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Samangan Earthquake Humanitarian Practice Case Study August 2010

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The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project, funded by DfID, aims to strengthen the effective engagement of local, national and international NGOs in reformed humanitarian financing and coordination mechanisms at global and country levels. The seven consortium members are: ActionAid, CAFOD, CARE International UK, ICVA, International Rescue Committee, Oxfam and Save the Children. For further information please visit www.ngosandhumanitarianreform.org

Background

On 19 April 2010, an earthquake measuring 5.3 on the Richter scale struck Samangan province in northern Afghanistan. This resulted in the death of 8 people and 50 injured, with homes in more than 50 villages completely or partially destroyed in the districts of Dara-i-Sufi Bala, Dara-i-Sufi Payin and Ruyi Du Ab. The affected villages are remote and extremely difficult to access, located at high altitudes, ranging between 2,200 and 2,600 metres above sea level and exposed to extreme weather, snow and severe cold, rain and strong winds. The area continued to be affected by aftershocks and later in the spring by floods which increased the vulnerability of the communities and further damaged the partially destroyed houses.

This Humanitarian Practice Case Study, under the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project (NHRP), focuses on how *Partnership* and *Accountability* has been implemented as a part of the response. The methodology for the paper has been through attendance in coordination meetings, interviews with the responding stakeholders and field visits to some of the affected villages.

Initial response

Immediately on 20 April 2010, the first coordination meetings were held in Mazar-e-Sharif, the regional capital and the base for most of the UN and NGO agencies. A Situation Report was issued by OCHA and on 21 April, the first OCHA led coordination meeting was held in Kabul to explore the additional support needed by the regional actors. Although the earthquake was widely felt and

awareness of the potential damage was high, responding agencies found they needed to undertake a concerted advocacy effort on behalf of the affected communities to get recognition for the needs because the limited and relatively small scope of the emergency was overshadowed by competing priorities in Afghanistan.

Despite the extreme remoteness and challenging access both in environmental and insecurity terms, initial humanitarian assistance, i.e. food, NFIs, tents, blankets and clothes, were provided by a number of organisations: namely UN, INGO, NNGO and the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) in the three districts in the weeks immediately following the earthquake. The government led coordination structures, ANDMA¹ and the Samangan PDMC², were closely involved in the planning.

Initial assessments showed that shelter was the one of the most urgent priorities with approximately 3,000 households in need of improved shelter. An ad-hoc shelter working group consisting of ten INGOs/ NNGOs and UNHCR was set-up in Mazar-e-Sharif to discuss the options. The earthquake struck at a time when tent stocks were low in the country and sufficient amounts of tents were not available for a comprehensive distribution. In addition, due to the severe environmental conditions in the area, ensuring a shelter option, which would sustain the population through the next winter, was considered to be a life-saving intervention. The shelter working group in Mazar evaluated the different options and cost ratios of tents, temporary shelter and rebuilding of permanent shelter and it was decided that the most cost-efficient and at the same time life-saving option was to opt for rebuilding permanent shelter.

Simultaneously in Kabul, coordination meetings with humanitarian actors and donors considered the shelter working group proposals and support was subsequently provided. It quickly became obvious that no one donor could cover all the shelter costs. Good donor coordination was, therefore, rapidly established to agree amongst the donors who was in the position to provide what. OCHA invited the donors on a field visit to Samangan which proved a positive contribution to ensuring a coordinated donor response.

¹ Afghanistan National Disaster Management Agency

² Provincial Disaster Management Committee lead by the Provincial Governor

Despite the coordination in the shelter group, the initial response proposals submitted to the ERF from the implementing organisations differed in methodology. A meeting held in Kabul with the ERF review board, in which OFDA and ECHO participated, came to the conclusion that the organisations should all follow the same methodology of one-room permanent shelter while supporting the livelihoods of the communities. Consequently, the proposals were sent back to Mazar for stream-lining. At this stage it was recognised that the ERF was not in a position to fund all the proposals, as the amount requested exceeded the total amount the fund can spend on one. Subsequent discussions commenced among the donors and the agencies in Mazar to verify how the funding responsibility could be divided.

Partnership

Out of the nine NGOs submitting proposals to the ERF none of them had previously worked together. The shelter group in Mazar met to discuss how they could divide the geographic responsibilities and secure funding for their projects, based both on funding availability and the capacity to deal with differing levels of complex donor requirements. The result was that Solidarities International, who already had presence in Ruyi Du Ab district and a partnership agreement with ECHO, would cover the district and submit their proposals to ECHO. NRC agreed to take on an umbrella function and establish a partnership with four national NGOs covering the district of Dara-i-Sufi Bala and as they already had a partnership agreement with OFDA they submitted a proposal on their behalf³. The ERF took on the remaining proposals for ACF and three national NGOs in the districts of Dara-i-Sufi Bala and Payin.

