International Disaster Relief

How can we move from a reactive to proactive business response?

Part of Responsible Business Week 2014

Introduction

Summary
Governments and the humanitarian community around the world are struggling to cope with the frequency and scale of international disasters.

Over six tables, senior business, INGOs and government representatives discussed the key opportunities and challenges to business engagement in international disaster response, recovery, mitigation and preparedness.

The following highlights some of the key challenges and learning.

Long term partnerships

Collaboration

Unique business contribution

Business expertise, products and services

Full cost of partnerships

Resources and capacity investment

Long term partnerships – benefits and challenges

Dr Jane Cocking, Humanitarian Director for Oxfam led the discussion. Too often NGOs, like Oxfam, are unable to take advantage of the unique business contribution, (products, services and skills) in the response stage of disasters. Dr Cocking stated “once a disaster has occurred we, like many others, in the humanitarian community respond immediately with prepared and sometimes complex systems and require all our resource to focus on the main priority of saving lives. While we want to engage the non cash business offer at this stage, it is very difficult for us to facilitate as need to make sure the support is valuable and appropriate to, such things as, need, culture and environment.”

Stéphanie Pullès, Head of Corporate Responsibility, Bouygues UK said “our architects, engineers and town planners are highly skilled, with the technical and practical expertise needed to help rebuild vital infrastructure - from homes to hospitals - providing emergency and longer-term support to communities affected by natural disasters.

“Part of the preparation involves rigorous training before colleagues are deployed to affected regions, so they have a realistic idea of what to expect when they hit the ground. We couldn’t do this without the support of our NGO partner, Emergency Architects, and here at Bouygues UK we are very proud of the benefits we are able to bring to communities worldwide as a result of this partnership.”

To maximise the benefits of the collaborative disaster relief by business and the humanitarian community, preparation and long term commitment appear to be key. Time invested in advance of a disaster leads to better communications and understanding of each partner’s contribution of expertise and ultimately to greater effectiveness.
Collaboration

The second of our tables hosted by Claire Hitchcock, Director, Community Partnerships Europe & EMAP at GSK examined best practice in collaboration in disaster preparedness. Nick Murdoch, Global Head of Aid & Relief Services at DHL discussed its ‘get airports ready for disasters’ programme with the UNDP; “During the first 48 hours the local community will be the first to respond so it is important to build local capacity in preparation of disasters. Through its workshops in disaster prone areas, DHL trains ‘onsite’ in the airports thus maximising local preparedness.” Katie Armstrong from Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited highlighted how they use the local knowledge of their employees and clients, and existing local relationships with NGOs to assess how best to respond to disasters.

Rowan Johnson, Senior Partnership Manager with the British Red Cross added “we map communities at risk from disasters and this helps us identify where we should focus our preparedness activities and programmes. We are always happy to share this information with business to identify how best they could engage. For example, the potential for Kathmandu to suffer from a major disaster in the next 15 years is high and we are currently working there on strengthening infrastructure.”

Businesses can combine their local expertise and their global resources to enhance disaster preparedness. Working collaboratively with an NGO can provide insight and help focus activity which can again maximise the impact. In her summing up, Claire Hitchcock stated; “For every £1 spent on preparedness, £4 is saved in post disaster response. In any commercial enterprise this makes perfect sense and looking at the bigger picture this saves time, lives and livelihoods.”

Unique business contribution

Bob Gibbons, Humanitarian Programme Manager, CHASE, DFID led a discussion on the barriers and solutions to unique business contributions that go beyond cash. Barriers identified included lack of clarity from both sides on what businesses can provide in disaster response to support relief agencies. Abi Griffiths Price from Hitachi Europe suggested NGOs and DFID could help businesses understand more about what are the challenges so business can identify their skills and resources that match the need. Jayne Brownbridge from Grant Thornton emphasised the importance of creating shared value which can then be used to identify and create the appropriate touch points where relationships can develop and again the need can then more effectively be matched to resource.

Communications and transparency again arose as the important attributes of a successful partnership. The identification and contribution of key individuals at different points of each organisation, for example leadership and field level, can provide support for the partnership management team that will enhance essential knowledge and understanding.

