



Sustainable post-disaster reconstruction projects in remote locations – Darfur revisited

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Introduction and background

Reconstruction projects, such as those conducted in Sudan since 2004, need an effective multidisciplinary planning and management framework, capable of responding to transitional and long-term reconstruction requirements. A preliminary multi-disciplinary framework design managers can use to develop better management and design practices, in the context of humanitarian aid and reconstruction projects in remote locations, was discussed in a previous paper (Kestle, Potangaroa & Storey, 2006). That paper presented the analysis of a selection of the data collected from semi-structured interviews with key decision makers working in West Darfur, Sudan. Analysis of a further selection of collected data from the same Sudanese research case study reviewed the realities and challenges of managing the pre-planning and operational stages of the UN Sudanese Humanitarian Aid project in West Darfur, in terms of managing the logistics, the camps, the stakeholders and communications. The findings offered a range of lessons learned and recommendations for managing future Humanitarian Aid projects, particularly those in remote locations.

The main challenges at the pre-planning and operational stages, according to the participants, centred around the fact that whilst they knew of the emergency situation in West Darfur and of there being IDPs needing care and protection, they knew very few specifics on the scope or magnitude of the emergency before going there. They were basically advised to “assess and fix it”. The participants all noted that there was no real expectation of being briefed but that the briefings they did receive were of little relevance to the actual situation. Statistical information on IDP numbers, available resources and amenities varied, and were therefore unreliable. The situation in Darfur basically evolved and personnel were in catch-up mode rather than being able to pre-plan months in advance. Curiously, the participants noted that the most useful information was gained from watching the news on television and from reading media articles, before going to Darfur. The logistical pre-planning was almost impossible to organise given a complete lack of systems being in place beforehand, and were not easy to set up in fact, given the working environment. In addition there was the issue of the inaccessibility of the site from both political and geographical perspectives.

The pre-planning stages and the operational stages on this project tended to become blurred, given the short lead –time, and the unreliability of statistical data. The lack of pre-planning and organisation of resources, whether labour or materials or infrastructure / systems / processes, created barriers to achieving any meaningful outcomes initially. There was unanimous agreement amongst the participants that the remoteness of the site seriously impacted on the project and their roles. There was a view that “remoteness was the enemy of the programme”. The distance between Khartoum and Darfur added to the problems in terms of getting supplies through intact, if at all. The only realistic and relatively reliable form of transportation involved planes, given there were no properly formed roads, only marginally formed airstrips and no formal airport facilities. However, according to the participants, there was never any real certainty as to when the planes may arrive or leave, nor what resources would be on board, and materials not locally available would have taken 5 weeks by road , but there were no roads as such. The materials were frequently looted, or there were floods, or heavy rains washed out the roads / tracks damaging or completely destroying the resources.

West Darfur is considered to be the most remote area of the three Darfur states (North, South and West) and this contributed significantly to the communications challenges noted by the participants. There was consensus amongst the participants that the management of communications’ systems and processes were either non-existent initially, or were unreliable at best. The camps were inaccessible by vehicles and Darfur was not serviced by fibre –optic cable nor satellite technology, so phones were the only form of telecommunication, in association with a Pulse mailing system. Reporting systems to HQ in Khartoum relied on a mailing system, and given the ever-changing nature of the emergency, reported information was quickly outdated,

In terms of the lessons learned and recommendations suggested by the selected participants for managing Humanitarian Aid projects future projects, four that are particularly relevant to the pre-planning and operations stages are noted here:

1. Simple operating systems be set up for say computers to respond more effectively with, given the primitive nature of the area.
2. There should be a clear plan of the area and an initial plan of action and priorities before or as the relief personnel are brought in for the Emergency and Recovery Phases.
3. The developed and planned future activities need to be recorded and available to the subsequent managers and groups of aid personnel, as there is a lack of institutional memory with people moving on, and the next group tend to re-invent the wheel each time.
4. Mobile offices are needed, such as converted containers or caravans that are self-contained modules with UHS radios and email systems that are already operational before the specialist technical, field operations and relief personnel are brought in for the Emergency and Recovery Phases.

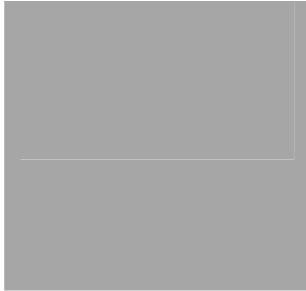
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Authors' Biographies

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