

HYGIENE PROMOTION WITHOUT WATER – WATER SUPPLY WITHOUT HYGIENE PROMOTION: NEW EMERGENCIES AFTER DISASTERS

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ABSTRACT

Recent major disasters such as the Haiti Earthquake and the Pakistan floods have revitalised in an urgent manner the focus on integrated approaches within the WASH sector. While some NGOs and IOs are focussing on the delivery of services such as water and sanitation, others are focussing on advocacy and hygiene promotion. Unfortunately, the two activities often happen at different places and not in coordination. For example, hygiene promotion with focus on hand washing is done in areas where there is no water supply and no sanitation installations. Was the outbreak of cholera in Haiti 10 months after the earthquake a result of the failure of some of these practices? In light of these “emergencies after disasters” it is necessary to take a more critical look at the approaches chosen during the immediate response just after the main disaster. This paper would like to shed light on the urgent need to revitalise the challenging integration of both services and advocacy within individual organisations and within the aid community as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

The aid effort after the devastating earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 again showed the need for an integrated approach in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. Whereas some organisations focus on providing infrastructure and services such as drinking water and latrines, a large number of organisations only provide so-called “software” activities. In addition, there is a lack of coordination and leadership at all levels within and between the different aid organisations. The cholera outbreak in Haiti 10 months after the earthquake clearly shows that WASH services were not provided in an efficient manner in order to prevent the spread of the disease. The changing character of emergencies, from refugee camps with large numbers of people concentrated at one site, to emergencies covering large

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populations and vast areas such as the Pakistan floods, also call for WASH organisations that provide both software and hardware activities. This paper will discuss the need for integrated WASH services, coordination and leadership in aid operations based on experience from Haiti, showing that if software and hardware activities are not combined, there are risks for new emergencies after disasters.

LEARNING FROM OBSERVATION – AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE IN HAITI

On October 21st 2010, a cholera outbreak was confirmed in the Artibonite valley not far from Port-au-Prince. The epidemic spread quickly, and had by December 2010 spread to large parts of the country and was threatening to spread to the Dominican Republic. It was the first cholera outbreak in Haiti in more than 100 years (Voice of America 2011), and by February 2011 it had killed more than 4200 people and sickened more than 215,000 (OCHA 2011). The cholera outbreak showed that the desired impact of WASH programmes had not been reached, however there were a large number of organisations working in Haiti in the months after the earthquake in the WASH sector. What were the factors that contributed to the lack of translation from these programmes into results? It is important to learn from observation during a disaster and its aftermath, so that lessons can be learned and applied immediately, but also for the future.

Although the situation for the aid organisations after the January 12th 2010 earthquake in Haiti was chaotic and the logistical challenges enormous, such situations show in a good way the approaches the aid community are choosing, and how they are implemented in practice. A number of problems were observed concerning the WASH sector about 2-3 months after the disaster; water, sanitation and hygiene activities were carried out in an isolated manner in different settlements without coordination, there was a lack of decision making power in the local representatives of the aid agencies that caused frustration, and there was a general lack of organisations providing infrastructure as opposed to software activities. These three problems are illustrated with some observations from Haiti below.

In the Petit Goave surroundings, some 80 kilometres west of Port-au-Prince, at least 50 spontaneous settlements with populations of 500 to 5000 persons emerged. These settlements mainly consisted of primitive shelters made out of some cloth on sticks to protect against sunlight, but not giving protection against heavy rains. The settlements were provided with a wide range of services by different aid agencies such as housing, food, health services, water and sanitation. However, when visiting the camps daily it was observed that services and infrastructure were provided in a highly uncoordinated and inconsistent manner. As a result of this, about two months after the earthquake there were camps with water services, others with some attempts of latrine construction, while others only received hygiene promotion programmes carried out by trained volunteers. Coordination to make best use of the limited resources was poor, because individual organisations were focusing on their own internal strategies and capacities. As an example, one settlement in the hills behind Petit Goave received prefabricated latrines at an early stage, however, it took

over four weeks to install them properly. At the same time there was no safe water supply in this settlement, while hygiene promotion was ongoing through local volunteers which had been trained by a different organisation. Closer to the town centre, however, water provision was sufficient, while latrines and even plans for sanitation installations were lacking. In a small camp with about 700 persons close to a large number of destroyed houses, one latrine block with only four stances was installed after two months. An appropriate water supply was never installed. A serious attempt was made by local volunteers of an NGO to promote hygiene there, but after a while the programme was suspended because it became obvious that hygiene training without any water and soap did not have the expected impact on the public health situation. Diarrhoea became a severe problem in this camp. Several patients were directed to the reopened hospital in town. These examples clearly show that when resources are limited, it is important to spend them in a coordinated way in order to have the maximum impact. For example, as the organisation doing hygiene promotion in a camp without water supply realised, investing in software activities without the necessary infrastructure is a waste.

These problems could have been solved through improved coordination. Like in many similar emergencies, numerous coordination meetings did take place in Haiti. Experiences from the meetings within the WASH-subcluster in Petit Goave gave a realistic picture of the coordination efforts and their impact on improvements over time in this area. Usually, about 10 organisations participated in the weekly meetings. However, the impact of the meetings was limited because of the lengthy internal decision making processes of different organisations. Most field teams were not authorised to make decisions without the clearance from their headquarters, often located in Europe or the United States. Many field coordinators were frustrated because they would make specific requests to their head offices, only to receive more questions in return. Obviously, the lack of decision making power in the field teams coupled with poor communication infrastructure, made planning and implementation extremely inefficient. Because of this problem, the coordination meetings became mere information sharing forums, without the improvement of WASH services as a result. This shows that the form of leadership in various organisations is still too hierarchical and not distributed to the necessary levels of operation.

