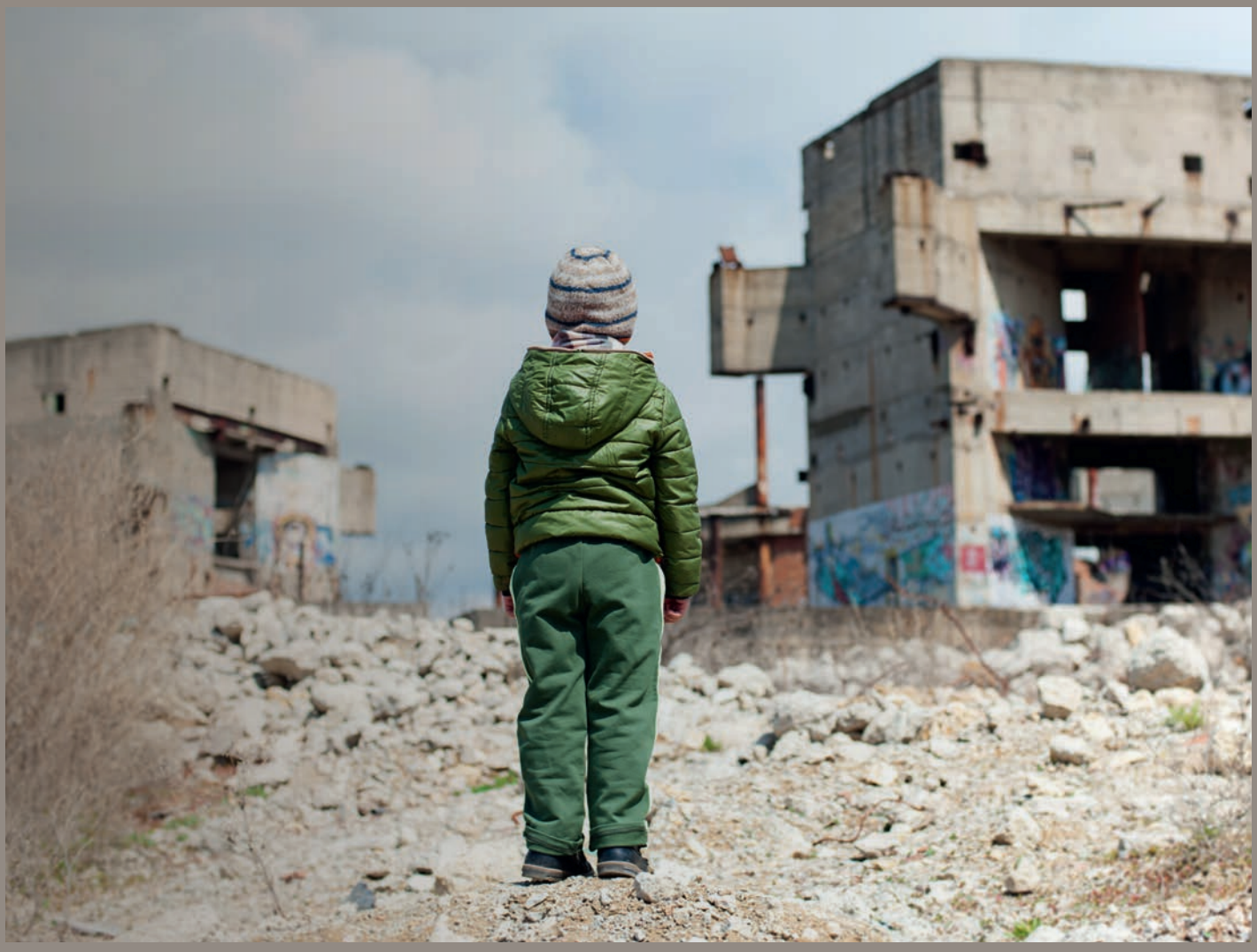
Association for Project Management

Managing Projects in Post-Conflict and Disaster Zones

November 2022



Because when projects succeed, society benefits

Cover image: Ruslan Shugushev/Shutterstock

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Foreword

Natural disasters in Indonesia, New Zealand, Haiti and Japan, man-made catastrophes such as the Port of Beirut explosion and Chernobyl and conflicts in Ukraine, Yemen and Syria illustrate the devastating impact large-scale traumatic events have on both people and infrastructure.

These events trigger an immediate humanitarian response, then once the media's attention moves on, rebuilding of physical infrastructure and the political and social fabric begins. Rebuilding projects in these environments introduces huge complexity and uncertainty offering unique challenges.

In this paper, professionals working in the military and in the humanitarian non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector share their experiences of working on the front line, and the value they place on good project management practices to assist in the rapid delivery of benefits.

