



GETTING DISASTERS RIGHT

MANY DISASTERS ARE UNPREVENTABLE, BUT EFFECTIVE RISK MANAGEMENT SHOULD HELP ENSURE RELIEF EFFORTS ARE RESILIENT ENOUGH TO LIMIT SECONDARY FACTORS THAT CAN MAKE MATTERS FAR WORSE. CLARE MORGAN EXPLAINS

Last month's earthquake in Nepal and the Ebola crisis that has been raging since last year have wrought untold devastation on the affected communities. But while high casualty numbers are inevitable from crises on this scale, a systematic approach to risk management can ensure a cascade of secondary factors do not compound the initial disaster and cause a greater humanitarian crisis.

While the challenges differ greatly for commercial entities operating in the affected regions, and not-for-profit agencies looking to assist in the relief effort, effective risk management can help to mitigate the threat to staff and local communities in both cases.

Risk tolerance

Grant Strudwick, head of security assistance at International SOS and Control Risks – which has helped companies respond to both crises – says one of the most important factors for organisations is to understand their own risk tolerance.

'When Ebola broke out, one of our clients had many staff doing a range of roles in the region. The company made an early decision that they didn't have the risk



tolerance, and it wasn't necessary for them to be there, so we worked to evacuate their people out of West Africa,' he says.

'Another organisation had a lot of contracts in place and needed to be there to support others in the region so they decided to stay as long as they could.

'The second organisation took a clear decision to put measures in place to ensure the staff that remained were effectively protected. They had a medical officer and a security officer embedded with them. We worked with those staff they deemed unessential, to create an evacuation plan and they left the country under charter.'

On the kind of security challenges something like the Ebola outbreak creates, Strudwick says: 'If you have your own medical facility to treat people and the locals decide that staff are getting better treatment than them, they may try to break into the property to steal medical supplies, or to coerce the medical staff to treat their people.

'Security details may also be required for vehicles because of violence towards government entities, or perceived government entities, for the lack of action.'

The recent earthquake in Nepal highlighted the need for a systematic disaster response to prevent secondary factors exacerbating the situation

Infrastructure breakdown

One of the lessons learned from previous natural disasters is that the usual methods of communication cannot always be used to contact staff to assess their situation, because of the damage to telecommunications infrastructure.

'People have learned to utilise multiple modes of communication, using whatever is working at the time, whether that is the internet, satellite phones or conventional phones. One thing we have learned when trying to contact clients is that text messages usually get through much better than voice messages,' he says.

Smita Malik, AVP of programs and special risks at expat insurer Clements Worldwide, says advanced planning is critical to ensure that all possibilities have been considered before staff deploy to a region.

'We encourage customers to partner with us to do a complete risk assessment of every country where they operate with a corresponding risk management plan. By doing that, they will have a plan for any type of event that occurs, and we can ensure they have the correct coverage. Sadly, many organisations come to us after a disaster and ask for, say, evacuation assistance but that is

▶ not covered with their policy for that particular situation.

'If it is an organisation such as an NGO responding to a natural disaster, like Nepal, we can help them think about that too before they enter the country to start assistance work. For example, if they need to evacuate an employee who gets injured during rescue efforts, where would you evacuate them to, given the overtaxed infrastructure in the whole region?

'When a crisis like the earthquake happens in a developing country like Nepal with a poor infrastructure, it can be crippling, so that puts health implications on your employees. You also need to think about transit – getting supplies you need into a country going through that kind of disaster.'

New thinking

The extraordinary nature of the Ebola situation was unlike anything the company had ever seen and has actually led Clements Worldwide to adjust some policies, Malik adds. 'Typically evacuation policies were based on a particular medical emergency – such as an individual being sick, not at risk of being sick – or political violence threatening an area – like Libya several years ago or Yemen or Burundi now – and foreigners needing to evacuate.

'Many organisations did not have coverage that would support evacuation from a pandemic. We educate organisations about those policies more now. But also, many countries were shutting their borders to people from infected countries, so when there was an evacuation you could not just send employees home. That crisis created a new level of thinking in contingency planning.'

While commercial entities look to extricate their staff from affected regions, aid agencies face the opposite issue, managing the safe deployment of staff to the region, and ensuring they are able to support the local community without jeopardising their own health and security.

