

Peacetime Strategies for Disaster Risk Mitigation

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Natural disasters are inevitable, and they often occur with little or no notice and require an immediate and effective response in order to prevent further damage or loss of life. Cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis and typhoons are all forces of nature. Environment abuse has led to the increase of natural disasters. The process of environmental degradation and damage can only be delayed. With the decline in global climate due to environmental and human factors, disaster and risk mitigation has taken on an unprecedented importance.

Environmentally focused solutions have limitations and require total global cooperation. There must be resources, education and training before they can be put into place. More importantly, the community and the affected peoples must be able to see the relevance of the proposed solutions. Why should fishermen plant mangroves that will stop them from accessing the sea for the daily

catch that would feed their families? International experts are brought in with scientific and technical knowledge that has little relevance and connection to the local community. Very often, the proposed solutions are too narrowly focused on the single problem at hand and do not take into consideration the challenges faced by the affected peoples in their daily lives; or offer any alternatives when an environmental solution takes away the only means of livelihood the community has.

In the introduction chapter of the *World Disasters Report 2005*, Markku Niskala, the Secretary-General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) said:

“Three things need to happen. First, we must understand what enables people to cope with, recover from and adapt to the risks they face. Second, we must build



Image: Ernest Goh

Meulaboh: History helps – Personnel from Mercy Relief (MR) and the Tentara Negara Indonesia (TNI) delivering supplies to Meulaboh in a Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) Chinook just days after the Tsunami. From left: Iwan Subrata (MR's Medanese partner); Hassan Ahmad (MR's Chief Executive) and Dr Iskandar Idris, (MR's medical volunteer) with other volunteers in the background

our responses on the community's own priorities, knowledge and resources. Third, we must scale up community responses by creating new coalitions with governments and advocating changes in policy and practice at all levels.

“If we focus only on needs and vulnerabilities, we remain locked in the logic of repetitive responses that fail to nurture the capacities for resilience contained deep within every community. We have talked about building capacity and resilience for decades. It is now time to turn rhetoric into reality: to dispel the myth of the helpless victim and the infallible humanitarian, and to put disaster-affected people and their abilities at the centre of our work.”

What happens before and after a disaster is all related to disaster risk reduction. The main concern is human life and human suffering. It is time to bring the humanitarian players together; to build an alliance for effective action locally, nationally, regionally and internationally.

Objective and aims

Mercy Relief's experiences in Myanmar, Sichuan and Aceh illustrate the importance of alliances and how the interoperability of different systems and institutional interactions are important elements in disaster risk reduction strategy.

Case study: Cyclone Nargis – Myanmar, May 2008

Although there were clear signals that there was inadequate capability to manage the disaster alone, the Myanmar authorities were hesitant to welcome foreign assistance. It was a situation where the international humanitarian community, including foreign military assets, had to wait by the sidelines and helplessly watch as the vulnerable survivors try to find food and help in the deteriorating ground

conditions. Demands and pressure by the international community brought little positive shift. While aid-offering countries and bodies observed the Oslo Guidelines that humanitarian assistance must be provided with full respect for the sovereignty of the affected states (paragraph 21), the Myanmar authorities lacked confidence that the assistance offered would be purely humanitarian. As the clock ticked, the devastated Ayeyawaddy delta community turned desperate. Timeliness of aid is key to any acute crisis in order to prevent further damage or loss of lives.

Prior to Cyclone Nargis, Mercy Relief had minimal and short-term engagements in Myanmar implementing piecemeal development projects. Had there been a sustained commitment and cooperation previously, Mercy Relief would have had the necessary ground network and trust and confidence of the local authorities, to have been allowed continued and early entry to provide more timely and effective penetration.

When the first groups were eventually allowed in, they were from the immediate neighbours, followed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members, then the other international agencies. However, each country went in with its resources and operated independently of each other. This resulted in serious duplicity of resources leading to wastages, and hence less efficient management of risk.

Whilst Mercy Relief awaited clearance from the Myanmar authorities to move into the badly affected delta areas, it dispatched the first two batches of relief



Image: Jaffar Mydin

Myanmar: Caught in the politics of hope – Mercy Relief's volunteer pharmacist K Thanaletchime administering medication during the daily mobile clinic runs in Twante, Myanmar



Sichuan: Goodwill gets better - Having worked closely during the acute phase, the partners launched the reconstruction of two schools in Ziyang. From left: Shi Qian (Ziyang Foundation for Poverty Alleviation); Gerry D'Silva (Hong Leong Group Singapore); Chia Hui Yong and Hassan Ahmad (Mercy Relief), Jiang Shi Lin (Deputy Mayor, Zhiyang Prefecture)

supplies to the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement and UNICEF in Myanmar. At the same time, Mercy Relief sourced for and built a network of partners on the ground, including the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and Singaporean businesspersons based in Myanmar, all of whom possessed reliable communication links with the local authorities and were already supporting the acute relief efforts in the delta region.

Mercy Relief only managed to deploy its personnel out of Yangon two weeks after the disaster, through the agreement made between the Foreign Offices of Singapore and Myanmar. ADRA is an excellent example – its engagements during peacetime, executing development work in the rural areas, gave it almost unlimited access to Ground Zero and even allowed it to act as a conduit for other foreign and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) going into rural Myanmar. Working with ADRA allowed Mercy Relief's staff, volunteers, resources and equipment access to the delta region. Mercy Relief was able to latch on to these partners to effect disaster relief in the unique situation that Myanmar posed to all relief agencies.