In extreme environments, where time is of the essence, staying calm under pressure and making the right decisions at the right time is critical. Good project management provides the framework and tools to do this, bringing structure to chaotic situations.

We see common themes emerge around processing complex information quickly and prioritising urgent actions; working with agility to pivot to ever-changing demands, while keeping the project focus on the delivery objectives, and of course, managing people inside the project as well as competing interests on the outside – the stakeholders, sponsors and funding agents, who have the ability to derail the project in an instant.

Above all, we see resilience, both personally and structurally, build up broken cities and communities and help shape a better future through the transformative power of projects.

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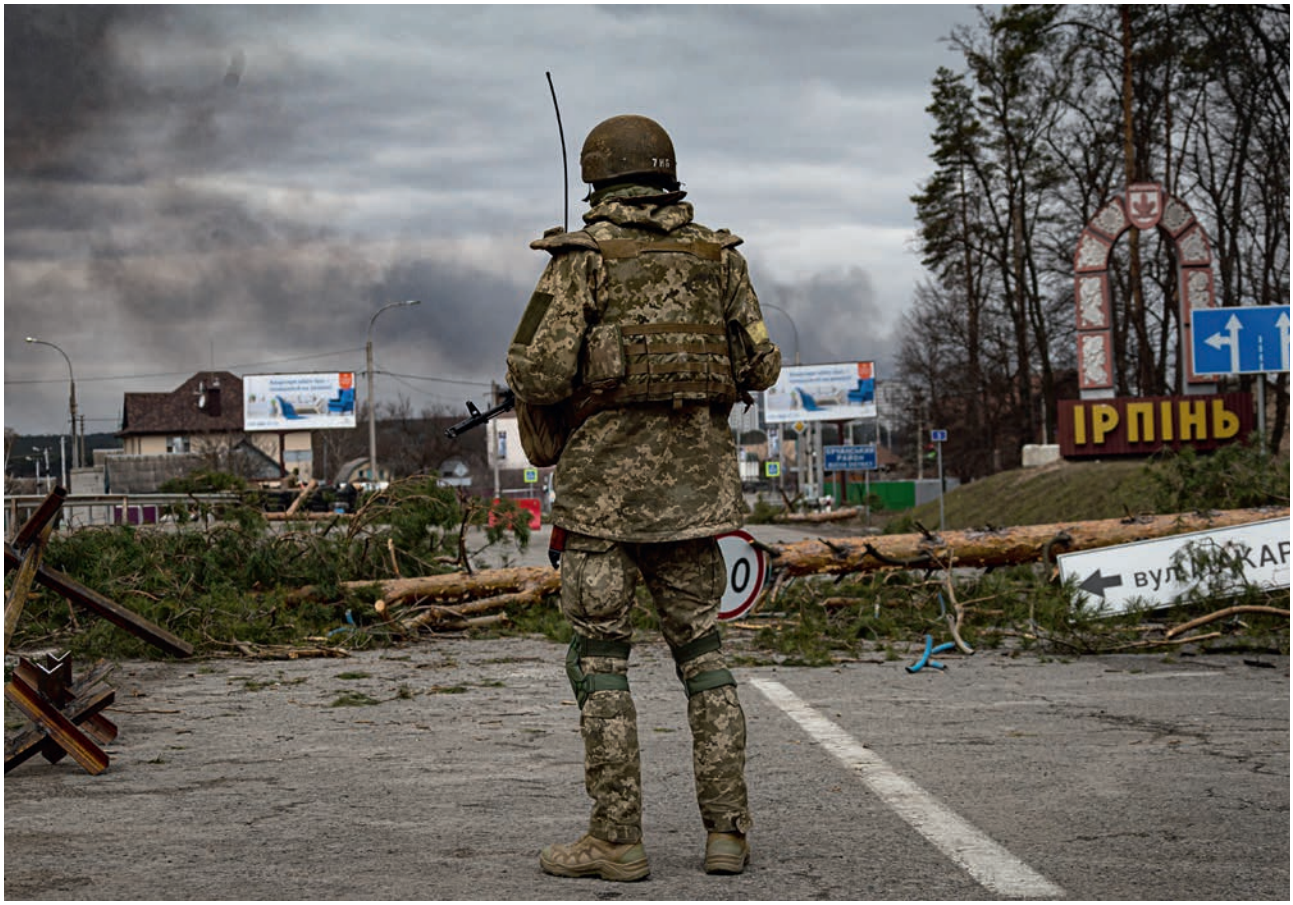
Introduction

On Thursday 24 February 2022, when Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, the invasion triggered a humanitarian emergency on a scale that hasn't been seen in Europe for decades. According to the UN, some 7.7 million people have been displaced within the country, and an estimated 13 million people are stranded in areas directly affected by the conflict. The response has also been massive. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) says that at least 250 organisations – more than 60% of them Ukrainian – have been actively delivering aid, comprising local, national and international NGOs, UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), volunteers and faith groups. Many of those already present in Ukraine before the conflict have since pivoted towards emergency humanitarian work. In March, the Ukrainian government created the Coordination Headquarters for Humanitarian and Social Affairs, a new entity designed to coordinate aid from foreign governments, international organisations and large businesses, and to channel it through local agencies. Nevertheless, Ukraine highlights many of the issues that frequently arise in emergency situations: lack of capacity; security risks; difficulties of access; sometimes poor coordination between agencies; and even corruption – all charted by the non-profit humanitarian analysis organisation, ACAPS.

