

The centrality of risk management to Concern's work

Introduction

Over the last five years, the Emergency Unit has developed policies and delivered workshops related to security, disaster risk reduction and the protection of programme participants that have considered how we analyse and respond to risk and vulnerability facing both communities and our programmes. The concept of risk management is also, in many ways, the thread running through the humanitarian principles and practice workshops we have been delivering over the last two years.

The aim of this paper is to suggest that the adoption of a more consistent approach to the identification and management of risk may improve the quality, appropriateness and sustainability of our programmes by improving our contextual analysis, programme targeting and emphasising the linkages and complementarities within and between our development and humanitarian interventions.

Our Operational Context

All of Concern's long term programmes are in countries that fall in the bottom forty of the HDI or have substantial proportions of their population living in extreme poverty. Given the cyclical nature of disasters in many of the countries in which we work, there is an evident need to link our humanitarian responses to these disasters with a broader approach that addresses underlying causes and vulnerabilities if we want to seriously address the causes and impact of poverty. Many of the countries in which we work are experiencing or recovering from conflict; have weak, under-resourced systems of governance; and suffer from inappropriate and unsustainable policies. In addition, many are located in areas that are prone to floods, droughts, tropical storms, earthquakes and land slides - hazards which are often exacerbated by, or are a direct result of, poor policies and practice. The HIV/AIDS pandemic and the frequency of malaria have particularly high impacts on many communities with whom we work as they are highly dependent on their own labour.

Generally speaking, the poor are most at risk from these hazards as they tend to be economically, socially and physically marginalised. They have fewer resources to draw upon, have less influence over decisions affecting their lives, and may be forced to live and make their living from areas that have a high degree of exposure to multiple hazards. It is generally accepted that development is unsustainable without a proper understanding of how and to what extent communities are vulnerable to disasters, and the establishment of interventions which minimize this vulnerability.

To this complex web of interacting hazards we must add climate change – a phenomenon likely to have a predominantly negative effect on the countries in which we work. The prolonged drought experienced across southern Africa in the last seven or eight years that is making maize production increasingly difficult, and the recent flooding in Kenya and southern Somalia, are consistent with what climate change models suggest we can expect in these areas in the long term.

This pattern of recurrent hazards contributes to chronic hunger and food insecurity and wide scale environmental degradation, and puts the lives and livelihoods of the poorest under enormous and continual stress. The fact that we are not surprised by drought in the Horn of Africa, abuse of power in Sudan, conflict in DRC, pervasive corruption in Tanzania, storms in Haiti, falling life expectancy in Southern Africa, flooding in Bangladesh, or the marginalisation and lack of influence enjoyed by the socially disadvantaged illustrates the predictability of the stresses facing the poor in the countries in which we work.

This context of complicated and interacting risks threatens the lives and livelihoods of the poor. If Concern is to achieve its mission to “help people living in extreme poverty achieve major improvements in their lives which last and spread without ongoing support from Concern”, we need to work with the poor in helping them manage risk in its many manifestations.

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Risk Management

Over the last few years we have used a working definition of risk as being the frequency of exposure to a hazard or hazards, and the magnitude of their impact on people's assets and livelihoods. We have considered impact to be directly related to the degree of vulnerability of an individual or community.

Particularly in regard to our work around DRR, we have taken a broad view of hazards. In addition to the more orthodox hazards associated with weather, geology, and biological threats - diseases and pests that affect humans, crops and livestock, we have explicitly recognised conflict, poor policies, poor governance and the impacts of climate change as posing hazards to the communities with whom we work.

We have also taken a consequently broad view of risk, incorporating the concept of 'extensive risk' which is characterised by large numbers of highly localised events which affect relatively few people and economic assets but due to their cumulative impact over years of cyclical recurrence, can corrode the assets of the poor to a greater extent than better publicised major disasters which may result in widespread death and destruction.

The magnitude of impact that any hazard or set of hazards will have on an individual's or a community's assets and livelihoods is directly related to the vulnerability of those individuals. Vulnerability describes why individuals and communities are not able to anticipate, cope with, respond to or recover from hazards and their impacts.

In Nyamlel, south Sudan, a risk analysis exercise identified a small group of farmers at risk of losing a significant proportion of their crops every second or third year because of localised, low intensity floods. These farmers were participating in an agricultural diversity programme but, because of the regular eroding of their asset base, were not benefiting from the programme in a sustainable fashion that could lead to the establishment of more livelihood options. The vulnerability analysis identified that they could not manage this risk because they lacked appropriate tools to construct an earth bund to protect their fields – something which was easily addressed by the programme – an intervention that had an immediate impact.

