

In case of emergency

Hashi Syedain looks at the latest strategies for staffing in a crisis

How does an organisation plan for unpredictable events, such as the Burmese cyclone or Chinese earthquake, that lead to a sudden and dramatic explosion in demand for its services? Services that may be required anywhere in the world, often in difficult, dangerous or hostile environments? Services that can be the difference between life and death, so that getting it wrong, or not doing it as well as you might, matters a lot?

These were some of the questions on the minds of the emergency directors of a group of large aid and development organisations, who came together informally in 2003 to find ways of improving their response to disasters and emergencies.

They believed climate change, latent pandemics and rising urbanisation could lead to more and bigger emergencies needing greater collaboration – a view that has since proved prophetic.

The group of seven – one British and six US organisations – representing a sizeable chunk of the non-governmental organisations involved in humanitarian relief and development (see box below), set the launch date for their Emergency Capacity Building Project (ECB): 1 January 2005. And then on 24 December, a week before, the

Asian tsunami struck.

It proved just how pressing the need for new thinking was. 'The tsunami demonstrated all the issues with scaling up. The response was unprecedented, the funding was unprecedented, the challenges of coordination were huge. There were all kinds of problems to do with key factors being overlooked and agencies working way beyond their expertise,' says Matt Bannerman, acting director of the ECB Project. 'The sector was using models and systems designed to cope with much smaller disasters. We needed a step change that would require us to work together and to make sure we were able to share best practice.'

Three-and-a-half years later, that change is beginning to take shape. A large body of research has led to a better understanding of the issues and more than 20 pilot projects have been initiated.

Greater cooperation between agencies is a major theme proving especially important in Burma where agencies are working through others already in the area. It helps if the agencies have worked together in the past: among the most exciting of ECB's pilots, says Bannerman, is a joint training programme in which 40 national staff from the ECB's seven members, plus some government and Red Cross participants, were trained in emergency operations in Pakistan and Thailand.

'The cliché of the aid worker who flies in to save the day is not the case in reality. Our agencies mainly work through local staff, but the internal systems for the development of those staff and for their career progression is not the same as for international staff,' says Bannerman. 'This programme leads to a qualification endorsed by all the agencies, which allows national staff who want to work in emergencies to show that they have the right skills.'

Training local and regional staff is recognised by all agencies as vital in building up effective 'surge

The Inter-Agency Working Group on Emergency Capacity Building

Oxfam-GB, Save the Children-US, World Vision International, Catholic Relief Services, the International Rescue Committee, Care International, and Mercy Corps formed the Inter-Agency Working Group on Emergency Capacity Building in 2003. With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation/Microsoft Corporation they set up the ECB Project, which ended this spring. They are seeking further funding. www.ecbproject.org

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How a disaster response works

When a disaster or emergency occurs, the first people to help are invariably friends, relatives and neighbours, followed by local, then national, emergency services. If an international response is required, there is a three-pronged system that includes the United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

In recent years, the UN has spearheaded a cluster approach to dealing with emergencies, in which agencies are grouped according to their expertise in different areas, such as water and sanitation or child protection.

Each cluster is led by a UN body, such as the World Food Programme or World Health Organisation, which is the agency of last resort and has overall responsibility for coordinating the efforts of others.

The system is intended to improve cooperation and ensure best use of resources but is not always so simple in practice. An agency may be present in a disaster area, but is not in the cluster for the type of assistance most required. As one aid worker put it: 'What makes sense when sitting around a table in Geneva does not always work in a flood region of Peru.'

capacity' – the ability to respond effectively to a sudden increase in demand. A recent report, *Researching surge capacity*, published under the ECB banner by People in Aid, a UK-based organisation that promotes good people management in the development sector, concluded that agencies need an organisation-side approach to building surge capacity.

Ben Emmens, HR services manager at People in Aid and co-author of the report, says the traditional notion that surge capacity is all about rapid response registers and rosters, lists of people who could be called upon in an emergency, is entirely inadequate. 'We found that the main issue is about the organisation's philosophy and approach and how it transitions through various stages of an emergency,' he says. 'There is a tension between emergency response and long-term development that needs to be confronted.'

A classic problem is that a worker's name is on an emergency response register at headquarters, but when an emergency arises, the local office where that person is working doesn't want to release them. Pre-release agreements have been signed but, in reality, organisations may find it hard to enforce them. It's a particularly thorny issue for those that don't have a standing

emergency response team, but rely heavily on the rapid redeployment of existing staff, whose posts must then be 'back-filled', as the jargon goes.

'Political will is key with pre-release,' says Marc Fleggenheimer, emergency HR coordinator at the Geneva secretariat of Care International, a large Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) structured as a confederation of 12 national member organisations worldwide. Care has a standing emergency team of only two – an assessor/team leader and a logistics specialist. For the rest of its emergency response, it must pull staff in from other projects or hire interim or contract workers.