For the vast majority of the agencies involved, some form of project management framework is an intrinsic part of their ability to respond and to deliver a positive impact in situations where uncertainty is the defining characteristic – be it a conflict, an earthquake, famine, flood or pandemic, or simply the challenge of extreme deprivation. Yet the operating environment is typically very different to that in which construction, IT or other professional projects take place. The constraints, the urgency and the heightened level of risk all decree that while the fundamental principles are the same, humanitarian projects are very different on the ground



Above: Ukrainian soldier in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which began on 24 February 2022

and require a resilient mindset to execute successfully. And that's important, because we live in a world where emergencies of one sort or another are widely expected to become more common. One reason is climate change, which will bring more frequent instances of extreme weather events; but there is also the renewed prospect of conflicts such as Ukraine, as the post-Cold War peace turns out to be an illusion, and pandemics, as well as increasing competition for resources.

So, project management in uncertain environments needs to be different, but what does it look like? And what does it take to be effective in this arena? It can be argued that different aspects of uncertainty are the hallmark of any project-based work. Trends such as globalisation and digital transformation have been disrupting whole industries and compressing the time over which change takes place. The enormous investment gambles that sparked the 2008 financial crisis have bequeathed an air of volatility and incipient crisis in economies around the world; the COVID-19 pandemic provided a crash course in living with uncertainty on a day-to-day basis. What could be learned from the humanitarian community and from the military who are used to dealing with these situations all the time?

It's clear that many of those working in humanitarian fields consider managing projects to be an important role. When humanitarian training provider Bioforce published *The State of the Humanitarian Professions 2020* – a study of more than 1,500 humanitarian professionals – it reported that "when asked to select a single profession that they most closely affiliate to, 16% of all respondents chose Project Management" – the highest for any professional group.

Many NGOs and humanitarian agencies have long since developed their own framework for managing projects on the ground. Save the Children, for example, launched a new bespoke Project Management Methodology in 2021 and trained 600 people in the first year. The ICRC, in common with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, deploys a results-based management approach.

There's also at least one generic tool that is widely used: Project DPro – Project Management for Development Professionals – which provides a guide to best practice and certification to individual humanitarian workers, and is owned by the organisation PM4NGOs. As the name suggests, it is focused more on development work than emergency response, but has been used to train more than 30,000 professionals around the world.

As anti-poverty charity CARE International explains in its Management Toolkit: "Managing projects is critical in humanitarian responses. The humanitarian sector largely operates on the basis of projects. Funding proposals are made on the basis of projects, and what we do meets all the classic criteria of a project: it has a set duration; it has set resources (budget, staff, others); it tries to achieve a particular objective."

Uncertain environments

Managing projects in disaster zones, conflict zones and even situations where there are extreme circumstances requiring humanitarian relief, all present very different challenges than those encountered in a conventional workplace. One of the biggest differences is the possible consequences. John Cropper, Co-founder of Pyramid Learning and former Chair of PM4NGOs, who ran Oxfam GB's worldwide project management for five years, explains: "In normal office situations in developed countries, the worst thing that can happen is that someone gets fired, or the very worst, that a company closes down. In both development and humanitarian projects, people get killed." Most obviously, they could be the victims of a disaster for whom help doesn't arrive, but what's at stake can be equally serious outside emergency response. Cropper cites a coffee programme in Honduras he was involved in that pioneered a new business model in which the many middlemen who took most of the profit were cut out, and small producers were given a direct line to the retailer. When it was scaled up, "all hell broke loose. All of the credit lines were cancelled from the bank overnight, and they shot the vice president of the organisation in front of his family."

Jo de Serrano, Chief Executive of NGO RedR, which provides training and capacity building for humanitarian emergencies, says that lack of information is one of the key differentiators. "The fundamentals are VUCA – the entire volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – environment. It's the operating environments where you're not necessarily sure of what your baseline is and gathering that information at the start can be a challenge.

In countries where governance systems may not necessarily be as robust as ours, identifying people in X area, or having the decision-making data you need at your fingertips is quite difficult."

She adds: "After an earthquake has happened, you have an absence of information for a few days, and then it starts to come in, and it's only then that you can start to say: 'OK, now we know the scale of it'."

