

Review of the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Program

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Review of the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Program

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report on the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Program provides an independent review of management issues for the consideration of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).

During the period from Monday February 6th, 1989 to February 14th, 1989, the consultant spent a day and a half in Washington interviewing head office staff of the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Program (PED), three days in Antigua, interviewing staff and government officials connected with the Pan Caribbean Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Project (PCDPPP), and two days in San Jose, Costa Rica, interviewing staff and officials of government and non-government organizations involved in the disaster health preparedness program.

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2.0 NATURE OF THE PROGRAM

To keep the report brief, we will not reproduce here basic information about the program, which is already known to the intended readers, but will direct our remarks to observations which may provide new insights to the program.

Development

Although PAHO is interested in health matters only, disaster preparedness for health often overlaps other areas such as infrastructure, communications, education, etc. In the event of a disaster, the preservation of human life is a top priority, hence the health component of the relief effort occupies a central role.

It happens then, that health preparedness is often the stimulus for the upgrading of other services involved in disaster relief, and PAHO can take credit for acting as a catalyst for the improvement and development of needed public and community activities.

In effect, PAHO'S program is providing leadership in the development of disaster preparedness as a whole.

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Organizational efficiency

An outstanding feature of the program is its emphasis on integration of the efforts of different branches of national governments, and between these and non government institutions, establishing communications across jurisdictional boundaries. Normally, institutional boundaries pose limitations and delays to interinstitutional cooperation, and programs are carried out in ignorance of each other. The PAHO program helps to break down this unnecessary isolation, thus facilitating a much greater effectiveness in operations, and a more efficient use of resources.

Diplomatic ingredient

Because of this cross-jurisdictional integration, this program, more than most others, is an exercise in diplomacy. First it is necessary to stimulate the interest of national governments in the program, getting them to undertake responsibility for organizing their own disaster preparedness program. Then much effort is invested in getting the various branches of the government to talk to each other, and to coordinate their contributions to the program. The integration of government and non-government organizations and programs is an extension of this same feature. The program also fosters intergovernmental contacts and cooperation through regional and sub-regional meetings and seminars.

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The humanitarian aspect of disaster relief is a common denominator of all cultures and nationalities, and coordination and preparedness for disasters provides a politically neutral area for cooperation which can open doors for other initiatives for greater harmony between nations.

Diversity and attention to detail

The term "region" refers to the Americas: North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. The region comprises some 50 different nations and jurisdictions, each with totally different requirements and degrees of development. Only very broad generalizations are possible, and each country has to be considered on its own merits, with its own schedule of development, and with different problems to be solved and requirements to be met. The result is that the program does not lend itself easily to simplistic or systematic approaches, by trying to apply what has been successful in one country to another; nor to facile comparisons, whereby one country's progress is measured against another's.

The response to the problem has been to keep the staff small, so that for each sub-region only one senior advisor is involved in developing the program and maintaining relations. All details are in the hands of one person only, thus avoiding problems of communication and coordination which would arise if more than one person was involved.

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Time is of the essence

This is a generally misused term, which gives an appearance of importance to activities which do not merit its use. However, in the case of this program, speed of response has to be built in to the executive and administrative functions, since rapid response is critical in life-saving operations. Thus the program has been supported by communications systems and equipment, and computerized data bases which facilitate responsiveness. In addition, responsiveness characterizes the normal developmental activities of the program, so as to encourage each country to set up its emergency program as quickly as possible. In other words, if the country is ready to advance, PAHO makes sure that it won't be kept waiting for materials or advice.

Bureaucratic delays have been practically eliminated by the decentralization of decisionmaking, supported by frequent visits of the Program Coordinator to the field, whereby problems can be resolved on a face to face basis, and action taken immediately.

Delays caused by administrative procedures that control financial transactions, travel advances, and staff and consultant hiring have been reduced as far as possible by fostering an attitude of cooperation, by using facsimile transmission of approvals, and by seeking exceptional treatment for the program. This approach has been made possible by the continuous support of the Director of PAHO.

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3.0 MANAGEMENT STYLE

The great diversity of the program and the need for responsiveness have given rise to a management style which is the opposite of the bureaucratic stereotype.

Most of the action takes place in the field, not at the head office: hence the move to decentralize the decisionmaking, and as much as possible the support services.

The type of work involves negotiation and persuasion in 50 different jurisdictions; therefore those involved must have a few basic policies to guide them, and lots of discretion in deciding what to do.

