

The Role of Humanitarian Organisations in the PNG Drought Response

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Abstract

Humanitarian organisations played an important role in the PNG drought response of 1997. During the drought, humanitarian organisations implemented traditional disaster response activities and also trialled a range of nontraditional responses that were more oriented towards community development. Churches, international organisations and local humanitarian organisations involved in PNG often have unique knowledge and experience that can determine the effectiveness of disaster response strategies in particular communities. This paper provides an overview of the response of humanitarian organisations to the PNG drought. It concentrates on nontraditional activities and lessons learned through the experience of nongovernment humanitarian organisations.

Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, church organisations, humanitarian nongovernment organisations (NGOs)—national and international—and community-based organisations (CBOs) are collectively referred to as humanitarian organisations (HOs). Most of the information in this paper was obtained from Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA) PNG files relating to the drought response and from discussions with other HOs. Information on involvement of other organisations was provided by the respective organisations. I have attempted to make information on organisations as complete as possible in the time available, but some organisations were not able to be contacted or were not able to provide information.

Position of Humanitarian Organisations in Communities

The long-term relationships that HOs have with communities in which they operate, and their unique local knowledge can be invaluable when planning or implementing disaster response or mitigation programs. HOs have a range of strengths and weaknesses in relation to disaster response (Table 1), which were clearly illustrated throughout the 1997–98 PNG drought response. They gathered valuable information during assessment visits to communities and through reports from communities or field workers. This information was often able to alert provincial authorities and the drought committee to serious community needs. In addition, HOs have a knowledge of community dynamics that affect efforts to distribute aid in communities.

However, while there are significant strengths of HOs in large-scale disaster situations (such as drought) in PNG, there are also some serious weaknesses that sometimes limit their effectiveness. The most serious of these is the limited communication between organisations and their unwillingness at

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Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of humanitarian organisations in disaster response.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Good communication with communities	Lack of communication between organisations
Knowledge of practices of communities	Lack of systems to collect information in a useful form
Knowledge of power structures and leadership in communities	Lack of knowledge of what useful organisations exist
Knowledge of needs in communities	Lack of knowledge of what organisations have a presence in particular areas
Knowledge of history of communities	Lack of interest in disaster response and mitigation
	Lack of knowledge of how their systems and presence could be used to mitigate a disaster or assist in disaster response at very limited cost
	Sometimes unwilling to assist outside of their immediate constituency
	Dependency of many on external funding

times to work outside their own constituencies or project areas. It was pleasing that, during the PNG drought, there were much greater levels of cooperation between HOs than there had previously been. The effectiveness of HOs during the 1997–98 drought provides a model for cooperation and communication between HOs.

Humanitarian Organisation Networking During the PNG Drought

HOs have been criticised for failure to coordinate their activities during a disaster such as the 1997–98 PNG drought. Lack of coordination has led to duplication of activities in some areas while other areas receive no assistance from HOs. A further criticism is lack of coordination between national disaster coordinating bodies and HO activities on the ground. PNG’s national disaster plan establishes coordination mechanisms to reduce this problem, but the effectiveness of those mechanisms is dependent on the cooperation of individual HOs and government departments involved in the disaster response. In some previous disaster situations there has been a reluctance by some HOs to coordinate activities through the PNG Red Cross (PNGRC) which, in the national disaster response plan, provides HO representation to the national disaster committee. This has

been the case particularly where international organisations have established a presence in PNG specifically in response to a disaster, without any ongoing commitment to the country or any knowledge of national coordination methods.

There are few NGOs in PNG with the capacity for rapid disaster response. During the onset of the drought, PNGRC and leading HOs communicated very closely and were determined that coordination would occur effectively between HOs and government bodies. Accordingly, contact was initiated with organisations likely to be involved in the disaster response to encourage their involvement on the national HO coordinating committees hosted by PNGRC. These committees held meetings throughout the drought and most organisations involved in the disaster response participated in them. This proved invaluable to HOs in coordinating activities, setting standardised operational guidelines and communicating HO activities to the national drought committee and the various sectoral subcommittees. This coordination meant that there was little duplication of effort or lack of communication between HOs. This drought-response mechanism demonstrates that the provisions of the National Disaster Plan can work and indicates that it could form an effective model for future disaster response and mitigation activities. However, it remains dependent on the willingness of individual organisations to be involved in this kind of coordination.

