

CRANFIELD DISASTER PREPAREDNESS CENTRE

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING UP YOUR EXPERIENCES IN THE MANAGEMENT OR OBSERVATION OF DISASTER RELIEF OR RECONSTRUCTION ASSISTANCE

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Disaster relief and reconstruction aid organisations are beginning to recognise the importance of training in the highly complex business of decision making for emergency response. Yet although the activity itself is well established, study and documentation of the process is not. To advance our collective stock of knowledge in this area, to help you to crystallise some of your own thoughts and experience, and to help in our mutual training effort, you have been asked to prepare a document for use in a forthcoming training course or seminar. These notes are intended to help you in the process.

Form of the Document

The document may take the form of a descriptive report, an evaluation study or a commentary on some aspect of disaster preparedness, relief or reconstruction. Generally, your report should focus on the work of the organisation with which you are associated for disaster purposes (for example, as an employee, volunteer or committee member). However, if you are lucky enough to be able to take a more Olympian view, you may compare and contrast the experiences of different organisations, or perhaps the same organisation reacting at different times or in different places.

If you have had first hand experience of a disaster - either as a victim or as an organiser of aid - draw on your personal knowledge as much as you are able. One moment of direct experience is worth more than a decade of conjecture.

In so far as it is practicable try to write up the material which you have so that it can be shared with people who work for organisations other than your own. In other words, try to bring out the essential truth of the events or circumstances which you describe, but do so in a way which ought not to threaten those whose status appears to make them responsible for the events which you report. In general, omit the names of individuals. If necessary, you may invent fictitious names to give human personality to your report.

Select Your Topic

Large scale disasters have an impact on many aspects of human experience. You are not expected to cover them all. In the first instance you should choose one sector to write about. For example, this may be any of the following:

- ♦ Emergency rescue
- ♦ Agriculture
- ♦ Nutrition and the distribution of food
- ♦ Medical needs, supplies and services
- ♦ Shelter and housing
- ♦ Environmental sanitation
- ♦ Clothing and other material resource aid
- ♦ Public Information
- ♦ Social welfare
- ♦ Etc.

Alternatively, you might choose a theme which would run across several of these sectors, for example:

- ♦ Materials handling and logistics
- ♦ Financial control
- ♦ Personnel recruitment and management
- ♦ Use of volunteers
- ♦ Communications
- ♦ Co-ordination with other agencies (including non-government organizations)
- ♦ Technology and its appropriateness
- ♦ Media coverage and treatment
- ♦ Political dimensions
- ♦ Etc.

Do not be afraid to tackle more than one area, but try to do so systematically rather than jumping from one topic to another.

Select Your Viewpoint

Our knowledge and interpretation of what goes on in a disaster varies according to what position we occupy. When writing your report be careful to mention from whose point of view the observations come. eg. are you reporting views from a donor government far away from the site of the disaster; from a private voluntary organisation (PVO) based overseas; from a local (national) government; from a local PVO; from the community leaders; or from the more humble victims of a disaster? You will often find that a comparison of views on the same topic but from different quarters is very illuminating.

Establish a Context

Unless you are sure that your fellow course or seminar participants will all come from the same organisation as your own, you will need to paint in some institutional background. What kind of organisation are you writing about? What are its stated goals and objectives (and, if different - its real ones); and where do the characters or events in your report fit in to the organisational tradition?

Similarly, an outline of the disaster phenomenon itself (cyclone, earthquake, flood, drought, etc) will be necessary in order to understand why certain things were done and when. Remember to include all important information which a stranger to the place, time and people will require in order to understand the points which you make in your report.

Select A Problem Question(s) Or Issue(s) To Be Raised

A straight narrative description of events can be made much more interesting and more educational if you can arrange the material which you have so that it poses a question or several inter-related questions. It is not necessary that you provide a definitive answer to the question asked, merely that the information which you present gives some indication of the direction in which lessons for the future may lie.