A third problem observed in Petit Goave was the lack of organisations willing to improve WASH infrastructure. Of the about 10 organisations active in the WASH sector, only 2-3 actually implemented infrastructure. One organisation provided a number of small scale treatment systems, whereas another was running a large treatment plant. A third organisation was building latrines, although at an extremely slow pace. All the other organisations were active with hygiene promotion and advocacy, sensitising groups within the settlements on hand-washing and proper use of sanitary facilities. However, washing hands without water is difficult, and using latrines which are not existent is even more problematic. The cholera outbreak might be a clear indicator of how big the lack of infrastructure, especially in sanitation, really was. It is now generally accepted that any water and sanitation service delivery programme should be supported by sensitisation and public

education (UNICEF 1999, Fonseca & Minnigh 2009), however, this example shows that the opposite is also true.

NEW EMERGENCIES

One of the explanations of the situation in Haiti is the changing character of disasters. During the 1990s many emergencies were caused by conflict and led to large numbers of people, often several hundred thousand, settling in refugee camps. In such situations, since the population is so concentrated, it is easier to plan and coordinate WASH services and different organisations with different specialisations work side by side. However, during the last ten years, large disasters are increasingly caused by natural phenomena, such as extreme weather caused by climate change. In addition, population growth and urbanisation increase the impacts of for example the tsunami, an earthquake or floods. This means that the relief effort is not concentrated in a single refugee camp, but spread over a large area with a number of small settlements. This was the case after the tsunami, during droughts and floods in West Africa, and the recent Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods. It means that one organisation cannot cover the whole population with water supply anymore, because the geographical area is too big. Reductions in relief money due to the financial crisis make resources scarce and only one organisation in WASH might be able to work in every small settlement. If this is the case, it is extremely important that this organisation can deliver the full range of WASH services; water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion.

HARDWARE VS. SOFTWARE

Why did the organisations in Haiti fail to realise this? Normally, all aid organisations have their character, but they are also limited by their internal policies, visions and mission statements. They are also increasingly limited by the nature of the donations. In addition, once on the ground, it is difficult to make a change in approach due to the challenges in the decision making processes mentioned above. Therefore, it can be observed again and again that organisations adapt their activities not to the need of the people, but to their own speciality. Due to the increased focus on software activities, many WASH organisations do not have the technical expertise to do physical infrastructure construction anymore. Another reason for this could be – formulated very provocatively – that software services are cheaper and easier to provide, and currently easier to get funding for. Results of “soft” services are more difficult to measure, while proper infrastructure improvements are cost-intensive and easy to evaluate in terms of their result and impact. While organisations in the past were criticised for focussing too much on hardware and engineering, there is now a danger that the scale is tipping in the other direction.

COORDINATION AND LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

When organisations become more specialised and professional in their core business, this can have a positive impact on quality. However, there is a danger that with “over-specialisation” their ability to provide the full range of WASH services is lost. This challenges the coordination mechanisms to its extreme and many good intentions seem to be wasted. Cluster meetings struggle to coordinate the efforts of various actors because each of them only covers a small area of intervention. The coordination effort becomes more difficult and costly. In addition, the organisations themselves need to spend time and energy to link up with meaningful partners in order for their assistance to make sense.

At the same time, coordination and forging partnerships is not possible without suitable leadership at all levels. Leadership has to be distributed throughout all involved actors to make efforts more effective at the level they are needed (MIT Sloan 2005). Many actors in disaster response are not aware of their duty to strengthen their capacity in leadership in order to provide the intended services but at the same time following their specific vision. A small team installing water supplies or setting up latrines need a wider understanding about leadership to properly integrate their effort into the overall aid approach. A head of mission has to be fully aware of his or her role in leadership to reach common goals in constructive cooperation with other actors. In addition, as mentioned above, field teams must have the authority to take decisions based on the local situation, in order to make the coordination effort smoother and the meetings more efficient. This involves a change in the decision making processes internally in the organisations. Since disaster management does not have a hierarchical structure and organisations are contributing on a voluntary basis, good and responsible leadership is crucial in order to achieve results.

SMOOTH IMPROVEMENTS

The extent of the disaster in Haiti early in 2010 with the cholera outbreak 10 months later has again reminded the humanitarian actors to rethink their approaches, especially within the WASH sector. Individual organisations both in the health sector and in the WASH sector should stronger try to combine all related aspects in their response activities. Only this will lower the pressure on coordination efforts and increase the effectiveness in providing services. Proper leadership has to be distributed throughout the teams of response actors to make coordination and integration possible at each interaction. Only the competent aid worker with an awareness of his/her role in leadership can reduce pressure on overall coordination. Future training of WASH teams has to contain strong components in leadership in order to take advantage of their professional capacity for the overall aid effort.

As the nature of emergencies is changing, the water, sanitation and hygiene sector needs to provide integrated services to reach the people in a professional manner. Properly integrated services at least within a given sector have to be widened so far that they cover a range of demands. This will increase the constructive contact between aid workers and the population in need and will reduce the number of actors local leaders and authorities have to deal with. In addition, efforts within a given sector can be balanced and more concisely focused to answer on specific, although very local situations.

In conclusion, experience from the most recent disasters shows that there is a need to return to a focus on service delivery by covering all aspects of WASH; software and hardware, as opposed to the general trend in the humanitarian aid community. Only in this way, agencies can efficiently respond to disasters that cover large geographical areas in a climate of limited aid funding. In addition, leadership has to be developed at all levels in order to make coordination easier and service delivery more efficient. The experiences from Haiti show clearly that both software and hardware assistance is necessary in order to prevent emergencies from emerging after disasters, such as the Haiti cholera outbreak in October 2010.

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