

TRANSFORMING ORGANISATIONS: FROM DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION TO DISASTER RESPONSE PROGRAMME, A CASE STUDY IN CAPACITY BUILDING.

Samantha T. L. Rex *

ARUP, Building and Engineering Consultancy, London, U.K.

Abstract

Building capacity in NGOs is a complex but frequently sought strategy for these organisations, due to a desire to increase their impact. In this paper I explore one organisation's experiment with a disaster response programme after the 2004 Tsunami, where they leveraged their existing development programme network, with the intention of scaling up its impact and simultaneously providing an effective post-disaster response programme. While the short-term objective was for an accelerated disaster response, there were many difficulties that hampered this effort, some of which were largely outside the organisations control such as political, cultural, environmental, systemic, and legal issues. In the short-term these organisational strategies are more dissimilar than similar, and timing may actually make them largely incompatible. But longer term there is wider scope to realise the intended benefits. This paper compares two variations to this model, one in India, one in Sri Lanka and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy. Finally the paper concludes with recommendations for organisational strategy in the post-disaster environment.

Keywords: Organisational strategy; project management; capacity building; post-disaster reconstruction.

INTRODUCTION

The Tsunami of 2004 took the lives of over 200,000 people and changed the lives of millions around the Indian Ocean. The international response was unprecedented, with billions of dollars raised, and volunteers, charities and relief and development organisations arriving from around the world to assist the affected areas.

One international non-governmental organisation in this effort has been developing an interesting disaster response (DR) model to deliver post-disaster reconstruction services, in the form of house-building and construction expertise. The model aims to take advantage of existing local resources and relationships from the main development programme which helps low-income households build their own simple, decent, affordable housing. It also aims to benefit from the organisation's experience in building communities. In turn, the normal development programme can benefit

* Samantha Rex; 13 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 4BQ; samantha.rex@arup.com

from a scaling up on its capacity. This combination is ambitious, as despite the potential mutual benefits, the requirements for the main development programme are fundamentally different to those of a DR programme.

Having trialled the DR model at a small scale after other disasters, the organisation made the strategic move to make its post-tsunami response the first large-scale implementation. However, going large-scale highlighted several of the differences in the programmes, from the change in management and structure, to the dramatic change in the environment factors. The question poses by some critics of the programme is whether the programmes are too divergent in their operations to be compatible, or whether the programmes are synergistic. It will be argued in this paper that the strategy can work, given some modifications, and in the right affiliate.

This paper compares the organisational strategy of the development programme with that of the disaster response, and looks at the two case studies presented by the offices implemented in Sri Lanka and India. By comparing variations of the structural models, the strengths and weaknesses of each approach are highlighted. Finally, based on this assessment, a recommendation will be made about modifications to the structure, and its reflection back on the strengths and weaknesses of the organisational strategy itself.

THE ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY

The development programme

The NGO's normal development programme, to help low-income families build their own dwellings, is predominantly funded by volunteer donations and is a user-led programme, responsive to local demand rather than a driving force for change. The programme also relies on volunteers to construct the houses, both the home-owners themselves and international visitors. This element of the strategy impacts on the nature of the construction. As Lewis notes [Lewis, 2001], complexity in the operational strategy of NGOs is very common.

Capacity building strategy

Edwards & Hulme discuss the ongoing desire for NGOs to increase their impact, and improve the situation of poverty for more people [Edwards & Hulme, 2002]. They define three possible frameworks for this capacity building: expanding existing operations, local advocacy, and advising at government level [Edwards & Hulme, 2002]. A few years ago, the organisation identified an opportunity to expand the existing operations by becoming involved post-disaster. It was recognised that a natural disaster creates an urgent need for larger quantities of similar houses to what is built in the normal programme. It was seen as a natural offshoot of the primary operations to be helping build back after a disaster. And by helping in a disaster, it can also jumpstart a regular programme to help low-income families nearby who were not affected by the disaster but who nevertheless require improved housing.

Hurricane Mitch prompted the organisation's first disaster response efforts. Since then they have been trying to expand the disaster response operations, seeing them as a way to expand into a country after the disaster is no longer a concern.

The disaster response (DR) model is based on the two situations (see fig. 1): firstly, if there exists an affiliate in, or relatively near, the location, then the international organisation (that runs the disaster response) can supply the necessary resources and guidance to help the local office to contribute. At its most basic level, the development offices provide the bureaucratic structure for operating in the location in question, such as operating licences and bank accounts.

