

Earthquakes

Essential lessons for humanitarian responders

In fragile or developing states, large earthquakes can turn back the development clock by years or even decades. It is impossible to eradicate earthquakes, but we can prepare and learn from past experiences to strengthen the humanitarian response and to 'build back better'.

These essential lessons draw from previous post-earthquake humanitarian responses, covering: debris management, shelter, health, livelihoods and economic recovery, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education, food security, nutrition and protection.

Lessons learnt

Across the project cycle

Lessons 1 to 4 are applicable across the entire earthquake response project cycle and should be the pillars upon which the humanitarian community builds post-earthquake responses.

Lesson 1: Engage broadly and rapidly with local and national actors – even the most affected communities and authorities have some capacity after an earthquake

It is a common misconception that after an earthquake, local communities and governments become helpless. On the contrary, even the worst-affected actors still retain some level of capacity. Communities can overcome the physical destruction of infrastructure by relying on their networks, skills, leadership and ability to self-organise.

There is a need to work more closely with local governments. National governments are responsible for the sustainability of basic services after the recovery phase, so bypassing governments can lead to long-term capacity and accountability issues (Ansari, 2010b; Hartberg et al., 2011).

Lesson 2: Acknowledge and do not undermine the work of private sector entities to ensure business continuity following an earthquake

Private sector actors, especially in urban environments, will often be engaged in humanitarian responses, working to ensure business continuity of various services such as water, sanitation, telecoms, food markets, health, etc. (Groupe URD, 2011: 2).

It is essential the humanitarian community becomes more open to working with the private sector and develops more creative approaches for doing so (IASC, 2010; Bhattacharjee and Lossio, 2011).

Lesson 3: Do not let infrastructure and access challenges get in the way of communication, especially with isolated communities

Earthquakes can disrupt communications infrastructure, limit physical access to affected communities and make it more complicated to deliver a transparent response.

The humanitarian community must adapt communications to the channels being used and the population groups being targeted, ensure information is not contradictory – which requires appropriate coordination mechanisms to be put in place (Sanderson and Ramalingam, 2015: 17) – and use two-way communication to ensure affected populations are not only aware of the humanitarian assistance available but can provide feedback and help with monitoring.

Lesson 4: Ensure cross-cutting issues such as gender, security and the environment are incorporated at all stages of the response

Implementers do not always prioritise cross-cutting issues. The environment is particularly relevant when looking at earthquake responses, since this type of natural disaster has serious secondary impacts on the environment. Earthquakes should be used as an opportunity to 'build back greener'.

Ensuring appropriate safety and security measures is paramount for any post-earthquake response. It is important these elements are based on consultations with affected populations and civil society organisations (Ansari, 2010b: 1).

The humanitarian community has much more to do to integrate gender in post-earthquake programming.

Assessment and analysis

The quality of a humanitarian response is partly determined by how well the context, needs and capacities of those affected are assessed and understood.

Lesson 5: Conduct thorough assessments which recognise and identify the distinct ways earthquakes affect different populations

Determining which populations are most affected and less able to cope after a disaster is always a difficult task. Determining which populations are 'directly' or 'most' affected by an earthquake is almost impossible. In some cases, almost everyone in the country may have been affected in one way or another.

International responders should always conduct assessments so they understand the distinct impacts of the earthquake on different groups of people. They need to understand the respective strengths and vulnerabilities of groups that may have special needs after a disaster.

Lesson 6: Follow established good practice for needs assessments, recognising the specific challenges of doing so in urban areas

Growing urban populations over recent decades make it more likely for disasters to affect cities (Sanderson et al., 2012: 3). This generates various challenges, as the humanitarian community is more experienced with conducting needs assessments in rural settings (Grünewald et al., 2011: 5; Sanderson et al., 2012: 4).

Vulnerable populations can easily be overlooked in urban settings. This is particularly problematic in post-earthquake situations, where humanitarian assistance needs to be delivered to large population segments with minimal delays (Sanderson et al., 2012).

Lesson 7: Conduct assessments in ways that avoid exacerbating tensions between host communities and internally displaced persons

Providing assistance to people affected by an earthquake – who may be displaced and living in camps or other serviced areas – runs the risk of creating tensions with neighbouring populations who may be classed as ‘non-affected’ but may struggle to meet their basic needs. Such a situation can also create perceptions that aid is being delivered in an unjust manner, especially considering that communities often bear additional costs when hosting displaced populations.

Oxfam advises targeting communities living in areas that surround camps (Young and Henderson, 2010: 13).

Strategic planning

Strategic planning builds on the assessment of humanitarian needs, which provides ‘the evidence base and analysis of the magnitude of the crisis and identifies the most pressing humanitarian needs’ (Humanitarian Platform, 2018).

Lesson 8: Locate spaces to store debris and, if appropriate, use short-term conditional assistance to clear it

Earthquakes cause a significant amount of debris and rubble when they destroy buildings and other infrastructure (Kilby and Williamson, 2011; Jackson, 2015). This is particularly relevant in urban settings. One of the most urgent actions is to clear the debris to make critical roads and rescue sites accessible (Mughal et al., 2015). This requires identifying available spaces to temporarily house rubble or be used to build temporary shelters.

