

Executive Summary

Earthquake Relief in Haiti: Inter-Organizational Perspectives and Lessons for the Future



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Harvard University

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Dear Colleagues,

On March 23rd and 24th of 2011, we held a roundtable discussion, “Earthquake Relief in Haiti: Inter-Organizational Perspectives and Lessons for the Future” at Harvard University. Our common aspiration as humanitarian practitioners is to save lives and reduce human suffering, and we hope the conversations begun during this meeting will help generate further research, coordination, and collaboration to support these goals.

We convened this meeting to provide a forum for discussing successes, challenges, and strategies for improving disaster response based upon the lessons learned from the Haiti earthquake. The following summary highlights some of the key themes discussed during each focal topic and throughout the roundtable meeting. We hope this will be useful to a diversity of players in the disaster response sphere.

We would like to invite the meeting participants to contribute writings for addition to the meeting webpage where this executive summary is posted (<http://hhi.harvard.edu/programs-and-research/program-on-humanitarian-effectiveness>). Writings are invited in op-ed format, white paper format, or as responses to the content of this report. We will review any submissions, reply with questions as needed, and post the final pieces with attribution to the web page. If you would like to send a piece for posting, or inquire about the possibility, please contact Eric Goodwin at Eric_Goodwin@Harvard.edu or 617-495-4768.

In gathering and sharing meeting participants’ unique perspectives, we aim to foster an ongoing conversation around lessons learned from the Haiti earthquake that may help inform future deliberation and disaster response.

We are grateful to the participants for sharing their experiences with us. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with them and others in the future.

Sincerely,

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Summary of Findings

Focal Topic 1: *Delivery of Services*

- A robust disaster assessment team is essential to increasing the effectiveness of immediate response efforts;
- Crisis response strategies are not always compatible with long-term development goals;
- Regulation of the humanitarian sector through some form of credentialing for those carrying out critical functions is necessary to assure professional service-delivery by qualified practitioners;
- Anticipation of needs, formal assessment, and adaptability are all critical service delivery capabilities.

Focal Topic 2: *Interagency Collaboration and Coordination*

- Though too many actors failed to coordinate with each other and with the Haitian government, several improvements in collaboration occurred during Haiti earthquake relief including innovative use of technology and inter-agency relationship-building;
- UN cluster system had many areas of weakness;
- Not all organizations used the same platform for information-sharing;
- Level of coordination and collaboration varied from agency-to-agency.

Focal Topic 3: *Communication*

- Communication between agencies and with beneficiaries was limited by language;
- Local communication resources and expatriate communities were not fully utilized;
- Effort to communicate with Haitian government and citizens was not always sufficient;
- Media coverage of disaster did not always align with relief priorities, thereby conveying to the outside world inappropriate messages about needs on the ground.

Focal Topic 4: *Accountability*

- Differing goals from multiple constituencies often results in inefficient disaster response;
- Number of services provided by humanitarian agencies is often prioritized over effectiveness of interventions;
- Consideration of accountability to beneficiaries should be combined with analysis of sustainability of interventions;
- Disaster realities and the mission/commitments of responding organizations often compromised the host government's ability to govern.

Summary of Strategies

Focal Topic 1: *Delivery of Services*

- Establish an inter-organizational joint-assessment taskforce with clearly delineated responsibilities;
- Strive to involve host government, local NGOs, community leaders and expatriates in disaster planning, service delivery, and assessment;
- Restore government capacity as quickly as possible so that local authorities can lead priority setting and substantively guide relief operations;
- Transition promptly to community-based solutions and improve local infrastructure and capacity to respond;
- Establish a better system for registering voluntary organizations working on the ground and making sure that individuals providing skilled services have appropriate credentials for this work.

Focal Topic 2: *Interagency Collaboration and Coordination*

- Introduce new technology- based coordination tools to augment in-person meetings;
- Form personal relationships and develop mechanisms for coordination and cooperation pre-disaster;
- Promote the inclusion of local government, personnel and institutions in coordinating response;
- Improve UN clusters or find a better way of coordinating inter-agency response;
- Improve OCHA-website or develop a more effective platform for coordination;

Focal Topic3: *Communication*

- Collaborate with local and expatriate communities for disaster response and translation;
- Leverage technology and local communication systems;
- Prioritize the restoration of local communication infrastructure;
- Collaborate with media to improve accuracy and utility of reporting.

