Can "Preparedness Auditing" make contingency planning actually useful?

Has contingency planning been worthwhile?

Recent years have seen increased interest in contingency planning by many institutions. Different approaches are used by different agencies but usually the steps include thinking about which hazards are the most likely to occur, describing the most likely scenarios and thinking about which programmes would be the best response in each of the most likely scenarios. Some agencies set 'triggers' for deciding in which circumstances a response should take place. In areas such as the Horn of Africa, where droughts and conflict are a repeated problem, many Government departments and agencies have trained staff in contingency planning and have prepared written contingency plans. In principle, these plans should make humanitarian response both quicker and better:

- quicker, because people will know how to monitor any on-coming crisis, and what they are supposed to do when it arises;
- and better
  - programmes will be designed when there is more time for thinking;
  - if we respond earlier, we have more response options and can protect future livelihoods.

Despite a major investment in contingency planning, response to crises in pastoral areas has too often been late. In some cases this has limited the response options to food aid in order to keep people alive, but only after massive asset depletion, with herds almost wiped out either by starvation or by excess sales. In other cases, response was too late to be useful[1], meaning that the limited funds available had been wasted. In such situations, and where there is no confidence that contingency plans will ever be funded, contingency planning quickly becomes a chore that is carried out because it is demanded by superiors. Busy field staff may find it simply an extra burden.

A contingency plan as a tool, not a document

One reason why contingency planning has not fulfilled our expectations is that writing a contingency plan has been an isolated activity conducted by one or two staff, divorced from the ongoing work of the rest of the organisation[2]. If a crisis occurred, there was no way to evaluate either the usefulness of contingency planning or the extent to which contingency plans were actually used. This paper proposes a simple tool for rethinking contingency planning, making it the business of all staff across an organisation.

Make 'step one' the start, not the end

One simple way to make plans more useful is to make the contingency plan the start, rather then end, of the process[3]. In most cases, very little time is needed to decide what the most likely hazards are – in pastoral areas, drought or conflict will usually be top of the list. Equally, there are not that many responses for any agency to choose from in any given crisis. In pastoral areas, agencies' livelihood responses will be usually limited to one or two of the following:

- support to fodder supply (production, marketing, distribution, etc.),
- support to livestock marketing,
- support to water supply,
- support to migration (including financial or practical support, conflict management, etc.)
- animal health (mainly parasite control),
- and cash or food based responses (free distributions, in exchange for work).

Since most agencies (including Government departments) already have a certain degree of specialisation, it should not take too much time to choose one or two appropriate interventions. Real contingency planning can now begin.

Quantifying preparedness

For contingency planning to be useful, preparedness has to be measured. Only then can we

1. know what we need to be doing when (focus on the areas where we are unprepared)
2. manage staff to do it (monitor the improvement in preparedness)
3. improve team work, by giving a single measure of performance to staff right across the organisation.
4. hold both the organisation as a whole and individuals accountable.

Quantifying preparedness is simple, and requires nothing more than a Gantt chart[4] or a wall-planner. Once an agency has decided what it would do in a crisis, it needs to know how long it would take from deciding to implement a programme to the time when the programme really started, i.e. began to provide real services and benefits to real people. Together, staff

[1] For example, fodder was distributed in Ethiopia after rains had finally fallen in 2006.

[2] There are other reasons why humanitarian response in pastoral areas has not been timely, even with good contingency planning. We discuss other reasons in discussion paper # 2.

[3] For more details, see *The RELPA Guide to Early Response*

[4] A Gantt chart is a bar chart illustrating a project schedule.

need to identify all the different steps which would be needed from getting a green light to move – proposal writing, getting funding, signing contracts with donors and arranging bank transfers, recruitment and training staff, purchasing, contracts with service providers, importing, transport, agreements with authorities and communities at local level, etc. Each step needs to be broken down – training may involve identifying a trainer, preparing the training, printing material, identifying trainees, etc.

Then, they need to estimate how long each individual step would take in an actual emergency – remembering that 'best case scenarios' are rare. Since the same staff will be responsible for achieving these response times, they should be capable of reasonable estimates. Some activities can be done at the same time, but others have to wait for a previous step – e.g. it is often impossible to spend money until a donor contract has been signed. A simple Gantt chart will show the shortest 'critical path' through the start up, indicating the total start-up time-line for a project. It is unlikely to be less than two months and for many projects will be at least four months.

Getting prepared: shortening the start-up time-line

'Preparedness' means shortening the start-up time-line. Staff across the organisation should analyse all the activities in detail to see which could be done before a crisis. For example, preparing draft job descriptions and having these approved 'in principle' could save two or three days. Pre-qualifying suppliers could save another two or three days by checking up on trading licences, and would also shorten the time for advertising a tender by over a week. Having draft project proposals written and discussed both within the organisation and with potential donors could save much more time. Ensuring that customs staff recognise and can accept the goods which will need to be imported could save long delays. Working as a team, staff will quickly see that individual 'savings' of one or two days quickly add up to improving response times by weeks or months. None of the steps should involve much expenditure of resources, so there would be little waste if a crisis did not occur.

Creating one team across departments

One frequent cause of delays in organisations is a lack of understanding across different departments. Finance and administration staff may not understand the urgency of certain steps, or even the realities of working in the field: programme staff may not consider the demands for accountability which donors and auditors will make, and don't appreciate the need to follow their organisation's procedures strictly. This exercise will ensure that staff across the organisation talk to each other and understand each other. Finance and administration staff have to discuss with programme and logistics staff exactly what will be needed for the project when and why, and what is needed in terms of procedures in order to achieve this. The 'blame game' should disappear: managers will be responsible for ensuring different departments cooperate, if their own performance will be measured by the length of their start-up time-line.

Timely response as a requirement

In many cases, with innovative thinking, time-lines can come down from three or four months to three or four weeks. This doesn't just mean that we can be faster – it opens up the possibility, for example, of making a decision as soon as rains fail to support marketing or fodder supply, because animals will probably still be alive by the time we are up and running. (Four months later, slaughter may be the only option.) The discussion between implementing agencies and donors can be focussed on the needs at each particular stage in the crisis (e.g. when marketing support will work, when animals will be too weak to migrate) and making sure together that these targets are met – donors funding on time, agencies delivering on time. Donors could even demand a preparedness audit as part of a proposal – if an agency wants money to distribute fodder, it should have to show that it can get it to the animals at the time they need it.

Preparedness auditing in evaluation

Evaluations have often told us we were late, which we usually knew already. An evaluation could include preparedness auditing, either of an individual agency OR of a 'response system' (the combined work of early warning, Government, donor, implementing agency, etc.), in order to tell us exactly where and why response was delayed, and what practical steps could have been taken to make response more timely.

Preparedness auditing as a standard tool will not automatically mean that all humanitarian response becomes timely, appropriate or effective. Ultimately we also need to build livelihood protection into longer term work – disaster risk reduction needs major investment in marketing infrastructure, animal health services, etc. But "preparedness auditing" is a start.

This paper was prepared by PACAPS, part of USAID's RELPA programme. The views contained in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of USAID or any of the other agencies participating in the RELPA programme.

PACAPS would welcome any feedback on this draft. Please send any comments to Simon_Levine@yahoo.co.uk
September 2008