Alternatively, if there are no existing operations in a country, it provides the opportunity to partner with other NGOs with stronger presence in the location and prepare for longer term development work having had the opportunity to understand the environment and how things operate and to have established some trust. It is variations of the first model that this paper addresses.

DR Model 1	DR Model 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build on existing development program in local/national affiliate ▪ Leverage resources and local relationships ▪ Use as a catalyst for upgrading program capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use local partners for resources and relationships ▪ Bring construction expertise ▪ Launch pad for future development programmes

Fig. 1. Models for Disaster Response Programme

The national affiliates are nearly autonomous organisations, similar to a franchise operation. This promotes the principle that the drive to build must come from the people themselves and in a way that is sustainable to their lifestyle. During the development programme, the international governing office provides a filter and funnel for funding and assists with some systems, primarily for financial control. The power that it holds over the affiliates is thus one of resources.

When the Tsunami hit, the organisation received unprecedented amounts of money from donors in order to assist the reconstruction. Four countries were chosen: Indonesia, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka had an exemplary development programme, having built a record number of houses in the 10 years since it was established through a tailor-made programme whereby groups of people work together to save money and take turns building each other's houses. The model has some similarities with the micro-finance group structures such as the Grameen Bank. This, along with the extent of the disaster compared to India and Thailand, led to the strategic decision that Sri Lanka would be the organisation's lead focus for its reconstruction efforts and receive the majority of funding.

THE POST-TSUNAMI CONTEXT

The national and international humanitarian response to the Tsunami varied in each of the countries given differences in the area it covered, political context, impact as percentage of economy, culture, existing relationships to the donor nations and access to resources. In the countries of the two programmes I experienced, India and Sri Lanka, they naturally differed in all of the above. One aspect which was highlighted by the geographical spread that actually was similar in the two countries was the fact that even within the countries, there was not one homogenous culture but numerous, with often confusing and contentious, sub-cultures to be dealt with. In Sri Lanka this is more obvious due to awareness brought by the civil war, but in India it came as a surprise that there was so much variation due to combinations of geography, religion, caste, livelihood and language.

In general the relief and reconstruction efforts in all locations were affected by:

- Sudden availability of great quantities of money with minimal systems for spending;
- Increased visibility and focus on corruption;
- Wide geographical spread of relief operations making logistics and communications difficult; and,
- Competition for resources (both staff and supplies).

IMPLEMENTATION

Model Variations

Within what is defined as Model 1, the organisation two variations occurred, one in Sri Lanka and one in India. In the first the programme (fig 2) was grafted onto the existing programme with the DR office essentially being but a branch of the main office. The site offices were enhanced upgrades to the existing offices rather than new offices. In the second variation in India (fig 3), the disaster response office was set up independently and with completely new staff and new site offices.

Initially comparing the performance of the two models, Model 1 - Variation 1 successfully leveraged existing local relationships to find available land and funding to move projects quickly and get around other political obstacles that hampered foreign players. However, this model suffered from poor project definition and control systems, through a lack of project management capability.

Model 1 – Variation 2 did not have the existing local relations to call upon (although the organisation did have a presence elsewhere nationally). However, it did have more management flexibility (local buy-in to the importance of management) and more appropriately skilled resources. In the short-term this model was hampered by the lack of influence on the ground to secure land and effective partnerships and trust with the end-users. It was also hampered by insufficient experience in managing projects of this scale at ground level.