It is recommended that a few (not more than five) basic policies be established to serve as guidelines for the field officers in their decisionmaking. Based on our observation of the management style of the program, the following are suggested:

- Pass the Baton. As soon as possible functions carried out by PED should be passed on to the participating countries.
- Demand pull rather than supply push. Countries have to request services or advice, rather than the program push or promote activities or services which the countries are not ready or willing to undertake.

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- Don't keep them waiting. Speed of response to requests for assistance is required under all circumstances, urgent or otherwise.
- Flexibility. Any solution that is within the bounds of policy, is acceptable.

The diplomatic nature of the development activities, and the great diversity of the national programs, requires that good people be hired, and then given lots of room to make their own decisions in the field and on the spot.

The Program Coordinator keeps on top of all this kind of activity by active two way-communication, and frequent visits to the field.

However, administrative procedures regarding finances, travel, personnel and purchasing are adhered to, so that decentralization does not present additional risks or problems to the organization.

The PED program, due to its emergency nature, is somewhat different from the rest of the PAHO development programs, and makes special demands on the central services, the position being that the services are there to support the programs and not vice versa. The potential problem with funding agencies is the slowness of the production of financial statements, which is due in part to the difficulty of getting participants and suppliers to report their expenses promptly, so that

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individual obligations can be closed and excess funds liberated for other uses.

However, concerning country program funds, subsidiary accounting systems are being installed at PAHO field offices, which gives the local representatives better information on the status of their accounts, and gives them access to detailed records with which to manage their budgets. A similar system does not exist for the local use of regional allotments.

4.0 USE OF RESOURCES

The PED program makes intensive use of a very small staff, compared to the vast geographical scope of the program, and the complexity of the individual national programs.

It is evident that an attempt has been made to maximize the efficiency of the human element by using advanced technology whenever possible. A network of facsimile machines has been installed to provide instant written communication. Desktop and laptop computers are used extensively, and word processing, transmission and data base programs are in use. Electronic mail is used to transmit data in machine readable form, thus saving transcription time and costs. Desktop publishing is used at the regional and subregional offices.

These networks and facilities are being extended in some cases to individual countries, so that information may be transferred in the most efficient way possible.

Information centres are being installed at subregional levels, supported by the publications activities of the regional office. Computerized mailing lists are used to select and circularize publications to appropriate users, thus ensuring a high rate of effective use of the publications. As with the other systems, individual countries are being

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encouraged to set up their own information centers, with similar systems, thus extending the network and bringing it closer to the ultimate user. Greater efficiency is obtained by sending the masters for duplication not only to the subregional but also to the national information centres, thus saving the costs, hazards and delays of sending publications through the mails.

A significant feature of the program is the use of elements which are the basis of networking: electronic communication systems, mailing lists, and cross jurisdictional contacts. In effect, networking is taking place, but as a by-product of other activities.

It is recommended that networking be taken up as a deliberate program to encourage people involved with disaster preparedness to get into touch with each other. These networks could be supported by the subregional offices, through the maintenance of network data bases (an extension of the mailing list idea), and procedures designed to upgrade and stimulate the use of the network.

5.0 PLANNING

The current attitude towards planning appears to be one of an apprehension that a formal plan for the program would impose unnecessary restraints to the flexibility and speed of response of the program. Much of the activity of the program is subject to frequent rescheduling of dates and events, so that any attempt to control activities through detailed programming would hinder rather than help the program.

One of the main policies of the program is rapid response to the requests and initiatives of the participating countries. Since these requests are unpredictable, and since the program is committed to respond to initiatives rather than program them, it is almost impossible to structure the activities according to a logical pattern or sequence, except in a very general way.

Budgeting according to the number and type of outputs also goes against the general strategy of the program, since this would tend to focus on means rather than ends, and would tend to perpetuate the program's involvement in activities, rather than try to get rid of them by passing them on to the participating countries as soon as possible.

A plan is generally used as an instrument of control, but it can also be used as a tool for dynamic prioritizing of resources. Given the

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frequent visits to the field by Headquarters staff, there is less need for control from a central office through the use of a formal planning and reporting system.

The need for instant reallocation of resources must not be hampered by planning system technicalities, as to what can or cannot be done without prior approval, nor is it convenient to hamper operations through paperwork which is not directly involved with results.

PED is frequently involved in direct participation in disasters, with the principal officers involved in the field, giving advice, and expediting matters at the scene of the disaster. The frequency, timing, and duration of such participation cannot be predicted. One cannot plan disasters.

