Chapter 10

Knowledge-Based Issues for Aid Agencies in Crisis Scenarios: Evolving from Impediments to Trust

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ABSTRACT

As part of its expanding role, particularly as an agent of peace building, the United Nations (UN) actively participates in the implementation of measures to prevent and manage crisis/disaster situations. The purpose of such an approach is to empower the victims, protect the environment, rebuild communities, and create employment. However, real world crisis management situations are complex given the multiple interrelated interests, actors, relations, and objectives. Recent studies in healthcare contexts, which also have dynamic and complex operations, have shown the merit and benefits of employing various tools and techniques from the domain of knowledge management (KM). Hence, this paper investigates three distinct natural crisis situations (the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the 2004 Boxing Day Asian Tsunami, and the 2001 Gujarat Earthquake) with which the United Nations and international aid agencies have been and are currently involved, to identify recurring issues which continue to provide knowledge-based

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization that was founded in 1945 to maintain global peace and security. Since its inception, the UN has expanded its role. These additional roles relate to developing friendly relations, promoting social progress, elevation to higher standards of living and better living standards, and upholding human rights (United Nations, 2010). In 1994 the UN introduced the concept of human security as part of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report (UNDP, 1994). The report was published in an effort to commend the virtues of sustainable human development which not only generates economic growth, but also promotes equal distribution of benefits to those worst affected by the crisis (UNDP, 1994). The purpose of such an approach is to empower the victims, protect the environment, rebuild communities, and create employment (UNDP, 1994). This concept was born out of a need to react to the changing elements of crisis situations and includes new security threats, international failures, civilian impact, a lack of preventative measures, globalization, and international advocacy (Comprehensive Crisis Management, 2008).

In recent years, and in accordance with human security, the UN has directed its focus away from peacekeeping and more towards peace building (Benner et al., 2007). With respect to this, the UN has looked to implement preventative measures in order to avoid crises. Crisis management can be multi-faceted and involves the prevention of crises, the development of preparedness measures, the course of relief and recovery, and the identification of a redevelopment process in the crisis aftermath.

This paper will discuss the efficacy of contemporary KM for crisis scenarios, the need for increased (associated) information sharing, greater teamwork and reduced duplication of effort. Finally, the paper lists a number of impediments that need to be broken down before a knowledge-based solution can be developed.

THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF CRISES

The crisis management cycle is best captured by a schematic which shows the severity of the each incidence against a given timeline, plotting all contributing factors in a pre and post-crisis situation (see Figure 1). The curve also identifies when weak signals are felt and any escalation into early warning signs thereafter; culminating in full-blown crisis which needs management to contain and/or minimize resultant impacts on society. Other work (Jennex & Raman, 2009) has described crises as a series of four phases: situational analysis (SA), initial response (IR), crisis response (ER), and recovery response (RR); and five decision/hand off points: the initiating event (IE), the control event (CE), the restoration event (RE), the normalizing event (NE), and a terminating event (TE).

CHALLENGE

When society discovers a priori signals that can lead to crisis, then the governing authority reacts through preventive diplomacy to return order to the system if the crisis is manmade. If the crisis is natural, then society instigates preventive strategies, i.e., building earthquake proof buildings, tsunami resistant coastlines, etc. These preventive steps may minimize loss of life and damage to