

The continuum of humanitarian crisis management

Messages for the World Humanitarian Summit

JICA Research Institute

Main Findings

- 1 Recognize that crisis management is not linear**
- 2 Transcend the divide of mandates and mindsets**
- 3 Putting 'local' at the center**
- 4 Prevention starts from crisis day one**
- 5 Consolidate a demand-driven rearrangement of crisis-related global cooperation**

This document is based on the findings of a research project at Japan International Cooperation Agency Research Institute.¹ The research team conducted a review of the literature, interviews with major stakeholders in the international community and case studies as well as examined outcome documents of the World Humanitarian Summit process, including the Secretary General's 'One Humanity: Shared Responsibility' report.

Introduction

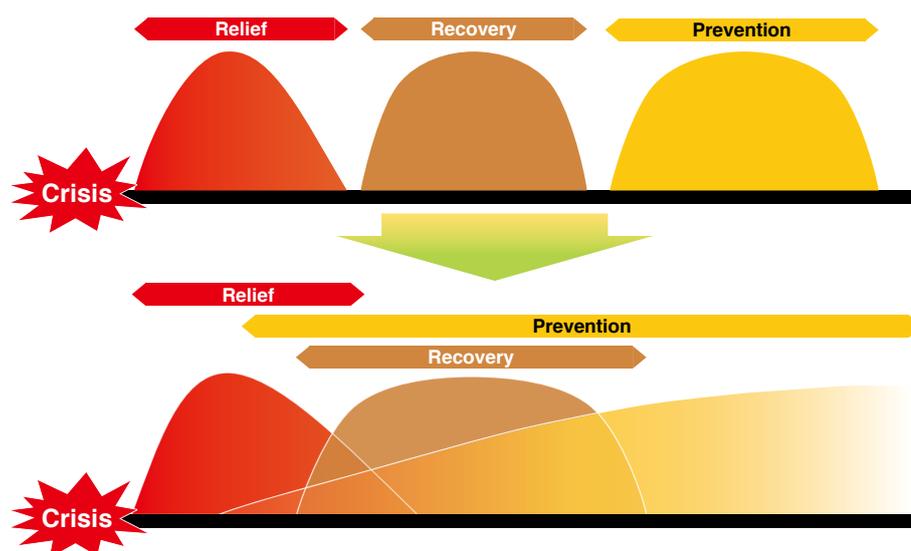
In addressing humanitarian crises, joint efforts by the global community are not only limited to offers of relief but also include support for recovery activities and the need to establish foundations for the prevention of similar crises in the future. Consequently, it is imperative to catalyze effective collective action in order to achieve the best possible outcomes in these areas. This need for collective action was envisioned by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 46/182 of 1991, at the outset of the present humanitarian system, as a 'continuum from relief to rehabilitation and development'. The very same problem of finding ways to realize the continuum has been reiterated—although expressed in different terminology—a quarter of a century later as part of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) agenda. What is at stake in global crisis management is our common human security, and thus confronting and overcoming emergencies are not challenges exclusive to actors with a humanitarian mandate, but goals that bind our global community together as a whole.

In terms of progress over the past 25 years, it remains true that crises continue to receive a short attention span while, at the same time, widespread unmet humanitarian needs discourage praising small advances. The original goal of consolidating the humanitarian system may have also played against the objective of generating long-term collective action, as even larger developmental needs kept significant actors busy with other agendas. More concretely, difficulties in moving beyond a linear understanding of crisis management and generating joint efforts to implement the full continuum have hindered success. Not knowing what such success would look like adds to the complexity of the problem. Still, one way or another, most stakeholders have tried different approaches in realizing the continuum and experience shows that, while challenges abound, advances have occurred from which some general lessons can be embraced in order to keep moving forward.

¹ The present messages are accompanied by a research paper entitled "The continuum of humanitarian crises management: Multiple approaches and the challenge of convergence" and will be followed by an academic publication including six case studies on complex emergencies and 'natural' disasters. Electronic versions and updates on the project can be found at JICA Research Institute home page: <http://jica-ri.jica.go.jp/index.html>

1. Recognize that crisis management is not linear

A collective approach to crisis management should not be mistaken for a linear process leading from crisis to normality. Every person, every family, every community and every city goes through this process at different speeds and along different paths. Activities for relief, recovery and prevention of future crises do not follow a clear sequence but overlap and thus require everyone's commitment. Such mutual commitment has been recently crystalized around the aim of building resilience², a goal shared by national governments and the international community, and therefore deserving of further support, experimentation and mainstreaming. Nonetheless, non-linearity does not mean that crisis management through phases is unnecessary, because phases play a fundamental role in how societies realize progress and how actors confront recurrent hazards to prevent relapse into crisis. The balance between contiguity and continuity of phases and actors remains a central challenge all actors should acknowledge. In order to advance on this front, the interplay between resilience initiatives and crisis management strategies and tools requires better understanding, and non-linearity needs to be reflected in all aspects, including strategy, coordination and funding.