Focal Topic 4: *Accountability*

- Incentivize accountability to the host government and those individuals affected by the disaster;
- Improve performance measures to better account for impact of interventions;
- Improve mechanisms for feedback and complaints;
- Increase ability of beneficiaries to exercise free choice to the greatest extent possible in accessing services.

Focal Topic 1: Delivery of Services

Discussion from the first focal topic revolved around three primary themes: improving immediate response to disasters; planning interventions for long-term sustainability and lasting impact; and regulating the humanitarian sector to assure professional service-delivery by qualified humanitarian practitioners.

Findings

- *A robust disaster assessment team is essential to increasing the effectiveness of immediate response efforts.*

Participants agreed about the need for rapid disaster assessment conducted by a well-trained joint-assessment team. This joint-assessment taskforce would help identify and communicate immediate needs.

- *Crisis response strategies are not always compatible with long-term development goals.*

Short-term interventions can weaken the local public and private sectors, jeopardizing long-term development and the sustainability of relief efforts. The establishment of field hospitals and refugee camps limited the development of lasting infrastructure and perpetuated the need for humanitarian service delivery. Though consensus was not reached, the quality of some service delivery, especially in the health sector, exceeding the local service capacity was debated.

- *Regulation of the humanitarian sector through some form of credentialing for those carrying out critical functions is necessary to assure professional service-delivery by qualified practitioners.*

The outpouring of international aid and direct services following the earthquake in Haiti posed new challenges to the humanitarian sector. To ensure the quality of service delivery, there is a need to establish procedures for credentialing aid personnel who perform critical skilled services (although the standards to be applied must recognize the scarcity of personnel and the exigent conditions). NGOs should also establish practices for coordination among themselves, with external donors and other aid providers, and with the host government.

- *Anticipation of needs, formal assessment, and adaptability are all critical service delivery capabilities.*

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, agencies prepare their strategy for intervention by anticipating needs on-the-ground based on their prior experience and available information about disaster impacts. Once in the disaster-affected area, a formal assessment can dramatically improve situational awareness so that interventions can be adapted to the situation.

Strategies

- *Establish an inter-organizational joint-assessment taskforce with clearly delineated responsibilities.*

A joint-assessment taskforce comprised of agencies with diverse skill sets can improve immediate disaster response by gathering and disseminating information about the magnitude of a disaster, specific needs, and resources. Participants agreed that this assessment should be made widely available to the humanitarian community to improve collaboration and informed response.

- *Strive to involve host government, local NGOs, community leaders, and expatriates in disaster planning, service delivery, and assessment.*

Including local actors at all stages of disaster response and recovery can improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of interventions.

- *Restore government capacity as quickly as possible so that local authorities can lead priority setting and substantively guide relief operations.*

Agencies should prioritize the restoration of the host government's capacity in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. When compromised by a disaster, host governments should be provided with the basic communication, transportation, and infrastructure necessary to resume governance. This will enable the host government to lay the ground work for recovery and ensure that aid givers are accountable for their performance.

- *Transition promptly to community-based solutions and improve local infrastructure and capacity to respond.*

A timely transition to community-based solutions will improve the sustainability of relief efforts. More research may be needed on how best to accomplish this.

- *Establish a better system for registering voluntary organizations working on the ground and making sure that individuals providing skilled services have appropriate credentials for this work.*

Most participants agreed that in a typical disaster setting, the host government should have the authority to limit and regulate NGO operations within the disaster-affected region. However, no consensus was achieved about the best way of regulating the humanitarian sector when a government's capacity to respond has been degraded by a disaster. Some ideas suggested were to: establish professional standards for humanitarian aid agencies; create a system of pre-registering disaster response organizations; and appoint one or more agencies to register organizations at points of entry immediately following a disaster in cases where a government's capacity has been limited. Some participants acknowledged that regulation of the humanitarian sector could result in decreased ingenuity and limited access to populations in need.

Focal Topic 2: Interagency Collaboration and Coordination

Several innovations arose in collaboration and coordination during the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, including improved civilian-military collaboration and exemplary coordination of emergency food distribution. While much can be learned from what worked in these cases, several other aspects of coordination following the disaster created frustration and inefficiency.

Findings

- *Though too many actors failed to coordinate with each other and with the Haitian government, several improvements in collaboration occurred during Haiti earthquake relief including innovative use of technology and inter-agency relationship-building.*

Applied technology and innovative social media use improved the capacity of organizations to coordinate. While many organizations benefited from utilizing Facebook, Twitter, SMS technology, and crisis mapping, the application of these tools is not extensively used within the humanitarian sector.