Case study: Wenchuan earthquake – China, May 2008

The Wenchuan earthquake took place nine days after Cyclone Nargis landed on the Ayeyawaddy delta. Although China was geographically further from Singapore than Myanmar, Mercy Relief's response team to Sichuan was at Ground Zero on the fourth day after the quake, a week before its first relief team to Myanmar got out of Yangon. The reason: Mercy Relief had an existing and sound network and goodwill with the local Chinese authorities and NGOs, established through its staff who had implemented development projects in various parts of China. The sustained peacetime engagement and

cooperation allowed Mercy Relief to effect timely assistance, with the assured warmth and confidence of the local authorities and partners.

Case study: Indian Ocean tsunami – Aceh and North Sumatra, December 2004

In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, despite the challenging terrains of Aceh, Mercy Relief was able to secure early access into Meulaboh and Banda Aceh in the first week of the disaster. Medan (North Sumatra) was the main launching pad for international aid into Aceh, with rotary-wing aircrafts forming an air-bridge between Medan and the other parts of Aceh. The substantial history and goodwill shared by Mercy Relief and the North Sumatran Government (in particular the governor himself), through consistent engagements and joint projects on poverty reduction in and around Medan, gave the former priority and easy access to the air assets.. As such, Mercy Relief was not only able to provide timely and effective penetration into the remote affected areas in Aceh, but also helped pave the way for many other NGOs to set up their bases in Meulaboh. The timely intervention, together with other foreign NGOs and militaries, helped eliminated the risk of a secondary disaster such as an epidemic.

Lessons learned

Bureaucracy, while necessary, is machinery that moves too slowly and, more often than not, may prove a stum-



bling block in emergency response operations. Government-to-government relationships take time to develop. NGOs are generally small and do not have the resources of the governments, international NGOs or intergovernmental organizations. On the other hand, their smallness allows for greater mobility and adaptability, and their personnel are usually made up of specialized generalists. Therefore, the solution for NGOs in a disaster is alliances — alignment and cooperation with like-minded NGOs that share similar goals and vision. Continuous engagement during peacetime can only build goodwill, understanding, cooperation, and lead to easier access and greater efficiency when it comes to risk reduction before and after a disaster strikes.

NGOs generally have a long and intimate history with various communities in the country. They are close to and familiar with the challenges faced on the ground by the communities they serve, as well as the challenges faced by groups working on the ground. They have developed working networks within the community and are familiar with the system of governance in the host country.

Poverty increases vulnerability. Poorer communities are more vulnerable to natural disasters as they do not have the means to prepare themselves against them. Mud houses tend to crumble easily even with lower Richter quakes. The damage to the mud structures, if it does not cause death by impact, may suffocate the victims instead. Peacetime development work not only increases the capacity of the local communities, it also enables the implementing organization to build rapport and goodwill with the local communities, partners and authorities for future cooperation.

The experiences of Mercy Relief and ADRA in the case studies above highlighted the importance of existing good work and will which enabled early and timely response.

Recommendations

In a region where 70 per cent of the natural disasters take place, NGOs play a crucial role. It is even more pertinent that a civilian alliance dedicated to humanitarian assistance working with both government and military is built. Asian NGOs have the ability to open doors and cultivate relations. With the track record of disasters in Asia, developing working relationships in the region during peacetime has to take top priority in any risk reduction strategy. The small steps taken to develop working relationships will have a big impact on goals to minimize the risks pre- and post-disaster.

Based on the experiences in Myanmar, Sichuan and Indonesia, and as part of risk management when a disaster hits, social assets in the form of institutional interactions and alliances are equally if not more important than technological, physical and operational assets and capabilities. When a disaster hits, the people who need assistance and the providers of assistance are all involved. It is crucial that the dialogue and engagement starts before the disasters hit.

Peacetime community capacity building

Peacetime is when trust and confidence can and should be built, to ensure that when a disaster strikes there is greater chance of reducing the suffering and further loss of lives because timely and necessary assistance can be accessed and implemented based on the relationships built. Risk reduction is often seen in physical, technological, structural and environmental terms. Risk reduction strategy must also take into account capacity building, community development and poverty alleviation — all of which is about enabling people to help themselves, to build their own risk reduction methods. An example of an informal community building that worked and saved lives and only came to light after the tsunami is the people of Simeulue, an island off Sumatra.¹

Humanitarian disaster response

The UN has the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as its coordinating office for information. Perhaps there is a need for a working office to coordinate operations for coalitions of NGOs responding directly to disasters in Asia. Effective coordination will contribute to more effective and efficient deployment of resources. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has included humanitarian affairs in its mandate, with regular exercises.

Governments hitherto have underestimated or ignored the possible impact of NGOs in actual delivery of humanitarian aid in natural disasters. The IFRC's Code of Conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief includes a section on recommendations to intergovernmental organizations.²

Mercy Relief is planning for a possible coalition of NGOs and corporate bodies in Asia, which share resources and network and have regular engagements and exercises. It would involve the heads of respective national disaster preparedness and response agencies. When the alliance of Asian NGOs crystallizes, the issue of civil-military coordination requires address.