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Editorial

Post-Disaster Needs Assessments: The Critical First Step


Frequently, disaster-affected countries start receiving unsolicited aid even before they have had time to conduct an assessment of real needs.

There are a variety of reasons to carry out post-disaster assessments: determining the immediate, short-term emergency needs of the survivors (the topic of this editorial); inventorying damage to housing, hospitals and other public or private infrastructure; or assessing the economic impact by putting a dollar figure on the direct and indirect losses attributable to the disaster.

Emergency needs assessments are an important first step before an intervention. Most agencies invest significant time and effort to carry them out; universities and other training institutions include the topic in the curriculum of virtually every course. Yet despite this institutional emphasis on rapid assessments, most decision makers—particularly at the international level—are not receiving the information they need to make quick and useful relief decisions. Too often, funds are allocated based on assumptions of what the victims ought to need or on domestic considerations fueled by the mass media. This has been the case not only in major disasters in the Americas but also in other regions of the world. An evaluation carried by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) of the effectiveness of the needs assessment is particularly explicit on this point (see www.tsunami-evaluation.org/ and follow the links under TEC Thematic Evaluations).

Ultimately, needs assessments have many end users, including the authorities and the public in a disaster-stricken country; the mass media looking for impressive statistics; as well as donors and external humanitarian organizations who are anxious to know how to contribute effectively. This article will focus on the international users of information generated by humanitarian needs assessments, a constituency that is generally not satisfied with what they receive from national authorities.

What information is the international community looking for?

Bilateral donors and other external agencies have little interest in a detailed breakdown by locality of the number of dead, injured or homeless. National authorities will use these statistics as the basis for administrative decisions; however, the data is of marginal value in identifying how to assist the country.

What donors do need to know quickly is what needs remain unmet. They do not need an exhaustive list of what the affected population may ideally require, but rather what is essential, in terms of ensuring survival and protecting health, that cannot or will not be provided locally. Many donors seek a niche area in which to orient their assistance. This could be in the medical care field or involve donations of medicines, vaccines, food or cooking utensils, or perhaps specialized skills or services. Donors also need to know what the country does not want to receive, such as medical volunteers, medicines close to their expiration date or old clothing. Avoiding inappropriate or duplicate contributions saves resources and embarrassment.

Why is the national assessment not enough?


The needs of minorities or remote populations can be overlooked when the assessments give incomplete or misleading information.

Getting timely post-disaster assessment information to the international community is not as simple and straightforward a task as it appears. Many international actors feel compelled to send their own fact finding mission or assessment team, sometimes competing with or overwhelming the national authorities. The teams most often present in the Americas are the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team (UNDAC); its sister agency in the Red Cross Movement (the Field Assessment and Coordination Team – FACT); the US and Canadian Disaster Assistance Response Teams (DART); and the UK Operation Team (OT). There are many reasons why foreign actors dispatch their own assessment teams:

- **Timeliness of the information:** Some feel they cannot afford the delays incurred by national assessments. Donors make resource allocation decisions under tight deadlines, heavy pressure and public scrutiny. Consequently, emergency agencies that cannot state their priorities and submit a project within a short timeframe are unlikely to receive support. The perceived need for immediate action also explains why so many decisions are not evidence-based, but rather respond to public expectations and perceptions. Too often, national authorities are reluctant to issue a statement of needs without having completed their own assessment. Making an early educated guess is not always a strength of public institutions.
- **Lack of resources at the national level:** By definition, a major disaster exceeds the resources and capacity of the affected country. This is particularly true for the capacity to collect and analyze information. The issue is not only the number of local staff available to participate in an assessment, but also their prior experience in major disasters. Although the knowledge base and fresh perspective of external actors are important, the unintended consequence is a proliferation of assessment teams that further overtaxes the limited human resources of the National Emergency Committee or Civil Protection. The result is an abundance of partial surveys and assessments that make it harder to get a consolidated picture of where needs exist and what the priorities ought to be.

Two additional factors ensure that external data collection teams will remain a fact of life:

- **Agency specificity:** Each international actor has specific constraints, mandates and means; they cannot provide everything needed. The response to a disaster must match the needs of both the affected population and the responding agency's own requirements. Assessment information must take into account the latter, and often only an agency's own staff or contractors can do this.
- **Accountability:** Donors and other humanitarian actors are accountable both financially and politically to their constituencies and some feel they cannot blindly trust the information they receive. There have been many examples of inflated losses or "shopping lists" that far exceed justifiable needs or, to the contrary, needs of minorities or remote, poor communities that have been overlooked in assessments. The mistrust of government information may run so deep that some donors expect their assessment to differ significantly!
  Although Latin American and Caribbean countries have achieved considerable progress in carrying out objective needs assessments, external validation is still a plus. If national authorities manage this situation well, an external assessment can be turned into an asset for the affected population. This discussion will continue in the next issue of this Newsletter with a look at recommendations and best practices related to post-disaster needs assessments.

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