

# **HUMAN REACTIONS TO DISASTER: THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR LONG TERM RECONSTRUCTION SUCCESS**

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## **Abstract**

In general, disasters are measured through their impacts on people while reconstruction programmes are commonly defined in terms of material provision, often with scant regard for the desires of the affected people.

Each disaster context has individual characteristics. In the confusion that frequently attends a disaster, humanitarian practitioners may find it difficult to distinguish between vulnerable victims and opportunist elites. Drawing on extensive personal experiences, including over 15 RedR missions, and published accounts of relief and reconstruction, this paper reviews some commonly encountered human reactions to disaster. General recommendations for community leaders and for humanitarian coordinators regarding planning for recovery after disasters are adduced.

Community preparedness and technological development should play an important part in reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening community structures. Lessons from a Housing & Hazards action-research programme in Bangladesh are presented that illustrate appropriate ways of developing and transferring technologies for improved construction in a very low-income environment. These are contrasted with experiences of planning for emergencies in rural Devon, UK. In each case, education and culturally appropriate communication routes are seen as fundamental to the hazard mitigation process.

*Keywords: Disasters; communication; community; mitigation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Descriptions of disaster impacts are invariably made in terms of the negative human consequences (such as '50,000 die in earthquake'). In contrast, much of the planning for disaster relief and reconstruction is guided by financial and technical parameters. Budgets are necessarily governed by the resources of the agencies; these dictate what materials can be provided, and to whom.

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In consequence, the disaster victim can become merely another impersonal parameter in the programme planning equation, which commonly takes the form:

$\$X, 000 = \text{water requirements of } Y, 000 \text{ victims at } 15 \text{ l/h/d.}$

An agency that presents a convincing case to funders and obtains, say,  $\$2X, 000$ , is then able to meet the requirements of  $2Y, 000$  victims. This process has proved effective in matching resources to needs quickly but it significantly does not take into account the desires (as opposed to needs) of the people who survive a disaster.

When desires conflict with needs, the humanitarian worker needs to understand how that conflict will affect his/her efforts to target particular socio-economic target groups. Failure to appreciate the root cause of the needs/desires conflict at an early stage will result in its escalation as the programme develops from relief into reconstruction. Experiences derived from a range of disasters suggest that survivors' desires will not always be readily communicated to outsiders. Some desires are encountered in many contexts; however, in addition to those, social, economic and cultural factors may all play a role in creating regionally specific 'wish lists'.

The following broad comments are general in nature; they certainly are not intended to represent an exhaustive list of all possible situations.

## **STANDARDISING NEEDS: THE SPHERE PROJECT**

Launched in 1997, the Sphere Project developed and created standards for use in humanitarian work. Following extensive consultations, the Guide drew together existing best practice into a single Humanitarian Charter that has been trialed and recently updated on the basis of experience across a wide variety of contexts. The organizations and individuals who drove this initiative deserve the congratulations and thanks of the sector for their energy and perseverance in creating an impressive document and in promoting its use to standardize and codify the levels of support that a disaster victim or refugee may reasonably expect.

It is not the purpose of this paper to comment on the operation of Sphere; that has recently been done by a major external review (Van Dyke & Waldman, 2004). Rather, it is important to go beyond the recommended minimum standards to consider what additional valid desires it may be necessary to satisfy and what hidden desires should be circumvented in order to achieve a smooth response.

The Sphere evaluation recognized that disparities between different disaster contexts may lead to increases in the minimum standards. The authors comment:

*'While the standards promulgated by the Sphere Project may be universal, the specific indicators used to determine attainment of those standards need*

*adjustment on an emergency-specific basis.’ And: ‘In areas where application of Sphere standards would create differences in the standards of living between these populations explicit attention needs to be paid to this problem.’*

To follow those recommendations, it is vital that relief agencies develop understanding of likely interactions between affected people and international bodies, between local businesses and politicians, between affected and unaffected communities and among a host of other stakeholders.

## **CATEGORISING DESIRES**

The range of desired outcomes from a disaster relief programme is potentially as large as the number of individual and corporate stakeholders. Indeed, it may become larger as stakeholders come to realize the advantages of collaboration. Fortunately for humanitarian agencies, few stakeholders will have sufficient organization to take significant advantage from their situations.