Inter-agency collaboration was strong in many cases. Participants noted improved civilian-military relationships and an exemplary food distribution effort that included service delivery by eight organizations.

- *UN cluster system had many areas of weakness.*

While not all UN clusters failed to coordinate effectively, the UN cluster-system was generally regarded by participants as an area of weakness in coordination. The clusters tasked with organizing water & sanitation/hygiene (WASH), health, and shelter were particularly targeted as ineffective. Participants voiced concern that cluster leaders had stronger affiliations with their primary agencies than with the cluster system, that leaders suffered from inadequate training, and that they were limited by an inability to establish functional subgroups and tiers of participants in the cluster system.

- *Not all organizations used the same platform for information-sharing.*

Inconsistency in information-sharing impeded effective coordination, with some agencies primarily using the OCHA website for dissemination of information, and others using different online resources.

- *Level of coordination and collaboration varied from agency-to-agency.*

Not all agencies collaborated. Complaints were aired that United States government agencies did not always collaborate well with the UN, and that the UN did not always respect the sovereignty of the Haitian government. Participants disagreed about whether or not organizational territoriality, also referred to as “flag-planting”, was a significant problem in the Haiti disaster response.

Strategies

- *Introduce new technology-based coordination tools to augment in-person meetings.*

Because of damage to the transportation system, agencies experienced difficulty traveling to in-person meetings and suggested that alternative forms of coordination augment traditional in-person coordination. One participant proposed the creation of a shared matrix listing needs and gaps to be filled to help coordinate response efforts without requiring time-intensive meetings.

- *Form personal relationships and develop mechanisms for coordination and cooperation pre-disaster.*

Promote inter-agency training, relationship-building, and cooperation pre-disaster. Establish policies for coordination and collaboration preemptively.

- *Promote the inclusion of local government, personnel and institutions in coordinating response.*

Greater inclusion of local personnel can help ameliorate the problem of finding long-term staff and may improve the sustainability of interventions once humanitarian actors leave. However, participants noted that employment of locals (often at relatively high salaries) by international organizations tended to lure skilled personnel away from and weaken local institutions.

- *Improve UN clusters or find a better way of coordinating inter-agency response.*

No consensus was achieved about the best way to engage UN clusters. Some participants felt the cluster system was fundamentally flawed and a new system should be created. Others felt some clusters functioned better than others, particularly if French was used as the language of communication. Suggestions for improving the cluster system included hiring an independent assessment team to review the system, and pre-appointing and training cluster leaders before future disasters.

- *Improve OCHA-website or develop a more effective platform for coordination.*

No consensus was achieved about the best web platform for information sharing and coordination. The OCHA website is currently the most widely utilized resource for online coordination. While some felt the system failed in Haiti and alternatives should be proposed, others suggested that with pre-selected teams, more leadership training, and increased support, the OCHA website could be improved.

Focal Topic 3: Communication

Effective communication in Haiti was confronted by language barriers and the limited utilization of technology. Media played an important role in communicating about the disaster relief effort to the international community, but their reporting at times included misinformation.

Findings

- *Communication between agencies and with beneficiaries was limited by language.*
Few international disaster responders knew Creole and many did not use translators. Inter-agency communication also experienced language limitations.
- *Local communication resources and expatriate communities not fully utilized.*
Haitian expatriates might have helped translate for humanitarians and communicate messages to local populations. Utilization of local telecommunications technologies might have improved disaster response efforts.
- *Effort to communicate with Haitian government and citizens was not always sufficient.*
No standard system was utilized for communicating with the Haitian government. Some agencies voluntarily met with Haitian ministries and submitted goals and progress reports, but the practice was not widespread. Similarly, successful communication with Haitian beneficiaries varied from agency-to-agency.
- *Media coverage of disaster did not always align with relief priorities, thereby conveying to the outside world inappropriate messages about needs on the ground.*
International media coverage was utilized to inform foreign policy-makers; however, reporting that looked for dramatic or emotionally appealing stories did not always match on-the-ground realities. Furthermore, fear of “bad press,” concerns about media ethics, and the view that media can be a distraction in crisis settings compromised relations between the media and aid agencies.

Strategies

- *Collaborate with local and expatriate communities for disaster response and translation.*

Meeting human resource needs by hiring expatriates can help resolve many of the language barriers. Expatriates may also be a useful resource for volunteer or paid translation services.

- *Leverage technology and local communication systems.*

Investigate local telecommunications capacities and utilize existing infrastructure to improve communications with local population. Ushahidi and Digicel partook in an innovative partnership for the application of private telecommunications technologies to improve communication with Haiti earthquake victims.