Case study: localised networking

At a more local level, the importance of communication and networking was demonstrated through the effectiveness of the Morobe Province NGO *kibung*¹. The *kibung* was formed by the HOs of Morobe Province to facilitate communication and coordination between organisations in the province. The *kibung* has been very effective in this role. During the onset of the drought, the *kibung* met to discuss how each organisation could most effectively be involved in the drought response. There was general recognition that not all organisations would have access to additional financial resources—but all organisations demonstrated a willingness to help where they could. Through active dialogue, and with only limited financial resources, the *kibung* was able to find means to establish many small-scale activities that collectively had a significant impact.

Examples of activities coordinated by the *kibung* include the following.

- *Scouts*: they required only bus fares and some lunches to be able to distribute leaflets throughout

¹. *Kibung* means a meeting, or meeting place, in Melanesian Pidgin.

the province or get them placed on public motor vehicles and in public areas at government stations and around towns. ADRA, Lions and Soroptomists were able to provide financial support.

- *The Appropriate Technology and Community Development Institute (ATCDI)*: the ATCDI was able to very economically put together information leaflets for distribution by the scouts, published by Word Publishing. Financial support for printing of leaflets was provided by ADRA, Lions and Soroptomists.
- *General coordination*: through coordination of NGO activities, a much more accurate understanding of the impact of drought in different areas was gained, which was useful in implementing HO activities. In addition, this information was provided to the provincial government through the provincial coordinating committee.

Table 2 lists a number of NGOs involved in all parts of PNG that networked with the NGO Drought Committee. It gives some idea of the wide range of organisations contributing to the relief efforts and the scope of the activities in which they were involved.

Table 2. Sample of nongovernment organisations (NGOs) involved in drought response and their activities.

Organisation	Areas of activity
Adventist Development Relief Agency	Humanitarian organisation (HO) coordination Food/commodity distribution Funding of community-based organisations (CBOs) Water supply Agricultural training Seed distribution
Anglican Church	Food distribution Seed distribution Water supply Health promotion
Appropriate Technology and Community Development Institute	Development and printing of resource materials
Australian Volunteers International	Volunteers
CARE Australia	Food distribution Seed distribution
CARITAS	Food distribution Medical assistance Seed distribution Water supply projects

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Table 2 (cont'd). Sample of nongovernment organisations (NGOs) involved in drought response and their activities.

Organisation	Areas of activity
Evangelical Brotherhood Church	Seed distribution
Foundation for People and Community Development	Food distribution
Lutheran Development Services	Food/commodity distribution Agricultural training Seed distribution
Lions/Lionesses	Food distribution Funding of CBOs
Morobe Province <i>kibung</i> (a nongovernment organisation)	HO coordination
PNG Red Cross	HO coordination Food/commodity distribution Funding of CBOs Disaster response training Water supply
Rotary	Financial support to NGOs
Save the Children Fund	Food distribution/logistics Seed distribution Water supply
Scouts	Information dissemination
Soroptomists	Funding of CBOs and NGOs
Word Publishing	Articles in <i>Wantok</i> newspaper
World Vision	Food distribution

Case study: cooperation between church organisations in agricultural aid distribution

Church representatives attending the national coordinating meetings in Port Moresby agreed to try to ensure that distributions of aid covered all church groups. Thus, it was clear in reports to other HOs and to government that a whole area had been covered by a particular distribution, which was not limited to one denominational group. It is difficult to ascertain how effective this was and not all churches participated. However, there are specific examples of where this cooperation did occur and was effective.

ADRA commenced disaster response activities by expanding its water supply program. Subsequently, funding was provided by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) to expand the water supply program and to initiate a distribution of seeds once rainfall began. A number of options for distribution were considered. Ultimately a joint effort

between ADRA, Department of Agriculture and Live-stock (DAL) and four church organisations was undertaken. ADRA's distribution was implemented by DAL and by the Anglican, Lutheran, Evangelical Brotherhood and Seventh Day Adventist churches.

The example set by this joint effort demonstrated that the churches could work cooperatively to help everybody. Ultimately, with funding from AusAID through one humanitarian organisation, several churches worked together in cooperation to ensure all people in distribution areas received assistance. If churches are able to cooperate in this way, they provide an excellent way to cover almost all parts of PNG. Further consideration needs to be given as to how to establish effective ongoing relationships between churches, so that similar cooperation can occur in the future. It is also important to find ways to extend the involvement of those church groups that remained exclusively focused on their own constituents during the drought response.