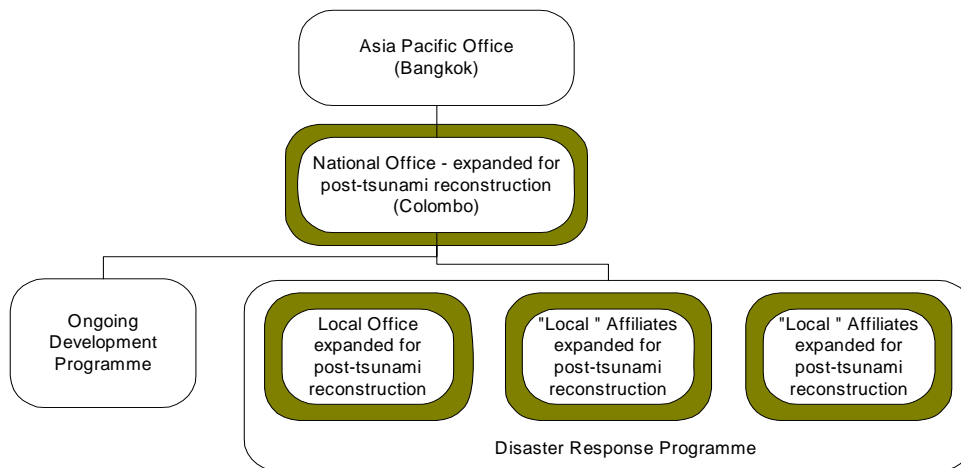


Fig 2. DR Model 1 – Variation 1, Sri Lanka.

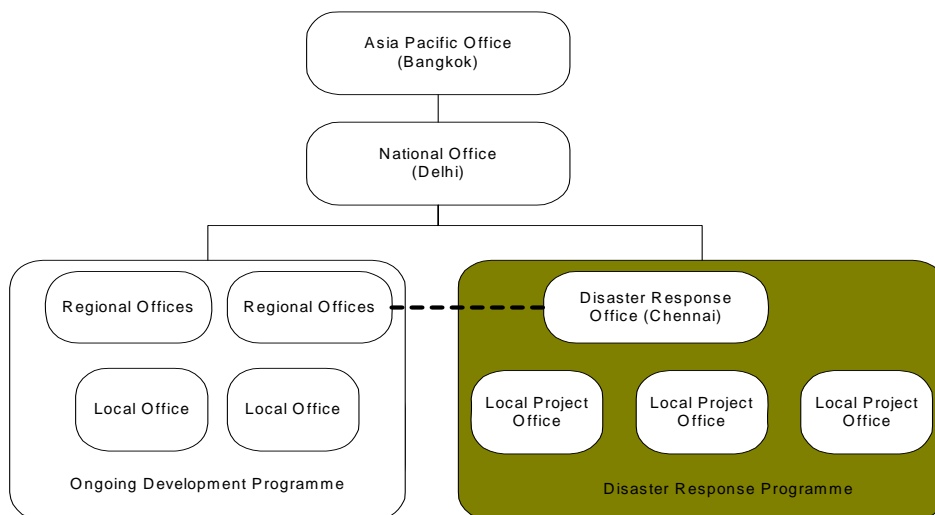


Fig. 3. DR Model 1 – Variation 2, India.

Comparing the development strategy to the DR strategy

At first glance the similarities between the programmes, particularly building low-cost houses, would seem like a natural fit for capacity building. However, if we break down the programmes into the components of operation, objective, resources, structure, management and environment, (see Table 1) it becomes easier to define where the challenges developed.

To begin with, the operation and objective of either model looks like it remains the same, with the core being building low-income housing, however the scale and speed dramatically change in the DR programme. To give some perspective as to what that meant on the ground, in Sri Lanka as an example, the national affiliate had had an impressive record of building over 5,000 houses in 10 years. But now they were now asked to build 7,500 houses in 1 year! At best, it requires the organisation

to become large-scale project-based, which could be organised and managed over time. Unfortunately however, no time was allowed for the actual change within the organisation.

Table 1. Comparison of the components of the different programmes.

ELEMENTS	DEVELOPMENT	DISASTER RECONSTRUCTION
Operation (task and technology)	Help people build their own single, affordable family units.	Build single, affordable family units – resistant to natural disaster. But 10 times the normal production capacity.
Objective (products)	Communities and homes	10 times more communities and homes
Resources (human and non-human)	Development workers, families/ communities, international volunteers, local tradesmen, local materials. Limited money.	Construction professionals, families/ communities, contractors, international volunteers, materials from wherever they can be sourced. Money may not be as restricted.
Structure (formal & informal)	Grassroots – driven by the communities. Small-scale.	Professional, large-scale.
Management (strategic & operational)	Local.	International funding – direction from far away. Transparent, detailed accountability, speed.
Environment	Organisation selects locations that can support activity in relatively safe, stable environment (no wars). Local politics managed by local resources.	Unsettled due to human tragedy and impact on existing political structures. Unfamiliar international players. Over-demand on resources, both human and non-human. Increased levels of corruption.

