Disaster Response: Finding Order in Turmoil

When disaster strikes, governments are faced with difficult, urgent decisions - but preparedness can make a difference.

After a sudden disaster, the first 72 hours of search and rescue operations are critical to finding survivors and delivering life-saving aid. But days after the earthquake that struck on 8 September, the Moroccan government was still clearing roads in the high Atlas Mountains - the epicentre of the 6.8-magnitude earthquake. Nearly 400,000 people were affected by the earthquake and more than 2,900 people died. After the “golden period” of 72 hours, relief efforts gradually switched to providing shelter, water, food and medical help. The affected region hosts some economically poorer communities in Morocco and it will take years to rebuild the ruined houses and infrastructure.

Tough, urgent decisions to be made

When a disaster strikes, critical decisions need to be made urgently in spite of the lack of information and the highly stressful situation. Due to the many challenges in relief efforts, decision-makers are confronted with trade-
offs that may not be apparent to observers such as the media and general public. Decisions made at this stage, while focused on providing optimal response, may also be influenced by other factors at the interface of the humanitarian space and geopolitics.

A key decision for governments following a disaster is whether to accept help from other countries. To make an informed decision, the government needs to know the type and amount of relief needed in the disaster-hit area. Some disasters require mainly medical supplies and personnel, while others may need highly specialised search and rescue teams with dogs and machinery to clear the rubble. Next, the government must assess how much of those needs can be met by local or national resources.

It was two days after the earthquake that the Moroccan government, having performed a needs assessment, opted to accept bilateral assistance from four governments. The decision to eschew broader international assistance at the initial critical stage led to criticism from the media. The immediate relief operations mainly relied on the army, local NGOs and civil society solidarity movements.

In contrast, after the Turkey-Syria earthquakes, Turkey immediately invited international search and rescue teams to render help. As a result, nearly 3,000 rescuers from 66 different countries arrived in Turkey the next day. This number grew to more than 7,000 rescuers four days after the disaster. The expansive impact area of the earthquakes, with almost 6 million people located in the disaster area, left little question as to whether national resources were enough.

However, the decision to accept international aid is not always straightforward. Put simply, having more resources does not necessarily translate to a better response. The government (or coordinating body) must decide how best to deliver help to the disaster area and people in need. Naturally, accepting more international help increases not only the pool of resources but also potentially the number and diversity of organisations involved. This can complicate coordination. The Turkey government had tried to centralise the coordination of incoming humanitarian organisations, which given the scale of the disaster, led to congestion in logistics hubs and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Big disasters generate substantial media attention and can lead to overwhelming response in the initial stage. If not managed properly, thousands of organisations will attempt to enter the
disaster zone, making coordination of the response impossible.

**Complicating factors**

Even after the decision to accept international help and deploy local networks, many factors can further complicate humanitarian response. In Turkey, the earthquake hit close to the city of Gaziantep with more than 2 million inhabitants. Rescue teams who arrived at the city had to navigate the area on foot based on calls of the locals. In Morocco, roads leading to the small, isolated earthquake-hit villages up in the mountains were blocked by debris. This means that both local and incoming international relief teams without the machinery and resources to remove the debris could only deliver aid after the army had cleared the way to the affected area.

In the meantime, stories of villages not receiving aid days after the disaster soon reached the media. Was it a mistake to reject more help? The Moroccan government's decision to accept limited aid allowed it more control, since most of the countries that they accepted help from speak Arabic, are close to the Moroccan army or routinely work with it. The decision might have averted congestion and improved the relief effort or could mean a lost opportunity to have highly specialised search and rescue teams contribute to the relief efforts. Tough decisions must be taken quickly in the moments after a disaster, but the implications remain unclear. Only time will tell.

**Preparedness and harnessing local networks**

Humanitarian organisations may be ready to do what they do best: save lives and help people in need. But they can only do so after the governments have decided on accepting help, coordinated access for these organisations and rescue teams, and cleared obstacles that hinder access. But that does not mean that disaster-prone regions cannot prepare for disasters.

Governments and humanitarian organisations could perform risk assessment and project the impact of potential future disasters to better predict relief needs should disaster strike. Documenting the available resources in the country and estimating the potential damage to infrastructure and health facilities are ways to allow them to make more informed decisions quickly at the onset of disaster. However, this ideal scenario rarely happens in reality and instead, decisions are often postponed until needs assessments can be done, which requires access to the disaster area. Moreover, disaster conditions tend to be so dynamic that true needs are discovered as one goes
Another important factor in the immediate relief operation is the role of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the disaster area and local ground-up movements that emerge because of the disaster. Locals are always the first to respond since they are the closest to the area, whereas international help tends to reach the area only after invitation, dispatch and transport. Moreover, large international organisations may not always connect well with local networks for a variety of reasons, including cultural and language differences. Therefore, a well-connected and readily available network of locals can play a substantial role given the urgency of relief efforts.

Governments often make difficult decisions that have a significant impact on the outcomes of relief operations under high pressure and with little information. It’s not easy, but it doesn’t mean they cannot prepare for disasters. This is one of the research interests of the INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group, which contributes to enhancing our understanding of the complex dynamics in humanitarian relief. Countries would do well to invest in preparedness and local networks that can save lives in the crucial first 72 hours.

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