NRC partnership with AGDO, KSRO, NPO/RRAA and SHA⁴

Humanitarian partnership between NNGOs and INGOs is based on the five Principles of Partnership: Equality, Transparency, Results-oriented action, Responsibility and Complementarity. Implementing these Principles is also a way to build the capacity of national organisations and reduce communities' dependence on international organisations. The initial reasoning for establishing the partnership between these organisations had nothing to do with the value of these Principles and capacity building. Rather, the main focus was finding a way to provide life-saving assistance to people in need and to achieve this, the organisations were in need of funding. Hence NRC and the partnering NNGOs all concluded that finance was the main



driving force of the partnership. NRC did not have shelter operations in Samangan and with the prevailing insecurity there was great need for organisations with access to take on the implementation responsibility. Although the Principles may not have been a motivating factor, the reality of the implementation means that the majority of the Principles were in fact upheld. Furthermore, whilst the funding might not allow for equality between the organisations, transparency, results oriented motivation and the recognition of the complementarity between the organisations are enabling the communities to access the assistance they so desperately need.

Yet as easy as it may seem at first for INGOs to partner with NNGOs, there are several hurdles to overcome. In this case, the organisations did not have a previous working relationship and considerable investments had to be made to ensure that the NNGOs in question were capable of upholding NRC standards, guidelines and policies since NRC was the organisation ultimately responsible for the funds and the implementation. As an organisation NRC does not have substantial experience of partnering with national organisations and hence an internal evaluation needed to take place to ensure that the organisation was capable to take on the responsibility. An assessment done by NRC of the capacity of the NNGOs showed that three out of the four organisations had no financial, logistical and HR systems in place, a gap which could jeopardise accountability and their ability to meet donor requirements. Addressing these issues and supporting the partners to put the necessary mechanisms in place before a contract could be signed required time and resources which in the middle of an emergency response are scarce. Yet the NRC and the NNGOs' approach was to focus on establishing mutual **trust** between the organisations. Following the recommendations of the 2007 ECB project⁵, it is generally agreed that trust includes elements of risk or vulnerability, expectations about the behaviour of others and the need to act despite uncertainties. A quick establishment of trust was vital and many of the questions/requirements by HQ and donors that were asked for could only realistically be addressed as the emergency response evolved.

³ NRC has had limited experience of working with OFDA grants and hence lining the organisation with the OFDA requirements has been time consuming.

⁴ Afghanistan Developmental and Educational Organisation, Khuram-Sarbagh Rehabilitation Organisation, Norwegian Project Office/ Rural Rehabilitation for Afghanistan and Shafaq Rehabilitation Organisation.

⁵ Emergency Capacity Building Project-A collaborative effort of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Emergency Capacity. www.ecbproject.org

Secondly, besides ensuring the proper implementation capacity and financial accountability of the partners as an umbrella organisation, NRC also takes on the security responsibility for its partners, ensuring preventive security measures and security awareness among the partners⁶. A part of the partnership agreement is for NRC to train the NNGOs and support them in establishing proper communication channels during their movements in the field. This process is new to the NNGO partners as they base their main security strategy on the protection of the populations. In fact the Armed Opposition Groups in Samangan are not external elements but part of the communities and since it is in the community's interest to let the organisations work in a peaceful manner, the NNGOs trust in their support. An added advantage for NRC in partnering with NNGOs which already have access is the opportunity for NRC to establish operations in Samangan, by getting recognition for the work of NRC and its partners and securing the community acceptance of the organisation. Hence the initial partnership can open up the area for further humanitarian assistance, supporting the communities in need.

Although the partnership in question is in the form of INGOs working with NNGOs as implementing partners rather than equal partners (one of the NNGOs even referred to themselves as a contractor), the process inevitably leads to capacity building of the NNGOs and most importantly facilitates a way for the NGOs to provide the needed assistance.

Accountability

Discussions at Kabul level, when it came to the methodology of the shelter assistance, repeatedly raised the question of community involvement in the dialogue. What was the community's preference: tents, temporary shelter, permanent shelter and if so with what design? The NHRP visited two villages in the Dara-i-Sufi Bala district to hear directly from the people how included they felt in the assistance provided to them. The first village visited, Shabahak Bala had received assistance from seven organisations including food, NFIs, tents and clothes and are planned to be included in the NRC/ Partner one-room shelter project. The village leaders felt very much involved in the assistance they had been given, felt it had been sufficient but stressed that their main and most urgent need was still shelter for the winter as the majority of the village is living in tents at the altitude of 2400 metres. The second village visited, Qaramqul, had only received initial food assistance from ARCS and tents from another NGO.

⁶ 10 days after the NRC/ NHRP visit 3 Bangladeshi staff and 1 Afghan working on road construction were kidnapped by Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) and were held until a deal for their release was made. Due to AOG movement in the districts a few INGOs have had to suspend their activities.

