

# **Managing Humanitarian Relief**

## **An operational guide for NGOs**

Second edition

Eric James, PhD

Practical Action Publishing Schumacher Centre for Technology and Development

Bourton on Dunsmore, Rugby, Warwickshire CV23 9QZ, UK

[www.practicalactionpublishing.org](http://www.practicalactionpublishing.org)

© Eric James, 2008

First published 2008  
Second edition published 2016



## **Preface to the second edition**

### **Trends in the NGO working environment**

The impact of disasters and humanitarian emergencies is enormous. According to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, between 2000 and 2015, disasters affected 3.1 billion people, caused US\$1.8 trillion in damages and killed 1.4 million people. The likelihood that hazards such as severe drought, desertification, flooding and earthquake will trigger a disaster has become amplified as social dimensions of vulnerability, poverty and exclusion have become more distinct. In too many countries, development remains stillborn or is being undone by the challenges of economic crises, resource scarcity, increased urbanization and political marginalization. Added to this is ever present violent conflict whether witnessed through chronic instability or new civil wars. Further, the results of climate change are not yet conclusively known but we do know that the cost of severe weather and other natural hazards is increasing. As a result, the number of reported disasters and their impact is set to increase in the years to come.

As people grapple with the different types of assistance and approaches available through prevention, relief, recovery and reconstruction work, significant challenges remain. These include coordination, resource mobilization, general management and understanding the complexity in which events occur. Part of these challenges are the frequent and simple explanations people maintain about the causes and contexts in which emergencies occur. All too often these lead to inadequate and ill-conceived interventions. One example is the notion of the hapless ‘South’ and the resilient ‘North’ – an outdated idea that was probably never true in the first place. When trying to understand and navigate through these challenges, it is worth noting several trends that have emerged over the last decade or so.

First, state fragility and failure continue to be a distinguishing feature of global politics that deeply influence the nature of international development and humanitarianism. As part of this, poor governance, ineffective leadership and bad decision-making have a role in exacerbating the conditions in which emergencies occur. Neglect of water infrastructure contributes to severe flooding. Urbanization, particularly in less economically advantaged areas, brings people to areas that are more vulnerable to natural hazards such as severe weather and landslides. Lack of building construction codes makes buildings more prone to collapse during tremors. Failure to address the grievances of different groups within a country leads to violent conflict. Preventing the negative consequences of disasters would help. However, according to the World Bank, about 20 per cent of humanitarian aid globally is spent on response while only 0.7 per cent is spent on prevention.

Second, economic crisis and the changing geo-political environment is altering the landscape in which NGOs operate. This has led, for example, to a reduction in giving by some donor governments and an increase by others. This follows a pattern of what has been termed the ‘rise of the rest’ and giving by new institutions and governments (e.g. Russia, Saudi Arabia and the UAE). While still evolving in many countries, the hurdles of long-standing traditions and beliefs where giving to charity, let alone humanitarian causes, is still uncommon in many parts of the world. The ramifications of this are unfolding at the time of this writing but it appears safe to say that previously familiar relationships and norms will be altered.

Third, the last decade has seen an increased securitization of aid. When conventional warfare was the norm, military personnel accounted for most war-related deaths (e.g. 80 percent during the First World War). Today, civilians bear a disproportionate share of pain, suffering and displacement in conflict. In many situations, humanitarian space (access to those affected by disasters and freedom from undue political or military interference) has shrunk or disappeared altogether. This has had a direct impact on the quality of assistance but also on the security of NGOs. In the last decade or so, major attacks against relief workers have increased 200 percent.

Finally, unexpected events ('wildcard' or 'Black Swan' events) are inevitable and could rapidly change the face of humanitarianism. The makeup and timing of these are literally anyone's guess but include disease outbreaks, bloody revolution in a major country or set of countries and even the use (accidental or intentional) of nuclear, biological or chemical devices. Technological failure, especially related to computers and satellite communications, could also trigger a cascade of events which have a humanitarian consequence. While each example would have similarities in terms of the managerial, operational and programmatic approach followed, individually they would present unique challenges for those providing humanitarian relief.

In addition to the network of states, international organizations and nongovernmental organizations that have traditionally responded to emergencies, the humanitarian sector is an expanding group of individuals, new partnerships and so-called 'non-traditional actors', religious and non-sectarian groups, who now find themselves shoulder-to-shoulder during responses. These organizations have helped create, and have been sustained by, a complex of normative and legal principles and financial structures. Refocusing the role of the state has regained currency particularly when it comes to governance, economic structures, meeting basic needs and its interplay with civil society. Addressing humanitarian challenges is perhaps the most important endeavour faced by practitioners, scholars and policy makers alike.

The trends discussed here run counter to the ongoing critiques of international aid (e.g. Polman 2010) which characterizes relief as a duplicitous endeavour, lacking accountability and guilty of self-serving interest. Without any acknowledgement of the paradox, aid workers are allegedly guilty of undermining some governments while being in the pockets of others. The problem with most of these critiques is that they both blame aid groups for the problems while pointing at them for the solution. The reader is left wondering what to do next. However, those involved in studying, designing and managing humanitarian relief are not standing idly by. To meet this mix of challenges, a host of efforts and initiatives are underway.

First, humanitarian assistance is undergoing a process of professionalization evidenced by ongoing standardization, a focus on improving quality and evolving best practices based on lessons learned. Examples of this trend include the Core Humanitarian Standards, the revised Sphere Standards and the IASC Gender Marker initiative which highlight the need for trained and skilful staff. Effective assistance programs start with bolstering the resilience of communities and minimising their exposure to disasters. This involves listening to others, being open to new ideas and above all, building trust between a variety of stakeholders.

Second, increased professionalization has been marked by an expansion of educational and training programs. The number of training and education programs has rapidly expanded

within the last decade to include informal sessions offered by organizations as well as a range of formal university-based courses. For instance, this book is being used in an increasing number of such programs, which is also personally gratifying to see. A further development of this trend, following the pattern set by the development of other professions (such as medicine), is the organization of relief workers themselves into groups and supporting organizations. Examples include Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection, International Humanitarian Studies Association, Humanitarian Logistics Association and the International NGO Safety and Security Association.

Finally, the need for innovation has become a recognized part of the field including the increasing use of tailor made technology. Imagine the disaster response of the not-so-distant future where assessments, coordination, distributions and other activities happen at a pace unknown today. For instance, a relief worker arrives on scene and instantly obtains actionable population data through a smart-phone application without the need for lengthy information gathering and analysis. If this 'app' reveals a need for a sizeable quantity of common relief items, such as plastic buckets or sheeting, these will be manufactured overnight using high speed 3-D printers bypassing today's cumbersome logistical chain. The ill and injured among the population will be rapidly diagnosed using mobile technologies before the first physicians are able to make rounds. Small flying drones will be able to transport lifesaving medicines to even the most remote location. These and other advances are already being developed and making their way into the field.

The aim of this book is to provide a practical yet comprehensive guide for these next steps in managing relief programmes. With this new edition I have added, updated and improved it. Through its use in training courses and on the shelves of relief workers in the field, the hope is to improve existing international humanitarianism. While acknowledging flaws and shortcomings of existing responses, the main bias of this book is toward action. Facing these challenges requires tenacity and resilience. As Albert Schweitzer suggests: 'Anyone who proposes to do good must not expect people to roll stones out of the way, but must accept his lot calmly, even if they roll a few more upon it'. Relief workers should be clear about their views, honest about their claims and forthright in their approaches. This book is meant to be a careful aid to help them do just that.