Mainstreaming disaster mitigation: challenges to organisational learning in NGOs

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Introduction, research aims, and method

Our paper looks at the implications for organisational learning of a recent study of the nature and extent of NGO activity to protect people in the South against so-called 'natural' disasters.[1] In particular, we discuss whether the mechanisms by which NGOs normally learn support the promotion of disaster mitigation and preparedness (DMP) within them. We believe our findings will be useful to those seeking to push other new or marginal issues and approaches into the mainstream of development work.

There are two main reasons why NGOs should be extensively involved in DMP. First, disasters triggered by natural hazards (such as cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, and floods) are a major threat to sustainable development. Between 1971 and 1995 they caused each year, on average, over 128,000 deaths and affected 136 million people, and 99 per cent of those affected lived in the South. Between 1991 and 1995 the economic cost of such disasters worldwide was US$439 billion (IFRC 1997). Second, poor and socially disadvantaged people, whom NGOs support through their development programmes, are usually the most vulnerable to such disasters (Blaikie *et al.* 1994).

Our research aimed to understand the scope and nature of relevant activities, identify good practices for replication elsewhere, and examine institutional and other factors influencing the work of NGOs.[2] An international research team collected evidence from a sample of organisations: 22 international relief and development NGOs with headquarters in the UK and 40 NGOs in Bangladesh, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Zimbabwe. More than 200 semi-structured interviews were carried out with operational staff and managers, and hundreds of internal documents were collected. The results were written up as five detailed reports (Twigg *et al.* 2000;

Matin and Taher 2000; Rocha and Christoplos 2000; Luna 2000; Shumba 2000).

The following discussion is based on evidence gathered from the study of the 22 international NGOs with headquarters in the UK (Twigg *et al.* 2000): four were relief agencies, nine were development agencies, and nine were involved in both relief and development. We focus on this study because it examined issues of organisational learning in more depth than the other four country studies, which put greater emphasis on DMP activities in the field. However, the discussion also presents important complementary or contradictory findings from those studies.

Findings on organisational learning

Overall, the research shows that DMP has not established itself in the mainstream of NGO work. Thinking about disasters and vulnerability is beginning to penetrate NGO consciousness at policy level but this is not being translated to the operational level, where disaster risk-reduction activity tends to be sporadic, poorly integrated with development planning, and largely unsupported by institutional structures and systems.

Analysis of the reasons for this sheds light on the mechanisms that NGOs use to acquire and apply knowledge. While there are external barriers to mainstreaming disaster mitigation in NGOs, in particular the limited interest among donors, much of the problem is internal and relates to different dimensions of organisational learning. We set out the main features of this in the following paragraphs.

Influences on learning at policy level

Natural disaster preparedness and mitigation are not addressed at policy level in most of the NGOs studied. Only three have a formal preparedness or mitigation policy. However, there are signs in several NGOs that disasters, vulnerability, and disaster mitigation are rising or are likely to rise in the strategy agenda.

It was difficult to assess the influence of intellectual debates and new concepts on policy change. We found indications of shifts in attitude, with the old view of disasters as one-off events being replaced by awareness that development processes can influence the impact of disasters. This suggests that extensive academic debates on this subject in the 1980s and early 1990s (Blaikie *et al.* 1994) have found their way into NGO thinking in very general terms.

However, the main influence on NGO thinking is recent disasters themselves, because of their impact on NGOs' own work and target groups. Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 was particularly significant: its massive impact on Central America's development – 9200 lives lost and economic losses totalling U$5 billion (Munich Re 1998) – has forced NGOs working in the region to reconsider their approach to disaster risk. We were struck by how many NGO staff spoke of disasters as opportunities for change in thinking and the adoption of new approaches. Yet this potential can be overstated: even in Nicaragua it is not clear that Mitch has led to much fresh analysis by NGOs of the complex issues involved in vulnerability reduction, and discussion of DMP is largely overshadowed by the national debate over different development models.

We were unable to reach firm conclusions about the influence of international NGO partnerships and networks on the policies of British NGOs towards DMP, as these vary considerably between individual organisations, but recent discussion of the subject in European NGO networks may be opening up what we term 'policy space' for discussing the issues and providing a mandate to take the work further. The Bangladesh study found that affiliations with international organisations involved in disasters have influenced the policy positions of some NGOs (although operational guidelines are far less up to date). One would expect local NGOs to be more sensitive to hazard risk and the need for mitigation and preparedness, but we found no evidence of Southern NGOs influencing their British partners' disaster mitigation policy.

Influences on operational learning: structures and systems

At country and especially project level, we found a lack of hazard risk assessment in planning, showing that NGOs' systems have failed to incorporate this issue. Awareness of risk is, predictably, much higher in sub-Saharan African countries where droughts are frequent and affect wide areas. Sudden-onset disasters in other regions are more likely to be seen as one-off events.

