**Contribution of NGOs in Complex Emergencies.**

Overview.

Complex emergencies are usually associated with widespread destruction of property and/or massive displacements of populations. They are also associated with increases in morbidity, mortality and the potential for disease outbreaks is usually high. Consequently complex emergencies require rapid and coordinated response in order to deliver essential services to the affected population and reduce the likelihood of increase in morbidity, mortality and outbreaks.

Complex emergencies tend to attract 3 major actors i.e. bilaterals (governments of individual countries), multilaterals (e.g. UN agencies involved in relief work like OCHA, UNHCR etc) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The military is also being increasing recognized as a major actor in emergencies. NGOs can be local or international and they play a crucial roll in delivering various forms of services in complex emergencies. They vary greatly in terms of financial, technical and operational capacities. Traditionally in complex emergencies there has been an inappropriate tendency to place undue prominence on international NGOs. This is partly due to the bigger resources, both financial and human, that these international NGOs have. But local NGOs with their limited resources but great knowledge of local situation can have as much or greater impact in terms of delivering services to displaced populations.

**Strengths of NGOs as actors in complex emergencies.**

Complex emergencies tend to pose varying levels of political and security risks. Consequently different actors approach complex emergencies in different ways, depending on their political and security considerations. On the other hand, among the actors in complex emergencies, NGOs have the least barriers to entry in the disaster zone. In addition NGOs have other strengths that make them ideal actors in emergencies. These strengths include;
1. **Ability to respond fast**: most major relief NGOs have established protocols on how to respond to emergencies, be it man-made or natural disasters. They also have readily available human, material and financial resources for use in emergencies. In addition, they have capacity to rapidly mobilize additional resources for use. All this makes NGOs able to respond rapidly to complex emergencies. In many situations, NGOs have been the first to arrive and start delivering services even before the bilaterals and multilateral partners arrive, and in some cases even before host governments.

2. **Flexibility**: most NGOs, both large and small, do have the capacity to adapt rapidly to changing environments. Many bilateral and multilateral partners have rules and regulations that sometimes hinder their operations. For example, many bilaterals and multilaterals have stringent security precautions which in some instances may hinder service delivery to populations in great need. In addition, both bilateral and multilateral actors have to consider host government concerns which in some instances may hinder delivery of services in complex emergencies.

3. **Manoeuvrability**: NGOs can reach many hard to reach areas and populations. Some well endowed NGOs have their own air or sea transport capabilities and this makes them able to reach practically everywhere.

4. **Creating public awareness**: being part of the civil society, NGOs traditionally have good links with the media. NGOs have used their relationship with the media to create public awareness and maintain focus on issues they consider important. This relationship with media can be extremely useful in complex emergencies as it not only creates awareness of the situation but also encourages donors to provide support. This interaction of NGOs and the media was particularly crucial in the initial stages after the tsunami when the full impact and destruction had not been fully comprehended by many people, including political leaders in the affected countries.
NGOs and health service delivery in complex emergencies.

In terms of providing health services in complex emergencies, NGOs play a very significant role. This role is both short term, in the emergency phase of the disaster, and also long term, during the reconstruction phase. For example in both the Liberia and Rwanda crises, NGOs were not only the first on ground, but at some point were responsible for about 95% of the health care delivery. Today, a considerable proportion of health services in both these countries are still provided by NGOs. It is important to note that both the Liberian and Rwandan crises happened more that 10 years ago and NGOs are still rendering services. In Liberia NGOs, have even been involved in designing national treatment protocols e.g. for malaria. In South Sudan and Somalia, where there has been long standing conflict, NGOs have assumed key roles in delivery health care to the population. Some of the key public health services provided by NGOs in emergencies include;

1. Curative services
2. Assist in disease surveillance.
3. Vector control.
4. Training and health education.
5. Water and sanitation.

In the early stages of the emergency in Aceh, NGOs provided a bulk of the curative services. In addition they also were the main sources of disease surveillance data. Vector-control activities to prevent malaria and dengue fever outbreaks were initially provided by NGOs and military groups. Harnessing the potential that NGOs offer in complex emergencies is something that needs to be stressed.
Challenges faced by NGOs.

Despite the huge potential and strengths that NGOs have in disaster response, there are challenges that they face in the course of doing their work. The main challenges include:

1. **Lack of big picture;** this is particularly a big problem for small NGOs, which do not usually have established connections with governments and multilaterals. As a result they are not aware of what is really happening on the ground in terms of the scale of destruction, number and location of displaced people and priority services that need to be offered. This may lead to NGOs engaging in projects that may not be priority or that are not sustainable after they leave.

2. **Poor coordination;** in complex emergencies, having a strong coordinating body is key to the successful delivery of services to affected populations. Where there is no coordination, NGOs may end up having duplicate projects in the same area, or may all be working in one location and totally undeserving other affected populations. In many instances when the work of NGOs looks haphazard, it is usually due to lack of strong central coordinating mechanism.

3. **Being ignored;** host governments tend to preferentially deal with bilaterals and multilaterals and in many instances tend to ignore NGOs especially in decision making. Also reports or concerns from NGOs that are considered to be non-technical NGOs are not taken seriously. Yet because of their presence and interaction with affected populations, NGOs especially local ones are in a better place to correctly identify the needs of the affected population. For example, in Aceh, it was a local NGO that repeatedly mentioned and finally raised awareness concerning the lack of water and sanitation services among a group of IDPs in a remote location.
Improving the effectiveness of NGOs.

Improving how NGOs work in complex emergencies would go a long way in enhancing delivery of various services in emergencies. Host governments, bilaterals and multilateral partners need to understand and appreciate that NGOs do have a central role to play in disaster response. They should not be seen as competitors, but as actors who if properly involved and engaged can improve the humanitarian response in complex emergencies. Some practical things that can be done and that would greatly strengthen the way all actors work in emergencies include creating greater links between host government, bilaterals, multilaterals and NGOs. There should be a clear effort to seek out and engage NGOs in joint projects, needs assessments etc. Also NGOs need to be involved in the decision making and policy formulating process. There must be a deliberate effort to seek out and incorporate the views of NGOs. Training of NGO staff both at headquarters and field level is another thing that would go a long way in enhancing the technical capacities of NGOs. This kind of skills and knowledge transfer will not only enhance the cooperation among various NGOs, but will also standardize methods used by the various partners. Finally the work of NGOs needs to be recognized and appreciated. This is especially so for the small local NGOs who need to be encouraged as they are key players in the humanitarian response. While they may not be able to match the major international agencies in terms of human and financial resources, they usually compensate for that with excellent local knowledge and understanding of the affected population.

Conclusion.

NGOs have always been and will continue to be involved in complex emergencies. It is thus necessary for all actors to come together and formulate a common response to complex emergency, maximizing on the strengths of different players. Promoting public awareness and stimulating donor response is key to a successful response to disasters. NGOs must be encouraged and supported in the roles they do best. This will result to rapid and efficient service delivery to affected populations.

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