Christopher Tidey, emergency communications specialist at Unicef, says as far as the security of staff is concerned, there are 'protocols in place within the broader UN system and on an individual agency basis' that all staff must follow. Humanitarian workers will both undergo training before they deploy and receive a security briefing once they arrive in country, he says.

Secondary impact

For the local population, in the aftermath of an event like the Nepal earthquake, those who survive the initial catastrophe are at high risk from secondary factors such as the spread of disease. Aid agencies work quickly to assess these risks and put in place measures to mitigate them, Tidey adds.

'After a natural disaster that has affected



“One of the most important factors for organisations is to understand their own risk tolerance”

infrastructure, there are often problems with a lack of clean water and sanitation, which can lead to diarrhoeal and respiratory infections and the spread of other diseases. For this reason, we often have vaccination drives and immunisation drives among the local population,' he explains.

While all humanitarian emergencies are different, one of the key learnings over the past decade or so has been the development of what is known as 'the cluster response', which came about following the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004.

The system sees the disaster area divided into several zones, with a single aid agency taking responsibility in each. It was developed to address the fact that the number, size and complexity of emergencies often exceeds one agency's capacities, and that the voluntary nature of the international humanitarian system led to uneven coordination, lack of predictable leadership and absence of accountability systems.

'The lead organisation will coordinate everyone that operates in that area. One cluster will be responsible for



ANALYSIS

DISASTER RELIEF

The Ebola crisis in West Africa demanded a new approach to policies and procedures

risk is that time is available to understand the context and develop appropriate risk mitigation and management issues. However, the danger here is that people can become complacent and not review their plans on a regular basis,' Reilly adds.

Building resilience

Along with improving coordination in the immediate aftermath of an event, over the past few years there has been a key focus on helping to make high-risk territories more resilient before disaster strikes. The World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery has been a key player in this area.

Explaining the facility's approach, Francis Ghesquiere, manager of the Disaster Risk Management Practice of the World Bank and head of the GFDRR Secretariat, says: 'Adverse natural events do not have to turn into disasters. There are numerous ways to avoid the negative consequence of these events. This generally starts with establishing systems to avoid the creation of new risks, including enforcing proper planning and using appropriate building standards.'

While there is not always time to evaluate processes during the immediate relief effort, aid agencies are always looking to learn from previous missions, and actions are analysed systematically in reviews at the end of each operation, says Jose Luis Peña Fernandez from the British Red Cross (BRC).

'In the case of Haiti, we had *Learning from the City*, a research piece focused on the challenges of responding to urban earthquakes in the context of poor security and low governance capacities; it was very useful to guide our thinking in urban response and resilience-building.

'In the case of Nepal, BRC has just concluded a three-year project to prepare for an earthquake in the Kathmandu valley. This project included contingency planning, research on capacity building needs, and a good deal of promoting coordination at national and global levels with the institution involved in emergency response in Nepal and at the global level. The project applied all these into practical actions to strengthen the capacity of the Nepali Red Cross, and to educate the population on the issue.

'We were presenting the outcomes when the earthquake struck and we didn't have time to reflect on them, but we are extremely interested in measuring the impact of these preparedness activities in the current response.' ■

health and nutrition, another for sanitation, and another for the protection of women and children. It helps to ensure proper communication among all aid agencies on the ground,' Tidey explains.

Understanding context

Lisa Reilly, executive coordinator at The European Interagency Security Forum – an independent network of security managers from several European NGOs operating internationally – says one of the biggest challenges aid workers face is trying to obtain an up-to-date understanding of the context, in order to ensure appropriate risk mitigation measures are in place.

'With a large influx of humanitarian workers in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, assumptions can be made, based more on previous experience than on actual understanding. With the developments in communication technology, the expectations on speed of response often means that the time that organisation formerly spent on ensuring an understanding of the context, to ensure safe and sustainable access, is a luxury that is no longer available.

'Every disaster response brings new dilemmas and risks. However, as a sector, those most understood are for a rapid response in a relatively stable context – such as Nepal. This can be very different from responding to a similar natural disaster occurring within a conflict zone, or a man-made humanitarian crisis such as Syria.

'The advantages of a slow onset disaster for managing

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