

Poised for a Breakthrough?

A Review of Significant Findings and Trends in Humanitarian Action

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The increasing number and broadening scale of natural disasters, and the widening scope and associated consequences of complex humanitarian emergencies are extensively researched and documented. There is no question of the far-reaching impacts of catastrophic events. Unfolding crises and the expanding dimensions of humanitarian

assistance, particularly during the last five years, bring to the fore the realities of humanitarian response efforts spanning varied geographic locations, in different country contexts, within diverse socio-cultural environments, and across a range of socio-political and economic strata. It is worth noting that humanitarian organizations, while working in dynamic, rapidly changing, chaotic and unpredictable environments, continue to develop an ever-increasing understanding of human need. However, due to the complex nature of crisis and emergency management – because no two disasters are exactly alike - and in light of the deepening and persisting needs of those affected, humanitarian action and humanitarian actors must remain responsive, yet adaptive. It is critical then, that humanitarian organizations continue to review and reflect on their collective experience, discover, capture, and share lessons, and adopt and apply best practice, continually enhancing the quality of their work.

Increasing visibility of the humanitarian sector brings greater awareness of its particular influence, unique roles, and specialized actions. However, there is also widening scrutiny of how agencies communicate the need for and manage their collective response to humanitarian crises. Quality programming, demonstrable performance, and timely impact remain as primary themes against which humanitarian action is judged. Hence, there is recognized need for the humanitarian enterprise to undertake more regular and more thorough analysis of learning, determining what changes are required and where improvement is needed to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in saving lives and alleviating suffering. There is need to bridge the gap between humanitarian principles and humanitarian practice. As such, collective effort to achieve enhanced and appropriate action requires identification



of key lessons and review of humanitarian trends. Similarly, individual organizations must remain conscious of persistent challenges and shortfalls, and seek to apply recommendations internally to inform their own strategies, policies, structures, systems, and practices.

To encourage continued awareness of current issues in disaster response, World Vision recently undertook an exercise to review key findings and trends in humanitarian action. This analysis explores current concerns expressed through a series of global initiatives set up to assess priority issues for humanitarian agencies. These issues appear as consistent themes across a number of reports and review processes* designed to identify lessons, and determine humanitarian implications of 'what went well' and 'what went less well', with proposed recommendations for change. These reviews span multiple agencies, cover a number of important themes in humanitarian action, and represent diversity of perspective and expertise across response organizations, humanitarian policy groups, coordination and guidance committees, independent evaluations, and academic and institutional research. Each process has been peer reviewed, and the reports thereby produced continue to be cited as insightful, relevant, and timely. They provide opportunity to continue to build upon and establish important milestones in humanitarian principles, policy, and practice.



Five recurring issues are pervasive across these findings. They are reflective of humanitarian principles and standards, yet are ultimately linked to and immediately expressed in practice. They are:




1. Protection: assuring safety, security, and well-being.
2. Participation: inviting and facilitating the involvement of every stakeholder.
3. Partnership: strengthening relationships for cooperation and mutual aid.
4. Professionalization: developing expertise and recognized capability.
5. Planning: assessing specific program needs and the particular actions required.

The purpose of this synthesis report is to provide an overview of highlights captured through this series of humanitarian reviews. Included in this analysis are significant findings that are reflective of recent experience in disaster response. The implications of observed gaps on effective humanitarian action are also mentioned. Priority issues emerging from this analysis are ranked based on their frequency of appearance across various humanitarian review processes, indicative of their consistency as



repeat learning and expressive of consensus that they are critical issues that require attention. Recommendations for action and improvement in key areas are provided. As part of the follow up to these humanitarian review processes, next steps should involve (1) the development and initiation of specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely activities for concerted follow-up, and (2) the identification of critical success factors that are required for the adoption of proposed recommendations across the wider humanitarian sector. Important global trends and humanitarian 'vital signs' are later referenced, and key questions are posed that challenge humanitarian organizations to gain traction in addressing recurring issues to better achieve collective impact in disaster and emergency response. Key findings and recommendations are color-coded

as follows to indicate their consistency and frequency of appearance:

-  → Observed in approximately 90% of sourced documents/reports
-  → Observed in approximately 70% of sourced documents/reports
-  → Observed in approximately 50% of sourced documents/reports



