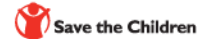




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Good Practices in Humanitarian Assistance: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The Good Practice Paper series of the NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project* aims to highlight examples of practices identified within the project's four focus countries (Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe), that contribute to effective implementation of the humanitarian reform agenda. The purpose of the papers is not to address problems nor do they necessarily capture the whole picture. They are not intended to make definitive recommendations.

Background

This Good Practice Paper focuses on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It looks at how non-food items (NFI)/Shelter Cluster members work together to give populations more choice and control over the humanitarian assistance they receive.

In an attempt to provide affected communities with more choice and control over the assistance they receive, humanitarian organisations have increasingly opted for cash and voucher-based interventions in preference to in-kind assistance in recent years.

In 2005, the American non-governmental organisation (NGO) Catholic Relief Services (CRS) piloted cash as an alternative to direct distribution in DRC. CRS partnered with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2008 to apply this method to NFI assistance, as well as expanding the use of the approach within the NFI/Shelter Cluster. They also encouraged other stakeholders to look into the possibility of using this alternative methodology, since the benefits for crisis-affected populations are well documented. The experiences of various NGOs have since fed into NFI/Shelter Cluster reflections, and proactive collaborative cluster work has increased the profile of cash-based alternatives in humanitarian assistance.

Rather than highlighting the practice of cash-based methodologies, whose benefits and pitfalls have been shown abundantly in studies and practice, this Good Practice Paper focuses on how cluster members are improving the way assistance is delivered.

Piloting an alternative approach

CRS already had significant expertise in running seed and tool fairs when they piloted cash as an alternative to direct distribution in 2005. UNICEF was interested in building on this expertise, and approached CRS in 2008 about applying this alternative method to NFI assistance. After running successful pilot programmes, UNICEF and CRS – which are respectively national cluster lead and co-lead – built on their collaboration in 2009 to expand cash-based interventions within the cluster. They encouraged UNICEF's implementing partners,¹ as well as other cluster members, to look into the possibility of trying this methodology too.

The escalation of fighting between rebels and the Congolese armed forces in autumn 2008 forced thousands of people to leave their homes in the Kivus. Concerns were raised that assistance to displaced people living with host families (the vast majority), and indeed to vulnerable host families themselves, was not being prioritised as highly as the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the newly emerging camps. The realisation that items from NFI distributions often ended up in the markets also prompted reflections on the appropriateness of the assistance provided.

The NGO Concern, which had been implementing a livelihoods programme that targeted vulnerable farmers with seeds, tools and livestock through fairs since 2004, gave families the option of using cash vouchers to pay school fees in 2008. For its part, CARE piloted an open voucher programme where beneficiaries could also buy food and shelter material.

These initiatives showed that recipients preferred fairs over the distribution of goods, because fairs offered them more choice. An additional benefit was the injection of cash into local markets, which benefited other community members as well.

All the partners in these programmes publicised their experiences and debated the pros and cons both within and outside the national and provincial clusters. The flexibility of the methodology, the limited technical know-how required and the fact that it offered the possibility of avoiding the logistical hurdles often experienced in DRC convinced more organisations to observe and implement fairs. Training sessions held in conflict-affected provinces (easily accessible to cluster members) also included sessions on cash and voucher methodologies to popularise the concept and to initiate discussion of wider implementation.

Fostering acceptance

At this stage, there is wide-ranging evidence that cash and voucher approaches have been broadly accepted and are likely to be expanded further in DRC:

- The concerted NFI/Shelter Cluster's 2010 strategy in the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) includes the specific objective of reinforcing, improving and expanding the use of vouchers, fairs and cash approaches in the NFI/Shelter sector. The cluster also aims to give 50% of NFI assistance in the form of cash-based voucher programmes.
- Joint UNICEF-CRS training sessions on cash- and voucher-based methodologies for interested organisations are underway. The two organisations will also release a study on the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of cash-based voucher fairs in June 2010, as well as practical information about how to implement NFI/Shelter material fairs.
- Concern and CARE are implementing multi-sectoral vouchers and cash transfer approaches in North Kivu addressing food, non-food, shelter, education and health needs. AVSI, IRC, NRC and Solidarités plan to continue cash-based voucher programming.
- Several cluster members or observers (including the International Committee of the Red Cross, various local Caritas branches, Asadem and Oxfam Quebec) have observed the fairs and have expressed an interest in implementing this approach.
- Donors too have accepted the approach: the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM), Irish Aid, the Office

¹ Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI), Solidarités and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

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A chance to influence the humanitarian system

of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the UK Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), the Pooled Fund and European Commission Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) have already funded cash or voucher-based programmes. ECHO's 2010 strategy encourages implementing partners to use innovative approaches in NFI/Shelter interventions based on a response analysis.

- Reflection is under way in other clusters. For example, the Food Security Cluster has been implementing seed and tool fairs, but has come up against the obstacle of limited availability of agricultural inputs on the Congolese market; the cluster is currently looking at ways to overcome this. Meanwhile, more and more organisations in the Education Cluster are resorting to voucher-based assistance for school fees.