Having said all that against planning, the program cannot throw out the idea completely, since its whole reason for existence is the promotion of planning for disaster preparedness. Let us examine then, the features of planning can be of use to the program, and what would be the minimum requirements of the funding agencies for a program plan.

The following questions have to be answered:

- How is one to measure the progress of the program towards its completeness?
- How long will the development program take?

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- How much will it cost?

The initial response would be, in each case, that it is impossible to tell. However, let us examine each question, to see to what degree the questions can be answered.

Progress towards completion

There is a need for an overall view of how the program will progress over time. Each country program will pass through various phases, which could be defined as follows:

Phase I - Stimulation

Encouragement of each country government to take the initiative to set up a disaster preparedness program. The phase would end with the appointment of a full time Disaster Preparedness Coordinator for the country.

This phase is characterized by the efforts of the program to induce or encourage the country to take this step, but would not include significant activity in program development.

Phase II - Viable emergency health preparedness

During this phase each country would establish and put into operating condition the basic components of the health preparedness program.

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This phase is characterized by intensive program development in the form of advice and encouragement, seminars regional meetings, production and dissemination of publications, help in setting up communication systems, etc. (Some of this activity takes place during Phase I)

Phase III - Refinement

This phase could be quite prolonged, as the country improves the performance of its emergency health program up to satisfactory levels.

The contribution of the program would be mainly the provision of advice, and continuing research and publications on topics not previously covered.

Phase IV - Phase out

Eventually the country would become completely self-sufficient, or have made arrangements with neighbouring countries for assistance in time of emergency. The program will phase out direct assistance, but would continue to provide basic services, such as continuing research, convocation of international meetings, coordination of policy, and so on.

As mentioned before, each country has its own program of development, so that not all would be in the same phase of development. However, eventually, most countries will have completed the first two phases, and some will have reached the fourth phase.

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Although disasters will become more frequent as natural systems become overstressed, population moves in to more hazardous areas, and technology creates new and unforeseen hazards, country preparedness programs should have the capacity to face these problems. Such escalation of disasters should not impede the phase out of the program.

On this basis it should be possible in a very general way to measure the progress of the program towards it's completion.

How long will it take?

Once phases have been defined, experience will serve as a guide to estimate the amount of time needed for the majority of the countries to complete each phase. The most advanced countries will take less time. It is possible that Costa Rica will complete its program within a decade of its starting date, whereas some countries have not yet taken the first step. An approximation can be made of the time that the countries in between these two extremes would take.

Lessons learned from the experience of the advanced countries, the growing experience of the program staff, the natural competitiveness of countries between themselves, and the growing body of expertise of professionals in the network will help speed up the process.

Mutual assistance agreements will help small countries reach a level of preparedness which they would not be able to achieve on their own due to

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limits of their resources and infrastructure. This would also help to speed up the process.

Thus one could begin to get an appreciation of how long it would take to complete the program.

How much would it cost?

Again this is not a question that can be answered directly, but the current level of expenditure gives an idea of the volume of activity and the effect this has on the development of the program.

Eventually, a large enough number of people would have taken the courses offered, to establish a critical mass capable of perpetuating itself. Educational programs would substitute the seminars promoted by PAHO, except on new topics, and international and intranational linkages between sectors would be established on a permanent basis. According to the policy of "passing the baton", these types of activity will eventually be phased out.

The most costly phase is the current one in which the program is in the process of establishing itself, and there is a great demand for seminars and meetings. As this phase is completed, costs would be reduced, and subsequent phases would probably cost less.

Finally it must be emphasized that a distinction must be made between the development aspect of the program, and the ongoing or permanent

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features of the program. Policy direction, international coordination, topical research for publications, and a continuing interest in development of the country programs would be permanent functions, which should continue either within the PED or merged with other activities of PAHO.

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6.0 BUDGET

An anomalous situation exists in the classification of the budget for the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Program within the Health Services Development program in the Area of Health Services Infrastructure, which is far removed from the Assistant Director, who is responsible for the Emergency Preparedness Program.

Two fundamental rules of organization are that there should be no delegation of authority without responsibility for results, and that a person should be given the authority over the resources needed to carry out the responsibilities assigned to him or her.

Although at present the authority over the budget is de facto given to the organizational program which is responsible for carrying out the activities, the budget classification, in principle, opens the door for organizational confusion of lines of authority.