Lesson 9: Anticipate issues related to lack of documentation and complex land tenure

Earthquake-affected populations often lose, or no longer have access to, their identity documents, which are often necessary to access government or humanitarian assistance to begin rebuilding their lives. Some populations are more vulnerable to having lost their documents. Another issue humanitarian actors should anticipate after an earthquake is that of land tenure.

Resource mobilisation

One of the challenges faced by humanitarian practitioners involved in post-earthquake response is how to quickly make resources available.

Lesson 10: Mobilise sufficient and appropriate surge capacities

Not all population groups are affected by a disaster in the same way. But one of the specificities of earthquakes is they often hit all types of population groups. NGO country offices are likely to have diminished capacity, as their teams may have been directly or indirectly affected.

International responders must mobilise sufficient and appropriate surge capacities. As well as being able to be deployed at very short notice, surge teams should have regional/country knowledge, technical knowledge and experience with large-scale emergencies.

Implementation

Implementation builds on the needs assessment, strategic planning and available resources. It is the phase when the response really takes shape. The needs of affected populations evolve quickly in post-earthquake contexts, so the implemented project must be adaptive enough.

Lesson 11: Account for quickly evolving health needs in post-earthquake contexts. Be aware that epidemics can happen

Crisis-affected people are more exposed to disease (Sanderson and Ramalingam, 2015: 23). Earthquakes can lead to mass displacement and inadequate access to drinking water, which make people vulnerable to communicable diseases such as cholera, meningitis and measles, which can reach critical levels (ACAPS, 2015: 1; Hall et al., 2017: 41). The health sector needs to be able to adapt to the affected population’s changing needs.

Addressing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs is also particularly important in urban settings, but can be overlooked by the international community.

Lesson 12: Prioritise the repair of existing structures, support owner-driven reconstruction, preserve architectural heritage and use relocation and resettlement only as a last resort

Relocation of communities after an earthquake is sometimes the only possible measure to mitigate against future disasters. But relocated households often end up moving back to high-risk areas to access their vital social networks and economic opportunities (Sanderson et al., 2012: 23).

Relocations should be a last resort. The humanitarian community should prioritise repairs to existing structures to ensure earthquake-affected populations can move back into their homes and start rebuilding their livelihoods (Rees-Gildea and Moles, 2012). It should strive to find the right balance between ‘building back better’ and preserving architectural heritage, the need to withstand further shocks and the preservation of cultural heritage.

It is crucial the humanitarian community ensures sufficient opportunities for restoring livelihoods in the relocation place.

Lesson 13: Be cautious with setting up transitional shelters, which may hinder longer-term reconstruction

After the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, the use of transitional shelters was controversial because there were fears these shelters would become permanent, which complicated longer-term reconstruction plans. Despite evidence supporting these critiques, it must be acknowledged transitional shelters have helped meet the needs of earthquake-affected populations.

Donors should amend their strategies in light of criticism they are more willing to fund transitional shelters that can be constructed and operational within a year than to provide funding for 'slow and incremental' initiatives (Sanderson, 2014: 147).

Lesson 14: Address long-term as well as immediate education needs

The humanitarian community is well aware of the immediate risks of having children out of school for an extended period after an earthquake (child labour, exploitation, etc.).

International responders often succeeded in providing the necessary material (tents, furniture and supplies) to ensure schools reopened as quickly as possible (Deters, 2011; Save the Children, 2015; Withers and Dahal, 2015: 15).

Monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning

Humanitarian agencies are under pressure to become operational quickly and address the most pressing needs among affected communities. It is easy for M&E and reporting to receive less focus.

Lesson 15: Recognise the value of MEAL and push through obstacles

Using flexible and creative ways to collect data can help good MEAL programming. Although humanitarians conducting MEAL in post-earthquake contexts face similar challenges as those responding to other types of disaster, some organisations have found creative ways to handle data collection in post-earthquake contexts.

Coordination

As affected communities' needs are almost always greater than the available resources, it is imperative humanitarian actors maximise their assistance and prevent duplication.

Lesson 16: Put time and effort into coordination to avoid negative impacts on the response

There are several reasons why it is particularly difficult to establish coordination mechanisms in post-earthquake contexts. First, as mentioned in Lesson 5: Conduct thorough assessments which recognise and identify the distinct ways earthquakes affect different populations and Lesson 10: Mobilise sufficient and appropriate surge capacities, the context complicates logistics as it is likely that humanitarian organisations and governments themselves will have been affected by the earthquake (IASC, 2010: 17).

Also, in the immediate aftermath there may be hundreds of humanitarian organisations pouring into the country, many of them not well-informed of their role (ACAPS, 2015: 1).

This essential briefing is a summary of the ALNAP Lessons Paper: Responding to Earthquakes published in February 2019. Download the full report here: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/alnap-lessons-paper-responding-to-earthquakes>

For 20 years, ALNAP has been sharing lessons for different types of response. For our other lessons papers please visit: www.alnap.org/our-topics/lessons-for-response

For more information or expert comment please contact ALNAP's Communications Team: alnapmedia@alnap.org

ALNAP is a global network of humanitarian organisations, including UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, NGOs, donors, academics and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve the response to humanitarian crises.

www.alnap.org