A discrete phased approach to funding hampers implementation

Funding is one aspect through which non-linearity in crisis management is evident. Implementing organizations often have separate humanitarian and development finance divisions despite both doing basically the same work. In practice, all of the funds support local teams in adapting to changing needs on the ground. The parallel system is nonetheless maintained at the global level, hindering efforts to implement different activities that lie in the gap between traditional relief and development activities, which may occur simultaneously as the crisis evolves. When such streams of funding are limited to single mandates, this may hurt coordination and create distrust. Through the survey, we heard of suspicion that the extension of the emergency phase was decided in order to obtain more humanitarian funds. Moreover, due to the segmentation of phases, critical activities in the transition period may go unfunded. The way in which phases and activities overlap, sometimes through the very same implementers, needs to be streamlined into a single system to facilitate synergies. Instead of being supply-driven, tailoring finance to the demands of different kinds of crisis—e.g., recurrent, protracted, slow-onset, rapid-onset, and so on—may be a better approach.

² As suggested by the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, resilience is the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions.

2. Transcend the divide of mandates and mindsets



Through the WHS consultation process, the idea of a collective approach to crisis management has been encouraged. Crisis management is an umbrella that tries to bring together and align mandates at the local level. However, at the international level, these mandates sometimes work as silos, in areas such as humanitarian relief, peacebuilding, disaster risk reduction, development and climate change. The push toward doing crisis management collectively should thus help in breaking down silos instead of reinforcing them. There is no single way of doing this. It can be done through the expansion and transformation of actors according to their comparative advantages as well as through complementary partnerships. Transcending the divide does not mean abandoning treasured principles of action, but making them work to deliver collective outcomes. Many actors now do not have mandate limitations, including implementing NGOs, donors and even several UN agencies. This reality should be reflected at the global level—as we suggest in Message 5. Division of labor is being replaced by specific sectors of expertise and agreement around crisis-specific tools, both of which inform responses to emergencies through different management phases. Coordination at the local level is key in removing the tendency for these sectors to become silos once more, and also in contributing to local accountability as processes are followed through.

Challenges to bridge mandates and mindsets in South Sudan

Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing consensus among actors in Southern Sudan on the need to link relief and development. However, the issue of how to bridge the humanitarian-development divide remains an unfulfilled agenda item. Aid workers in the field recognize there are organizational gaps between humanitarian and development communities in their principles, project cycles and organizational culture. For instance, teams working on the Humanitarian Response Plan led by OCHA, and the 2016–2017 Interim Cooperation Framework led by the UN Country Team held dialogues to explore the possibilities of collaboration. Through these dialogues they have managed to agree on a common interest in advancing ‘resilience’ and ‘basic human needs’, while the actual components have remained contentious. In another example, one donor carried out a joint humanitarian and development analysis to promote strategic talks between the corresponding branches of its own operations. They tried to create a framework for information sharing, common assessment and development programs in a cooperative manner. However, during a trial of this approach, participants found it to be too systematic. For a complex emergency like South Sudan in particular, phases are non-linear and issues differ drastically from one place to another, so the attempt to systematize collaborative work between humanitarian and development, though ideally good, was found to be not easily applied in practice.

Layering management phases in the Philippines

During the crisis management following Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, both humanitarian and developmental approaches were implemented in parallel, although considerable progress was made in narrowing the gap between the two approaches. On one hand, a cluster approach was activated in response to Typhoon Haiyan in order to support relief as an IASC-categorized “Level 3” crisis; on the other hand, efforts to plan and implement recovery and rehabilitation started early, with support from development actors. Once the President of the Philippines stated that the response phase was over, some organizations with strict humanitarian mandates were embarrassed, as many relief needs remained unmet. This shows that mandates could also imbue crisis management with a false sense of linearity resulting in conflicts between strong political ownership and organizational mandates. Still, the overall picture remains positive, thanks to the commitment of the Government of the Philippines in realizing the ‘continuum’ from response to longer-term rehabilitation. The government’s efforts towards re-organizing humanitarian clusters to manage sectors of recovery and rehabilitation, and empowering new institutional arrangements to facilitate the bridging between phases and across mandates may contribute to a more harmonized, comprehensive approach to crisis management.