No other organisations had visited the village. They did not know how to respond to the question about whether they felt involved in the assistance they had been provided since no one had asked them what they were in need of. They also stressed their urgent and primary need for shelter support prior to the onset of winter and asked that the village be included in the NRC/ Partner project. The majority of the village had taken the tents distributed and relocated to a lower altitude with their livestock.

Although the few number of villages visited do not allow for any conclusion regarding the accountability, the main impression is that the deeply impoverished people of Dara-i-Sufi Bala are happy with whatever assistance they can get and not too particular about who is providing it and how it is provided. The traditional compound structure housing large families will not be replicated with the one-room shelter approach but the design of the structure enables families to further build onto their houses next year and the one-room will provide them with life-saving shelter for the winter. The communal culture is very strong in Samangan meaning that communities prefer equal distribution to all rather than a focus on the most vulnerable families. In order to accommodate this, all the proposals include a livelihoods component for families that do not receive shelter assistance, providing cash-for-work opportunities supporting the construction and communal village facilities as a way of reducing community tensions.

Conclusion and recommendations

The response to the Samangan Earthquake exemplifies the challenges of providing humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan encompassing those of an environmental and security nature. Although the initial response came through in the end and the subsequent shelter response is underway, the time it has taken to reach that level is not ideal. The coordination on both the regional and Kabul levels has been extensive and yet the inequality in the initial response, with some villages being well covered and others less so, is challenging. Given the lack of pre-existing profiling and mapping of the province, humanitarian actors simply did not have accurate maps of the areas. Likewise, the lack of an awareness of the population distribution and the village locations are among the main reasons being cited by OCHA for the unequal distribution. Information about the needs was received from communities managing to report their situation to the district governor and trusting that is then forwarded on, as well as villages pointing humanitarian actors to the needs in neighbouring villages. In addition the extreme remoteness and damaged infrastructure has limited the access to villages in potential need. Despite these challenges, humanitarian actors in the north seem to have been able to cover the most urgent initial needs as far as we are aware. However, also

expecting them to be able to incorporate community consultations and accountability aspects while struggling to get life-saving supplies into the area is a tall order and not necessarily in the community interest as that would have even further delayed the response.

In regards to the subsequent shelter assistance, the humanitarian community has had to resort to innovative and complementary ways of responding. Yet, reaching those agreements, establishing partnerships and meeting donor requirements have been very time consuming and with only a window of five months from when the earthquake struck to the needed completion of the permanent shelter, it has been a frustrating process for all involved. At the time of writing this paper, four months after the earthquake struck and two months before the onset of winter, the permanent shelter work for all the organisation is just commencing and it will be a race against time to finish before winter. However, by the time that the funding appeared to be achievable, the partners undertook, at their own risk, significant preparations such as beneficiary selection, staff recruitment, logistics preparation and accountability measures (for example complaint mechanisms systems etc.) in order to speed up the process and to be prepared once the funding came through.

The experience shows us that partnership is not an emergency response activity; rather it is something we need to establish and identify as a part of our emergency preparedness if we are to be effective in our response. Yet in this case, where that option was not available, the effort by NRC, their partners and the donor to find a way to make it work as the only response option to be had, is to be considered a good practice while there is also room for significant improvements. The methodological streamlining, the geographical and funding division among the responding agencies and donors is also to be considered a very good practice for minimising gaps and avoiding duplication. Yet again, the process has been time-consuming and a lessons learnt evaluation of how it can be further improved on a national level could be very useful.

Recommendations

- The importance of emergency preparedness and preposition of stock is something all stakeholders emphasise on. There is a great need to preemptively resource agencies on the ground and move away from the traditional reactionary emergency response.
- There is a need for OCHA, together with ANDMA and the PDMCs, to ensure the existence of Provincial and preferably District profiles complete with maps and an updated WWW matrix facilitating immediate response.
- District focal points should be identified based on the WWW for assessments and consequent distributions

who have both extensive knowledge about the district and access to areas. In the case of Dara-i-Sufi Bala, Dara-i-Sufi Payin and Ruyi Du Ab both Solidarities and ACF have long-standing presence in the area. Yet the initial Mazar led coordination was not aware of their presence and much of the initial distribution was done by organisations new to the area.

- OCHA needs to have the capacity to establish support staff outside of their regional offices together with ANDMA and PDMC led efforts due to, among other things, the government's lack of capacity for information verification and sharing.
- Inclusive coordination needs to continue beyond the initial response; the agreement was by the majority of the organisations that the most cost-effective response in regards to shelter was the one-room permanent shelter to the worst affected families and the focus would not be on tents. Yet an organisation which was not a part of the initial response later secured a donation of 1400 tents which they distributed only weeks before the remainder of the organisations were to start their shelter construction. The tents may have fulfilled a temporary need but on the more holistic level the dual shelter response leads to a higher cost of the total intervention.