Other significant factors in emergency response are the difficulty of access to a disaster zone and the breakdown in communications. The Community Action Nepal project, which was awarded APM's Social Project of the Year in 2017, faced the challenge of remote locations, with many of the villages affected by the 2015 earthquake located up to eight days' walk from the nearest road. It may be dangerous for humanitarian relief workers to get to the scene, especially in conflict zones, such as Ukraine.

And it's common for telecoms infrastructure – which of course includes internet connections – and electrical power to be shut down during such events, meaning that it is even more difficult to obtain a reliable picture on the ground.

Lt Col Langley Sharp, who ran the Centre for Army Leadership and is author of *The Habit of Excellence: Why British Army Leadership Works*, says: "Uncertain environments can mean different things in different contexts, but ultimately, it's about not having certainty over the outcome. Ambiguity is resonant throughout much of what you do, and there's a lack of full understanding of the picture." Uncertain environments are also characterised by putting people under exceptional pressure, he adds. "As leaders, one of our primary roles is to consistently understand the context in which we're operating. And that becomes very difficult when you're in an uncertain environment. We have to understand the context to the best of our ability, and translate that to the people we are leading, so they have an understanding of how they need to act and to adapt."

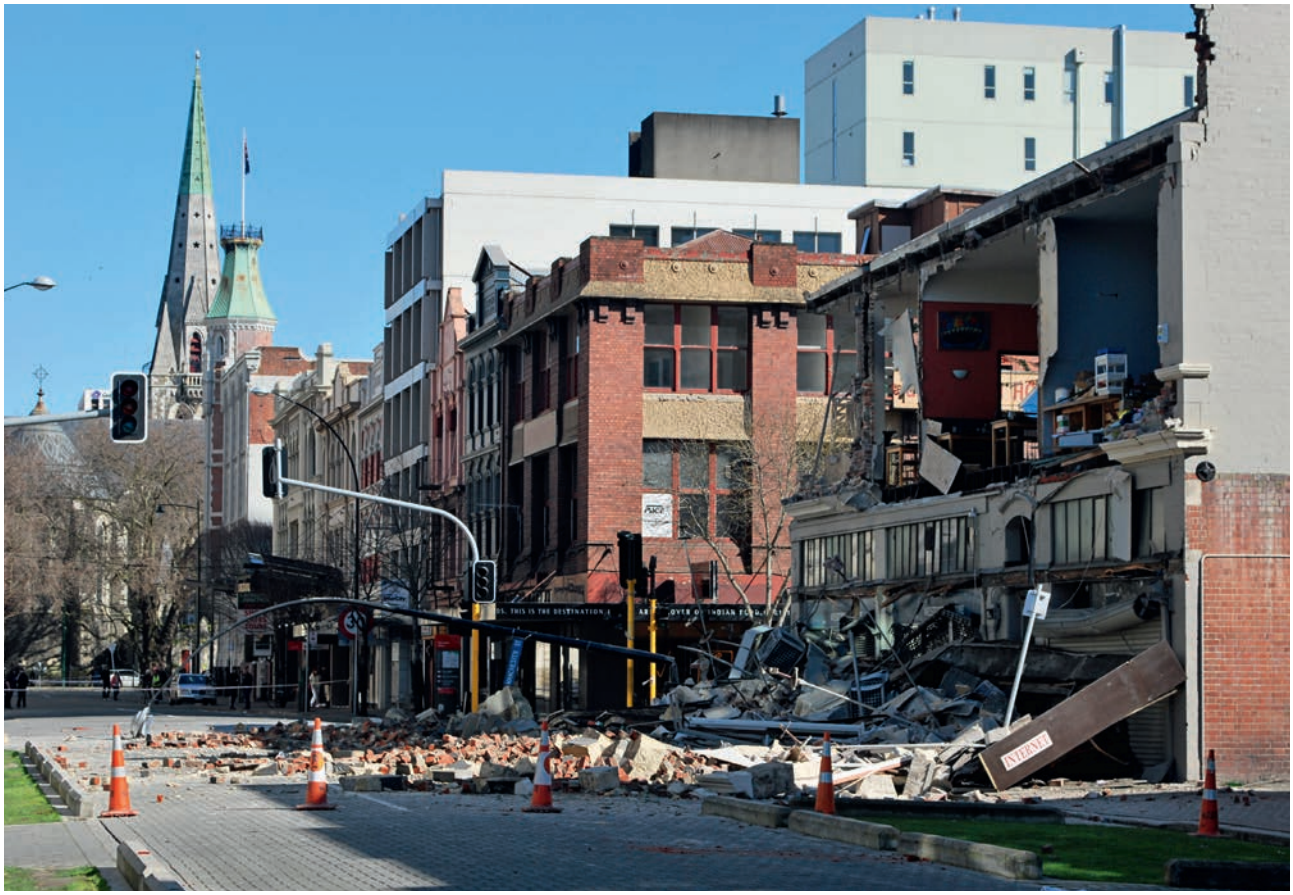
Using VUCA to deal with uncertainty

The US military coined the term VUCA in the 1980s; it stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, and is used to describe situations where events are turbulent, often dangerous and, above all, unpredictable. It has since been widely adopted in organisational leadership and is used as a way to manage the challenges that are posed by uncertainty. For project managers, the main issues created by a VUCA environment include how to plan efficiently and make informed decisions using information that is at best unclear, and where the dynamics are changing all the time. At its worst, VUCA can overwhelm individuals and organisations, and paralyse decision-making. The approaches advocated for managing VUCA include embracing change rather than resisting it; becoming adaptive in decision-making; and analysing carefully what can be understood, by breaking down the environment into its component parts. US management thinker Bob Johansen proposed a new framework to respond to VUCA in which the components are replaced by vision, understanding, clarity and agility.

Summary:

- **Project management takes on a greater importance in extreme environments because human lives are often at stake.**
- **Shortage of information is often an issue in planning project activity and is compounded by a breakdown of communications infrastructure.**
- **Leaders need to make sense of situations that may be highly ambiguous, and translate that understanding to their teams.**

Initiation and planning



Above: The damage in New Zealand's Christchurch caused by the 22 February 2011 earthquake

Initiation and planning are usually the two first stages of the project management life cycle, and for the majority of projects involved in humanitarian relief and development, their role is just as important as in any other context. Initiation typically involves writing proposals to obtain funding from donor organisations without which the project won't happen; and planning is arguably even more crucial in situations where there is a real urgency to provide relief and where the resources needed may not be readily available.

