

Business engagement in emergency preparedness and response



Overview

Businesses have played an important role in humanitarian preparedness and response. In the first days after many major disasters, local and national businesses play a crucial yet often unacknowledged role in the humanitarian response. Global firms such as Unilever, Google, UPS and BT are also rising to meet humanitarian challenges, whether by providing funds and materials, by restoring critical services or by developing new technologies and approaches.

The global nature of business has made it particularly important for business leaders to pay attention to humanitarian issues given that disasters and other humanitarian crises can affect employees, customers and suppliers, as well as critical infrastructure. The role of private sector engagement in emergency preparedness and response is poised to grow as longstanding humanitarian challenges such as conflict and disasters are joined by a new range of risks, including urbanisation, climate change, pandemics and technological interruptions.

Partnerships focused on emergency preparedness and response between aid agencies and businesses are becoming increasingly common. For instance, the IKEA Foundation and the UN refugee agency UNHCR have worked in close partnership to introduce new, more durable shelters to house displaced people. Businesses are also increasingly engaging with humanitarian challenges independently through research and development, or by helping to get urgently needed goods and services into crisis-affected locations.

Below is a summary of key findings regarding the opportunities and challenges inherent in business engagement in humanitarian preparedness and response from a recent study by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute, the Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) at King's College London, Vantage Partners and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), with support from the UK Department for International Development (DFID).¹ The study included case studies in Kenya, Jordan, Indonesia and Haiti, as well as by discussions with key humanitarian and business leaders.

Opportunities for further engagement

Aid agencies regularly engage with businesses to improve emergency preparedness and response. While humanitarian organisations are always interested in innovative opportunities, specific needs for business partnerships exist in the following areas:

- Improving communication between affected people and emergency responders on the ground during a disaster.
- Strengthening needs assessments and information management (i.e. the ability of responders to understand what is happening on the ground).
- Accessing expertise during a disaster (e.g.

¹ See the final report of this study: Steven A. Zyck and Randolph Kent, *Humanitarian crises, emergency preparedness and response: the role of business and the private sector – Final report*, July 2014.

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A Syrian refugee in Lebanon with an Electronic Card that allows him to feed his family

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- legal, cultural, linguistic, scientific and transportation experts).
- Enabling the rapid recovery of key services (e.g. cash transfers, telecommunications) and the resumption of supply chains into crisis-hit areas.
- Preparing regions, individuals and businesses to better respond to humanitarian emergencies.
- Providing professional development opportunities for aid agency staff.

Barriers to further engagement

A range of barriers limit collaboration between businesses and humanitarian agencies. These include a number of basic issues:

- Businesses and aid agencies often use specialist vocabularies which each side may not be familiar with.
- There are few online and in-person forums for businesses and aid agencies to interact, share information and formulate collaborations.

- Businesses and humanitarian agencies are frequently not aware of the numerous ways in which they could collaborate, thus limiting their deliberations to financial donations and other more basic forms of engagement.
- Thinking about private sector engagement in humanitarian action is often left to aid agencies' fundraising offices and businesses' communications or corporate social responsibility departments, with technical specialists playing a relatively minor role.

Strategies for further engagement

The study pointed to a number of tangible strategies for businesses to consider as they continue to engage in emergency preparedness and response. While further recommendations are outlined in the full final report of the study, the points below are particularly pertinent for businesses interested in strengthening humanitarian planning, partnerships and innovation.

PLANNING

Ensure strategic and operational dialogue takes place between businesses and aid agencies in disaster-prone countries

Regular, in-person meetings between key business, humanitarian and government figures help to build trust and relationships which can then be leveraged to prepare for or respond to crises.

Create simple materials to help humanitarian organisations understand how to collaborate with businesses

Publications, videos and podcasts would help aid agencies to better understand business structures, processes, terminologies and contributions and the rationales for supporting humanitarian action.

Participate in exchange programmes between key businesses and aid agencies

Short-term exchange programmes between businesses and aid agencies, which have yet to be established, can enable technical specialists and others to gain an understanding of their respective approaches and the challenges they face, thereby enabling them to identify opportunities for collaboration.

PARTNERSHIPS

Ensure business partnerships with aid agencies are easy to 'activate' during a crisis

While partnerships between businesses and aid agencies often take time to develop, private sector and humanitarian staff members in crisis-affected countries may be uncertain how to 'activate' these partnerships when a disaster strikes. The procedures governing these partnerships should be clearly understood by key personnel.

Support aid agencies in designing online systems for matching business inputs with humanitarian needs

There is a need for businesses to work with aid agencies to reviewing existing humanitarian-business portals and design an easy-to-use and trusted website where business resources can be matched with humanitarian needs. This is one area where technology firms have significant capacity relative to aid agencies.

Partner with other businesses to drive humanitarian preparedness and response efforts

Multinational companies can help local firms in crisis-prone countries to better prepare for or respond to disasters, whether independently or through the Global Compact Local Networks. Global banks, for example, have successfully worked with local microfinance institutions and small banks in parts of Africa to strengthen cash transfer programmes and contingency planning.

INNOVATION

Establish innovation hubs to deal with key dilemmas facing humanitarian

Research and development hubs between aid agencies, businesses, universities and other interested institutions encourage humanitarian innovation by building upon the c humanitarian challenges which can be rolled out by aid agencies, business and others.

Document and measure the impact of private sector engagement in humanitarian action

There are many examples of powerful ways in which businesses have supported humanitarian action. However, to enable companies to refine their approaches and partnerships – and to demonstrate the value of their humanitarian work – it will be increasingly important for them to study their work internally and to welcome independent, external evaluations. This will form the basis for a broader process of lesson-learning between businesses, aid agencies, governments and others involved in humanitarian action.