Again, the organisation may not have realised the changes in requirements for resources. In general, in a major post-disaster such as the 2004 Tsunami, both human and material resources are over-demanded which slows progress and drives up prices. This is more a component of the environment that I describe in more detail later. The internal difference in resources derives from the situation that in the development programme, the construction is very basic and in developing countries very little expertise is required at the scale the programme operates. However, when they must increase the capacity in quantity and speed, more experienced and skilled resources are required to actually manage the projects. We saw even the benefit of the person who is consulting the end-user, not just being experienced in consultation, but also in understanding the construction process so that they could better understand what aspects of the design and construction were open to influence and at what time.

In addition to construction expertise, possibly large-scale, basic project management experience was also essential. For both of these skill-sets, smaller developing countries may not have people with this large-scale time-critical management experience and expats with these skills frequently don't have the experience to understand the environment adequately.

Following from these changes, the structure and management of the organisation is then different because it must grow significantly to accommodate the new people. In the development programme, each office unit is very autonomous, to the extent that the main office rarely has first hand knowledge of what is happening. The international office only checks very high level indicators of each national programme to see if they are on track. However in the DR programme, the international office must become much more directional in terms of providing processes, experienced personnel, controls, and resources. Add to this the growth in staff numbers within the local offices, and the controversial break of autonomy, and one can understand why these changes could be so painful to those on the ground.

Environment

Because the greatest benefit identified in the strategy for the DR programme is the ability to leverage existing relationships, I think it is critical to highlight that this is not effective in the dramatically changed environment, post-disaster. Most importantly, certainly in the first months, the environment is one of tragedy, loss, and bereavement. There is often chaos and disorganisation, and physical as well as emotional hardship on the survivors. The beneficiaries of the DR programme are not hopeful in the way they are in a development programme, as it takes much more time to recover from the sudden loss.

Using Sri Lanka as an example again, the country has a domestic house-building capacity of just over 5,000 houses per year. After the tsunami the country that had over 300,000 houses to rebuild as quickly as possible. Thus our national affiliates were not only being asked to step up capacity 10-fold in a non-existent ramp-up period, but would be competing for the limited national resources, facing an even greater capacity challenge.

Post-disaster the political environment also changes dramatically as a flood of new players arrive on the field, each with their own agenda, and with their own baggage of experiences. Coordination of these players, and ensuring communication and involvement is very different to the normal partnering in development. There is much pressure on the politicians in these countries as well. There is pressure to be seen both internationally and locally to be doing the right thing by the people. It is a chance to win political mileage by tactical moves enabled by the influx of resources and money. And there is frequently the revealing of older issues that can no longer be avoided (this happened even in the US where the poverty in New Orleans had largely been overlooked until the hurricane brought it to international attention and forced the politicians to take action).

Speed

One of the fundamental issues that face the DR programmes is that of speed. It was seen as a benefit of this particular strategy, and it is one of the key factors that make

the two programmes different and possibly incompatible. To begin with, some of the learning that the normal organisation intended to transfer to the DR programme was that of accelerated building projects for entire communities of on average 100 households. These quick builds are then completed over the course of a few weeks by volunteers. However, what is deceptive is that it takes months to a year to actually prepare for these events. Especially, when carried out in environments where information and land are difficult to get hold of, the preparation process takes a very long time. They are impressively organised, but arguably don't offer any long-term advantages to the community (as speed is an illusion), except for the community-building it inspires.

But another issue that became apparent in the reconstruction, was that speed may not be so crucial in reconstruction. Although there is a desire to re-settle people as quickly as possible, once their immediate, emergency needs are taken care of the following process is inherently time-consuming. While there are ways to decrease the actual building time, it is very difficult to accelerate the participation and community building processes, vital to the long-term success of the new communities. This is extremely relevant as a risk to these projects, as to quote just one source, assuming that crisis and poverty will make any house desirable is wrong:

“...from Bosnia that out of the 116,000 internationally funded houses physically identified by February 2003, 8,000 were completely abandoned. One would imagine that the donors providing millions of their own public funds, as well as the country in question, plunged into poverty by a devastating war, would have made sure that the funds available were spent to enhance recovery.” [Skolte, 2004].

