

Joint After-Action Review of our Humanitarian Response to the Tsunami Crisis



**CARE International, Catholic Relief Services,
OXFAM GB & World Vision International**



Report of Workshop Proceedings

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Note for Readers

The views and opinions expressed in this report are perspectives of individual staff members who were involved in the humanitarian response at various times in different locations and do not represent official positions of any of these four agencies.

Acronyms

AAR	After Action Review
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
HAP-I	Humanitarian Accountability Project – International
ICVA	International Committee of Voluntary Associations
IWG	Interagency Working Group
PiA	People in Aid
RCCC	Red Cross Code of Conduct
WVI	World Vision International

Executive Summary

This is a summary of the Joint After Action Review (AAR), co-facilitated by CARE and WVI, with participation from OXFAM GB and CRS, between 7 and 8 April 2005.

The workshop was a consolidation of a number of country-level learning activities following the crisis caused by the tsunami of 26th December 2004. The AAR focused mainly on the four most-affected countries; Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with additional participation by staff from CARE Somalia.

The primary purpose of the workshop was to explore ways in which participant organizations could jointly improve their performance and quality of work by reflecting back on their activities and actions. It presented an opportunity for participants from various organizations to discover for themselves what happened and why, and how to build on strengths and improve on areas of weakness, as well as exploring ways in which they might collaborate more effectively together.

During the workshop, participants discussed best practices and lessons learned in country groups and then discussed best practices and lessons learned across three themes: accountability, capacity and coordination.

Of the best practices discussed over the two days, five were selected as having been most crucial to improving response time and effectiveness: having existing capacity to respond; making linkages at community level with local structures and community leaders; having consistent leadership in the development of strategic plans; the existence of a longer-term planning and fundraising strategy; and the use of humanitarian standards such as Sphere.

The top lessons learned from an interagency perspective included the need for early social/economic analysis which will aid programming and program monitoring, for joint rapid assessments; a central role for community consultation and participation, and the importance of preparedness planning, notably the need to build local capacity for emergency response.

Time was then spent action planning how to work collaboratively on the first three of the lessons learned. Participants returned to their countries with plans for how to collaboratively take forward the learnings from the workshop.

Reflecting on the workshop, participants said that as the starting point for a longer process of collaboration, this workshop had been very useful. Participants generally felt that it had helped in reinforcing closer working relationships between NGOs; and many suggested that the process should be opened up to wider representation not only from different organizations, but also from more widely within organizations. It was also anticipated that the outputs of this workshop will be a valuable input to the planned multi-agency evaluation and the recently-launched InterAgency Working Group (IWG) on Emergency Capacity Project (Gates).

Introduction

While the military is generally credited with developing the After Action Review (AAR) methodology, the approach is now commonly used by groups, teams and organizations to help improve performance by reflecting back on their activities and actions. Using terms such as 'lessons learned', 'post-operation review', 'learning review' or 'learning after the event', such events are a performance-based discussion that allows participants to discover for themselves what happened and why during a particular event (such as a disaster response) and how to replicate good practice and improve on weaknesses in future.

There is significant variation within the humanitarian community in the application of AARs. Organizations such as World Vision International have been routinely organizing lessons learned workshops within 3 months following a disaster event. Their proven positive impact on performance and, by implication, the fact that such reviews provide tangible evidence of the organization's accountability towards improving the quality of its emergency response has led to a broad consensus to move towards more systematic application of AAR approaches and incorporation of subsequent learning.

This joint regional AAR was held in the wake of the crisis caused by the tsunami of 26th December 2004 and builds on a series of single agency country-level learning events. It is linked to an independent joint evaluation scheduled to take place during May and June 2005. While in the country-level AARs each agency looked in detail at operations in their respective contexts, the joint AAR focused on lessons learned about interagency collaboration and the application of "industry standards" (notably the Sphere minimum standards, HAP-I, People in Aid, NGO Code of Conduct).

The conceptualization and organization of these joint activities pre-dates the start of the Gates-funded "InterAgency Working Group (IWG) on Emergency Capacity" project and did not draw on resources allocated to that initiative. However, since the purpose¹ of the IWG is so closely allied to AAR objectives, the joint AAR was viewed as a concrete example of an IWG-type activity and could be considered as a pilot to assist in the design of future IWG activities.