Under the present circumstances personal relations between the two areas are good and enable the set-up to work, despite its faults, but should there ever arise a difference of opinion over priorities or interpretation of policy, the Program could be brought to a halt while differences are ironed out. This problem is unnecessary and can be

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solved by simply assigning the budget to the correct organizational unit in the first place, as it is in the case of WHO programs.

Every program or function should have a plan for its execution. The plan consists of a description of the tasks and activities to be carried out, and a calculation of the resources needed, which when expressed in financial terms, is the budget. Approval of the budget implies approval of the plan, and if the budget is cut, it implies that the plan will have to be modified accordingly. It is difficult to see how a program can be run properly where potentially the plan and budget could be handled by different authorities.

A separate line item for the budget as part of the responsibility of the Assistant Director would:

- give high visibility to the Program at a time when the United Nations is embarking on a Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters,
- assist in the raising of funds from outside donors by highlighting the in its official documents the contributions made by PAHO to the Program out of its own resources,
- clear up the impression that there is disagreement within PAHO as to who should have authority over the Program, which weakens the case to be made for the Program,

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- settle the confusion as to whether Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination (PED) and Disaster Preparedness (DPP) are the same thing or not, and whether the amounts appearing against these names in financial statements and schedules represent different budgets, or whether one is included in the other or not,
- avoid giving the impression that emergency preparedness is limited to strengthening health services rather than a multidisciplinary and cross sectoral coordination involving many government and non government institutions in each country,
- bring out the fact that even within PAHO, the program has aspects of technical cooperation among countries, health education and community participation, coordination and support of human resources development, publication and dissemination of information on disaster preparedness, coordination of research; and that consequently it should be positioned outside these functions, rather than within one particular program.

Therefore, it is recommended that the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief budget be classified as a separate line item under the responsibility of the Assistant Director.

7.0 FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The general impression of the program is that it is well conceived and run. The decisions and actions regarding the managerial and administrative structure are appropriate, and indicate an aware and active management of the program.

The achievements to date indicate that the program is moving forward, although the absence of a time structured plan against which to measure progress makes it impossible to tell whether expectations are being met with regard to the speed of implementation. However, since responsiveness is a basic policy of the program management, it does appear that the program is moving forward as fast as possible, and that delays, if any, are not the fault of management.

As to the use of resources, there is every appearance of an effective use of a small, well qualified, and resourceful staff, which is given ample opportunity to create and develop solutions to the problems they face. As to the use of equipment, up to date technology is used to enhance the effectiveness of the staff and the speed of response to requests for assistance. Publications are designed for multiple use and application. Desktop publishing facilities are being developed at the

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subregional offices, for greater efficiency and service, and to facilitate the adaptation of publications to local use.

A significant feature of the program is the use of elements which are the basis of networking: electronic communication systems, mailing lists, and cross-jurisdictional contacts. In effect, networking is taking place, but as a by-product of other activities.

It is recommended that networking be taken up as a deliberate program to encourage people involved with disaster preparedness to get into touch with each other. These networks could be supported by the subregional offices, through the maintenance of network data bases (an extension of the mailing list idea), and procedures designed to upgrade and stimulate the use of the network.

Decentralization is appropriate to the needs of the program, and is being supported by frequent field visits by the Coordinator to ensure the program remains on track. The establishment of a few basic policies to serve as guidelines for the field officers, would strengthen decentralization.

It is recommended that a few (not more than five) basic policies be established to serve as guidelines for the field officers in their decisionmaking. Based on our observation of the management style of the program, the following are suggested:

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- Flexibility. Any solution that is within the bounds of policy, is acceptable.

The lack of a plan that shows the overall structure of the program, and that provides a means to measure its progress towards completion, an estimate of the time to completion, and an estimate of the total cost, is a matter of concern to CIDA, one of the main contributors of funds to the program.

It is recommended that a special program plan be prepared that meets CIDA and other funding agencies' requirements, without placing counterproductive constraints on the program. Such a plan, if not carried to the level of useless detail, could be of use to management in devising strategies for greater effectiveness and cost/effectiveness of the program.

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An anomalous situation exists in the classification of the budget for the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Program within the Health Services Development program of the Area of Health Services Infrastructure, which is far removed from the Assistant Director, who is responsible for the Program. This has the potential for detrimental effects on the smooth operation of the program.

It is recommended that the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Program be given a budget that appears as a separate line item under the responsibility of the Assistant Director.