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Linking preparedness and performance: the tsunami experience

By Anisya Thomas, Fritz Institute Dec. 18, 2005

The devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 prompted an unprecedented response from the humanitarian sector. International relief organisations, including the UN, the Red Cross and NGOs, sprang into action, often in collaboration with new or existing partners. Within affected countries, national governments, the armed forces, corporations, social groups and citizens all responded. The resources raised for the humanitarian effort were also unprecedented.

While the relief community began their assessments, assembled their supply chains and began to deliver assistance, the Fritz Institute developed a strategy to study the relief effort. We contacted our international and local partners, convened a cross-section of local and global private-sector and humanitarian experts in New Delhi and Mumbai, and sent teams of researchers and practitioners to the field in India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Over the next 90 days, we collected qualitative and quantitative data on various aspects of the relief operation. In all we interviewed:

- 100 logisticians with 18 international organisations (UN, Red Cross, NGOs);
- 806 affected families from 100 villages in India;
- 600 affected families from 97 villages in Sri Lanka;
- Emergency Relief Directors from 225 NGOs operating in India;
- Emergency Relief Directors from 150 NGOs operating in Sri Lanka;
- 49 district-level government personnel in India;
- 40 corporations that participated in or contributed to the relief effort; and
- 20 journalists who covered the relief efforts.

Several distinct findings emerged from the research. First, we found that accurate assessments were critical to accurate relief coverage. Second, experiences on the front line were significantly influenced by the quality of ‘back-room’ preparedness and capacity (in areas such logistics, procurement and finance, for example). Finally, the voice of affected people can be an important indicator of the effectiveness of aid.

The importance of assessments

Assessments are critical to understanding the number of people affected and their needs. Most large agencies have a protocol for assessments, and use the findings to guide their procurement and programming. However, few share their assessments, and the information gathered from these multiple sources remains fragmented. Only 38% of the international organisations we surveyed participated in joint assessments. In the absence of accurate assessments, relief delivery can be disproportionately influenced by media reporting.

The survey of logistics professionals focused on Aceh in Indonesia. It indicated that, while 72% of the organisations surveyed had an assessment process, 62% of those that did said that their plan did not meet their needs. Some of this had to do with the sheer magnitude of the disaster, but some of it related to a lack of local presence, with few trained local staff and access problems (only 38% of the assessment teams included local people).

At the local level, only 20% of the NGOs in India and 30% in Sri Lanka performed a needs assessment, and most of them were simply trying to arrive at an order of magnitude on estimates of the damage. In these cases, the assessments were based on primary interviews conducted with the local community, mainly fishermen, community leaders, village and district government officers and other NGOs. These assessments were also limited by geography: local NGOs only assessed needs in the areas where they had a presence.

As a consequence of incomplete and partial assessments, some villages received many more supplies than they needed, and others far less. In India, even 60 days after the disaster, there was wide variation in the availability of basic relief supplies and services. While 80% of all respondents said that they received food on time, coverage varied by village. Every single respondent in Ramanathapuram reported receiving adequate and timely food aid, but only 31% of the respondents in Pudhukottai said the same. Similarly, districts like Nagapattinam, widely reported to have suffered the most damage, had over 500 NGOs registered as providing relief; other areas received no, or sporadic, assistance.

Assessments also guide the appropriateness of the relief supplies, and are critical to the creation of effective supply chains. For example, understanding the food and clothing preferences of affected people or the number of children, infants and women who need help is important in determining the content of the assistance that is mobilised. Knowing what is available in the local markets and what needs to be procured overseas determines the transport and tracking systems that have to be set up.

In the future, agencies should consider sharing information about their assessments to get a better idea of on-the-ground needs. They should also consider creating standardised assessment protocols, which include mechanisms that will allow them access to local experts and local assessments. This will enable them to leverage individual resources and local knowledge, facilitate more accurate and even coverage and enable more appropriate aid.

Back-room readiness and front-line failure

The tsunami experience demonstrated once again that a lack of back-room capacity results in front-line failures. This was particularly true for the supply chain (the process of assessing, mobilising, transporting, tracking, warehousing and distributing supplies and relief items). Our survey of relief organisations, which focused primarily on those operating in Aceh, found that there was a severe shortage of logisticians in the field. In fact, 88% of the organisations we surveyed had to reallocate their most experienced logisticians from other assignments. Furthermore, only 26% of the logisticians in the survey had access to software with track-and-trace capabilities to anticipate and prepare for the receipt of procured and donated goods. As a consequence, supply lines were clogged, huge amounts of goods piled up at airports and transport and warehousing were inadequate. The lack of automation meant that donor reports were very time-consuming to prepare, and provided only minimal data on the performance of organisations.

