

## Workshop: Institutional flexibility in situations of rapidly changing vulnerabilities

A rapidly changing environment demands organisational flexibility both in the field offices and in the headquarters to fully meet the requirements of a complex situation.

- Organisations need to have systems that enable them to quickly recruit qualified staff either from internal or external sources.
- Quick decisions on matters related to allocation of resources, procurement, new programming, reporting requirements, and coordination mechanisms are paramount.
- Speed without sacrificing accountability needs to be designed into the system. Rigid adherence to strict systems and procedures, rules and regulation is inimical to quick response to compounding crises.

### Issues and challenges posed during the workshop on the topic included:

There are often difficulties in **recruiting qualified staff**, who are competent to deal with the requirements of the crisis. Rapid deployment to the field is often delayed. Applicants may have a relevant academic background, but no solid field experience to deal with the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional aspects of the work. Or they may have ground experience but not have the managerial expertise to be able to analyse and deal with complex changing contexts.

In addition, organisations are constrained by their own **internal processes** in terms of developing appropriate terms of reference, project design, procurement, staff orientation, delegation of power and authority, re-allocation of funding and immediate fund-raising for new projects.

Not many organisations' **standard operating procedures (SOPS)** allow flexibility. There are cases on the one hand that headquarters would say that the field staff are in a position to decide what is best in a given situation, the field staff on the other hand would say that they could not act without the go-ahead from headquarters. **Therefore there is a need for a clear-cut understanding about the decision-making roles and powers of field managers.**

Staff need to be properly oriented regarding their **freedom to decide and manoeuvre** when confronted with problems in the field. This should be written into their job descriptions. Field managers need to be empowered through a clear delegated power and authority commensurate with the huge responsibility assigned to them.

They also need **experience and understanding of community-based approaches**, recognizing that the affected communities are the first responders before, during and after crises. Their mobilization and participation in essential elements of response activities can enhance the capacities of both the community and the institution's work.

**Raising awareness of the affected population** about the nature of the hazards that are likely to affect them, their vulnerabilities to them and their own capacities to deal with them is essential in helping the communities to identify measures that will address the risks.

**Advocacy to donors and partners** is a prerequisite for them to understand the complexity of the situation so that they themselves can be flexible in dealing with the institutions which are actually operating at the field level. Communication and field updates can help in raising awareness of the compounding crises. The more they are aware, the more they will be open in re-orienting their programmes.

In exercising flexibility, donors may need to:

- forego the logical framework, which may not include critical emerging factors.

- loosen some reporting requirements in terms of quality, length and frequency, during the height of the field operation. Re-designing forms and formats may also be necessary to facilitate a speedy narrative and financial reporting.
- Allow for possible delays in attaining pre-defined and agreed objectives or even accept that alterations in objectives are necessary. Agreement to redesigning of the programme due to the new or emerging compounding crises may be the best option.

Agencies need to factor in the possibility of compounding crises in the design of some of their humanitarian operation, prior to securing funding support. In this case, **flexibility is built-in in the design itself.**