Knowledge communities and the tsunami response

Experience from the Crisis Prevention and Recovery Community of the UNDP

Gita Swamy

When the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the shores across South and South East Asia and East Africa in December 2004, many lives were lost, livelihoods were destroyed and hard-earned development gains were set back decades. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) country offices and headquarters together with many other local, regional and international organizations responded quickly to the needs caused by the destruction in all affected countries. UNDP quickly deployed its experts for advice and guidance on tsunami related recovery initiatives. Within days, UNDP's internal and global community of practice on 'crisis prevention and recovery' was mobilized to assist affected countries. Over a period of 6 – 8 weeks, this community of practice and others within UNDP were actively and intensely supporting UNDP offices in the tsunami-affected areas through the provision of knowledge advisory services. How did this support unfold and what were the main lessons learned?

Crisis Prevention and Recovery Network: developing a community

In 2001, UNDP created the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, establishing the topic as one of its priority areas to help strengthen UNDP's capacity to respond to crisis and post-conflict situations, as well as contributing to the prevention of their reoccurrence. Emergency response was not necessarily the main priority for this bureau – as there are other UN agencies primarily dealing with this – focusing rather on the link between emergencies and longer-term development.

The Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Network (CPRP Net) was established a year later. CPRP Net, a global community of practice, links UNDP staff on crisis prevention and recovery issues. The main purpose of the CPRP Net is to contribute to strengthening capacity at the country level and thus improve UNDP's overall organizational performance. This is done through:

1. Providing opportunities to access new and updated information, lessons learned and best practices related to crisis prevention and recovery;
2. Facilitating exchange of knowledge and experiences at the country, regional, and global levels; and
3. Harmonizing organizational policies and priorities by providing closer linkages between headquarters' thematic units and country offices.

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The CPRP Network functions partly like a moderated mailing list: messages sent to the group (cprp-net@groups.undp.org) go first to the network facilitator. This allows the facilitator to ask the sender for clarifications if needed, before sending messages on to the network members.

The mailing list function of the network is supported by regular regional face-to-face meetings of Crisis Prevention and Recovery practitioners, to discuss and further develop latest operational and policy related challenges and approaches. A UNDP Intranet provides easy access to relevant information in the area of Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice: a one-stop shop capturing knowledge and information, and providing tools such as guidelines, templates, terms of references and information on programme management and funds.

The Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Network is part of UNDP's larger practice area on Crisis Prevention and Recovery and is linked to other important activities in this area, such as policy development, community building, knowledge management, advocacy, communication and learning, to name a few.

Since its inception, the CPR community has developed into a lively virtual network that provides a discussion forum for knowledge exchange, support and advice. The network is part of UNDP's knowledge network structure. Developed in 1999, it has since expanded to create knowledge communities for all of UNDP's practice areas and other areas of special concern. Today, the main networks follow a common model: they are moderated by network facilitators and coordinate major initiatives. The referral system is a key activity of all networks, allowing network members to seek and provide structured advice that can be transformed into easy access knowledge products.

The CPRP-network group has steadily grown into a full-fledged community of practice, including more than 1100 colleagues working in UNDP programming countries on issues related to peace building, post conflict reconstruction, disaster management and risk reduction. CPRP Net member participation in the referral system and electronic discussions has doubled in the last year. While the network addresses a broad range of issues, queries and group discussions have been dominated by the topics of natural disasters, post-conflict peace building and integrating disaster risk into the local and national development policies.

In response to the tsunami

Within a few days of the tsunami disaster, the first query was launched on the CPRP-Net and the Information and Communication Technology Network. The Maldives had lost all their lines of communication and needed to identify the best available technology to restore island communication. Within a week more community members working in tsunami-affected countries were requesting advice from the CPRP-Net on such issues as livelihood recovery strategies for Sri Lanka, resettlement schemes for coastal areas in India and post-disaster governance issues in Indonesia, to name just a few. It soon became apparent that while most queries were related to the crisis prevention practice central to the CPRP-Net, they were often strongly linked to

other internal knowledge communities such as democratic governance, poverty eradication, energy and environment, information and communication technology and gender. This required close cross-community cooperation and coordination of queries, advice and preparation of knowledge products. As such, regular tsunami-update e-mails were sent to all members of the network and an internal tsunami website was set up to facilitate access to all relevant information and documents.

As UNDP field offices moved from immediate disaster relief to longer-term recovery a few weeks after the tsunami, the CPR-community, together with all other key practice networks, developed a knowledge advisory approach, whereby the greatest knowledge needs of UNDP offices in tsunami-affected countries were identified and channelled into a virtual discussion. To better serve the cross-thematic nature of knowledge needs, the discussion was divided into three broad topics to be guided by different networks: strengthening livelihoods in post-disaster, linking post-disaster recovery with conflict sensitivity, and fostering participatory approaches.