Critical Role of the Cluster

Combining open and dynamic cluster members with the convergence of interests between the largest NFI provider in DRC (UNICEF) and a pioneer in voucher and seed fairs (CRS) – which were respectively national cluster lead and co-lead – has prompted effective moves to give beneficiaries more choice in the assistance they receive.

The NFI cluster lead – UNICEF – has been instrumental in the expansion of the methodology. UNICEF has been open to innovation, and to reaching out to organisations with proven expertise in the field. Their collaboration on the methodology with implementing partners under their Programme of Expanded Assistance to Returns (PEAR) and Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) programmes has been crucial for other organisations to gauge the impact of larger-scale interventions. They helped to catalyse experience and expertise and allowed partners with an existing track record to implement and adapt the approach. They were also flexible enough to turn a bilateral project into a joint cluster undertaking, with training on cash and voucher fairs open to all members and a guidance manual in development. They advocated for the method to be implemented in crisis settings too, and consistently encouraged other clusters to use the cash-based voucher/fair approach.

This can be seen as textbook practice, in line with Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) generic Terms of Reference (TORs) for cluster leads. The TORs call for cluster leads to: *“Ensure utilization of participatory and community based approaches in sectoral needs assessment, analysis, planning, monitoring and response”* and *“Promote/support training of staff and capacity building of humanitarian partners”*.

As a cluster co-lead with experience in fairs, CRS has been very active in advocating for this type of methodology to be tested, and has consistently encouraged donors and other operational actors to adopt it.

Cash and voucher programming pioneers CARE, Concern or Oxfam have readily engaged in exchanges with other actors, and cluster members have been active in questioning the way humanitarian assistance was provided. This prompted discussions, reflections and debates in and outside of the cluster, with various actors piloting projects, reaching out to other organisations and clusters, and observing fairs.

Throughout the process, the cluster truly provided a discussion forum and training space and strived to improve the quality of interventions. The links between the national cluster in Kinshasa and provincial levels (North Kivu,

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South Kivu, Ituri, Katanga) were made through regular sharing of information and strategic workshops, allowing for synergies and parallel dynamics in other provinces as well.

The practice was institutionalised by inclusion in the 2009 Humanitarian Action Plan NFI/Shelter Cluster strategy, with limited objectives. It was further developed in the 2010 HAP, this time with much more ambitious objectives: 50% of NFI assistance to be delivered through cash and voucher schemes.

Active communication efforts have helped to popularise the concept, as well as answering practical concerns about implementation in a conflict-sensitive context. Cluster members publicised their experiences and invited other organisations as observers to their fairs. OCHA joined in the promotion of the methodology by making a film called *“Soko Muzuri”*, which was presented to the humanitarian community and the press. Humanitarian Advocacy Group (HAG) presentations promoted the interest of other stakeholders – particularly donors. Exchanges within the Inter-cluster also brought about cross-sectoral discussions.

Complementarity

Out of the five Principles of Partnership (PoP) endorsed by the Global Humanitarian Platform in July 2007,² complementarity was best illustrated in the collaborative approach adopted by cluster members.

UNICEF, as the cluster lead and largest provider of NFI, acted as a catalyst, helping to mobilise funds, nurturing the debate in various provinces, advocating for the approach to be institutionalised in emergency contexts, but refraining from direct implementation. CRS readily shared information and trained interested organisations in the methodology. International NGOs with the required programme experience implemented the projects in those areas where such approaches could work. Donors observed the fairs, bought into the approach and accepted to fund it where proposed.

However, local NGO involvement has been limited. Some local NGOs – primarily Caritas branches – have implemented fairs as subcontractors for international NGOs or partners. Several others have participated in reflection workshops or training sessions on the methodology. However, their involvement in the debate to date has remained limited. Further examination is needed to identify and tackle the obstacles that are preventing their involvement.

As a step towards improving the process, local and national organisations with the greatest knowledge of and access to beneficiaries in remote parts of DRC should be encouraged to take part in the cluster debates, as well as observing fairs to see whether this methodology is the best solution for local priorities.

² The Principles of Partnership (PoP) are: equality; transparency; result-oriented approach; responsibility; complementarity. See www.globalhumanitarianplatform.org.

Conclusion

This example of good practice shows the potential value of an active cluster leadership, co-leadership and membership in: identifying innovations; institutionalising them in a common approach; learning lessons; and promoting lessons learned and best practices more widely to promote buy-in for the approach at other levels.

Furthermore, it shows that innovations that are beneficial to the people humanitarian organisations are striving to assist do not necessarily need to be costly endeavours, but rather require an openness and willingness to consider new approaches.

It remains to be seen whether the dynamic will transcend the NFI Cluster and become more institutionalised as a programme approach that is widely adopted by the NFI Cluster membership, and indeed by other clusters.

The biggest challenge is reaching out to local NGOs. After all, it is the populations served by humanitarian organisations and their representatives that will ultimately define whether cash- and voucher-based schemes are a way forward for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

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