A trend in humanitarian learning is noted when multiple appraisal mechanisms, research activities, and/or evaluation methods similarly document a recurring issue affecting or limiting the success humanitarian relief operations. Where various review processes discover and capture a particular point of learning and remain consistent, even from different perspectives, in their analysis of the issue, the findings speak more powerfully to the collective need for improvement. However, while sector-wide 'performance appraisals', reflection, and synthesis are critical to enhanced practice in humanitarian action, suggested recommendations require follow-up to ensure that the learnings are adopted and applied. World Vision is therefore currently internalizing these lessons and recommendations, and is actively identifying opportunities and mechanisms to implement specific, measurable, appropriate, relevant, and timely activities in response to the learning.



FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS	CONSISTENCY & FREQUENCY	RECOMMENDATIONS
There is a growing call for staff and agency certification, as it needs to be shown that agencies have met and can continue to meet established standards.	There is increasing concern that the humanitarian sector remains unregulated by objective accreditation.		<p>Develop and affirm/certify a core set of professional standards for humanitarian organizations and their staff, emphasizing competence and capability to operationalize humanitarian principles.</p> <p>Map and determine the most effective ways to utilize available resources and develop further mechanisms for the accreditation of core sets of humanitarian competencies and skills.</p>
Poor interagency coordination and cooperation remains a significant issue in emergency response.	Of concern is the lack of coordination in information sharing, particularly between INGOs and government agencies and local actors. Poor information sharing and hence poor planning lead to inappropriate or duplicative activities.		<p>A shared response to common challenges needs to be articulated in a way that defines and formalizes humanitarian coordination activities within an agreed framework of clear goals, desired coordination outcomes, relevant activities, and appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.</p> <p>Promote wider awareness of and facilitate improved adherence to agreed standards and protocols for information management and interagency communications.</p>
Accountability to beneficiaries needs to be improved, moving from standards and policies to practical application that is measurable.	The lack of proper accountability mechanisms results in programs not being responsive to real needs. Furthermore, the absence of beneficiary voices is reflective of disempowerment.		<p>Improved accountability needs to support the participation, inclusion, and facilitated ownership by communities, local NGOs, and governments not just during response but continuing through to transition, rehabilitation, and recovery as well.</p> <p>Ensure that local staff, beneficiaries, and local government actors receive orientation and training in humanitarian accountability principles and practices.</p> <p>Encourage clearer articulation of shared accountability expectations between agencies and beneficiaries – blending what agencies are obligated to provide and what beneficiaries have a right to receive. Improved monitoring and evaluation around accountability to beneficiaries is also needed.</p>
Emergency response activities and funding priorities focus more on supply-driven asset replacement rather than livelihoods security and sustainable community recovery.	The inability of households and communities to meet livelihood needs increases their vulnerability to future shocks and reduces their coping capacity. The absence of productive livelihoods remains a significant post-disaster concern.		<p>Ratify the validity of a livelihoods approach to emergency response that is supported by good research.</p> <p>Proactively communicate the importance of more accurately aligning funding priorities with actual (longer-term) needs that strengthen the programmatic linkages between relief, rehabilitation, and development.</p> <p>Initiate further research on effective models of livelihood security protection and the linkages with relief, rehabilitation, and development.</p>
Major gaps persist in terms of capacity (staff) and capability (sectoral expertise) for large-scale and complex emergency response.	The growing complexities of humanitarian responses are requiring deeper staffing levels and more available sectoral specialties (e.g., psychosocial, gender, disability, peace building, etc).		<p>Undertake more robust assessments of assumed vs. actual vs. appropriate capacity, and ensure emergency response planning includes well thought through HR mechanisms to support relevant and needed program activities.</p> <p>Develop models and plans for assuring appropriate surge capacity in emergency response, including consideration of resources for developing and preparing staff through leadership training, lifelong learning, expert recruitment, and career tracking.</p>
Early warning systems are lacking or are not relevant for use by local communities.	Communities are at increased risk from disaster impacts where information and knowledge about potential hazards and existing vulnerabilities is lacking, and an effective alert/communication mechanism is inadequate.		<p>Develop early warning systems that are informed by the experiences, real needs, and actual risks communities face.</p> <p>Ensure that information dissemination and disaster communication systems are developed in a way that bridges local knowledge and practice with available science and technology.</p>
Inappropriate programming results from inadequately designed, uncoordinated, and poorly structured needs assessments.	Ongoing pragmatic needs assessments are important so that programs reflect situational changes on the ground and support an even transition from relief to recovery.		<p>Needs assessments are to be planned within a broader framework of the response strategy and coupled with interagency mechanisms for information sharing and coordination.</p> <p>Increase the dissemination of successfully modeled tools and techniques for high quality and integrated needs assessments. This needs to be accompanied by relevant training and capacity building.</p>