Traditional Distributions as Disaster Response

The advantages and disadvantages of traditional relief distributions are listed in Table 3. Typically, in disaster situations, the immediate reaction by HOs is to provide distributions of commodities to solve immediate needs and allow communities to re-establish. During the PNG drought, the major needs were food and water. At times there was also a need for shelter and other household goods due to wildfires that occurred as a result of the very dry conditions. Disaster relief distributions are absolutely necessary in times of critical need but, if provided on an ongoing basis, tend to create dependency. Many parts of PNG already have a culture of dependency on external assistance both in times of disaster and for ongoing development initiatives. It is important that both humanitarian and government organisations seek to overcome this dependency wherever possible. This will only be achieved through ongoing preparedness programs and not by continuing to resort to handouts when disasters occur.

The impact of the PNG drought was unusual in that the lack of water and length of time without rainfall would not necessarily have caused a national disaster in most other parts of the world. Many areas stricken by the drought were affected as much by lack of preparedness, and the social and political environment, as they were by the severe climatic conditions. This is an issue that needs to be addressed directly through national programs implemented by government and NGOs. However, it also needs more indirect approaches that help overcome the culture of depend-

ency and engender an environment where people are more willing to do more for themselves.

Disaster Preparedness and Response Through Development Activities

During the drought response, a number of development programs were commenced or expanded by NGOs, in addition to more traditional means of commodity distribution. These included:

- agricultural training;
- water supply installation;
- nutrition education;
- traditional food-source education; and
- postdisaster training.

The development approach requires significantly more predisaster planning and skills, and programs are more difficult to quantify, plan and implement. However, they can have a much longer term impact and, if implemented prior to natural disasters, could ameliorate the impacts of events such as occurred during the 1997 drought in many areas of PNG. The advantages and disadvantages of a developmental approach to disaster response are listed in Table 4.

Analysis

NGOs are attempting to create programs that can help to address the issue of dependency throughout the country. It is likely that a long-term development program aimed at reducing the impact of disasters such as the drought would ultimately be much more cost-effective than continuing to implement disaster responses. Greater analysis of some of these programs

Table 3. Advantages and disadvantages of traditional relief distributions.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Provide rapid relief to people in need	Encourages dependence on repeat assistance
Easy to standardise	High cost when implemented repeatedly
Immediate results	No training to avert future disasters
Fixed and known costs	Difficult to ensure that people most in need are assisted
Fixed and known timeframe	Can create community conflict about who gets what
Well known methodologies	
Appealing to media and the public	
Good public relations for donors	
High commodity cost, low personnel/administration cost—attractive to donors	

Table 4. Advantages and disadvantages of a developmental approach to disaster response.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Longer-term impact	Rapid implementation during disaster response may reduce long-term impact
Can reduce the impacts of natural events	Requires considerable predisaster planning
Cost effectiveness	Less attractive to donors as they do not have the same fixed timeframes and quantitative results
Significant education components	Difficult to standardise
	Difficult to estimate costs
	Difficult to estimate timeframes
	Generally less appealing to media and the public
	Public relations for donors generally more challenging

may enable a selection of them to be adopted by government in the national development program. While it is not possible to fully analyse these programs in this paper, two case studies are presented below to encourage further discussion and research in this area.

Case study: cost effectiveness—installing a water supply system rather than delivering food

During the 1997 drought, ADRA compared the cost of supplying food to various communities with the cost of implementing a water supply system that could supply sufficient water for irrigation and drinking. In most cases, it was significantly more cost-effective to implement a water supply program than to feed a community for three weeks. This illustrated that if a water supply program could be implemented immediately, it would have been less costly to install a very basic irrigation system for them to continue to grow food in their own gardens during a drought, than to feed people, even if it started raining within three weeks. Furthermore, in many communities the installation costs could be justified by the cost savings in just one disaster situation, which is an outstanding payoff for an infrastructure item that benefits the community in both disaster and nondisaster periods.

There were some villages in Morobe, Madang, Milne Bay and New Ireland provinces where ADRA was able to achieve this and those villages had plenty of food throughout the drought while other surrounding villages were struggling for food.