But this immediately raises an uncomfortable question: how can you plan and prepare for an emergency that cannot be predicted? In a sudden-onset emergency – such as an earthquake or a tsunami – there is unlikely to be any advance warning, and action is required immediately, without the normal luxury of time that is available before a project gets off the ground. CARE acknowledges this, saying: "In the first 24-72 hours after a sudden-onset emergency, it will not make sense to use the more formal tools of project management." Instead, the organisation advocates working from simple checklists until more information is available.

However, just because specific events are not expected, that doesn't mean that some level of preparedness cannot be put in place. Some countries – especially those that experience regular natural disasters – do allocate resources for that purpose on an ongoing basis. John Cropper explains: "In areas like Central America, or Indonesia and the Philippines, every year they are going to be hit by tropical storms – you don't know exactly where or when, but you know they are going to be hit. Cuba is one country that does emergency preparedness extremely well, a lot better than the United States. So, the same hurricane has less of an effect there even if it's hitting with greater force, because there are lots of emergency protocols in place even though they are doing it with fewer resources. But they are dedicating state resources to preparedness, whereas in some other countries there's almost nothing."

At a project level, he says it is harder to obtain funding for preparedness work, because disaster response takes priority – even though that is a short-sighted approach.

However, NGOs do have knowledge from their experience of previous emergencies about what is going to be required that enables them to have the outline of a plan ready when disaster strikes. "Depending on the type of emergency, you can broadly guess what the issues are going to be," says Jo de Serrano. "In a conflict, for example, it's going to be shelter – people have nowhere to stay, they've been displaced, so you also have a protection issue. You're looking after vulnerable people, women and children on the move and you know then that there'll be a livelihoods issue, because people won't be able to support themselves. You can broadly plan on that basis. And what will be missing is the context, you know, for floods, you're going to be looking at water and sanitation, you're going to be looking at health and public. For typhoons, you're going to have people who are staying in a typhoon shelter, which is going to be the school, and so you'll know that there will be problems with getting children back to school. You've got all that from previous experience, but always the context then comes in on the top of that." That doesn't give you a template for a project plan, "but you can certainly use this knowledge and fill in the details as they become available," she adds.

It has been argued in the past that the humanitarian sector should develop more detailed 'off-the-shelf' plans for different types of emergency; whether that is practicable is another question. But establishing preparedness whether that is through a national agency such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the United States, or through non-governmental organisations in which a body of knowledge is developed and that experience can be drawn upon certainly goes some way to speeding up the response when it is required.

Slow-onset emergencies, such as preparing for a famine, pose a different challenge. "One of the biggest challenges with preparing for a famine is money," says Cropper. Because until there are pictures of starving babies, no one's interested and there's not enough money. What's happening currently, with food prices doubling in some countries in Africa, is that we already know there will be major famine caused by the war in Ukraine. A lot of famine is cyclical and it can be predicted. The people on the ground know when it's coming, the communities know it's coming and the NGOs know when it's coming, but there is not enough money to do much about it until suddenly there's a DEC appeal."