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Humanitarian assistance tends to focus primarily on physical/material assistance at the expense of other underlying issues/needs (e.g., HIV/AIDS, gender, geo-political and legal considerations).	Lack of attention to geo-political, economic, and social issues in emergencies results in superficial assistance that does not address underlying causes of vulnerability or the real impacts of disasters (e.g., social inequalities, exclusion, and hierarchies).		<p>Facilitate the participation of sectoral experts and specialized lead agencies in emergency response assessments and programming. Ensure the coordinated collection, analysis, and use of sectoral information in the process of determining specific and real needs.</p> <p>Develop a better understanding of 'other' vulnerabilities that exacerbate primary disaster effects or trigger secondary consequences.</p>
Inadequate funding and inappropriately earmarked funds hamper timely emergency response.	Many humanitarian crises remain neglected or are forgotten, and are responded to only after needs overwhelm available resources and capabilities.		<p>Develop a shared communications strategy and follow up on the Good Humanitarian Donor Initiative.</p> <p>Challenge donor policies through targeted key messages informed by sound needs and advocacy assessments.</p> <p>Support the development of donor accountability mechanisms that include indicators and benchmarks for donor response.</p>
Those affected by disasters are often treated as helpless victims.	International Humanitarian Law and a rights-based approach to assistance are at risk of becoming obscure in the rush to spend money and provide immediate aid.		<p>Reinforce orientation and training on International Humanitarian Law to international and national response staff.</p> <p>Implement mechanisms to assure that representation of the needs of local communities is visible and respected.</p>
There is an over-emphasis on emergency response, with inadequate attention to risk reduction, disaster mitigation, and preparedness.	Disaster risk and subsequent humanitarian needs are greatest where adequate disaster preparedness is lacking.		<p>Enhance the role and visibility of disaster preparedness and mitigation, particularly where pilot interventions or current practice demonstrate impact.</p> <p>Using data and case examples/evidence from the field (pilot studies, risk reduction research), educate donors on the need to fund disaster preparedness initiatives.</p> <p>Provide space for stronger contribution of grassroots interagency partnerships designed to support disaster risk reduction capacity building and action research.</p>
Local (community) and national (government) capacities for emergency response have been systematically ignored, undervalued, and poorly supported by international agencies.	Where local and national capacity for disaster management is ignored or undervalued, there is a lack of ownership and beneficiary participation pre-response, resulting in increased dependence on aid and reduced community resilience post-response.		<p>Intentionally seek opportunities to establish clear partnership strategies with local actors prior to and from the start of a relief response in order to quickly scale up during a response, and achieve a smooth transition from relief to recovery.</p> <p>Develop appropriate management models to support more effective integration of representative and diverse levels of emergency response capacities.</p>
Local staff capacities for emergency response need to be built up and maintained.	Because initial emergency response effort is initiated at the local level, a lack of capacity at this level of management reduces overall response effectiveness.		<p>Develop and ratify action plans for the integration of local staff capacities for emergency response into broader (national and international) response mechanisms.</p> <p>Undertake a mapping of local emergency response capacity and assure funding to provide additional resources to grow local staff capacity.</p>
There are increasing instances of cultural insensitivity, poor accountability, and inappropriate programming on the part of agencies.	Humanitarian efforts can be perceived as being one-sided and distanced from realities on the ground.		<p>Agencies need to listen more, and effectively support policies and programs that are more attuned to local needs.</p> <p>Provide avenues to receive and follow-up on beneficiary complaints that is supported by an institutionalized and common mechanism to do so through the HAPI mechanism.</p>

The results from this analysis suggest that there are core issues in humanitarian action that continue to demand the practitioner's attention. Regardless of disaster type, location, context, or the scale and length of the response, continuing lessons are noticeable. Furthermore, persisting challenges in humanitarian practice do not appear independent of other observed gaps. One lesson is often cited in conjunction with another, with knock-on effects through the collective system for humanitarian relief operations. It follows that appropriate *planning* and effective *partnership* across a *professional* cadre of agencies helps ensure full *participation* and concerted efforts to *protect* lives and livelihoods. There is, therefore, interdependence between the diverse segments and specialties in humanitarian response. The need for collective action to address collective concerns in order to achieve collective impact is hereby reemphasized.