3. Putting ‘local’ at the center



Societies affected by humanitarian crises are in the best position to respond, recover, prepare and prevent further relapses into calamity. This is not only a re-statement of the national responsibility principle but also an empirical observation. No matter how much the international community is prepared to provide external support, it can never be more than second best. Local actors should be making decisions throughout the whole crisis management cycle: assessing needs, setting objectives, planning implementation, monitoring and evaluating outcomes. Ownership combined with capacity building empowers people and the different institutions originally in charge (or created in response) to come up with the best possible solutions. Strategies and coordination mechanisms for external support in which the local is not at the center are a recipe for trouble. It is true that, depending on the type of crisis (e.g., armed conflict), putting the local at the center can be more or less challenging and may require very careful arrangements not to result in additional harm to the most vulnerable—for instance, affecting humanitarian access. Nonetheless, the centrality of the local remains a fundamental guiding principle.

Honduras after Hurricane Mitch

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch dumped heavy rain across several Central American countries with devastating consequences. In the most affected country alone, Honduras, 5,657 people died, 8,052 went missing and 70% of GDP was lost. The international community hurried to provide support, relief and meet recovery needs through an agreed-upon coordinated effort, known as the 1999 Stockholm Declaration. At the center of the agreement were national plans to help reconstruct and transform already fragile institutions. Donors provided support as a single team, creating a follow-up group working at three levels (i.e., executive, technical and sectoral) that continues to function even now, well after the main disaster recovery process has ended. Challenges abound as, over time, different priorities have been pushed to the top of the list and comprehensive disaster risk reduction (DRR) remains a work in progress. However, the case shows how progress can be achieved by putting the local at the center.

The local in the Syrian crisis

With the war in Syria entering its sixth year, the humanitarian crisis has reached an unprecedented level. Because the nature of the conflict is very diverse in terms of actors, locations and intensity, and even though the UN Security Council has authorized humanitarian agencies to conduct cross-border assistance, approximately 4.5 million affected people live in hard-to-reach areas. With no political settlement in sight, the international community should maximize its efforts to mitigate the humanitarian situation as much as possible in at least two ways. The first entails working toward a cease-fire at a local level in order to reach out to people in need. The second is to try to engage with local actors. Since the collapse of the national public service, numerous local councils and NGOs have emerged in opposition-held areas to assist people. While they face many difficulties, including weak capacity and insufficient resources, local actors lead self-help initiatives at the grassroots level. Although it is hard to define ‘local’ in a war-torn situation like Syria because of conflicting interests and complicated relations with armed groups, the international community should assist in enhancing their capacity and administrative structures in order to enable them to navigate their own humanitarian response and reconstruction process. Both goals are interconnected and should be pursued in tandem. In order to achieve them, local actors should be the prime partners, as local ownership builds and increases resilience within a society.

4. Prevention starts from crisis day one

Ideally, prevention should precede crisis but, in practice, it usually comes after. The actual institutions and capacities for dealing with future threats are formed through the process of relief and recovery. Framing crises as opportunities is very common but the actual process of bouncing back better is not automatic. Prevention and preparedness for future emergencies in places where they have occurred in the past receives less attention across the management of all types of crisis, both in terms of knowledge and funding. This trend needs to be reoriented to promote an understanding of how the momentum for change that crises create can be used in mainstreaming long-term prevention through institutions, technology and capacity building. It is natural for relief-recovery activities to aim toward at least restoring lost assets and rebuilding the original functions to pre-crisis levels; still, the opportunity to enhance preparedness for an effective response and to build back better should not be missed, as it was agreed in Sendai in 2015. Examples of the way forward include the development of early warning systems from the very beginning, sharing the experience of past crises that may reoccur ten or twenty years later and nurturing local systems capable of preparedness, mitigation, prevention and long-term development.



Crisis

Prevention

Conflict prevention in East Timor

Following crises in 1999 and 2006, the international community has generally recognized East Timor as a stable country that has quickly turned the page on conflict and is now focusing on its own development. Specifically, following the 2006 crisis that emerged only four years after the country's independence, the government issued the National Priorities Process (NPP). NPP was a coordination mechanism for '3Ds' so that diplomatic, defense and development actors could work together to address both short- and long-term challenges. In 2010, the Government issued a message 'Goodbye Conflict, Welcome Development'. Furthermore, the formulation of the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) in 2011 was aimed at boosting the transition of East Timor into an upper-middle country by 2030. In other words, conflict prevention has been cautiously incorporated into development.

