects the UN to pay for any military intervention from its budget, where that intervention is required as a result of humanitarian aid.

Cluster co-ordination

Often there are too many agencies on the ground with no one body co-ordinating their actions.

Mr. Mitchell concluded that the system is responsive, but it is not impartial and capacity needs to be improved.

Oisin Walton presented the key role that TSF have in disasters and how they approach the problem of re-establishing telecommunications.

The key to success in the communication of a mission is in its Telecommunications.

In the event of a disaster, landlines can be destroyed and GSM systems can be either damaged or saturated. TSF develop communications centres with modern broadband facilities that are satellite based, because this is the fastest and most reliable form of communication in such circumstances. All events need telecommunications and ICT plays a big role in preventing a situation from deteriorating further. It is estimated that for every \$1 spent \$10 is saved. This is particularly true of very remote areas where information may take days or weeks to reach relevant agencies leading to a higher percentage loss of life and livelihood.

The objective is to communicate in 'real time' and so TSF set out to establish telecom centres in the most remote areas where they provide training in their use and an online form for people to register developing situations. The challenges to this are: (a) to maintain a reliable and efficient centre; (b) to keep costs down; and (c) to make it accessible to non ICT specialists.

In order to reduce costs TSF have developed software to compress data so that at a cost of \$10,000 per year approximately 12 million people can be protected.

Oisin concurred that the key to minimising the effects of disaster lies in preparedness and re-stabilising good telecommunication links, by making these links available, accessible (through training) and cost efficient.

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