Global interest in humanitarian response is high – after a string of sudden, large-scale disasters triggered by the Indian Ocean tsunami, the South Asian earthquake and a record hurricane season along America's Gulf Coast in 2005. But high-visibility catastrophes overshadow more chronic – and often more deadly – humanitarian crises. Neglect takes many forms: some crises may be unreported, unfunded, uncounted, or triggered by a secondary, unanticipated event. Other crises are neglected because governments keep them secret, or aid organizations find it awkward to operate, or decision-makers misunderstand appropriate responses. Beneath all such crises is a deeper neglect of social vulnerability to disaster. Humanitarian organizations, donors, governments and the media must address all types of neglect to ensure people are not abandoned to unnecessary, silent suffering. (World Disasters Report, 2006. IFRC)

Reflection and Projection

Preparing for and coordinating more effective emergency response requires a better understanding of evolving scenarios, changing vulnerabilities, and emerging trends that result in realization of disaster risks or further exacerbate existing hazards. In moving forward, humanitarian agencies should first take a 'step back' in order to more comprehensively and more concretely recognize the thresholds of coping capacities, reduced resilience capabilities, and threats to sustainable development. What can humanitarian agencies learn from past and ongoing experience that can help prepare them for the future? Will



current lessons be again identified in later disaster response? What new knowledge will emerge and what new dimensions in humanitarian practice have yet to be fully understood? Will the humanitarian sector have resolved current issues and feel confident that improved disaster response is likely next time round?

A combination of human-related factors has set the stage for more frequent and devastating "un-natural" disasters: natural disturbances made worse by human activities. (Natural Disasters & Peacemaking, World Watch Institute, 2006)

Ongoing research reveals the following:

- **Water Scarcity:** water scarcity already affects every continent and four out of every ten people in the world. The situation is getting worse due to population growth, urbanization and the increase in domestic and industrial water use.¹
- **Emerging Diseases:** new, highly contagious diseases, such as SARS and avian influenza, know no borders. Their potential to cause international harm means that outbreaks cannot be treated as purely national issues. In the last few decades, new diseases began emerging at an unprecedented rate of one or more per year.¹
- **Environmental Change:** environmental and climate changes have a growing impact on health, but health policies alone cannot prevent their effects.¹
- **Environmental Refugees:** at least 25 million people became environmental refugees or were displaced by natural disasters and large-scale development projects, such as dam construction, in 1995. This number is projected to double by 2010.²
- **Resource Wars:** in about a quarter of the roughly 50 wars and armed conflicts of recent years, resource exploitation helped trigger or exacerbate violent conflict or financed its continuation. The money derived from resource exploitation in war zones has secured an ample supply of arms and military equipment for armed factions and has served to enrich a handful of people—warlords, corrupt government officials, arms merchants, mercenaries, and unscrupulous corporate leaders. But critical human needs have been trampled in the process.²
- **Farmland Quality:** each year, some 5–8 million hectares of farmland go out of production as a result of degradation. Worldwide,



land degradation has reduced cumulative food production by an estimated 13 percent on cropland and 4 percent for pasture over

the last half-century.²

- **Population Growth:** The world's population topped 6.4 billion in 2005. This is more than twice as many people as populated Earth in 1950. In 2005, the world population grew by some 74 million people. This is exacerbated by the fact that nearly all population growth between 2000 and 2030 is expected in urban areas of the developing world.²
- **Children Orphaned by HIV/AIDS:** at the end of 2001, an estimated 13.4 million children under the age of 15 in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean had lost a parent to AIDS. More than 11 million of these "orphans due to AIDS" live in Africa. By 2010, the number of children orphaned by AIDS is projected to reach 25 million. Most of these children—20 million of them—will live in sub-Saharan Africa.²
- **Foreign Aid Spending:** Ten years ago, the Rio Earth Summit attempted to bridge the interests of countries of the North and the South in forging a sustainable development path through what is sometimes called the Rio bargain. But in the decade since Rio, aid spending has declined substantially rather than increased. According to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development figures, official development assistance amounted to \$54 billion in 2000, down from \$73 billion in 1992 (in 2000 dollars).²
- **Rich-Poor Divide:** In 1960, the per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in the 20 richest countries was 18 times that in the 20 poorest countries, according to the World Bank. By 1995 the gap between the richest and poorest nations had more than doubled—to 37 times.²

