Improving Disaster Response: Role of Knowledge Sharing

By Christopher Chen

Synopsis

The Asia-Pacific region is the world's most disaster-prone region; a more efficient, coordinated disaster management system has never been needed more. There is growing recognition that a robust system of information and knowledge exchange can enhance coordination in humanitarian responses and relief efforts.

Commentary

THE HUMANITARIAN system – the global network of players who extend assistance to victims of disasters and conflict - remains wedded to a 'silo management' structure. This needs to shift to a more collaborative process of disaster management. The lack of a cohesive multilateral coordination strategy results in a significant amount of duplication and the inefficient use of resources.

Humanitarian stakeholders need to work towards ensuring that they are operationally compatible with one another in preparation for future disasters. This involves the active sharing of knowledge and institutional best practices amongst relief providers, civil society, donors, military, and governments. This engagement should not be limited to a top-down approach, but also involve a bi-directional process of interaction.

What's New?

The digital revolution has seen many practitioners push for open data exchange yet there remains a distinct lack of comprehensive data and knowledge available. At best, practitioners have partial access to raw data. More often than not, they are faced with data narratives, which only give surface-level information. There is also a disparity in access to data amongst stakeholders.

The data asymmetry problem needs to be addressed to allow lessons learnt and best practices to be shared with everyone in the humanitarian sphere. Recently, various organisations have attempted to build more extensive platforms that integrate knowledge from multiple organisations by using collaborative software technologies.

In 2010, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) found that NGO coordination in humanitarian situations often occurred without sufficient practical guidance and blueprints. In response to this, the ICVA established an online platform – the NGO Coordination Resource Centre – which offers easy access to resources which can support practitioners in the field.

These resources include sample Terms of reference (TOR) for NGO coordination, checklists for efficient NGO organisation, and funding strategies. Such resources can help to facilitate coordination efforts during disaster management. Comprehensive databases also provide regional and local actors with insights to global standards of humanitarian aid. They can use this information to shape their own response mechanisms.

Contact management systems have also been created to make humanitarian efforts better coordinated. Developed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 2015, the Humanitarian ID Initiative comprises a global directory of humanitarian professionals.

Humanitarian workers simply have to create an account online, 'check in' when they start working on a new emergency, and they will have immediate access to the contact information of other practitioners working on the same emergency. Users are also able to use their Humanitarian ID to access several other online resources such as *ReliefWeb*, *ACAPS*, and *HumanitarianResponse*.

What's Stopping Us?

Even with these developments in collaborative software technologies, knowledge exchange can only take place if those involved make a conscious effort to do so. The unwillingness to share critical information is perhaps the main impediment to coordination in the humanitarian sector.

The desire for inter-organisational cooperation is one that policy-makers and practitioners often talk about. However, these words rarely translate into definitive action. NGOs are very individualistic, with their different mandates, core values, ideals, and guiding principles. Organisations with different agendas have little motivation to work together.

Some have mandates which prevent them from engaging with certain actors and this is exacerbated by the need to compete for donor aid. This all means that the humanitarian environment disincentivises the sharing of vital information and knowledge.

Moreover, the larger, more established INGOs often fail to engage adequately with their smaller, locally-based counterparts. While initiatives, such as the UN Cluster

Approach, aim to foster better coordination in global humanitarian efforts, the reality is that there is still an obvious disconnect between the large international players and their local counterparts. This then creates a knock-on effect where key decision-makers are disconnected from the realities on the ground.

Need for a Paradigm Shift

There is a pressing need to address the institutional insularity and agenda-driven approaches that still exist in the humanitarian sector. The larger international organisations should strive to build linkages and partnerships with local actors in different regions through sustained engagement over the longer term and not limit their collaboration to only when disasters strike.

Some organisations have already embraced this notion. The IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation adopts a mentor role for humanitarian organisations around the world. Besides offering financial assistance, it also conducts regional training sessions and capacity-building exercises for local NGOs. At the same time, it engages in constant bi-directional dialogue with them through getting their feedback, incorporating it into policy decisions, and using it to improve their own practices.

Closer to home, ASEAN's Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ERAT) sources its members from within the member states. In the event of a disaster, this arrangement enables other external disaster responders to tap on the in-country ERAT members' understandings of the conditions on the ground. This allows the integration of local knowledge into the decision-making processes of the wider ASEAN Community.

Local humanitarian practitioners are usually the first responders in disaster-stricken areas. It is important to invest in their capacity for action and leverage on their local knowledge when international aid is needed. An open system of knowledge exchange enables more actors to share and evaluate datasets. This collaborative effort teases out more nuances in disaster relief operations which might otherwise have been missed.

The current and increasing threat posed by disasters needs more robust humanitarian responses from practitioners. This can only be achieved if knowledge is actively exchanged, shared and utilised between humanitarian actors. Collaboration is often an overly-romanticised notion. Even so, it is necessary for humanitarian actors to keep working towards this to ensure they are better prepared to respond to the disasters we face in this region.

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