The Biafran war of the 1960s was a major turning point in the history of humanitarian relief in that it resulted in high profile for agencies and raised awareness among a new generation of international activists. It also provided a useful lesson in the need for awareness of hidden desires and agendas. Black (1992) reports that

*‘The relief agencies were unscrupulously, and unwittingly, to be used as Biafra’s allies and spokesmen. In their humanitarian zeal and naivety, many took on trust the Biafran claims of ‘genocide’...they fell for it hook, line and sinker.’*

This was an example of a ‘hidden agenda’ that arose from a desire among the Biafran leadership to maximize political benefits at the expense of delivering relief where it would do most good; similar situations have arisen in numerous complex, and some natural, emergencies since 1968.

Political advantage is possibly the most powerful desire that drives responses to the major influx of materiel and personnel during a relief operation; if so then financial gain comes in a close second position, particularly as agencies become more wedded to the concept of local purchasing. From the perspective of the relief community, these drivers are particularly problematic because politicians and businessmen (who are commonly the same individuals) tend to be already well organized.

Many other desires may be encountered. Rather than to list all the possibilities, Table 1 (overleaf) suggests a rudimentary categorization according to the likely impact or influence that unmet desires could have on the efficient running of a relief and reconstruction programme.

Clearly, there is overlap between these broad categories but this approach will assist in deciding where to seek possible desires and agendas.

<b>Level</b>	<b>Desire</b>	<b>Impact on Relief</b>	<b>Impact on reconstruction</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>1a. Individual</b>	Cash/income/gain	Need to establish true numbers for accurate application of standards	High value reconstruction goods encourage extra claims.	Reconstruction is better done at a community level.
<b>1b. Individual</b>	True needs/desires are not what is provided	Can result in wasteful distribution of un-needed goods	Unwanted aid will be sold.	Beneficiaries seldom decline aid.
<b>2a. Community</b>	Host communities will seek parity with displaced people.	Must be considered if hosts are also affected by the context	Host compliance is needed and allowance for their appropriate desires made.	Could be linked to political or business factors.
<b>2b. Community</b>	Security/Protection	Affected people will not settle readily in an insecure environment	Unless context is secure, reconstruction work may need to be repeated.	Political uncertainty is a symptom of insecurity.
<b>3a. Elite groups</b>	Business	Local business community will have only limited stocks suitable for relief.	Local procurement offers significant opportunities for local business and benefits for agencies.	May generate or exacerbate local business rivalries.
<b>3b. Elite groups</b>	Politics	Rival political systems may be encountered, each seeking advantage.	Leaders will misrepresent their involvement for political gain.	Correct choice of leaders often essential to successful community participation.

**Table 1: Categorising unplanned desire**

### **Individual desires**

The Sphere standards are intended set minimum levels of provision and are unlikely to satisfy the desires of many people. Displaced populations are notoriously difficult to determine for the purposes of calculating relief needs. Numbers are almost invariably over-estimated with the consequence that surplus goods find their way into local markets with financial benefit accruing to the over-supplied population. However, leaders and other elites soon organize themselves to take advantage of any significant benefits by controlling local markets.

## *House reconstruction in Bangladesh*

Bangladesh is notoriously vulnerable to a number of hazards, of which cyclonic wind and flooding are the best known. Two headline events, the 1988 floods and the 1991 cyclone, between them destroyed some 6 million homes (Hodgson, 1995).

Despite the huge relief programmes mounted after each event, most of those homes were rebuilt by their owners without assistance. A mere 10,000 houses were provided by various NGOs after the 1988 flood; for most of the beneficiary families, their new homes represented a quantum leap in household fortune which provided hedges against future misfortune. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence (Ahmed, 1999) that such bequests cause community tensions and result in pressures by elite groups for allocations to their affiliates. Ahmed also noted that many of those 10,000 houses or parts thereof had been sold within a few years.

The lessons described above have led to experimentation with a more participatory approach to building improvement on Bangladesh (Hodgson & Carter, 1999). This has indicated appropriate ways forward using cultural communication methods and improved traditional technologies. In a careful analysis of initial programme impacts, Magne (1999) identified several factors relating to individual needs and desires:

- The poorest people (who often are the most receptive audience) cannot afford any increase in costs;
- Every household desires a 'modern' brick or concrete house and therefore a traditional appearance is often not acceptable;
- People do not usually rebuild until they have to. By then, many of the building for safety messages may be forgotten.
- Bangladesh's culture of aid dependency means that people can expect rewards for participation in projects. This programme, which seeks to help with knowledge rather than cash, is therefore of little interest to most;
- The NGO middle-men, needed to reinforce the building for safety messages, often cannot understand the objective of improving traditional methods. They would rather be paid to build 'model' houses: this would increase their organisational standing in the community.