This AAR was co-facilitated by CARE and WVI, with participation from OXFAM GB and CRS. Given its status as a pilot activity and in view of the fact that equal numbers of national and international staff from five affected countries², in addition to HQ-based staff were involved, it was not feasible to equally involve all seven IWG members in the AAR since previous experience with similar workshops had shown that groups above 40 become significantly more difficult to manage to achieve concrete outcomes. Other IWG agencies were therefore invited to send two participants each and options for broadening participation were discussed during the workshop.

¹ The purpose of the IWG is to advance more effective delivery of humanitarian assistance by NGOs through a joint capacity building strategy. IWG members share a commitment to tackling some of the most persistent obstacles in humanitarian aid delivery by creating the means for more open communication, collaborative problem-solving, and sharing best practices within our sector. This includes joint support to accountability networks, such as Sphere and HAP-I, to ensure that accountability standards are adopted at all levels within the organizations and staff are equipped to apply them consistently and comprehensively. IWG members are CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Mercy Corps, OXFAM-GB, Save the Children US (SC-US), and World Vision International (WVI).

² Representatives mainly came from Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Two staff from CARE Somalia also participated.

Welcome and Reception

Participants were welcomed by Khun Prasong (Raks Thai Foundation), Dr, Muhammad Musa (CARE), Jock Baker (CARE) and Eleanor Monbiot (WVI) at a reception and dinner on the evening of April 6th.

Day One

Introductions

Jock Baker outlined the background to the Joint AAR workshop and explained the links with the wider interagency process. Eleanor Monbiot presented the findings of the WVI's recent regional Lessons Learned workshop in Singapore and shared highlights of the results. (See Annex 3)

Workshop Objectives

The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Build understanding, trust and collaboration between agencies
- Initiate opportunities for an interagency learning process to improve the quality of our collective responses
- Identify the most important lessons emerging from organizations' interaction and tsunami response
- Contribute to the objectives of the Inter-Agency Working Group to improve our capacity in emergency response
- Explore ways in which learning can support the implementation of industry standards (e.g. Sphere, HAP-I, People in Aid, ALNAP, Red Cross & NGO Code of Conduct)

Expectations of the workshop

Participants were asked to note down their expectations of the workshop and to outline the contribution that they considered they could make to the process.

Expectations could be categorized into three main areas:

- This workshop would be the start of a process whereby organizations could consolidate their “voice” by collaborating more effectively
- Lessons learned from the workshop would feed into strategic decision-making on humanitarian action in the future
- Sharing experience and information about ways of working would build understanding between organizations

Contributions were diverse and included sharing insights, experience and lessons from personal experience of the tsunami response

Chronology Card Exercise

In this session participants reconstructed a timeline of events which ran from one month prior to the tsunami until the end of March. The construction of the timeline served two main purposes: to jog participants’ memories about the details of the response and to develop a common understanding of the key events before examining lessons learned. Additional information was gathered on organizations’ participation in AARs as well as and planned evaluations and reviews. (Annex 5)

Several key points emerged from this exercise:

- Issues faced by each organization were very much the same
- Each organization started working individually, but there was a point in mid-January at which organizations realized that they would have to work together
- Responses were generally quicker where systems had been put in place prior to the response
- The amount of management capacity needed to be active members in coordination activities and undertake collaborative assessments and implementation was underestimated.

Country Group Discussions

In this session participants split into country groups and a regional group. The country groups were from Thailand, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Staff from CARE Somalia joined the regional group as no other organizations from Somalia were represented. A list of questions was given to

participants as a discussion guide. However, participants were not obliged to respond directly to these questions.

The output from this session was a list of the top five Best Practices in each country and a list of the five top Lessons Learned, or areas for improvement.

Country Group Discussions: Reportback

Each Country group reported back on their discussions and summarized top best practices and lessons learned. (See Annex 6)

The issue of collaboration was raised in all of the country group discussions and several other points were made. One was the issue of the overwhelming numbers of meetings and the need to have more effective meetings with improved leadership rather than merely more meetings.

A further point that was made was that if NGO internal coordination is formalized and up and running early, then response to the emergency could have been greatly improved.

Thematic Group Work

In this session, participants discussed best practices and lessons learned under three main focus areas: accountability, capacity and coordination. Each group defined their five top best practices and five lessons learned.