In the most acute disaster situations, NGOs are under pressure to act immediately even if there isn't a plan. If they have emergency stores already in the country, they will certainly be under pressure to deliver them to the disaster zone as a matter of urgency – in spite of there not being a comprehensive picture of what is needed and where. What agencies do have to do in those circumstances, says de Serrano, is rapidly triangulate information among themselves. "An example would be the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams, which do preparedness missions. They will go in and work with the government to establish: this is what should happen, what have you got in place to do that? That provides some baseline information."

UNDAC comprises four components: experienced and specially trained emergency managers made available by their respective governments or organisations; a methodology for establishing coordination structures, and for organising and facilitating assessments and information management during the first phase of a sudden-onset disaster or emergency; a proven system to mobilise and deploy an UNDAC team to arrive on site within 12-48 hours of a request being made; and the equipment that enables the UNDAC team to be self-sufficient in the field when deployed for disasters and emergencies.

NGOs also need to engage with the UN Humanitarian Clusters, which is a system pioneered by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to coordinate multi-agency responses in emergencies; there is typically an array of clusters for different areas of activity such as water, nutrition, shelter, logistics and communications.

In any project, the objectives and scope have to be defined, and the more uncertain the environment, the greater the emphasis should be on the overall impact rather than very specific results and outcomes. The priority should be to define your purpose clearly, says Langley Sharp. It's the reason why everybody is there and it will help to rescue you when things are going

badly, he argues. "You have to define the purpose of the mission and communicate it to everyone," he explains. "If the purpose is clear, it galvanises everyone together. In the military we have 10 Principles of War, the master principle being 'selection and maintenance of the aim'. So, whenever things are seemingly so overwhelming, so complex and so unachievable that fractures occur in your team, you must focus back on: what is your aim? What is the purpose of being here? What is the mission? That focus of mind allows you then to prioritise what work needs to be done and when it needs to be done."

In most humanitarian work there has to be a formal proposal, which is required to obtain funding, in which the objectives must be articulated. That's often done using a logframe – a logical framework – which is a document that captures the inputs, outputs, the activities that will take place and the outcomes that are expected. De Serrano, who previously worked for the UK's Department for International Development – DFID (now the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office), says: "DFID used to do payment on results for some of its organisations, including the UN, which I think upset them quite a bit."

The competitive nature of bidding for funding in humanitarian situations is also contentious in some quarters. "If you have to bid for donor contracts, then that probably does more harm than anything else to good project management," says Cropper. "Because what you're effectively doing is encouraging people to overpromise. And I have seen so many cases where a local team might write a first draft of a proposal. And then the grant writers start making it look a lot more sexy and prettifying it because they want to win the bid. And then it goes back to the people on the ground, and they say: 'we can't do this!'"

He adds: "It's starting to change, some donors are getting a bit more modern in their approaches. But so many donors are requiring people – a bit less in large emergencies, but in almost everything else – to put in a proposal for, say, a two-, three- or four-year project in considerable detail, even saying what the different outputs are going to be, the activities, detailed budget, sometimes even a detailed implementation plan. And it's a fiction. It's not even to do with the developing world. It's just a very old-fashioned approach to contract management and the bidding process."

One interesting alternative to the potentially negative effect of competitive bidding was seen in the response to the Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand in 2011. The Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild Team was formed to restore the city's infrastructure. Five delivery organisations were brought into an alliance, which had hundreds of projects to complete, but in order to streamline the programme overall, workflows were overlapped and time-wasting tendering was eliminated. In effect, the contractors were encouraged to collaborate on issues such as knowledge sharing and building standards, while competing on the work that they completed. The five contractors initially each took on equal shares of the work, but their shares were then adjusted based on performance. A 'pain and gain' system meant that contractors were paid the actual cost of their work and any profit or loss was pooled.

Summary:

- **In the early stage of a sudden-onset emergency, a conventional approach to launching projects may not be appropriate.**
- **Preparatory work can help with readiness for some kinds of emergencies, as there are many aspects common to all situations, but is hard to obtain funding for.**
- **A key priority in any emergency response is to define the purpose of your mission as early and as quickly as possible.**
- **A logframe – logical framework – is a key tool used by aid and development agencies to define what a project will seek to achieve when bidding for funding.**