Considerable further work is needed to clarify how best to develop and promote affordable, desirable technologies among the 20m households that could benefit from simple improvements to strengthen their traditional houses and mitigate future hazards.

There are a number of ways in which this happens. For example, in one undocumented case involving trucking of relief goods over several thousand kilometres, it was surmised that sale of relief goods was occurring at the port of

arrival in country, freeing the trucks to carry alternative loads for most of their journeys. Oversupply at the point of delivery permitted replacement, identical, loads to be purchased (cheaply) and to be delivered as contracted. It seems that the individual beneficiaries made a small gain but the groups organizing such a scheme would benefit disproportionately.

Each individual's situation is unique and there is a risk that assessments fail to identify the range of possibilities. It is not unusual that a number, sometimes a majority, of beneficiaries will be supplied with items that they do not need or maybe do not want (such as inappropriate foodstuffs as distributed to Kurdish refugees in 1991 and Kosovars in 1999). However, a programme that has been set up and financed may be difficult to redirect and considerable waste of resources can result.

Determining the true desires of aid beneficiaries can be difficult since no one will turn away a gift. Evaluating past programmes is no easier because most recipients appreciate that lack of gratitude is likely to cut off future aid. Noting peoples' actions provides more reliable indicators of their desires than what they will tell researchers.

During an evaluation of house rebuilding after the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh many different coping strategies were observed in practice. The clearest example was that of a boatman who had lost home, belongings and means of livelihood (Hodgson, 1995). His immediate strategy was to borrow a large sum at exorbitant interest to replace clothes and household items and to repair his boat. Arguably, the most effective way of supporting this strategy would have been to repay the loan but that was not offered by the relief agency. The respondent himself would not, even after an hour of face-to-face discussion of his circumstances, admit that the housing materials he had later been given did not fulfil his most urgent priority. Hundreds of others affected by the cyclone responded similarly, despite their varying needs. That experience has prompted extensive, continuing, research by the University of Exeter Housing & Hazards Group into the factors influencing housing decisions in Bangladesh (see box above).

## **COMMUNAL NEEDS**

Communal structures exist to provide essential infrastructure and common security for their constituents. Any programme that unwittingly undermines existing communal structures by, for example, providing better infrastructure to a displaced community or by compromising security arrangements, will encounter resistance from the hosts or neighbours.

Sphere standards sometimes exceed the existing communal provisions, in which case, humanitarian workers will need to either consider a lower level of humanitarian response or to incorporate raised standards for the hosts into their programmes. The Sphere evaluation recognizes that:

*'The relationship between emergency-affected and surrounding populations has always been a tenuous one.... The Sphere Project should develop guidelines for how to address this issue.'*

This issue has been with us for many years. The Oxfam Water team working in Eastern Sudan in 1985 undertook a number of upgrades to the water supplies of host communities while development of water supplies to the Harteshek camps necessarily resulted in the improved reliability of sources supplying JigJiga in eastern Ethiopia in 1989.

### **Security in Karamoja, 1980**

Karamoja, a province of Uganda measuring about 250 x 150km, was subjected to famine in the aftermath of the war that deposed Idi Amin in 1980. Relief and rehabilitation programmes included upgrading of roads almost to all-weather status, through the construction of drift bridges, by a 100-strong workforce recompensed with food-for-work (Hodgson, 1987).

Despite the clear expected benefits (later realized) of better wet-season access by relief transport, there was little enthusiasm for the work. On reflection, it could be appreciated that:

- Famine was accepted as a natural process;
- None of the villagers involved owned any type of wheeled transport;
- Each was capable of running 50-60km barefoot across country overnight;
- The chief beneficiaries of the road works would be the local political and business leaders and the national army.

Thus, the workforce could see little personal benefit, apart from the short-term need for food. Indeed, the roads could arguably result in a deterioration of their security. Road construction schemes have suffered similarly in other countries since, including Ethiopia during the late 1980s, and the wider aspects of improved transportation should always be considered.

Security issues are sometimes less clearly defined as the experience (above) from Uganda illustrates.

### **ELITE GROUPS**

During the aftermath of any disaster, in any part of the world, rescue and rehabilitation workers will invariably encounter a number of elite groups, including traditional and administrative leaders and businessmen, both within and outside of the law. Relationships between individuals in these groups may be difficult to determine. Where interests coincide, local elites can coexist with the humanitarian

work to mutual advantage; however, superior knowledge of local politics and business conditions will almost invariably result in of any imbalance of advantage accruing to the local players.