Examples of the kind of question which can help structure your report are as follows:

- ♦ What was done and why? Often, the obvious answer (eg. that "the need existed") does not constitute the full story.
- ♦ Where were which decisions made? (How much influence, power or choice, for example, did the victims have?)
- ♦ When were important decisions made and why were they made at that time (not earlier or later, etc)?
- ♦ What else might have been done but was not? (It may be useful to compare organisations for ideas on what else could have been done.)
- ♦ Of the options which were not pursued: which ones were considered and rejected - and why; and which ones were not even considered - and why?
- ♦ What results were achieved by the action embarked upon?
- ♦ What unintended consequences followed from the actions?
- ♦ What do those (people/institutions) who were responsible for making the decisions know of the results of their efforts? Is this different from what the victims or other observers know?

- ♦ What assumptions were underlying the decisions or plans of action as they emerged? Which of these assumptions were proven sound and which false?
- ♦ What conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the experience? These should benefit others in a similar position, ie. the same organisation at some future time, or in another organisation now or in the future.

Three short Annexes are attached which set out some more precise questions in each of three sectors. However, it must be pointed out that these were prepared for the purpose of exciting discussion of a specific disaster which took place in a specific place. In relation to your own disaster experience, these questions may or may not be relevant. In any case, you are probably far better equipped to ask your own questions now that hindsight has suggested some answers.

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ANNEX 1: Shelter and Housing

- ♦ What types of assistance were provided by helping agencies in, (a) the provision of emergency shelter, and (b) for the construction of more permanent houses? Were whole housing units provided, or materials only, or technical advice, or credit, or land, or all the necessary components?
- ♦ Did the housing assistance which was provided conform to local and traditional patterns? If not, how are the differences explained?
- ♦ Who designed the houses constructed after the disaster and who built them? How do the answers to these questions compare with the procedures by which houses are normally designed and built in the area? If there are differences between normal procedures and those used after the disaster, how are the differences explained?
- ♦ Were distinctions made by (a) the victims themselves, and (b) the helping agencies, as between temporary and permanent housing? What results were obtained?
- ♦ Was housing aid given away free to beneficiaries or were charges made for the materials and service provided?
- ♦ Was education in disaster resistant construction techniques offered by helping agencies? What is known of the effectiveness of this education?
- ♦ To what extent were local materials employed in post-disaster housing, and to what were materials imported? If materials were imported, why was this done?
- ♦ How were houses laid out (in relation to one another) in post-disaster reconstruction projects? Did the layouts used correspond with traditional patterns for the dwellings?
- ♦ Did the existence of different types of housing in any one village, or between villages, cause any problems for the communities served?
- ♦ What proportion of the post-disaster housing construction was undertaken by the victims themselves, and what proportion by the helping agencies?
- ♦ Did the housing organised by the agencies make provision for water supply and/or sanitation facilities?

- ♦ To what extent did the intended beneficiaries have the opportunity to participate in decision making about the type, size, materials, siting and timing of construction of the dwellings provided with the assistance of the agencies?
- ♦ What professional advice did helping agencies have in planning and managing their housing programmes?
- ♦ How were the size of housing aid programmes decided upon? How was the need for housing assessed?
- ♦ Did the helping agencies which were concerned with housing have previous experience in this field? For any which did not, what special problems were encountered?

ANNEX 2: The Social Aspects of Feeding and Other Material Resources Distribution Programmes

- ♦ What kinds of feeding programmes were undertaken by helping agencies after the disaster? Why and how was it decided to embark on these programmes?
- ♦ How did the victims feed themselves or obtain food after the disaster? In what way did the disaster prevent people from doing this in the normal way?
- ♦ How were feeding programmes organised? What improvements could have been made in the methods employed?
- ♦ How were food rations distributed? Did people queue? Were alternative systems tried, and with what results?
- ♦ What were the objectives of the feeding programmes? What was the target group?
- ♦ Is anything known of the nutritional state of the recipients before and/or after the food was distributed?
- ♦ Was provision of water to victims considered as important as the provision of food? If not, why not?
- ♦ Was food aid distributed as dry rations or cooked? If both methods were used, what were the advantages and limitations of each?
- ♦ What foods were found to be appropriate as aid?
- ♦ To what groups were goods distributed? How was it decided that some groups should receive material help and not other?
- ♦ Is there any evidence that animosities were produced between those individuals and/or groups which received help and those who did not?
- ♦ What was the balance of benefits against any negative social impacts which might have been obtained from the distribution of material resources?
- ♦ What social groups were especially badly affected by the disaster? What provision was made within the community to care for such people (eg the old, the infirm, widows, orphans, the mentally ill, etc) and what provision was made by the helping organisations?