In essence, risk management is very simple - it requires that we address the scale, frequency, intensity or impact of a hazard, or people's vulnerability to a hazard, or both. In practice, it requires a careful contextual understanding of the nature, cause and interactions of the many types of hazards, and identifying why communities are unable - or only partially able – to manage the risks that face them as a result of these.

The complexity and nature of hazards facing poor communities are such that it may not always be possible to introduce measures to reduce their frequency, magnitude or scale, particularly in the short term. For example, when looking at the risks facing those in displaced camps in northern Uganda, the underlying hazard facing the community was conflict. While it was not realistic for Concern or our partners to resolve this, risk analysis suggested areas where we could help the displaced reduce their vulnerabilities to some of the consequential risks associated with the conflict. These included issues around firewood collection, the siting of water points, the location of latrines and protecting particularly vulnerable groups such as child headed households.

Risk Analysis – an approach to holistic contextual analysis and quality programming

In addition to reinforcing our commitment to responding to humanitarian crises, Concern's current Strategic Plan focuses the organisation on four programme sectors through which we will seek to realise our mission of contributing to the elimination of poverty: health, HIV/AIDS, education and livelihoods. These areas of activity are to be informed by a number of cross cutting issues including gender and equality. In practice, these activities have at times seemed to be separate programmes that compete for resources and prioritisation rather than complementary activities that collectively contribute to the elimination of poverty.

Contextual analysis and understanding are fundamental to quality programming and must be carried out in such a way that it allows decisions to be made not just in relation to geographical and sectoral targeting, but also to allow links to be made and complementarities to be found between our preferred programme

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interventions. Risk and vulnerability analysis must be at the heart of the highest level of analysis that we make when seeking to determine where we should work in any given country, and what we should do there, supporting a more holistic contextual analysis that will inform and prioritise programme choices, practice and quality.

Risk analysis aims to identify the nature, characteristics, inter-action and causes of existing hazards and to anticipate future ones which could threaten poor people's assets and livelihoods, identifies their impacts, and establishes who are the most vulnerable to these and why. Risk analysis should include an analysis of micro and macro issues, and of their linkages between them, as this will highlight the underlying causes of poverty such as inappropriate policies, poor governance and the denial of rights. Responding to risk of this nature would require long term advocacy programmes that would necessarily be complemented with programmes to reduce vulnerability, so as to make appreciable differences to poor people's lives in the shorter term.

In Zambia, the longer-term advocacy programme may be to strengthen the capacity of the health services to deliver anti-retrovirals to those who are HIV positive, but this is being complemented by subsidising the cost of diesel mills in villages, a measure which reduces the increased workload on women resulting from the reduction of available labour in the community resulting from sickness, death and nursing responsibilities.

Risk analysis, by its nature, is not restricted to one programme sector, and therefore helps draw together the most important issues for a community, facilitating the easier integration of programme sectors, cross cutting issues and potential areas for advocacy at the outset of programme identification and design. It informs geographical and sectoral programme choices, the affects of poverty as well as the root causes, identifies trends, contributes to the anticipation of future risk, and helps prioritise programme choices by grouping and ranking hazards into a hierarchy. It may also suggest how best to protect our programmes and so ensure their greater sustainability.

A preliminary risk analysis in the central highlands of Angola illustrated a number of these points. The Concern programme was intending to focus on an agricultural diversity programme, education, HIV/AIDS awareness, and support to the government's decentralisation process. However, risk analysis identified malaria as a principal hazard as it not only threatened the health of the poor, but could also have undermined the sustainability of the proposed programme activities. The peak malaria season coincided with the peak agricultural labour requirements (in an area that had lost most of the draught animals and was thus highly dependent on human labour) and would result in lower participation rates in the programme. The schools programme would be jeopardised because the incidence of malaria would lead to poor attendance as children would either have been sick or needed to provide substitute labour for sick adults, and the cost of medical care would mean the diversion of limited money resources from school expenses. In response, Concern determined that, assuming further data collection and analysis confirmed the disease as a major risk, helping communities to address malaria - through expanding the roles of existing partners or encouraging specialist malaria focussed organisations to work in the area - would have to be an essential complementary activity to the programmes already identified.

Conclusion

Our mandate directs us to work in a group of extremely poor countries, many of which are regressing economically, almost all of which are threatened by recurrent hazards, and all of which have large – and in many cases increasing – numbers of people living in absolute poverty.

Given the predictable nature of hazards in almost all of our target countries, and their impact on the poorest people living in them, the key issue for us is whether the more consistent analysis of risk and vulnerability could contribute to improving programme appropriateness and quality and to the eradication of poverty and, if so, how we ensure that this analysis becomes a central approach for the entire organisation. As such, we would welcome a wider discussion over the proper role of risk and vulnerability analysis in our overall approach to programming.