Aspiring community leaders see the chaos of disaster as an opportunity for advancement. Technicians are commonly thrust into positions of leadership due to political affiliations. Both must therefore be approached with caution until their true worth can be proven.

#### **Water engineers, Mostar, 1994**

Mostar city was divided by fighting during the Bosnian war, with parallel administrative systems being established on both sides of the line (Hodgson, 1996). Humanitarian workers seeking to restore water services throughout the city were faced with two water supply administrators, each claiming to represent the former water company. One (who had, indeed, previously worked for the city) had been appointed on the strength of his military activities while the other was a very able and noted academic. Unfortunately, it was not immediately evident that neither had direct experience of water supply and distribution. This delayed the planning of reconstruction since all workers with intimate knowledge of the distribution network had either died in the war or had emigrated.

Successful businessmen see opportunities behind every challenge. The bigger the challenges posed by a disaster, the more rewarding will be the potential opportunities. This applies equally to local businesses and to international ones that soon start lobbying the international relief agencies (Blaikie, et al., 1994); however, the local suppliers have the larger potential to interfere with the smooth running of a programme.

#### **UPLOWMAN, UK**

Although all UK local government bodies should conduct emergency planning, few do so. The village of Uplowman (population 300) set out to develop community preparations for emergencies. The process took over a year; school children conducted village mapping, while women's groups, the elderly and the general public were consulted through focus and public meetings. The capacity of rescue services was explored and additional first aid training arranged for 18 villagers (the village is more than 8 minutes from an ambulance station). Village resources were identified. The output was a simple plan delivered to each home with instructions for a range of emergency situations. A secondary output of the process was a considerable strengthening of local democracy brought about by community ownership of the process.

It takes typically between three and six months before local elites start to explore what opportunities may exist to create business, exploit strangers or for more nefarious purposes. Regular review of programme aims and achievements is essential to help in identifying individuals or organizations whose own objectives do not coincide.

## **PLANNING FOR EMERGENCIES**

### **Kurdish leaders, 1991**

Isikveren Camp contained the bulk of the population of Zakho city and its surroundings, some 80,000 people. A rugged terrain and the speed of arrival of the displaced people resulted in a chaotic distribution of what had been a well-ordered community. Humanitarian workers seeking dialogue with the community were faced with two or more sets of leaders: the former civil administrators; and a set of traditional village elders. Each group had its own constituents and the true position was not resolved before the displaced population returned to its various homes in northern Iraq.

Given that disaster may occur at any time, in almost any place, it behoves every civil authority to make appropriate plans for relief and recovery. While the specifics of each community context will vary, the above examples point to some general principles. It is clear that any disaster management strategy should seek to:

- Incorporate as many individual needs as possible, and
- Minimize chaos through effective leadership and dissemination of information.

Achieving these aims calls for a process of community involvement and appropriate preparation at all levels. Strong community leadership is essential in the aftermath of disaster; however, without planning to ensure that the led know what to expect, it is a matter of luck whether leadership alone will be effective.

In preparing for emergency situations, many factors relating to vulnerability, geography and social conditions will need to be considered. Blaikie et al. (1994) provide a more complete analysis to which the reader is referred.

## **SOME BROAD CONCLUSIONS**

Humanitarian relief and reconstruction pose many technical and logistics management challenges. In the confusion of dealing with those 'hard' issues, factors pertaining to 'soft' issues can often be overlooked or put to one side. The above examples illustrate how the desires, as opposed to the needs, of the people

affected by the emergency may lead to long-term programme ineffectiveness. The Sphere standards provide an important minimum level of assistance but may often require to be modified to allow for additional desires among the effected people.

The essential process of ascertaining desires will be complicated by local political and business climates. It will take time and require a fundamental understanding of cultural and economic issues. Ideally, disaster preparedness will have explored potential issues at community level in advance of the emergency to assist with that understanding and to develop robust response mechanisms. How this is done will be context-specific; the experiences of rural communities in Bangladesh and UK illustrate both the similarity of the principles to be applied and the different approaches needed when engaging community action.

The real challenge is to design effective assistance that supports long-term desires. Cuny (1993) drew attention to the pitfalls resulting from a failure to involve people in recovery programme planning over 20 years ago but, sadly, many of his comments remain pertinent in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Mere delivery of aid should not be regarded as an end in itself – too many programmes are signed off as successfully completed as soon as the last cent has been expended!

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