- ♦ Did the help given by outside organisations to especially disadvantaged groups correspond with local custom and/or the best interests of the victims?
- ♦ What is known of the psychological needs of the victims? Was any assistance provided by relief agencies and/or others in the field of post-disaster mental health?
- ♦ Is anything known about the effect of the introduction of food aid on the local farm economy?
- ♦ Was there a need for clothing and/or blankets among the victims? Did relief agencies distribute these commodities? Which type of commodity was most relevant to the needs and which was not?
- ♦ How equitably were relief commodities distributed (a) between affected communities and (b) among individual victims?
- ♦ Was money distributed by the Government and/or by helping other agencies? How was this done? What problems were encountered, and what were the benefits obtained? How were decisions made as to who should receive help in cash?
- ♦ What was done by helping agencies in relation to orphans? What were the advantages and limitations attached to each of the different policies pursued?

ANNEX 3: Rescue and Medical

- ♦ How did the relief organisation know what the nature and magnitude of the post-disaster problems were? On whom did they rely for their information and/or an assessment of the situation?
- ♦ How did news of the need for help get through to the outside world?
- ♦ When did the helping agencies arrive on the scene? How did this timing relate to the emergency or existence of the needs addressed?
- ♦ What criteria were used to assess the medical need and to decide in which cases help should be given and when not?
- ♦ Was the physical rescue of victims necessary? If so, who did this and when?
- ♦ Did the medical help reach the remote areas?
- ♦ What kind of injuries and/or sickness were reported by victims to medical personnel? When did these manifest themselves?
- ♦ How did people manage in areas where no medical assistance was given?
- ♦ What medical assistance was provided?
- ♦ Did different kinds of helping organisations provide different kinds of medical aid?
- ♦ What kind of organisation was best equipped to provide what kind of assistance?
- ♦ Did mortality and morbidity patterns (numbers of people dying or getting sick from various causes) change after the disaster compared with the patterns existing before?
- ♦ During the period after the disaster, did mortality and morbidity patterns change? If so, how?
- ♦ Which type of medical personnel were most useful after the disaster, and which were less appropriate?
- ♦ Were foreign medical personnel used in relief operations? If so, was their presence of value? What extra difficulties or limitations did foreign personnel suffer over those encountered by nationals or very local personnel?

- ♦ What medical procedures or practices were employed in the post-disaster period (eg. immunization, distribution of medicines, surgery, counselling, etc.)? What was known of the efficacy or worth of such procedures in post-disaster situations?
- ♦ Where were the decisions made (in which organisation or at what level within organisations) that certain procedures (eg. immunization) should be embarked upon?
- ♦ What attention was given to preventative health measures after the disaster?
- ♦ Was epidemiological surveillance organised after the disaster to monitor the incidence of disease?
- ♦ Were any comparisons made of the costs and benefits to be obtained from alternative courses or medical aid and/or preventative action?
- ♦ Was there adequate water for drinking immediately after the disaster for humans and for animals?
- ♦ What efforts were directed towards reinstating the communities' supply of potable water? How successful were these efforts? When were the benefits obtained?
- ♦ How did the special health provisions after the disaster compare with the type and level of health provision which existed before? Did the difference, if any, have any effect on the management of the on-going health services or on the level of expectations among the local population?
- ♦ Did the arrival, purchase and/or delivery of medical supplies correspond with the need?
- ♦ How were dead bodies disposed of? How best was this done?
- ♦ Was there a need for first aid after the disaster? To what extent was this need met, and by whom? Did any unmet needs in first aid result in avoidable deaths?
- ♦ Of what value were the local village health centres for the purposes of giving first aid?
- ♦ What was the relationship between any mobile medical teams and the local hospitals? Did they complement one another or conflict in any way?
- ♦ Was the need for potable water seen as a priority early enough?