

Proposal for Presentation at 2014 DevNet Conference

The Role of Learning in Building Resilience

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We all remember the Indian Ocean Tsunami, when the scale of the disaster overwhelmed the humanitarian system. Approximately, the number of people affected by that event was 2.4 million. Typhoon Haiyan, which hit The Philippines in November last year affected about 14million people. In 2004 – the year of the Tsunami, approximately 110 million people worldwide were affected by climate-related crises. The forecast for people who will be affected by climate-related events alone next year, 2015, is 375 million. Conflict and other types of crisis add to the demand for life-saving humanitarian interventions. Despite significant investment in building humanitarian capacity over the last 20 years, the increase in the scale and frequency of disasters is far outpacing the capacity of the current humanitarian system to respond adequately.

It is generally, though not unanimously, accepted that prevention (or mitigation) is better – and more cost effective - than cure, and Disaster Risk Reduction and resilience-building programmes abound. In reality, capacity to respond in both risk reduction and disaster response modes will always been necessary. Until now, much of the “heavy lifting” of disaster risk management has been undertaken by traditional humanitarian organisations including UN agencies and iNGOs, but this is expensive, and often dis-empowers duty-bearers and affected populations. Increasingly, national governments are taking more responsibility for coordination, and other types of organisation, including businesses and the military are playing a more important role. Despite significant investment in national disaster response legislation and infrastructure, it is still recognised that capacity must also be developed at the local level. The scale and ethics of the situation require that the people affected by crises, and in the best position to respond, are empowered to do so. This includes local organisations, as well as local and national governments.

Since the humanitarian sector has become more “formalised” over the past 30 years, a massive amount of knowledge has been collected and curated in the form of standards, research, case studies, journals and papers, - yet this is inaccessible to the majority of people who are most affected by crises. Conversely, those people who deal with crises regularly have a large store of knowledge in their heads, - rarely written-down, and so inaccessible as learning resources to others who face similar challenges.

In 2011, the British Government commissioned a Humanitarian Emergency Response Review, and largely in response to its recommendations, The Humanitarian Leadership Academy has been initiated, as a global sector-wide endeavour, by Save the Children UK and DfID. The Humanitarian Leadership Academy is expected to catalyse transformational change in the way that capacity is built to respond to increasing demands.

Dunedin-based Chris Cattaway has been consulting for the Academy for the past 18 months. Last year he led an extensive consultation, a series of engagement events and the scoping study for the East Asia and Pacific Region. He has subsequently co-authored the strategy for establishing an Academy Centre in The Philippines – which will be one of the first centres to be set-up.

At the time of writing this abstract, The Academy is awaiting final sign-off from DfID for an initial GBP20m funding. This represents approx. 40% of the first 5 year budget, with the balance to be raised from institutional and corporate sources and partnerships.

This unique opportunity to explore and to plan an initiative of this scale, and deciding how to maximise the potential for the Academy to make change on a transformational scale, has necessitated considerable consultation and reflection. A major component of the work will be to undertake research into what types of learning activities have the most impact.

Clearly, there are already a considerable number and many different types of capacity building programmes around the world. Moreover, even with this unprecedented amount of funding available, The Academy cannot hope to, and would not want to, provide capacity building on a sufficient scale. So, the approach will largely be to facilitate and to broker partnerships, and to seek ways in which The Academy can complement and add value to what is being done already, as well as to engage with a broader range of organisations beyond the traditional humanitarian sector actors.

In particular, capacity building in the humanitarian sector has been characterised by short-term, project-related funding which has not been conducive to longer-term planning aligned to organisational strategy. The Academy will assist organisations; as users and providers of learning products and services, to adopt longer-term Organisation Development / Organisation Maturity approaches, and to utilise Learning and Development approaches to make a broad range of appropriate, contextualised and quality-assured learning resources available worldwide.

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