Key lessons learned

1. *Be prepared!* What is true for all activities in emergency and post-emergency settings is also true for knowledge communities: they need to be prepared. In order to respond effectively to such sudden requests as those that surfaced after the tsunami, it can be useful to anticipate possible scenarios and think these through as part of the community activity. While the CPRP Net was able to respond immediately to requests from colleagues working in tsunami-affected countries, streamlining all related requests and activities across UNDP's communities and networks, whilst at the same time developing a systematic response approach was initially challenging.

   All in all, 'being prepared' does not necessarily mean developing elaborate scenarios for each possible disaster, but thinking through cooperation and collaboration mechanisms that can unfold quickly, building on existing capacities and systems. While rapid reactions and preparedness for such emerging topics are the bread and butter for knowledge communities working solely on emergency response, more general development-oriented knowledge communities might want to reflect on the inclusion of such preparedness aspects so that if called upon, they too can fulfil their role in facilitating access to knowledge.

2. *Cooperate and collaborate across practices.* In the first few days after the tsunami, it became apparent that the scale of the disaster affected not just a few programmes, but whole country operations, especially in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. The scope of destruction went beyond the limits of Crisis Prevention and Recovery issues, affecting and relating to governance, environment, poverty and ICT-themes. This broad range of issues called for a coordinated approach of all relevant UNDP knowledge communities, rather than an isolated community focus. Cross-community collaboration was the key to a successful and demand-driven provision of knowledge services within UNDP.

3. *Encourage a flexible knowledge community.* In the aftermath of the tsunami, members of UNDP's knowledge communities, varying from on poverty reduction to Information and Communication Technology, used their thematic community as their primary point of reference and guidance. While some of the communities had no prior experience with disaster related recovery issues, there was a need to flexibly adapt to new requests, identify experienced members and work with a number of the communities' external partners, especially with members of the CPRP Net. The result was increased and effective cooperation with other networks on the one hand, and the inclusion of disaster risk and recovery issues into other UNDP networks on the other hand.

4. *Define and limit activities.* In emergency and recovery situations, needs for assistance are numerous and demand a variety of support services. A knowledge community can provide only a certain kind of support for specific areas related to its expertise, leaving other support areas to be covered through other means. Defining beforehand – as part of the preparedness – what kind of support services a knowledge community can offer in such relief and immediate recovery situations can help target its assistance and increase effectiveness.

   UNDP's mechanisms and internal institutions reacted very rapidly to the tsunami and developed quick and systematic responses on how to support UNDP offices on the ground, cooperate with other UN agencies, support needs assessment exercises and mobilize resources. Given the wide range of these activities, the knowledge communities took a few days to define their specific niche to go beyond existing services, yet cater to the emerging demands from tsunami-affected country offices which they were equipped to respond to.

5. *Timing is key.* Post-disaster contexts are rapidly evolving situations that can only be effectively assisted if response is quick and timely. Due to the voluntary and evolving nature of community discussions, it is not necessarily possible to ensure communities adhere to external guidelines and provide their input sufficiently quickly. However, in post-disasters context, this timely delivery is key and opportunities can be lost if timing is off.

6. *Balance the needs of community members.* In the first view weeks after the tsunami, attention, queries and discussion on the network focused on tsunami response. This was a natural reaction to the extent of the destruction and the need for advice; as such, network members strongly supported the needs of their colleagues working on tsunami recovery. However, after a few weeks the community tended towards more balance between the topics at hand and spontaneously emerging needs of the network members. Once this balance was achieved, the relevance of network responses improved, addressing wide-ranging needs of a global community simultaneously dealing with a number of disasters, conflicts and violent crisis, whilst maintaining coherence. In such situations, community moderation becomes critically important: while suddenly emerging topics such as tsunami response should evidently be given priority, this has to be carefully balanced with other topics that are of no less urgency for other network members, but, at such a time, perhaps less visible on the global agenda.

Conclusions

The tsunami response demonstrated the strength of UNDP's knowledge network system, in terms of members' willingness to cooperate and coordinate in a time of crisis, whilst maintaining flexibility and adaptability to changing needs. However, it also uncovered room for improvement within knowledge communities, especially insofar as they were ready and equipped to respond effectively. All in all, the critical success factor for knowledge communities in disaster response turned out to be their ability to quickly mobilize members for ad-hoc and rapid action and adapt a niche approach effectively complementing other on-going activities.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are personal views of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the UNDP.

About the author

Gita Swamy is the Knowledge Management Coordinator for the Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Area of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) based in Geneva. In this capacity she has started and facilitated UNDP's Crisis Prevention and Recovery Practice Network. Previous to this, she has worked on development and crisis prevention issues in Kenya, Sri Lanka, Germany and other countries. Gita holds degrees in Political Science and Development Studies.