Critique of the role of outsiders in disaster invention

If "education is mainly a domestic affair," and development a long-term process, what is the role for outside agencies that deliver emergency relief? The next two papers present a withering critique of the performance of private voluntary agencies in their response to disasters. Frances D'Souza and Fred Cuny, themselves veterans of failed campaigns, suggest ways that agencies must change in order to make a significant contribution to development.

Do disaster relief agencies learn from experience? D'Souza reviews agency performance in East Africa in 1980—1981, in a previous round of drought-induced famine. She points to the difficulties agencies face in collecting and using information about in-country conditions prior to the onset of crisis. They lack an institutional memory in the form of experienced staff trained in analysis and in co-ordination with other agencies. In essence, D'Souza suggests that private voluntary agencies need less amateur enthusiasm and more professional discipline.

Cuny's thoughts were captured during the course of the Institute, and are summarized briefly here by the editors of this supplement. He sees private voluntary agencies as ill-equipped — given dependence on unskilled staff and feast-when-famine funding — to contribute to prevention and mitigation of disasters. The rigid military structure of government agencies limits their ability to work with poor, marginalized communities. Cuny poses a series of dilemmas that will be resolved only with a creative re-organization and a shift from a disaster relief to a disaster mitigation posture.

Information and professionalism in disaster relief programmes

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During the past decade there have been significant changes on the part of humanitarian organizations in their approach to disaster relief. However, there remains a discrepancy between what is now known about how to achieve a timely and effective response and what actually happens. It is, for example, debatable whether or not disaster relief programmes and their agents constitute a system, or alternatively whether the international response to disasters is still largely arbitrary, unco-ordinated and less effective, particularly in the longer run, than the budgets involved would suggest.

It may seem unnecessarily critical in the 1980's, after so much has been achieved by humanitarian organizations in terms of re-organizing their attitudes and response to disasters, to point out that many organizations continue to raise millions of dollars for emergency relief, without perceiving any real obligation to provide themselves or their fundors with reliable and accurate information before, during or after a disaster. It may also seem churlish to have to point to the failures rather than to the successes. However, it is precisely because of the destructive effects of a badly planned disaster relief programme that it seems necessary to underline the pivotal role of information in a successful response. Equally, it is useful to examine the motivations and structures of decision making within humanitarian organizations which may discourage a rational approach to disaster relief (D'Souza, 1984).

THE IDEAL SYSTEM

The ideal response to a threatened or actual disaster by a group of operational agencies should include three elements.

First, each agency should have a clear idea of its own particular role in disaster response and also a full appreciation of its limitations. These factors should be known and accepted by other non-operational agencies and funding bodies such as the UN and governments. The agency's recruitment of staff should reflect this understanding of its role, thus ensuring that people with appropriate skills are hired. In addition to a clear idea of their own areas of competence, it is desirable that there be

adequate channels of communications between operational agencies. These should be maintained even in non-operational times (i.e. when there is no emergency to respond to) in order to keep each other informed as to what kind of preparations they may be making for any future disaster. These same channels would ensure that each agency is aware of what kind of action is being taken by others once the disaster has happened.

The second element concerns the degree to which the agencies can collaborate with one another and with other bodies at field level and, thus, co-ordinate their programmes for maximum benefit. This requires, firstly, that HQ both support and, equally, take directions from their field staff; secondly, that the changing needs of survivors be discussed between agencies at field level and the tasks necessary to meet these needs allocated according to the differing agency talents and experience: and finally, that there be both acceptance and a procedure at HQ and field level to appoint a lead agency which would guide the field operation responding to a disaster.

The third element is that the relevant experience gained by the different agency representatives at both field and HQ level during the course of a disaster be systematically documented. This information should then be made available as a training tool, or simply for purposes of reference when another similar disaster occurs or the same geographical area is once again threatened by disaster.

The ideal system, so defined may seem a counsel of perfection. In fact, however, it is no different from the way in which a commercial company needing to survive in a competitive world would have to work, the key feature being that, at each stage, information is specifically gathered in order to improve the way in which operations are carried out.

The 1983 hurricane Alicia in Texas provides a good example of how a disaster and vulnerability to disaster can be dealt with in an almost ideal world. The hurricane was heralded by reliable, updated and widely disseminated reports on its probable pathway. A sophisticated and well-oiled warning system was set in motion down to the most local level where, for example, officers of the law toured the remoter rural regions with loudhailers. Buildings, (and especially houses) were required by law, to have safe areas and to be capable of being battened down.

The hurricane threatened thousands but only six people died as a direct result of high winds though damage was estimated at $600 million. Many people will have carried hurricane damage insurance. We learnt that during the height of the storm a surgeon performed a heart transplant operation.