- *Prioritize the restoration of local communication infrastructure.*

Local communication infrastructure is necessary for the timely restoration of private and public sector capacities.

- *Collaborate with media to improve accuracy and utility of reporting.*

Most participants agreed that the best strategy for engaging with media is transparency and openness. Some suggested that inaccuracies and failure to portray “the full story” resulted in poorly informed policy decisions by foreign diplomats. Providing a centralized press resource with accurate information and messaging might improve this problem. While participants agreed that the media plays an important role in communicating about disasters to the international public, concerns were expressed about some media personnel invading the privacy of disaster victims. The suggestion was made to train foreign news correspondents in disaster ethics.

Focal Topic 4: Accountability

Discussion for the final focal topic revolved around two guiding questions: To whom are humanitarian actors accountable? What are the incentives for accountability? Participants agreed that various levels of accountability exist, with humanitarian responders accountable to the populations served, the host government, donors, their professions, and their agencies. However, no consensus was achieved for how to best balance the often competing priorities of different constituencies.

Findings

- *Differing goals from multiple constituencies often results in inefficient disaster response.*

While ideally, humanitarian agencies have the best interest of beneficiaries in mind, in practice, balancing multiple priorities including donor interests and agency goals may at times impede efficient service delivery.

- *Number of services provided by humanitarian agencies is often prioritized over the effectiveness of interventions.*

Donors are often driven by the quantity of actions taken, rather than the impact of programming. Choosing impact indicators and then measuring the long-term impact of interventions is in the best interest of beneficiaries.

- *Consideration of accountability to beneficiaries should be combined with analysis of sustainability of interventions.*

One of the common criticisms of the Haiti disaster response is that the country is worse off now than it was before the influx of foreign assistance. Critics cite the lack of new infrastructure and local capacity-building as evidence of poor accountability to beneficiaries. Participants suggested accountability measures include sustainability of interventions.

- *Disaster realities and the mission/commitments of responding organizations often compromised the host government's ability to govern.*

The sovereignty of a host nation is often challenged by its decreased capacity to govern immediately following crises. In other cases, governments' sovereignty may be challenged by their unwillingness to allow humanitarian agencies access to disaster victims.

Strategies

- *Incentivize accountability to the host government and those individuals affected by the disaster.*

Accountability can either be mandated through the regulation of a host government or incentivized. Participants discussed the possibility of an incentivized system wherein humanitarian agencies receive benefits for complying with set standards.

- *Improve performance measures to better account for impact of interventions.*

Participants agreed that the impact of interventions should be prioritized over the number of activities conducted, but that this measurement can be difficult to accomplish. In-depth investigations of impact are often costly, requiring significant time and resources from humanitarian agencies. Furthermore, the international donor community must be educated about the importance of impact-driven interventions rather than activities-based interventions in order to improve accountability to beneficiaries. Over time, comparative studies of disaster relief measures would improve strategic planning for humanitarian assistance.

- *Improve mechanisms for feedback and complaints.*

Agencies should strive to consistently solicit feedback from beneficiaries and the host government. To improve the feedback process, a common mechanism for gathering feedback and complaints might be created so that local populations may easily voice concerns.

- *Increase ability of beneficiaries to exercise free choice to the greatest extent possible in accessing services.*

To increase the efficiency of aid, participants discussed the merits of moving toward a free-market system where beneficiaries receive money directly and are empowered to make their own decisions about how to spend it. This approach might improve the local economy and result in greater efficiency in humanitarian response.

Organizations Represented

- 82nd Airborne Division, US Army
- American Refugee Committee
- Brigham and Women's Hospital
- Catholic Relief Services
- Cambridge Health Alliance
- Centers for Disease Control
- Clinton Foundation
- Digicel
- GOAL
- Haitian American Nurses Association
- The Program on Crisis Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School
- Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
- Hiliary Critchley Consulting, LLC
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
- International Medical Corps
- International Rescue Committee
- Israel Defense Forces Medical Corps
- MGH Center for Global Health
- Massachusetts General Hospital
- Ministry of Health of Haiti
- Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery
- Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense - Health Affairs
- Oxfam America
- Oxfam Great Britain
- Partners in Health
- Project HOPE
- Project Medishare for Haiti
- Samaritan's Purse
- Save the Children
- UNICEF
- United States Southern Command
- US Air Force
- US Department of Health and Human Services
- US Navy
- USAID
- World Vision Haiti
- UTHHealth

ROUNDTABLE CO-ORGANIZERS

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