The organisation has put considerable effort into restructuring and upgrading its emergency rosters over the past couple of years, culling names that were no longer relevant, and getting greater engagement from local offices. It is now working towards a three-tier system of global, regional and local rosters, with an agreed skill level and availability for people on each tier. The global roster will eventually contain 30-60 names, says Fleggenheimer, but is still some way short of that. 'To a great extent it's about training,' he says. 'Most of our people are working in development generally, not in emergencies.'

Care wants to be in a position where it can respond simultaneously to two emergencies that would require setting up complete programmes from scratch. Moreover, across all of its emergency responses, it is aiming to deploy within 72 hours in 90 per cent of cases by 2012. Last year, says Fleggenheimer, it achieved that in 80 per cent of the emergencies it responded to, 'but they were smaller emergencies'.

A structured system throughout the organisation has many advantages – it offers career development opportunities for country staff and can make working relationships easier when outsiders fly in during an emergency. 'On a practical level, when someone arrives in a country office, there will be less reason for local staff to say, "I don't know anything about this person and whether they have the right skills," because the core competencies of people on the roster have been endorsed throughout the organisation, not just from the top down.'

In a handful of the largest organisations, the emergency response model is based on standing capacity. Oxfam has a group of about 80 humanitarian support personnel (HSP), specialists across a range of disciplines, such as water and sanitation, security, maintaining livelihoods, HR and finance, who are on open-ended contracts and are sent around the world on three to six-month assignments, as the need arises. It has just

added an extra element, as yet untested, of a four-person on-call team, made up of an engineer, a public health specialist, logistician and programme manager. 'The idea is that someone's name would always be identified as the first port of call against each of those four areas,' says Samantha Wakefield, HR manager in Oxfam's humanitarian department.

HSPs are expensive and Wakefield says that the organisation is now working towards a situation where they would only be needed for the largest emergencies. Small and medium-sized crises would be dealt with by building up local and regional rapid response registers.

One way of doing this is through a more systematic approach to scaling down at the end of a large operation. In any emergency, most staff working with agencies will be people recruited locally on temporary contracts. 'We're phasing out in Aceh [Indonesia] from 300 to 60 staff,' says Wakefield. 'It's a matter of course now that people are asked to leave contact details. We also try to identify potential people for global staff, as HSPs. About 10 people were identified in Pakistan [following the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir],' she says.

This may sound like simple common sense, but when it comes to emergency work, the reality is that much has traditionally been done on an ad hoc basis – and organisations are now taking a more systematic and professional approach.

Susan Barber, director of strategy for humanitarian and emergency affairs at WorldVision, says her organisation has developed a range of simple HR tools and processes that can make it easier to build up teams quickly and keep them motivated. There is a rapid induction pack that consists of standard elements about working for WorldVision, plus sections on holidays and working conditions that can be tailored according to context. It's being used generally, says Barber, not only during a surge.

The organisation is also using more specific, task-orientated terms of reference, rather than traditional job descriptions, when employing people on short-term assignments. 'It's very important that people understand their own role. In the past, people have come out of emergencies without knowing how they had performed. People feel guilty when they've seen suffering and want to know what they've achieved,' says Barber. Clear terms of reference, combined with systematic appraisals, help motivation, she adds.

The aid and development sector has already come a long way since the tsunami as organisations improve their capabilities internally

Developing teams who will have to work together in challenging contexts

Training in teamwork has traditionally been neglected by the development sector, says Matt Bannerman, acting director of the Emergency Capacity Building Project. 'The work is high pressure and the emphasis is on getting the job done. But there are often issues around trust in teams, when people come together from different cultures,' he says.

The ECB has developed a series of teambuilding tools that can help teams to operate more effectively in emergencies – 'not big away-day, but quick exercises of about an hour,' says Bannerman.

Save the Children has recently introduced facilitation as a standard part of its emergency response process, so that a trained facilitator will come in to help teams after the first couple of weeks of a programme.

Ian Rogers, an emergency preparedness and response adviser with Save the Children Australia, currently seconded to the US, recently acted as facilitator to an emergency scheme in Bangladesh, in the wake of 2007's Cyclone Sidr.

When you have people coming together from different countries with different priorities and work styles, it's easy for tension to mount, he says. 'If people don't feel listened to, they might go off and do their own thing, which depletes resources,' he says.

Rogers describes part of his role as 'walking people through the decision-making process'. In emergencies, decisions are made quickly and may be revised as circumstances change, but this isn't always communicated and can cause confusion, especially when staff turnover is high.

Misunderstandings can also arise because of language differences – so making sure people really understand the nuances is vital, says Rogers.

and externally through better collaboration. Now the ECB is approaching donors to fund the next stage of its work – which will focus on implementing more field applications. 'There's no magic bullet for surge,' concludes the *Researching surge capacity* report. 'The critical enablers are all about "more of".' ■

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