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Dealing with Disasters

Capacity Building Toolkit for National Civil Society Organisation Platforms

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Crisis coordination and communication

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Coordination and communications should be developed by National CSO Platforms (NCPs) prior to crises, ensuring they are recognised by government and international actors. Opportunities for communications and influence, for example via the media, should also be exploited. During disasters, this preparation needs to be complemented with technical solutions to ensure that communications are not disrupted. Communities themselves should always be included in communications and guidance.

Coordination and communication before a disaster are important to ensure that assessments, risk reduction and preparation are based on accurate knowledge of risks, vulnerabilities and hazards. They are critical during a crisis to coordinate many different actors, ensure effective response and support and inform affected populations.

Knowledge sharing

CCONG, Colombia, links member CSOs with the needs of the population in that region. It also coordinates the actions of these organisations with local authorities. While national government usually wants to centralize the use of funds, without local information this cannot be done effectively.

PREDES, in Peru, do this by creating dialogue Platforms with local government and the population to discuss the problems and to decide what each actor should do in the face of that problem.

Some NCP and member organisations make good use of media, both local and national, to communicate the needs of communities faced by disasters. Pakistani CSO Pattan has made use of newspaper media locally to press for action on flooding, and nationally to advocate for changes in disaster policy and practice.

Communications during disasters

Strengthening coordination and communications prepares the ground for response to crises. The experience of many CSOs participating in this project shows just how challenging this can be. During the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in March and April 2020, many were unable to communicate effectively, as they were 'locked down', without access to reliable telecommunications or internet. These channels may not be robust in a disaster. For example, in Kathmandu, Nepal, mobile network transmission towers are often built on top of buildings which are vulnerable to collapse in an earthquake. Nepalese CSO NSET has developed expertise in using radio communications in a crisis to mitigate this. In other cases, local radio and texting have proved invaluable – for example in the 2010 Haiti earthquake. While NCPs may not themselves have the technical expertise to ensure good use of these communications channels, they may have members who do. There are specialist organisations which can provide knowledge and support, for example CDAC (http://www.cdacnetwork.org/).

CSOs have a particular responsibility to reach and support the 'last mile' [11]. As Indian Platform VANI points out, in any large disaster, it is local people and local CSOs who are first responders. The Platform's role is to establish communications between local groups and outside agencies including government and international agencies. NFN, in Nepal, identify a similar role, establishing needs with their member organisations and sharing information with government to seek support. ASONOG in Honduras emphasise participatory communication with communities before, during and after a crisis.

CSOs and Platforms who have experienced crises often find difficulties in dealing with the surge of government and international effort. GNDR Platform leader AFAD describes the problem in Mali: 'Too often international NGOs seize aid without involving local structures, neither technical nor local NGOs, and take direct action. This does not benefit local NGOs, who can provide local support because they are closer to the communities, knowing the realities.' Platforms have an important role in building relationships enabling them to achieve collaboration rather than competition. VANI, in India, cites the example of a cyclone in Kerala, where local CSOs were the first responders. When the scale of the disaster led to international response, VANI brokered links between local CSOs and INGOs and also with the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) functions of large businesses which wanted to provide support. A major study by the START network of INGOs identified methods to strengthen national capacity[12] including:

1. Capacity building of national NGOs to lead response – replacing international with national surge - through building national level CSO humanitarian consortia (such as DPNet in Nepal and the Humanitarian Response Consortium in the Philippines).

2. Working collaboratively to transform surge capacity through INGOs working with NCPs and consortia of CSOs. For example, in the Philippines a surge roster combining both national and international organisations is being developed.

FOOTNOTES

[11] This article provides a brief and useful overview: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/apr/03/disaster-communications-ict-internews.

[12] 'Time to Move On': START network 2017. https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-09/Time-to-move-on-humanitarian-surge-study-apr2017.pdf .

Crisis coordination and communication: Action Points

• **Ensure that good communications of local knowledge, needs, priorities and vulnerabilities is gathered through members.**

• **Ensure good communications channels to local, regional and national government to share this information and secure a response.**

• **Make use of media to inform, campaign and advocate for effective disaster risk reduction and preparedness.**

• **Audit communications channels used by Platforms and their members to assess whether they are robust in disaster events. If not, establish alternative technical solutions.**

• **Ensure effective means of communications to and from affected populations at the 'last mile'.**

• **Build relationships with government, INGOs and others in preparation for crisis response.**

• **Advocate for national and locally led crisis response, in line with the principles of localisation, to ensure that response is appropriate and targeted.**

ACTION POINTS