Important to understanding the strategy is the fact that this organisation is involved in reconstruction that is possibly the third phase after a disaster, following emergency relief and then transitional shelter. Therefore there is actually some time to help the organisation change before the projects get fully underway. That is, as long as it is understood and structured sufficiently to begin the process immediately.

CONCLUSION: IMPROVING THE STRATEGY

Looking back, the original strategy appeared to be an easier opportunity than the actual implementation revealed. Finding out where that there were fundamental weaknesses occurred relatively quickly. In Sri Lanka, within the early months the implementation of project controls and monitoring revealed significant misappropriation at board level and ground level, which led to several suspensions and ensuing court case. The leadership that remained was nevertheless resistant to the controls being insisted by the international organisation and external funding was necessarily cancelled, although the program continues at a much smaller scale with local funding. This was the major prompt for this evaluation.

Having thus far identified that the key challenges were in the structure and management changes, as well as the impacts of the changed environment and focus

on speed, these challenges can be appropriately addressed in some adjustments to the strategy and incorporated in an organised roll-out.

First, addressing the structure and management changes, any capacity building will require growth to a certain extent. In the short-term there is no viable alternative (except perhaps partnering locally where possible) to having the international office provide support and direction, which has the side affect of changing the power structure, at least temporarily. In order to achieve this successfully, the international office will need to have sufficient trained resources ready to deploy. There will need to be adequate time given for the change to take affect and for results to be expected to begin. The local team would need to be intensely involved in the process, but this cannot be done by consensus. It should be emphasised however that the DR structure is largely temporary and that once the organisation has expanded and finished its initial DR objective, the aim is to hand over the enhanced organisation back to the local operators.

Where this approach is rejected (this must be allowed for as different local leaders will respond to this differently), then it may not be appropriate to work with the existing organisation. As, from my analysis above, there is less benefit to the DR programme from the development programme than possibly vice versa, it should be seen as a valid option to set up an independent DR office in the disaster-affected area. This office will liase with the existing offices, but will be controlled by the international office.

With regards to the environment, a review of the results of hundreds of World Bank projects concluded that the success of projects in the developing world is largely interfered with by external factors outside the control of the project manager [Youker in Oladapo, 2002]. Thus, the uncertainty in developing world environments is more of an issue than the post-disaster specific one. Project managers must therefore set up a process to scan the environment, to identify potential problems, and to try to establish power relationships that can help them manage the key actors and factors [Youker in Oladapo, 2002]. If this were established as one of the key tenants of a new project management culture, the organisation would be much more versatile in any situation.

And finally, the issue of speed should be handled with caution. I would primarily recommend the maximum use of the time afforded at the front end of the post-disaster where the other agents are struggling to secure the environment, that this organisation does not just immediately begin looking for partners and appropriate land, but also address the full change that the organisation must undergo. The organisation should do everything possible to have plans and structures ready to roll-out so that the internal issues are minimised in terms of their impact on time. The external issues will be unavoidable, and relationships with governments and local partners, as well as user engagement and community building cannot be sacrificed for speed.

To summarise, while the development programme is likely to be enhanced, and capacity extended, through the use of a DR programme in the right situation, the DR programme itself does not benefit as significantly from having existing operations on the ground, except from the basic bureaucratic support. The actual programmes are actually very different in strategic components, and while strong management processes can help address these differences, time for accommodating the significant changes must be factored in. And finally, the strategy may not work in all locations. Where a development programme already exists, the local leadership must buy-in to the dramatic changes that this will require.

REFERENCES

Edwards M & Hulme D. (2002). "Making a Difference: Scaling-up the Developmental impact of NGO's – Concepts and Experiences." *The Earthscan Reader on NGO Management*. Ed. Edwards M, and Fowler A. Earthscan Publications Ltd.

Lewis D. (2001). "Culture and ambiguity: Anthropological approaches to NGO management." *The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organisations: an Introduction*. Routledge.

Naoum S. (2001). *People & Organizational Management in Construction*. Thomas Telford Publishing, Thomas Telford Ltd.

Oladapo, M.A. (2002). Procurement Systems and Project Organization Model for Low Cost Housing. FIG XXII International Congress, April 19-26.

Skolte, H. (2004). Tents in Concrete: What internationally funded housing does to support recovery in areas affected by war. The case of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Dr. Ing Thesis.

Youker, R. (2003). The Nature of International Development Projects. PMI Conference, September 21.