NGOs' operational and funding guidelines have little to say about DMP. Where the subject does feature, it is just as likely to do so in development guidelines as in those for emergencies. In any case, the documents vary in range and depth, and in general such documents tend to contain limited practical guidance on planning and implementing projects. This gives desk and programme officers considerable leeway in

applying guidelines, thereby making them influential players within NGOs, especially development NGOs. They may also have great influence over the development of country plans, project approval, and in some cases choice of local partners. They could play a major role in promoting DMP but they have very heavy workloads and are generally too busy with their ongoing concerns to reflect on or absorb new ideas. One of the most significant, and emphatic, findings of our research is that overwork and pressures of work are not minor factors in NGO operations and performance but *systemic weaknesses*. In our view, this is a major obstacle to the uptake of new approaches.

Emergency units and advisory teams have grown rapidly in recent years, which is potentially significant for disaster mitigation because discussion of DMP has traditionally taken place in the emergencies arena. However, in NGOs working in both relief and development, institutional and cultural tension between emergency and development departments is evident, fuelled by lack of clarity about the mandates of emergency teams. One development worker spoke of the 'fear of relief culture' in their NGO. Where emergencies specialists lead debates about disaster mitigation, this may act as a brake on the willingness of other staff to become involved. The research team in Bangladesh, where several NGOs have set up separate disaster units, also questioned whether this separation is a strength (in promoting DMP ideas) or a weakness (in marginalising them).

At programme and project level we did not see signs that Southern partners are pressing for greater activity in mitigation – if anything, the limited evidence available suggests that partners needed pushing by the British NGOs and are sometimes resistant. The reasons for this remain unclear, although it is likely that time and work pressures play a part. Even in a country as hazard-prone as Bangladesh, NGOs' approach to disasters tends to be responsive.

Institutional memory, learning and information mechanisms

Several factors hinder NGO learning about good practice. Project documentation is poor overall, often difficult to find, and of varying quality. This is significant, since we found that internal project documentation makes up a significant part of interviewees' reading.

Monitoring and evaluation of DMP is weak, focusing on performance of activities, not on projects' impact in reducing disaster risk. Most of the few projects that attempted to assess their impact did so at a relatively early stage. NGOs are comfortable with indicators of

output, especially where these are quantitative, but shy away from indicators of impact and seem unsure of how to apply them.

Evaluation of disaster mitigation is problematic because of what one NGO worker referred to as its 'preventive logic': the measure of success is that something – the disaster – does *not* take place. More work is needed to develop appropriate indicators. However, the consequence of poor evaluation is a lack of evidence that mitigation can be effective, making it much more difficult to persuade other NGOs and donors of the value of investing in mitigation measures. Added to this is the problem that evaluations are rarely shared outside the organisations that commission them.

We discovered a handful of strategic initiatives to train NGO staff, local partners, and other NGOs in mitigation and preparedness theory and practice on a regional basis. Such training is expensive. There is some evidence that it has influenced individuals who took part in it, but there are clearly challenges to 'internalising' training at the organisational level, and more attention to long-term follow-up is required. We sensed that demand for training courses and materials is high, although we noted one NGO's perception that its partners were putting too much effort into new courses and materials to the detriment of local capacity building.

The issue of information supply and use is a thread running through the study. Work pressures clearly leave NGO staff very little time for reading and thinking. However, it does not necessarily follow that they are not well informed: in fact, they draw on a variety of information sources, selecting those that best meet the practical needs of their job.

Unsurprisingly, books and academic journals do not have a wide readership among NGO staff, who prefer short case studies and similar material on lessons learned from experience. The Bangladesh study highlighted an additional problem in that most material on disasters is in English and therefore particularly inaccessible at the grassroots level.

Conferences, seminars and the like are not considered significant sources of information: interviewees are aware of such events, but rarely attend them (possibly because of the pressures of work). However, internal workshops or lunchtime debates are recognised as a valuable means of communication and awareness-raising.

Personal contacts, in the same NGO or partner organisations, are a very important source of information. Learning from other individuals

is often immediate, to the point, and happens in the course of operational work. Some interviewees pointed to key individuals in NGOs whose personality, enthusiasm, role, or history within an organisation make them important information conduits. E-mail plays an important role in maintaining such personal contacts, especially with partner organisations overseas.

On the other hand, knowledge of what non-partner NGOs are doing is limited: NGO workers want to know, but are too busy to spend much time finding out. This seems to be in contrast to NGO staff in Bangladesh and the Philippines, who find personal and operational contacts with other organisations to be important sources of information (and like their Zimbabwean counterparts seem generally more keen to attend workshops and seminars).

Language and its limitations

Like many other professional and academic disciplines, disaster studies and management have developed a number of theories and an extensive vocabulary of technical terms. We investigated how NGO staff understood some of these concepts and terms. In particular, interviewees were asked how they defined two key terms: 'preparedness' and 'mitigation'.[3] The replies brought home to us how important terminology is in the take-up of ideas.

Few of those we spoke to are comfortable with the terms, especially 'mitigation'. Several see such terms as jargon or over-academic, and find them off-putting. Unsurprisingly, people working in emergency relief are most likely to use the words, while those working in development are least at ease with them. Policy workers tend to be relatively conversant with the terminology, although this does not necessarily make them any happier to use it. People working on food security issues have an alternative set of terms, including 'shock' (for 'disaster') and 'risk/vulnerability reduction' (for 'mitigation').

