

COORDINATION IN POST-DISASTER AND POST-CONFLICT SITUATIONS

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Imagine a multi-vehicle highway accident on the edge of a big Canadian city, in a blinding snowstorm. There's an argument raging among the city police department, the provincial police, the emergency fire services, the paramedics, and several wanting-to-be-helpful bystanders, including a GP, an emergency nurse, and a St. John's Ambulance-trained first aid worker. They're each defending their priorities and approaches, and there is no clear boss in this situation. The provincial and the city police are asking for advice from their respective headquarters, and have been asked to wait until the necessary liaison takes place at senior levels.

Doesn't happen, you say? I admit it's unlikely to happen in Canada, because we have trained personnel, clear emergency protocols and functioning hierarchies. Yet this is the order of the day in post-disaster situations that happen in developing countries – whether it's the Pakistan earthquake or Hurricane Mitch in central America. Most poor countries do not have the luxury of investing in disaster preparedness – the excess capacity and training in 'what to do if' - that rich countries take for granted.

And once the disaster strikes, the humanitarian actors come flooding in from all over the globe – it's not just dealing with different services in one country, but a hodgepodge that includes local actors (civilian and military); the United Nations in its myriad forms; a bevy of NGOs, only a handful of whom have professional experience and the infrastructure to deal with disasters; and foreign governments who are pressed by their public to provide assistance and want to make sure it is visible to their domestic media. And there is no agreed coordination mechanism.

In an emergency, as in few other situations, democracy is not at a premium. The first priority for saving lives means know-how, speed, excellent logistics and access to stockpiled goods and services. Yet there is woeful underinvestment in humanitarian response in a number of critical areas.

The first is in preparedness. At Oxfam Canada, during the Caribbean hurricane season, staff were seldom worried when there were hurricane forecasts for Cuba. In Cuba, lives were seldom lost and property damage was limited. This was because the national radio service tracked the progress of hurricanes, and gave adequate advance warning. Moreover, everyone – from the public to the public utilities and the medical services – were trained in where to go during emergencies, and what to do. At one greenhouse supported by Oxfam Canada, staff proudly demonstrated how they could take down the structure in less than

half an hour: they might lose a crop, but they wouldn't lose valuable infrastructure. If a poor country like Cuba can significantly mitigate the damage done by natural disasters through planning, communication and preparedness, there is no reason why other countries in the region – or around the world - cannot do the same.

The second is assured advance funding. We all know there will be disasters, and that about 20% of ODA-eligible funding is spent on disaster response in an average year. There is no reason why the UN cannot have annual replenishment of a fund ready for immediate disbursement in an emergency. Right now, UN response must wait until countries have pledged funds for a specific situation. And if the disaster occurs in a place remote from cameras or of little strategic interest for big powers, there may be no pledges forthcoming at all. Canadian officials have been leery of committing upfront funding to what they fear could be an inefficient and perhaps politicized process. But Canada would have enough like-minded partners in the OECD to create a strong, principled, proportional and quick disbursement mechanism that would not leave UN agencies paralyzed for lack of resources. Replenishment would be based on good performance, including good coordination among UN bodies, and an appropriate split of spending on service delivery and administration. Just the time saved in begging various capitals for donations would be significant.

If there is no political will for a global pre-funding mechanism, the least Canada can do is to pre-qualify reputable and capable humanitarian agencies – UN, non-governmental and governmental – to respond, so that when an emergency hits, there is no delay in the response as agencies scramble to prepare submissions and await their approval. This will require officials and their Ministers to choose among delivery channels and defend their choices – but this is not an insuperable barrier. It will also require Canada to invest its humanitarian dollars where they are most effectively used – and that won't necessarily be in Canadian capacity. On cost alone, never mind cultural and linguistic suitability, one can imagine that a Cuban field hospital could outperform a Canadian army unit in most situations in Latin America, if not around the world.

The third area that would improve humanitarian response efforts is a combination of clear decision-making structures and quality control. Neither of these is as simple as it sounds. Let me talk about the latter first. In a humanitarian emergency, the human response to suffering and misery – especially what may be called 'innocent' suffering and misery after a natural disaster – is compassion and a desire to help. After the tsunami, the most common phone call Oxfam Canada – and many other humanitarian response agencies – received is offers of goods and services. Canadians wanted to help, even though the most useful response is money. Even offers of hard expertise like trauma response or emergency water and sanitation equipment is almost impossible to deploy without pre-planning and pre-positioning. Canada has no coordinated system that would allow the deployment of human and material resources overseas in an

efficient and coordinated way in an emergency. Some large agencies, like the Canadian Red Cross, do have some trained volunteers who can be deployed relatively quickly, but there is no coordinated country-wide system to match the appropriate skills and technology with the particular cultural, linguistic and material requirements of a particular emergency. It would be helpful to decide whether creating such a system made more sense on a national basis (the Canadian flag option) or a global basis (the comparative advantage option).

I have left for last the most difficult issue of field coordination. In a disaster, civilian national and UN authorities need to be able to allocate tasks and coordinate the response among all actors – local and global; government, non-government and private sector. They cannot do so now. Coordination and division of labour is voluntary, and competition is rife. Competition and choice is desirable in many areas of endeavour, but I would argue that it creates waste, gaps, duplication, and worst of all, adds unnecessary suffering for people already devastated by a natural disaster. Canada would not be able to respond effectively if hundreds of humanitarian organizations and volunteers came to respond to the Saguenay floods or the Ottawa ice storm, and our government would not permit it. Why are we complicit in rushing to the scene of disasters in poor countries without adequate coordination and leadership?

It is difficult to argue that we have too much humanitarian response capacity in an era of climate change and political instability. But we definitely are not using it to maximum effect. We can and must do better.