Few humanitarian organizations work according to the logic of this ideal example, and at times the departures from the ideal system are so great and the consequences so grave, that it becomes legitimate to question whether there is a system at all (Shawcross, 1984).

The following example illustrates the kind of problems that can occur if background and operational information is either not collected or, even if collected, not incorporated into details of relief programmes at field level.

THE KARAMOJA FAMINE RELIEF PROGRAMME

The Karamoja Famine Relief Programme 1980—1981 (IDI, 1980a and b). In 1979, a combination of drought and insecurity in Uganda made the predominantly pastoralist Karamojong in North Eastern Uganda increasingly vulnerable to famine. Contrary to general belief, the traditional Karamojong response to drought is to sell off their cattle to more southern traders and markets in return for grain. This is because they themselves do not cultivate or stock grain in sufficient quantities to sustain themselves through lean years.

During 1979 this pattern of exchange was prevented due to general lawlessness and in particular due to cattle raiding in the aftermath of the Tanzanian army's liberation of Uganda. The Karamojong became increasingly short of food (between July and November of 1979) and mission stations in the area began to report cases of starvation and to request assistance. Towards the end of the year, some agencies (notably the World Food Programme (WFP), the Lutheran World Federation and CARE) began to import some food into the area for distribution through the locally based Church groups. In January 1980 the Ugandan Minister of Health appealed for emergency relief. In March 1980, a rapid inflation in grain prices was reported. This is now a relatively well known and reliable danger signal. In the next month (April) there was a rapid and severe deterioration in the nutritional condition of very large numbers of Karamojong. The classic signs of impending and widespread famine were reported — including migration of emaciated people to mission stations and other potential sources of relief food; further outbreaks of raiding; increase in movement of peoples from one centre to another, and from the bush to the centres in search of food.

In spite of the fact that many of the humanitarian agencies had senior representatives in Kampala throughout 1979, there was apparently little sense of urgency in dealing with the emerging famine to the North East of the capital.

Clearly what would have been extremely valuable in late 1979 would have been a survey, however rudimentary, giving some indication of nutritional status, geographical distribution of people in need, and food and other resources in the famine areas. Such a study could also have collected information on communications between feeding centres and the state of the roads. This in turn could well have provided more realistic estimates of tonnage of food likely to be needed over a given period of time and the amount and kind of logistic support required to transport food into the area. Such a survey was not carried out and even anecdotal reports from visiting media people, agency representatives and missionaries were largely disregarded until May 1980 — a good six months after widespread food shortages were inevitable, and by which time Karamoja was in the grip of a major and devastating famine.

The international relief effort began in earnest in May/June 1980 and coincided with extensive media coverage of the starving peoples. However, as was well documented at the time, the relief operation was far from smooth. The major impediment appeared to be a constant

and serious discrepancy between the dimension of the problem and the aid provided. The failure to estimate the numbers of people in need resulted in inadequate amounts of food being ordered and certainly inadequate logistical support to transport food into the area. This failure was compounded by the absence of a well qualified lead agency to direct the operations and to assume full responsibility for co-ordinating relief items and personnel. For example, between May 1980 and the end of that year, no less than three UN agencies acted as lead agencies only to discover that they were not technically competent to carry out the task required of them.

The following examples of discrepancies in estimates of numbers at risk put forward by the various agencies again illustrates the kind of difficulties facing individual agencies who have neither the freedom, time or resources to carry out meticulous surveys — but who, nevertheless, are often in need of sound information.

- In **March 1980** the UN resident representative estimated that half a million people were affected by food shortages and 136,000 were said to be in a critical condition. On the basis of this guestimate it was recommended that 6,400 tonnes per month be sent to Karamoja though nothing was said at this time about how long such a relief programme should continue.
- In **July 1980** a different estimate reckoned that 300,000 people were at risk out of a total population of 400,000 and that between 60,000 and 80,000 were in urgent need of food.
- In **August 1980** another agency report expressed the view that mass feeding had greatly improved but there remained 20,000 people still in critical need of food rations.

The difficulty in getting reasonably accurate estimates was by November 1980 recognized by all agencies and some concerted attempt was made to get better figures. The results of a multi-agency survey suggested that 3,000 tonnes per month for ten months would be needed to feed 350,000 people which represented 75% of the total population in Karamoja.

However, at the time this survey was completed less than one third of this amount was currently being delivered to the feeding centres of the region. For example, between 20th September 1980 and 19th October 1980 (30 days) one major UN agency with 50 trucks at its disposal delivered only 1,000 tonnes and another with ten trucks managed to deliver 50 tonnes. Later, in the month of March 1981 and well over a year since the famine had been declared, the UN humanitarian organizations delivered 28 tonnes in that month. This total compared unfavourably with the 4,700 tonnes delivered by one U.K. based voluntary organization between 28th January and 16th March (Stephenson and Kemball-Cook, 1984).