In response to the identified lessons and observed trends, and in anticipation of surfacing needs, World Vision suggests consideration of the following important questions:

- How are humanitarian agencies coordinating and collaborating with each other, with donors, local and national governments, with expert institutions, and with communities to better prepare for and respond to disasters? What coor-

dination models are proving successful? How can 'quick wins' be easily identified and promoted?

- Are current disaster prevention, mitigation, and preparedness efforts reaching the most vulnerable? What is the value added? Are these efforts responsive to changing environmental and social dynamics?
- What communication strategies and key messages are humanitarian organizations using for awareness raising, public education, advocacy, and expression of policy? Are they proving effective? What is missing?
- Will new skills and expertise be required of the humanitarian practitioner? Have these been identified? How will they be developed?
- What are the priority humanitarian interests of donors, governments, individual agencies, and beneficiaries? Are these priorities aligned? How and why are they different?
- How is humanitarian response changing and adapting in response to lessons learnt? What can agencies adopt individually, and what can they not afford to do independently? Where are the 'vehicles' of change?



Disasters and complex humanitarian emergencies are on the rise. In fact, the full extent of their immediate impact and the lasting longer-term effects on human lives are not completely understood. However, developing trends provide key triggers or flash points that can help motivate and drive organizational awareness, improved responsiveness, prospective learning, positive change, and further improvement in humanitarian action. A review of global lessons and adoption of key recommendations with an eye to the future is crucial if humanitarian organizations are to better anticipate and meet human need.

While there are specific actions individual agencies can take to apply the proposed recommendations in practice, translating industry-wide lessons into inclu-

sive humanitarian policy and standards for effective emergency relief operations requires collective inter-agency commitment and collaboration. To do this successfully, organizations must recognize each other's capacities and capabilities in a way that promotes synergies, builds on collective strengths, and promotes consensus building towards the fulfillment of common goals. World Vision believes that positive learning and sustainable change is encouraged by mutual transparency, shared ownership, and collective accountability. Indeed, these are qualities that necessarily define humanitarian action. The same is true of joint efforts to bridge gaps between humanitarian principles and humanitarian practice.

The decisive question is revisited: is humanitarian action poised for a breakthrough?



Where there is willingness and commitment to change and where success is modeled and replicated, this question can be answered affirmatively. Where structures, systems, and resources are properly aligned with needs, realities, and opportunities, the response to this question can be encouraging. Where there is persuasive vision that is supported by an operational plan that moves humanitarianism from 'as is' to 'is now', the response to this question can be inspiring. If not, there is the risk of a faltered link between established principles and enhanced practice, with the hope of improving the lives of millions remaining as nothing more than a static ideal. World Vision believes that "if you want to create incremental change, focus on behavior. But if you want real breakthrough, change the paradigm." (S.R. Covey)

Yes, there is need for humanitarian organizations to revisit how they can further develop their ability to remain proactive and be effective in their work, even in the face of emerging uncertainties. (The Learning Humanitarian Organization, World Vision International, 2007)

*More information is available in sourced documents/reports of significant humanitarian learning and recommendations. These include:

- Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami July 2006
- Humanitarian Response Review August 2005
- UN-NGO Initiative Synthesis Report October 2006
- Southern African Food Emergency Response, Mid-term Strategy Review November 2003
- Towards A United Nations Humanitarian Assistance Program for Disaster Response and Reduction: Lessons learned from the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster July 2006
- Lessons for a Safer Future: Drawing on the experience of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster December 2006
- Humanitarian Accountability Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions, Tufts University September 2006
- Good Humanitarian Donorship: overcoming obstacles to improved collective donor performance
- Forced Migration Review, Tsunami: learning from humanitarian response July 2005
- One World Trust – 2006 Global Accountability Report



¹ World Health Organization, 2007 www.who.int
² Vital Signs, World Watch Institute, 2007 www.worldwatch.org

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