Nonetheless, at the local level, East Timorese people still worry about land disputes, high youth unemployment, and unresolved disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) issues, all of which could induce instability again. In response to the 2006 crisis, local NGOs supported the community in launching an early warning system (EWS) for possible outbreaks of violence. The community-based EWS in East Timor was created based on a traditional customary practice called 'Tara Bandu', through which public agreement on social problems is achieved. Therefore, by incorporating 'Tara Bandu', the EMS ensured sustainability and legitimacy. The EWS helps people to monitor the security situation themselves, thereby preventing potential disputes from escalating: such as land disputes, youth and veterans issues. The system is also a tool to alert society and the government. Local NGOs share information on conflict risks raised by the EMS to relevant stakeholders, including the government, so that conflicts can be solved in advance. One staff member from a local NGO says, "the system is expected to support conflict prevention efforts in East Timor from the ground," and so it has delivered.

Building back better after the Java earthquake

Earthquake-resilient houses were built following the Java Earthquake in 2006. The Indonesian government developed a simple technical standard covering 'key requirements' for reconstructing houses, and an approval process to ensure construction quality. Moreover, universities and government organizations trained carpenters and workers on the ground. A community-driven approach, originally developed in Aceh, was improved and widely used in housing reconstruction in Yogyakarta. Community groups managed the reconstruction process and funding, empowering the community through ownership. The challenge has been to disseminate safe building practices beyond the recovery phase, thereby demanding further consideration.

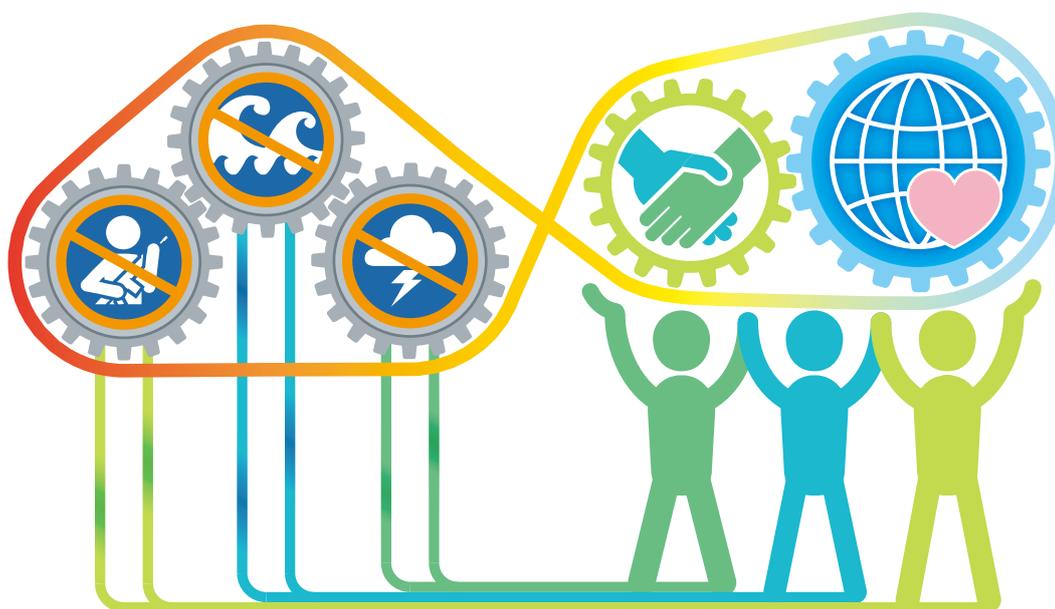


Photos by Kazutaka Isaka/JICA

5. Consolidate a demand-driven rearrangement of crisis-related global cooperation

While the humanitarian-development divide may seem to be an artificial distinction for affected populations, this does not mean specialization is undesirable. Specialization is indeed required in order to confront the complexity of modern crises. It is true that each crisis tends to be unique, but for at least some types of crises responses tend to follow similar patterns and confront similar challenges. For example, after natural disasters it is easier to put the local at the center, make joint needs assessments and coordinate local plans; in the case of armed conflict, this can be more problematic. Pandemics require specific training, strong communication skills and a long-term commitment to ensure functional preparedness. Similarly, protracted crises require long-term commitments that potentiate periods of progress and absorb shocks.

The Sendai Framework for Action is an example of a coalition around a type of crisis that generates agreements on the full management cycle, even at the level of tools. Recent pandemic crises have created momentum towards reform at the global level, while reviews of the Peace Agenda also point towards a reform process. Creating and operationalizing other frameworks for action may be more difficult to achieve but are worth trying. The fact that many organizations remain committed to addressing different crises should be enough to guarantee crosscutting learning. Such a demand-driven rearrangement of crisis-related global cooperation should ensure that comprehensive and effective support is provided from a better position.



Crisis icons from OCHA Humanitarian Icons
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