Finally, the failure to gather and disseminate good information led to confusion as to which sectors of the population were most vulnerable and what kind of feeding programmes were therefore appropriate. For example at one time three agencies were carrying out three different kinds of feeding programmes in one area, ranging from an attempt to blanket feed *all* children judged to be even minimally malnourished or at risk and regardless of age, to a programme which provided sophisticated medical and nutritional care to 200 children out of a total population of 7,000 children. A third programme selected only children under five and attempted to feed them all regardless of nutritional status.

Towards the end of 1980 a second famine was threatened. This was due to three main factors. Planting was disrupted due to the famine itself, and continued insecurity in the area. The scanty rains failed altogether in some areas. Buffer food stocks maintained as a contingency for precisely such a failure became dangerously depleted and seed stocks promised for delivery in September 1980 only arrived in February 1981, thus missing the planting season. Furthermore, even in 1981 when fears of further famine were very real, there were still delays in the delivery of long haul vehicles and inadequate servicing facilities to ensure maximum performance of vehicles already in the area.

An unprecedented representation by several of the voluntary agencies operating in Karamoja to the UN Secretary General resulted in a tightening up of the programme and widespread famine in 1981 was, in fact, narrowly averted.

THE INFORMATION GAP

It is perhaps unfair to select one relief operation in which clearly everything that could go wrong did and one in which the field conditions, if not impossible, were at one point so difficult as to make the logistic problems almost insurmountable. But the purpose in selecting this example is twofold; first it provides a telescoped view of the kind of issues and difficulties which to a greater or lesser extent affect *all* relief operations at one stage of an emergency; secondly, because the Karamoja example illustrates the value of information in the pre-disaster, emergency and post-crisis contexts.

This highly condensed account also illustrates at least four aspects which all too often accompany overseas disaster relief programmes.

1. Few if any agencies, but particularly those big enough to have sufficient resources to prevent famine, were able to act in advance of the disaster.
2. There was little if any real commitment to or reliance on what information was available as a basis for making decisions.
3. The forward planning by the major agencies to deal with contingencies such as these was lacking and even where present not used.
4. The inability of the major relief agencies to co-ordinate programmes and delegate specialist tasks resulted in an untidy and late response.

A recent survey of European private voluntary organizations (D'Souza, 1984), which regularly respond to disasters, has concentrated on the organizations' perception of the role of information (the second aspect listed above) and education in their response to disasters. The survey, though frequently critical of the organizations, was carried out with the utmost support and frankness from all agencies involved. Some of the survey's results may be summarized as follows:

- Is information used in determining whether to respond to a disaster? The key factor in such a decision was fundraising — i.e. could the agency raise the funds required to support a response? Subsidiary factors included donor or public pressure upon the agency to respond, the relevance of the agency's mandate, and the previous presence or otherwise in the country where the the disaster is taking place. The information used therefore was rarely a technical evaluation of need and ability to respond technically. Half the agencies admitted that there was no technical basis for such a decision.

- Is information used in determining the form of response? Once the decision had been taken in favour of responding, information was required to determine the most effective form of response. Views on the type of information required ranged from a belief that the agency's own network could provide all the information required to a genuine disquiet that considerable sums of money were going to be committed without a clear or substantial idea of priority needs. At the same time, those agencies expressing this anxiety could not see how useful and relevant information could be incorporated into the decision making. The power of the fund-raising imperative would invariably overcome the perception of the need for voluntary restraint engendered by an objective appraisal of priorities.

  However, operational agencies did perceive a greater need for appropriate information at this stage, than did non-operational agencies — perhaps because of their greater media visibility if things went wrong. These agencies identified a requirement for information on the severity of the disaster as a basis for a decision on their particular role. This would affect decisions as to how (or whether) to promote assistance for special groups, such as the aged or women. Finally they wished to have information as a basis for planning for the *evolving* needs of a disaster-struck community.

- What is the form of information used in determining response? Overall few had really thought what form the information would be most useful. Some for example said that they wished to have a check list in order to judge the severity of a disaster, others wanted a "snapshot of the community" concerned, yet others thought that a sort of Michelin guide to disasters would help them. It became increasingly clear that what the information agencies have in mind had very little to do with research data and everything to do with who the information came from. This is extremely important since it suggests the need to build a bridge between the researchers and the action people. Thus ten of the fourteen agencies interviewed said that if they had a field person well known to them then they relied *entirely* on that person. One representative believed that "information should not be institutionalized as the informal network is very valuable because you know the people involved." Another said that they did not attempt to assess the field information but responded to whatever was requested to keep the operational partners happy. More importantly yet another said that information available was not used because it was unusable, by which he meant that it was not in a readily digestible form such as a checklist.

