



## STEPPING UP THE RESPONSE TO HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Lessons Learned from enhancing the emergency response capacity in DRC

The need to respond faster and increasingly more coordinated in humanitarian crisis has become ever more prevalent in the past decade. The Humanitarian Reform Process (the Transformative Agenda) has reinforced emergency response capacity at the global level and motivated NGOs to join the cause. The DRC has implemented a Corporate Emergency modality, which has been initiated three times since 2014, aiming at a more effective and quicker response. In order to learn from its newly established emergency modality, each of the so called Corporate Emergencies has been accompanied by a Real Time Review in order to learn 'in real time' what works and what needs improvement. This Evaluation and Learning Brief compares the findings from the three Real Time Reviews and comments on the usefulness of the review process to the organisation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian landscape has changed in recent years. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has committed itself to strengthen leadership, coordination and accountability in major sudden-onset humanitarian emergencies by activating Level 3 (L3) emergencies, triggering a certain protocol of faster coordination, leadership, operational peer reviews and rapid assessments. DRC is committed to respond to and align with these international changes in order to act more effectively in crisis; "as a result of a deliberate strategic decision to expand and to be able to assist more and advocate better; the latter based on DRC's knowledge of the situation on the ground", (stated in an internal note on the increased outreach of the organisation, April 2014). The Corporate Emergency modality in DRC emanated from these wider international developments, with the Central African Republic (CAR) being the first declared (December 2013), followed by South Sudan (May 2014) and Iraq (October 2014) and intends to ensure that DRC

technical expertise and response mechanisms are being activated so that DRC's institutional capacity is utilized to its full extent.

A Real Time Review has been conducted for each of the Corporate Emergencies. The Reviews have aimed at highlighting key challenges and inform relevant timely adjustments to the programming. In addition lessons identified have been used to further improve systems and procedures of Corporate Emergencies and organizational learning inside DRC.

Real-time evaluations, or reviews, have become an integral part of evaluation practice among humanitarian organizations, their breakthrough largely attributed to the UNHCR's evaluation and policy analysis work back in 1992. Since then the concept has evolved considerably, the term „real-time evaluation“ being expanded to „real time reviews“ as in the DRC or „Real-Time Operational Reviews“ as in the Inter-Agency Standing Committees practice.

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## 2. FINDINGS FROM THE THREE REAL TIME REVIEWS: COMMON DENOMINATORS

Although the emergencies in CAR, Iraq and South Sudan differed in many aspects regarding the present societal context, the historical circumstances and the differences in timing of the DRC Corporate Emergency, a number of findings have shown strong similarities across all three reviews and are thus worth highlighting:

**Long term trusted presence on the ground contributes to emergency access:** DRC's long lasting commitment and presence via country programs helped significantly in terms of legitimacy, respect and trustworthiness; qualities many other emergency responders do not have at their disposal. All three Real Time Reviews highlighted that DRC is an agency that is trusted by its peers and beneficiary communities and is showing flexibility to adapt and adjust to needs on the ground, in particular in an emergency setting. This has led to gap filling opportunities for DRC, for example in Southern Iraq, where other agencies were not available or were not granted access. In all three Real Time Reviews DRC was also greatly respected for its willingness to contribute to the global humanitarian coordination, for instance in South Sudan covering for UN personnel when they were absent.

**Accelerated growth in all three responses:** The analysis of running budgets, which indicate donor disbursements to DRC operations and the actual spending figures, prove that the declaration of a Corporate Emergency clearly enabled accelerated growth of all three responses, although with varying speed.

**Rapid growth, however, also led to overstretch:** All three Corporate Emergencies demonstrated a clear understanding that the emergency responses would not have been possible in this magnitude without the support of the HQ Emergency Unit. All three Real Time Reviews have, however, highlighted gaps in basic management structures in country – most notably in logistics but also inefficiencies in procurement and financial management - due to disproportionate growth in a very short amount of time. The management systems of a standard country program were not able to adapt to such a quick emergency expansion which led to considerable overstretch in all three cases. This is an experience many other international humanitarian NGOs share. One of the main recommendations that came out of all three Real Time Reviews was to improve support functions, for example by undertaking better analysis of systems, capacities and procedures before the Corporate Emergency protocol kicks in or developing „emergency intervention concepts“ at an early stage for corporate

emergencies to help guide management decisions and get DRC staff in HQ and in the Country Office on the same page.

**Human resources are an ongoing field of improvement:** One of the most noted added values of the HQ Emergency Unit was staffing for the three emergencies. This, however, could not solve overarching systemic challenges regarding human resource management in (not only corporate) emergencies. DRC staff, both local and international, shows above average commitment and the willingness to work very long hours in times of crisis. All Real Time Reviews have highlighted a relatively high staff turnover and short contract lengths, which in some cases affected quality of delivery. Knowledge of accountability frameworks and special DRC procedure in particular amongst field based staff was rather limited. Structured induction processes were almost always lacking.

**Increased focus on the emergency:** The Corporate Emergency modality helped to increase focus and attention toward the respective emergency at HQ level. It created a sense of urgency and helped communication to wider audiences in Denmark and internationally.

**Procedures and protocols need to be further clarified:** All Real Time Reviews have surfaced the need to further specify and agree on the exact protocol of a Corporate Emergency, the clarification of decision making processes and fleshing out exact roles and responsibilities. This also includes development of benchmarks with specific targets and better clarification as to what is expected during a response. Starting after the first Real Time Review this has been taken into account, and a process has been initiated by the DRC Division of Emergency Safety and Supply which is aiming at providing greater clarification of roles and responsibilities in that regard.