Bob Gibbons concluded that with the increase of disasters affecting employees, supply chain and markets the social and business case for greater engagement is great and will only increase with globalisation.

Inspiring action

Kate Gibson, Vice President Corporate Responsibility, IHG opened the debate on the role of business in disaster relief with “Businesses can and are using their resources to make a positive impact in disaster relief, the challenge is how can business do it better, make full use of all their assets and scale it up.” Better communication to build understanding again came out strong for creating success in partnerships between business and the humanitarian community. In addition the table discussed how to build the business case internally for disaster relief programmes and the need to engage all levels of employees. Representatives from IBM, Bank of New York Mellon and Bain and Co. suggested employee engagement is important and that the millennial employees are extremely enthusiastic about the sustainability of our planet and want to build resilience in our society while strategically linking to the employer’s business agenda.

Harmonie Limb from Oxfam also challenged business to think about the more sensitive or long term complex disasters taking place in Syria or the Central African Republic. “We have since the 2004 tsunami seen greater activity by business in such disasters as Haiti and the Philippines which is amazing. The next level up for business would be to use their technology and resource to help those affected by what we call the forgotten emergencies that sit under the media radar. The annual flooding in Bangladesh or the long term conflict in DRC affects millions of people and the need for business support is significant.”
Full cost of partnerships

Jay Aldous, Director of Private Sector Partnerships from the World Food Program examined how to understand the full cost of non financial partnerships and asked if and how we should attribute a financial value, and whether this would provide a greater understanding of the benefit.

Full cost recovery of in-kind support from business, it seems, is not necessarily communicated very well. This can lead to businesses being frustrated by a perceived lack of interest in products and services by the humanitarian community. Jay Aldous explained “A business can offer such a variety of goods that would be very much in demand in a relief situation. For example, a business in Europe can offer 2 tonnes of emergency supplies for a disaster in Asia. I think we need to be able to communicate effectively with that business the cost of moving, managing and monitoring that contribution. That is to say air and land transportation, customs and legal requirements, storage (likes fridges for medical supplies) and even personnel costs for those who will need to manage distribution. It is these costs and sometimes the appropriateness of the goods that restricts NGOs ability to accept the goods. The positive point however is if discussions about in-kind support can take place before a disaster strikes, more in-kind support can be utilised and benefit the victims of disasters.”

Richard Ellis, Director of Corporate Social Responsibility for Alliance Boots discussed their relationship with International Health Partners (IHP) to which it provides medical supplies; “investing time and resource in our relationship with IHP has led to a greater understanding of need and the development of a mutually beneficial and streamlined working arrangement. Through our discussions we have been able to provide them with a stockpile of goods applicable to every disaster and when a disaster strikes, we can send additional supplies that are specific to the needs of the people affected. Building a successful relationship takes years not months.”

Resources and capacity investment

Celia Moore challenged the group to focus on how to develop the best strategy of engagement around disaster relief partnerships. Three key points were highlighted as essential, namely; complete a disaster risk analysis of your business so you can link these risks to the activities of the programme which will drive buy-in from management and also get real commitment beyond philanthropy. As Bill Royce from Weber Shandwick stated “use the language of your finance people and talk about the risk as a when and not if. Finance will support you if they feel confident that you are identifying real risks to the core business.” Secondly determine the business’s ‘unique contribution’ and sphere of influence that could span your supply chain, customers, geographical coverage etc when deciding what and when you could assist your NGO partner. And finally identify and build a bank of skills and products that can support your partners when a disaster strikes.

When developing partnerships both business and the humanitarian community agreed that the first step is to determine in advance the basics of the relationship. Matt Sparkes, Global Head of Corporate Responsibility, Linklaters suggested “getting a framework agreed and signed off by your legal team commits both sides. The framework rather than a full contract will allow you flexibility to change and adapt to need.” In addition be clear and consistent in the nature of the commitment. Hannah Barrett, Community and Social Responsibility Manager for RFU added “even companies with the best intentions can make it hard work for themselves and the NGOs if they are unsure as to what they can deliver short and long term.”

To find out more about the BITC International Disaster Relief programme, including the recent survey analysis to be published in October 2014, please contact Jane.Smallman@BITC.org.uk