'Mitigation' and 'preparedness' are understood or were explained in a variety of ways, with a substantial overlap between the two. Many interviewees preferred to give examples of what they considered to be mitigation and preparedness (e.g. 'cyclone shelters', 'crop diversification', 'contingency plans') instead of definitions. This preference for the concrete over the abstract, which we found again when we asked the interviewees what sources and types of information they used in their work, has significant implications for the promotion of new approaches.

Zimbabwean NGOs are also uncomfortable with the terms 'preparedness' and 'mitigation', and, since drought is the main natural hazard they are addressing, are more likely to adopt terms used in food security and natural resource management. The difficulty in clarifying terms and concepts may be partly due to the fact that many have no equivalent in local languages. In the Philippines, understanding of the two key terms is better, perhaps because of the higher proportion of disaster specialists interviewed, but the term 'disaster management' causes some confusion. Elsewhere there is a tendency to re-label other types of work (relief/rehabilitation in Bangladesh, development in Nicaragua) as 'mitigation' or 'preparedness', showing that there has been little or no thinking about what these concepts mean.

The formal language of DMP may be valuable in academic circles and among some full-time disaster professionals, but we believe that the use of such technical terminology in writing and discourse acts is a barrier to many more who are unfamiliar with it, preventing their engagement with the issues – especially since NGO workers are often extremely busy. This does not mean that they do not understand the main issues if these can be explained in a more appropriate manner. It may be time to discard the old terminology and adopt the more accessible language of 'risk' and 'risk reduction', which is already in common use and more readily understood.

The human factor

Greater emphasis on the human factor may be one key to progress. Organisations are not just structures but communities of people, and our study showed that determined and well-placed individuals can push significant innovations through, even at policy level and in large and highly structured NGOs. It also demonstrated that investment in good personal contacts can help defuse institutional tensions between emergencies and development structures. In addition, a growing army of technical advisers of every kind is building up within larger NGOs. They operate across intra-institutional boundaries and they have a mandate – and, crucially, time – to think. They are potentially important figures in bridging the gap between policy and operational practice.

We found that the influence of such individuals depends as much on cultural factors – the time they have been in the organisation, their personality, and their personal networks – as on their formal position

within the structure, but can be considerable. High rates of staff turnover in British NGOs, shown in our study and other research (Wallace *et al.* 1997:5-6), probably amplify the influence of a core of long-serving staff, particularly as guardians of institutional memory.

A similar picture appears among NGOs in the South, although here formal seniority in the organisation plays a more important role. In Bangladeshi NGOs, experienced senior managers are influential in setting disaster policy, while NGOs in the Philippines benefit from a substantial cadre of long-serving staff experienced in DMP (as well as relatively low staff turnover). Nicaraguan NGOs have recruited experienced disaster planners and managers who lost their jobs in government as a result of recent retrenchment. However, among Zimbabwean NGOs it is felt that senior management in headquarters is too dominant in decision making, and does not always understand the situation on the ground.

This suggests that targeting key individuals in organisations has potential as a means of disseminating ideas and good practice, although it may be difficult for outsiders to identify them.

Conclusion: ways forward

Our research shows that NGOs, as learning organisations, face considerable challenges in bringing marginalised issues such as DMP into the development mainstream, but the studies also indicate how learning about such issues can be stimulated. We have three main recommendations to make here.

First, NGOs must recognise that organisational learning is much more than a matter of making information available. NGO staff must be given time and opportunity to learn.

Second, advocates of alternative theories and approaches need to think of NGOs as communities, not merely as formal structures. They should identify and target key individuals within NGOs who can share information, promote ideas, and influence policy and practice.

Third, there should be greater emphasis on practical aspects of learning. It is relatively easy to argue a new idea successfully, especially if it is presented in everyday language, but much more difficult to explain how to put it into effect operationally. It is here, crossing the boundary from policy to practice, that NGOs want to learn more.

Notes

1   The term 'natural disaster' is widely used to refer to the impact of natural hazards (e.g. cyclones, earthquakes, floods) on society. This is misleading because the impact of such hazards is profoundly influenced by the extent of society's vulnerability to them, which is influenced by socio-economic conditions and trends (i.e. development processes).

2   The research was funded by the Department for International Development (DfID) and managed by the British Red Cross, but undertaken by a team of independent researchers who are solely responsible for the outputs and the views contained in them.

3   The technical literature gives a range of definitions. We have interpreted them broadly as follows. 'Mitigation': any action before, during, or after a disaster to minimise its impact or potential impact (ranging from physical measures such as flood defences or building reinforcement to non-structural measures such as training, land use regulation, legislation, and public awareness raising). 'Preparedness': specific measures before disasters strike, usually to forecast and warn against them, take precautions when they threaten, and arrange for the appropriate response (e.g. organising evacuations, stockpiling food supplies, and training rescue services).

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