This finding was reinforced in the survey of 375 NGOs in India and Sri Lanka. In India, 60% of organisations did not have adequate warehouse facilities, and 40% lacked transport to carry relief supplies to affected areas. In Sri Lanka, 58% lacked warehousing and 52% reported inadequate transport.

There were wide disparities in the services received by those affected across India and Sri Lanka. While approximately 60% of the families surveyed said that they received timely and adequate aid, 40% said that they did not. The lack of transport and warehouse capacity forced immediate unloading and distribution at those points that were easiest to access, leaving the beneficiaries there with the feeling that materials were simply being dumped: ‘They came in trucks and gave in excess … We didn’t take much, they [supplies and clothes] were piled up on the road’.

For the future, we recommend that humanitarian organisations regularly evaluate their supply chain processes, technology and human resources. Standardised processes supported by flexible technologies across organisations can facilitate coordination, collaboration and resource sharing at the field level. Technology can also increase the visibility of the entire relief chain, allowing staff on the ground to prepare better for the flow of supplies.

Training, particularly at the field level, will help to build competency and skills, enabling logisticians to create common processes. We also recommend alliances at the country level with private individuals and organisations who have transport and warehousing capacity which can be utilised during a major relief operation. For example, each country affected by the tsunami has professional associations of private-sector logisticians. They have an understanding of local conditions, customs rules and private-sector capacity. After the tsunami, many of these associations contacted the Fritz Institute, offering to help. Creating exchanges between these organisations and humanitarian logisticians could be mutually beneficial in preparing for the (inevitable) next disaster.

Recipient opinions are a strong indicator of aid effectiveness

Despite much discussion, the humanitarian sector has yet to widely establish or implement benchmarks for aid effectiveness. Effectiveness is usually determined by what was done: throughputs and outputs, not outcomes. Comparisons between the services of one aid provider and another, or the outcomes of one donor versus another, are rare. It becomes impossible to assess effectiveness or efficiency in any meaningful way.

New models and methods are being explored. One effective measure of aid effectiveness could lie in the opinion of the recipient of humanitarian assistance. In the view of the recipient, did the aid that was provided achieve its intended outcomes in terms of alleviating suffering?

Sixty days after the tsunami, we interviewed large numbers of families affected by the disaster across all the impacted regions in India and Sri Lanka. We asked them about the types of assistance that they received in the first 48 hours and in the first 60 days. We explored their opinions about the content and adequacy of the aid, as well as the process of aid distribution. The results were revealing.

Not surprisingly, there was wide variation in the type of help received by affected villages and districts.

Sixty days after the tsunami, more than two-thirds of respondents in India and Sri Lanka reported that they were satisfied about the aid they had received, but once again this varied across the affected districts. We also asked recipients about the timeliness of aid, and whether they felt their dignity was maintained during the distribution process. The data revealed that perceptions of inequity stemmed from the different approaches used by different aid agencies. While some had to queue for aid, some received it from the village heads, and some received food for work. There were also cultural sensitivities about the appropriateness of the clothing received, wearing used clothing and living in temporary shelters (which were associated with gypsies, travelling performers and itinerant salesmen). If recipient-driven aid is to be meaningful, then those most affected by the tsunami should have a say in what it contains, and how it is distributed.

Our case studies also revealed systematic exclusion because of local politics, caste, village hierarchy and social norms. The most vulnerable were made even more so: handicapped people, widowed women and the lowest social strata in the villages reported being kept out of the distribution process, or not being able to reach the sites where aid was distributed.

In the long term, data such as this, combined with reports of where donor dollars were spent, can begin to provide insights into the effectiveness of relief. If collected objectively and consistently across providers, this type of data can begin to form an evidence base of good practice, and good providers.

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References and further reading

Managing Information in Humanitarian Crisis: UNJLC Website, April 2005, http://www.fritzinstitute.org/PDFs/Case-Studies/UNJLC%20Website.pdf.
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