**Creating a common understanding on protocol and roles appeared to be one of the most noticeable challenges:** A consistent pattern have been communication difficulties at all levels, between staff and leadership in countries, between country leadership and HQ and between different units in HQ itself. Most stakeholders have had very different and insufficient understandings of the newly introduced Corporate Emergency modality and the responsibilities that come with it, due to perceived unclear roles and protocols on the one hand, but different interpretation on how an emergency actually has to be managed on the other hand. The global mandate is clearly there, but – so it is perceived - not effectively communicated. The added value is clearer to senior management with more experience in the organization and knowledge about the



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history of the Emergency Unit. The focus on improving these communication processes is a pattern not only in all Real Time Reviews but also in all management responses. Workshops and meetings, in relation to the Real Time Review processes, have highlighted the need for an increasingly systematic and facilitated clarification process, which can build up confidence and internal solidarity when it comes to the added value of the Corporate Emergency modality; supporting a common narrative of „one DRC“ instead of „different units and country programs“ with different agendas.

**Mixed results of the interaction between emergency response and regular country program:**

In terms of synergies between regular and emergency program, the current organisational setup requires a review of knowledge and information management systems, in particular with a view to ensuring internal coordination and protocol. The „diplomatic approach“, as mentioned in the CAR Real Time Review Report, of emergency staff being sent into the countries has helped ease tension between country and HQ leadership. As in other humanitarian organizations applying the L3 protocol, debates on the readiness of the particular program arose and discrepancies between „emergency“ and „regular“ country program have surfaced. In some cases country directors did not immediately buy into the changing reporting line. However, in most cases interaction between emergency response and country program worked relatively well, sometimes with rather limited interaction between the two.

**Good quality of emergency distribution channels:**

Management of emergency distribution is perceived as superior by partners, in the case of South Sudan explicitly with good protection mainstreaming which has been highlighted as a good practice that could be replicated to other countries.

**Expandable availability and quality of data and professional M&E systems:**

M&E systems appear to be a weaker link and do not show the quality and robustness emergency programming would need in order to respond to its fullest capacity.

**3. BROADER IMPLICATIONS: THE REAL TIME REVIEW METHOD AS A TOOL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE?**

Many of the patterns that have emerged in the three Real Time Reviews are not unknown to other NGOs and to other L3 settings. What has been new in DRC is the institutionalisation of a committed learning and improvement process by – amongst other things - setting up a management response, in which the recommendations and their follow up is being surveyed and agreement is reached on how to move forward. However, questions remain to be answered on how the regular use of Real Time Reviews adds value to DRC and its beneficiaries.

- **Having identified the majority of issues regarding the roll-out of a Corporate Emergency: Are we actually learning?** Owing to its participatory and light methodology, the chosen Real Time Review approach made it possible to incorporate interpretations and recommendations by both field staff and HQ. In all three cases it brought together relevant stakeholders to address results and recommendations. This alone can be argued to add value. Over the past few months there has been a heightened awareness towards the issues of communication problems and a number of ideas and answers have been discussed to address them across the whole organization. However, the current Corporate Emergency response in Ukraine, April 2015, will provide more answers to the question of whether or not the lessons identified in the reviews helped to improve the management of emergency responses in DRC in particular in its very early phase.
- **Is the Real Time Review for quick changes or longer-term organizational learning or both?** In particular the Real Time Reviews in Iraq and South Sudan have made it clear that the clarification of the intended use of this feedback tool needs to further improve. Is it used to make quick changes to programming on the ground (in which case it would need a collaborative mandate between the head of Division of Emergency Safety and Supply and Country Director from the start), or is it rather used as a feedback tool, which highlights issues that have to be addressed from a broader organizational change perspective and therefore needs a longer term management response? Both perspectives seem valid and need to be addressed in regards to the chosen methodology, the management of expectation to the result of the review, and in the process of drafting the management response. A two stage approach for learning and evaluation seems appropriate for DRC, as suggested in the South Sudan Real Time Review Report:

A quick and light feedback loop like the Real Time Review during an on-going response followed up with a more conventional, external evaluation once the programme has stabilized.

- **Being modest and transparent in its use:** In order to improve the practical benefit of the Real Time Reviews, the DRC and other actors have to be modest and selective in its use. It should be made very clear that its use promotes endogenous learning rather than solving questions of control. To make this possible it is advisable not to publish the results externally but rather make use of them to the fullest extent internally. A reduction of guiding questions is also advisable. A light Real Time Review cannot fulfil the usual requirements towards a methodologically sound external evaluation and should not try to do so.
- **The country office must have a say in timing, use and scope:** Real Time Reviews should be triggered by demand of the country office as well, although it has been wise to incorporate them in the „CE package“ from the beginning. If Real Time Reviews are to utilise their full potential for internal learning and quick re-programming, the exercise – though not completely optional - has to be owned by the Country Director and his or her team.
- **Building in-house M&E capacity:** The idea of having DRC staff enriching an external expert led Real Time Reviews has proven an interesting concept for building evaluation and learning capacity inside DRC. DRC is now creating a pool of M&E interested staff, which is able and willing to accompany RTRs in the future, infusing the process with even more DRC knowledge and insight.

#### FURTHER READING

*Comprehensive background and all protocols of the IASC Transformative Agenda:* [www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc)

Cosgrave John, Ramalingam, Ben and Beck, Tony, *Real time evaluations of humanitarian action*, ALNAP Guide, March 2009.

Krüger, Susanna; Sagmeister, Elias, *Real-Time Evaluation of Humanitarian Assistance Revisited: Lessons Learned and Way forward*, in: *Journal of Multi Disciplinary Evaluation*, Volume 10, Issue 23, 2014.

#### CREDITS

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