The tendency to move gardens regularly could reduce the long-term effectiveness of fixed irrigation systems, but creative approaches to this situation that

are appropriate to local culture could be effective. For example, where a village has decided to locate permanently in one place and a gravity feed water system is installed, it is possible to design overflows from filters, tanks and pressure breaks so that overflow from the system during off-peak times can be used for agriculture. Even if the community locates gardens elsewhere during normal seasons, they at least have the option of getting water to a particular area for gardening in a drought situation. Pipes with taps could be run some distance from a couple of the overflows, at very little extra cost, for use when the community required them.

One community in Morobe Province relocated gardens to areas within their tank overflow and the runoff from their tap stands, and used their dish and clothes-washing water on their garden plants for pest control. They had an outstanding crop of a wide range of food in a severely drought-affected area, throughout the drought. The total system and training cost less than feeding the community for three weeks with the distribution package developed for drought relief.

Case study: low-cost humanitarian organisation involvement—information dissemination by PNG scouts

Many organisations do not have the funding to get involved in commodity distribution or water supply programs. However, they are still willing to be involved in whatever way they can. During the drought, the scouts demonstrated how effectively a small organisation could be involved. In Morobe Province, they attended every meeting of the Morobe NGO *kibung*, making themselves available to everybody. They never requested significant funding to be

involved in activities, simply enough to cover their modest expenses. They were involved in design of brochures and in distribution of information. They were the key channel for getting information to many remote parts of Morobe Province. Organisations, such as the scouts, given appropriate training and resources from other humanitarian organisations, would be willing to be involved in activities in communities if there was funding available for ongoing disaster prevention and mitigation activities. This is a simple way that organisations with a strong desire to be involved, excellent relationships with communities and teams of volunteers can have a very significant impact on communities at minimal cost. There is immense scope for more effective partnerships between NGOs and CBOs with support from the donor community, in order to achieve the sort of outcomes seen during the drought response.

Concluding Comments— Implications for Nongovernment Organisations

Table 5 lists the factors that affected the severity of the 1997 drought in PNG. Clearly the effectiveness of and the need for disaster response activities depends largely on levels of preparedness prior to disasters. HOs in PNG are at the forefront of disaster preparedness activities in the country and play an important role in disaster response. In Morobe Province, the ADRA water supply program and the Lutheran Development Service (LDS) *Yangpela Didiman* programs had a significant impact on the need for disaster response distributions. The LDS *Putim na Kisim* program and the ADRA Small Enterprise Development program are beginning to have a positive impact on savings levels in participating communities and

demonstrate the feasibility of more widespread community banking services for rural areas. Ongoing water supply, agriculture, credit, business, health education and disaster preparation training programs from a wide range of organisations are able to have a significant long-term impact, reducing the need for disaster response. These education and community development-oriented programs are cost-effective when compared with reliance on disaster response strategies and need to be looked at much more closely by the government and donor organisations when considering approaches to disaster response and food and nutrition issues in PNG.

NGOs are beginning to better prepare for disaster responses. The PNGRC and ADRA are developing national disaster response and mitigation plans for their respective organisations as a result of experience gained from the drought. After the drought, the Lutheran church hosted a workshop on lessons learned and disaster preparedness; the Baptist church and University of Technology were also involved. As disaster response plans are prepared, there is a growing awareness of how disaster mitigation can be tied in with regular development programs.

The collective HO response to the 1997 PNG drought was a very positive experience for NGO involvement in disaster response. Lessons learned from this experience can be applied to future disaster situations—but more importantly, they can form the basis of a more sustained, development-oriented approach to disaster mitigation in PNG. NGO, donor and government organisations involved in development assistance and disaster response need to look at ways to reduce the impact of disasters in communities, rather than simply responding to a disaster as it occurs, if they have a genuine interest in the welfare of the PNG community.

Table 5. Factors affecting the severity of drought.

Direct	Indirect
Lack of water supply for irrigation	Law and order problems—making distribution very difficult where it was needed
Lack of diversification of agriculture	Loss of many traditional food sources, dependency on store goods (affects existing nutritional levels and hence vulnerability to disaster; affects savings levels)
Lack of knowledge of how to use water in agriculture	Lack of access to infrastructure/banking services
Lack of savings	Lack of education on disaster mitigation and need for savings
Loss of knowledge of alternative food sources	Lack of government services in agricultural extension and health and nutrition education
Lack of access to land	
Lack of effective government systems for distribution	