- What kind of *exchange* of information between agencies is required? All agencies spontaneously said that exchange of information, and thus *co-ordination* of efforts to maximise benefit was virtually non-existent but desperately needed.

  The reasons, however, put forward for the apparent obstacles to co-ordination varied. Those individuals who represented consortia were most keenly aware of the difficulty in co-ordination — they said that information of whatever kind is very rarely shared at consortium meetings because each agency jealously guarded its own information in order to gain an advantage in either media or fund raising terms. This kind of difficulty is for obvious reasons more often the case with the operational agency — the non-operational ones being content to rely on their operational partners who are usually well established over a period of years. Other agencies said that even if field information gained by one *in situ* agency is made available it is usually too late to be of use in guiding response decisions. Another representative said that, in his long experience, agencies attempt to maintain their *status quo* for historical reasons and that this underlying principle precludes logic. Their individual structures do not allow federation in any functional sense and although many agency staff spend a considerable proportion of their time in inter-agency meetings this does not guarantee practical joint programmes.

- Is information used within agencies as a basis for increasing staff professionalism? One of the effects of a lack of co-ordination and exchange is that there is no mechanism to impose standards based on the by now clearer picture of what happens in different kinds of disasters and what the needs will be. Nor is their any central mechanism whereby technical information however presented can penetrate different agencies to ensure that their response is based on observed need rather than perceived ones. Professionalism, it seems, may be inimical to the agency's own image of what "charity" means.

TRAINING OF FIELD STAFF

This brief review of the survey's results reveals the crucial central role of information in determining agency policy. Equally, it points to the vital need for increasing staff professionalism not least in selecting and using such information. The selection and education of agency staff emerges as a major priority in improving overseas disaster relief programmes.

Professionalism implies a system in which qualified staff can practice within a career structure, which will advance and deepen their experience. This is extremely rare. Staff may have to be recruited rapidly if an agency decides to respond to a disaster. The consequence is that there is no adequate briefing and the hastily recruited staff may have to begin emergency work almost immediately after they arrive. The conditions under which they work may be quite alien to them and/or they may have to do work which is not related to their training. Medical teams trained to save lives may have to spend days assessing the magnitude of the problem; methods to calculate those in most urgent need have to be developed. The conclusion may be that the best way to prevent mass deaths may be a question of designing sanitation systems rather than applying western medical concepts. It may take weeks before the team feels it is being effective; in the meanwhile morale can drop rapidly.

The problems here may be managerial rather than purely medical or nutritional and experience may account for more than any professional qualification and yet it is still extremely common that medical staff are more often recruited than perhaps people who have experience in managing resources under difficult field conditions.

In theory there are solutions. First of all some agencies have certainly discussed the idea of maintaining a core group of experienced individuals but even if they are available at the time of a disaster this procedure is extremely expensive and very often, there are insufficient numbers of qualified people to work in this area. An alternative solution is to appoint one key person who has sufficient background knowledge and experience to brief new recruits and to interpret the field information as it comes in to a senior decision making position. Thirdly, there are regular courses to familiarize would-be disaster relief staff as to the kind of problems which may arise at field level.

Many of the larger operational agencies certainly do provide courses of one sort or another for their permanent development staff but few do so for short-term staff and even when they do happen they tend to be in-house affairs stressing the aims and philosophy of the agency concerned rather than the technical issues. In the past five years many external groups and bodies especially the universities have turned their attention to training courses and some are successfully run. The problem here is to know for whom exactly they are designed and when they should be held.

In regular courses of any kind there is always the tendency to bring in theoretical material and to lengthen courses to satisfy university boards of their relevance within the academic system. Moreover the people who attend the courses especially if they are participants from countries which regularly suffer disasters tend to come from the higher administrative levels of government rather than from those who will actually have to operate at field level.

CONCLUSION

Little attention has been given to the immense difficulties agencies, whether United Nations or private voluntary, have in implementing development programmes let alone disaster relief programmes. The suggestion here is that education in a broad sense might be useful to agencies in combatting the lack of coherence in overseas relief programmes. The concentration has been on private voluntary organizations because it is believed their concerted action could be a formidable force and one which would set standards rather more rapidly perhaps than United Nations specialist agencies which probably will always be rather more cumbersome in their response. There are clearly many opportunities for education to improve disaster response but the crucial first step is that the agencies should genuinely wish to change elements of their procedures.

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