Accountability

Good practices identified by the accountability group included the use of various standards and codes in the planning phase, and capacity-building relating to the standards particularly in terms of new staff orientation to new staff. Examples of good practice include the adherence to these standards in relation to working with communities and advocating for the rights of those who are internally displaced/

Lessons learned and recommendations included the need to be accountable also to those beneficiaries living in the area who were already vulnerable, but not directly affected by the tsunami; the need for greater community consultation and participation; the need to follow through with post-delivery monitoring mechanisms; the need for a compliance system that allows for grievances from communities, as well as monitoring compliance of the codes and standards. Additionally, participants considered essential the concept of a separate unit with a fast track methodology in procurement, recruitment, financial procedures.

Capacity

Good practices identified by the capacity group included the pre-identification of staff with relief competency as well as the existence of emergency surge capacity and capacity building plans; the

development of interagency initiatives such as education of non-NGO partners, review of pay scales, capacity and expertise sharing and prior development of industry standards.

This group recommended improved systems for mapping local capacity both before and during emergency response; the development of better mechanisms to grow agency emergency surge capacity; the identification and coaching of national staff in key emergency response competencies; increase in capacity at all levels with a wide range of stakeholders, and the implementation of structures to increase staff retention.

Coordination

Good Practice included the early establishment of operation planning documents as well as the establishment of relationships with the various actors.

Lessons learned focused on the lack of emergency preparedness and the need to coordinate at the level at which decisions are being made; notable coordination at the community level

A specific recommendation was that the IWG should work with UN OCHA to ensure that coordination meetings have a joint NGO/UN chair.

Day Two

Review and Preview

The previous day's session and the agenda for the second day were reviewed. The time of sessions scheduled changed slightly reflecting over-run of time on Day One.

Comment on Day One Evaluations

Evaluations from Day One showed that participants had found the group discussions useful and many commented on the general atmosphere of openness between participants.

Thematic Group Discussions: Reportback

Each group (accountability, capacity, coordination) reported back on their discussions and took questions. (Annex 7)

Envisioning the future

In this session participants were asked to consider what an ideal future collaboration might look like. Participants worked in groups to draft two statements:

A powerful, trusting, community-driven collaboration that is respectful of all stakeholders.

Share and apply good practices to ensure that qualitative humanitarian needs and rights of the community are met.

Participants were then asked to reflect on what would need to change in terms of systems, structures and attitudes for this kind of collaboration to be realized. (Annex 8) These included the following:

Attitudes

Attitudes need to be caring, trusting, and open. Agencies need to be transparent and driven by the needs of communities'. The mindset of delivering alone must change: we need shared processes, and more sharing of expertise.

Systems

Systems need to facilitate rather than block. Consultation and coordination mechanisms need to be built into emergency preparedness and response plans. A dedicated inter-agency liaison should be identified early on.

Structures

Structures governing and protecting the principles of collaboration need to be established, so that agencies are accountable to each other and also directly accountable to the communities. Interagency collaboration mechanisms need to be established at global, regional, national, district and divisional levels to take forward the idea of sharing and applying lessons jointly learned. The IWG structure needs to be duplicated at regional and national levels.

Next steps

To determine next steps, participants selected the top five Best Practice and Lessons Learned outputs of both the country group and thematic group discussions. There was a clear consensus around those selected – the remaining outputs received relatively few “votes”. In a plenary session, we then decided what our next steps would be to take these best practices and lessons learned further; then each country group discussed how they would operationalize each step.

Interagency Top Lessons Learned – Things to do better next time

- Social/economic analysis should be carried out early to aid in programme planning and to monitor impact.
- There is a need to build local capacity for emergency response.
- Joint rapid assessments are needed for information sharing and better coordination.
- Plan for an emergency before it happens. Ensure MOUs are in place (with the government and other NGOs), and roles are defined.
- Coordination must take place at the community level and with communities. Ensure space for community participation.

Interagency Top Best Practices

- Good links existed at the community level with local structures and community leaders.
- Having existing capacity to respond was critical to improving response timeliness and effectiveness.
- Consistent leadership in early and not subject to turnover, assisting in the ongoing development of strategic and operational plans, communication of these plans, and coordination of implementation.
- A longer-term planning and fundraising strategy that is communicated early to donors helped align needs and resources.
- Use of humanitarian standards such as Sphere has been key negotiating tool in promoting effectiveness and accountability.

In a plenary session, the first three of the lessons learned (monitoring systems; building local capacity; joint assessments - Annex 9) were discussed further in plenary and then in country groups how these might be taken forward. (Annex 10). It was agreed that a proposal to conduct joint assessments would be taken to the IWG for more discussion

Using Lessons Learned to Support Industry Standards

In this session participants discussed ways in which they could use learnings to support implementation of industry standards such as PiA, Sphere minimum standards, the Red Cross Code of Conduct and HAP-I. Participants worked in four groups, with each group examining a single initiative.

The output of this session were suggestions and recommendations about how these standards could be put into practice based on the best practices and lessons learned. (Annex 11).

Multi-agency evaluation

Eleanor Monbiot spoke about the emergency management capacity building initiative (Gates initiatives) and how this workshop might be linked to them. The three initiatives are:

1. Improved agency effectiveness in sourcing, developing and retaining quality staff for humanitarian action
2. Enhanced agency accountability to industry standards and improved practice in impact measurement of humanitarian action
3. Improved capacity for risk reduction and emergency preparedness among IWG agency staff, affected communities and local and national authorities

One example of such activities is this AAR, which will inform a subsequent joint evaluation that CARE, WVI and Oxfam are organizing with the participation of some of the other IWG members.

The multi-agency evaluation has three main purposes, namely:

1. The impact, timeliness, coverage, appropriateness and connectedness of the respective emergency responses of the three agencies, highlighting key lessons learned and recommendations for improving emergency preparedness and response to humanitarian disasters in future;
2. To what extent programmatic decisions and approaches by the three agencies to date have contributed to recovery and reconstruction and, referring to relevant lessons learned in this and similar contexts, recommend how agencies might adjust their programmes to improve the efficiency and quality of their programmes during the next phase of operations.
3. Coherence and coordination between agencies, identifying examples of both good practice and missed opportunities.

Specific issues for consideration for the multi-agency evaluation include Impact, Quality assurance, Appropriateness, Co-ordination, and Capacity.

The evaluation is scheduled to begin in early May and the two teams will be led by independent evaluators with team members drawn from non-tsunami response agencies and national consultants in each country. There will be two evaluation teams: Thailand and Indonesia; Sri Lanka and India. A draft TOR was shared with HAP-I, ALNAP, and Sphere and continued engagement is planned with these networks. Final products from the evaluation will be posted on the ALNAP website.

Reflection and evaluation

Feedback at the end of the session was overwhelmingly positive and a wide range of comments were made indicating that participants are committed to moving collaboration forward. However, a

point that was made repeatedly was that this workshop would be most invaluable as the starting point of a process of collaboration rather than a stand-alone event.

Comments from participants included:

- *As a starting point of a process, what we have done here is good. But if all that is done is talk about this and not more, then it is hard to say that taking people out of the field/emergency response is worth it. Since we have seen lessons learned the same for 10 years, is this a starting point?*
- *Follow through on a couple of key things: take first steps. Start with a couple of easy things that will hopefully set the pattern for collaboration and coordination. For example, share documents, make immediate contact. Otherwise, inertia...*
- *It is unfortunate that other agencies are not here. If we agree on taking things forward, then this time was well spent. We need to keep the momentum going.*
- *In terms of personal relations, this meeting has let us get to know each other, which will also help us have understanding in the future and get things done in the future. It has helped with building interagency relationships.*
- *We are talking about a lot of people in these agencies, but remember that even though the people in this room are getting on together, we need to be aware that the others in our agencies need to be on board also. Who goes to meetings has been a question. There are some people not present here who “can make it or break it” and make inertia happen.*
- *Coming here has let me know that I am not isolated in these issues. I see that others have the same issues and I feel empowered. I’ve gotten info on how some organizations have addressed issues differently from how we have, and I may be able to use some info to fill gaps and share info back in my country.*
- *Consortia/groups are becoming requirements rather than options. Donors are changing the way they are managing aid—sending aid to consortium of NGOs. This is at least the start of a relationships for those who are just meeting, but as it gets stronger it should get easier.*
- *There are issues of humanitarian space, getting smaller and smaller (military, private business, etc). Interagency collaboration is important—key agencies coming together and making some decisions about how to deal with this situation. Any activity that makes us come together closer is worth it.*