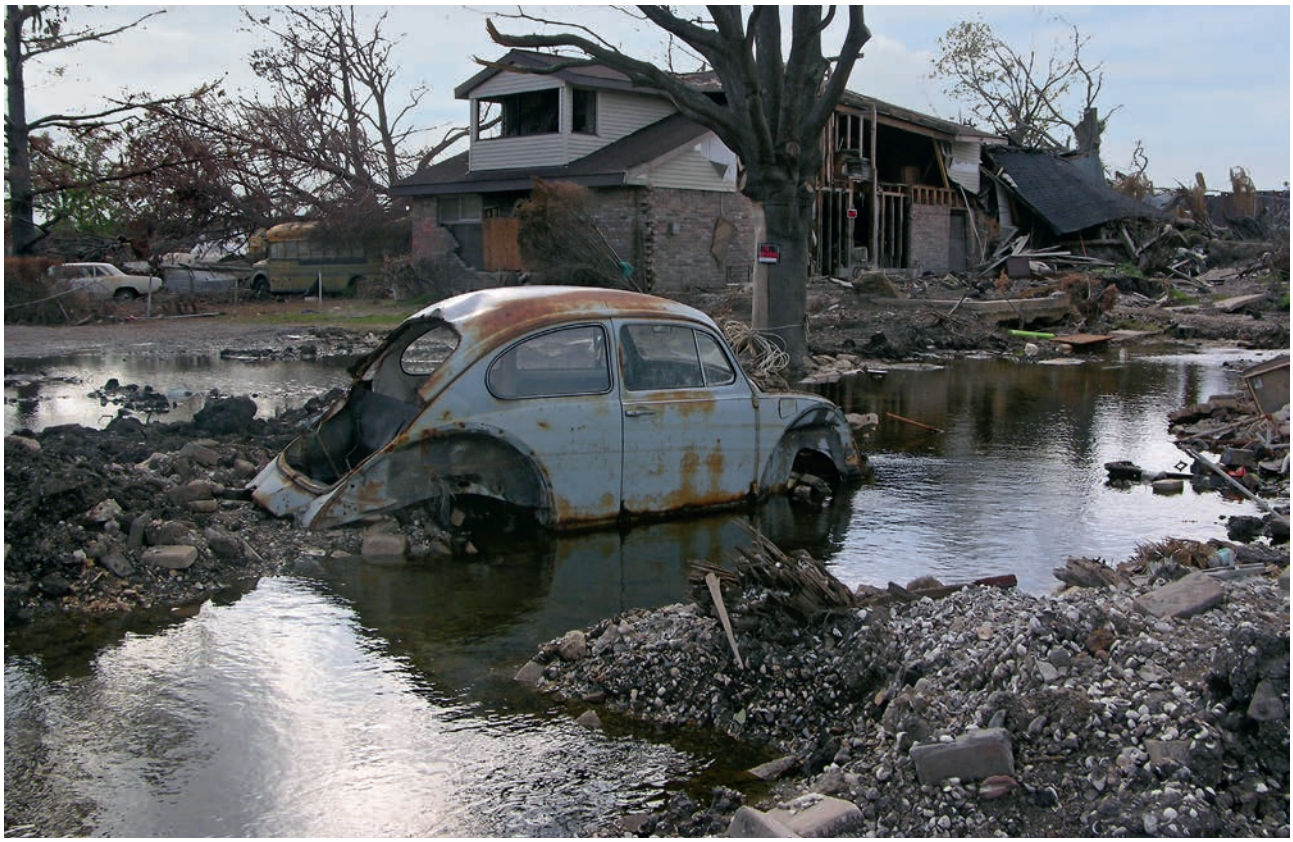
Engaging communities

The relationship between humanitarian agencies and the local populations they are working to support has become a defining aspect of project management success in the worlds of conflict and emergency. The community that is impacted has to be recognised as a key stakeholder – not the only stakeholder, but arguably the one that is most important; consequently, the community should be involved in every stage of the project management life cycle from the project initiation and design to delivery and evaluation.

Previous episodes of sexual abuse and exploitation among some NGOs have ensured that safeguarding is now an intrinsic part of project planning and monitoring in all humanitarian relief programmes.

But the bigger issue is the trend away from a world in which aid agencies frequently made decisions on the best course of action for the community and then delivered it without consultation to a world in which agencies are now expected to consult the population at every step, and in which the community becomes part of the solution. Basically, that means that agencies need to find out what the community wants before they initiate a project. "You're not just as an organisation saying, here you go, we're going to give you 10 bags of rice," explains Jo de Serrano. "They may say: I don't want 10 bags of rice, because we don't eat rice here, or I haven't got the cooking fuel. What I want is X, Y and Z." Even in rapid-onset emergency situations, consultation with the community is vital, says John Cropper. "You can't just say we are going to build 50 latrines in this slum because the water system has been destroyed by a hurricane or whatever. Are people going to use them? Why should they use them? That's going to depend on where they're located. Being somewhere where the community thinks is appropriate is going to depend on people being able to access them or not, it's going to depend on them being in a safe location for women."

Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 was widely seen as a disaster where community engagement was not carried out successfully. State and federal authorities were deemed highly neglectful in not



Above: Water leakage from the New Orleans levee three months after Hurricane Katrina hit on 23 August 2005

having reached out to communities to organise evacuation beforehand, and many people refused to leave their homes because they had nowhere to go to, or couldn't take their pets. Sandra Knight of the Project Management Center of Excellence at the University of Maryland, and formerly of FEMA, told APM's *Project* journal in 2019 that "Katrina was a big lesson learned", and one particular lesson was that "Project management needs to become much more people-focused". Kevin Hannes, a Senior Team Leader at FEMA, added that in subsequent hurricane incidents, FEMA had learned to "put survivors into the process from early on by encouraging them to see themselves as part of it".

In the aftermath of the earthquake in Christchurch in 2011, community engagement was put at the centre of the response by the New Zealand Red Cross. The organisation reached out in multiple ways: knocking on doors, consulting with community groups, conducting numerous surveys and even measuring the wellbeing of those affected, all culminating in a 280-page evaluation study of its response.

Involving the community in humanitarian projects is not just a desirable aim, it is increasingly seen as essential because it provides accountability. As the UN's OCHA puts it: "Accountability to affected people is a commitment by humanitarians to use power responsibly: to take account of, give account to and be held to account by the people we seek to assist." OCHA says the measures used should include:

- systematically sharing timely, relevant and actionable information with communities
- supporting the meaningful participation and leadership of affected people in decision-making, regardless of sex, age, disability status and other diversities
- ensuring community feedback systems are in place to enable affected people to assess and comment on the performance of humanitarian action, including on sensitive matters such as sexual exploitation and abuse, fraud, corruption and racism and discrimination

One key aspect of engaging with communities is overcoming cultural differences. Cropper gives an example: "Suppose you have a situation where, in addition to listening to community leaders, it's really important for you to listen to women and to get their perspective. Well, there are cultures where that work of understanding absolutely needs to be done by women, because it's simply not acceptable for men to come in and speak to them." Languages are absolutely vital. You will never obtain the sociocultural nuance you need to really understand a community if you can't speak their language. Just how communication and interaction are going to take place needs to be designed into a project right from the outset.

Understanding who all the significant stakeholders are in the situation and what their motivations are is one of the crucial tasks at the outset. In Afghanistan, it could be a tribal leader; elsewhere, it could be local politicians, possibly corrupt, who have their own interests in mind. "In Haiti, you've got to work with the Vodou *oungans* (priests)," says Cropper. "They're generally very helpful. You can see where they live by a little flag, and you arrange a meeting, maybe take them some rum and explain what you're doing, and listen to and understand their concerns. Because if they say: don't work with this organisation, then people won't. It's all about understanding communities, community leaders, local leaders, religious leaders – you need to understand the society and the context you're working in."

He gives another example: "I was the vice-chair of Anti-Slavery International for several years. Now, if you're working on issues such as contemporary slavery in somewhere like West Africa, well, slavery is still pretty much accepted in Mauritania. This means again, that you need to understand the power dynamics and the cultural, the sociocultural context. If you get these things wrong, there are very real consequences very quickly. So, stakeholder management is definitely something you have to get right in an emergency."

Dan Connors, an ex-military intelligence officer who is co-founder of Applied Influence Group, says that in emergency situations, understanding people's fears is particularly relevant. "If there's been a hurricane or a flood, the immediate threats that people are feeling might be: I've lost my house, where am I going to stay? Once tentage comes in and emergency accommodation has been provided, attention will then turn to other threats. However, if you're a tribal leader, in a position of authority in your local society and your village has been washed away, then has your position washed away with that? That will be where you are trying to reassert yourself."

Cropper adds: "In a conflict situation, you have stakeholders who are armed and dangerous. And so understanding the power dynamics is extremely important. And you have to make sure that you are seen as neutral, because it's the only protection a humanitarian worker really has." For NGOs and other agencies on the ground, that can mean turning away help from military and other authorities, and demonstrating your independence – even if that incurs risks.

At the same time, the politics of humanitarian emergencies cannot be understated. Connors says: "When I was in Bosnia and Kosovo, there was probably a greater requirement to influence other international organisations who had deployed from Western countries who think that they're there to help, when actually, the individuals are more often concerned how they are going to get their name in lights or they've got their own personal agendas. That can be more challenging than working with local people who had practical things that they were trying to achieve. So, massaging egos was a real issue."

Influence mapping, says Connors, is a useful tool that can capture all the key stakeholders, their relationships and what is driving them in terms of motivations. Nevertheless, the objective of stakeholder engagement is not just to understand what people want; it's also to gain their trust and credibility so that you can achieve what you have set out as your objectives.

During his military career, says Connors, "we would come in for a six-month tour of duty and we might be the fifth rotation of six months that the local people had seen. You might be dealing with a legacy of relationships, whereby they say: this is the fifth time we've been promised a school." The three key elements of credibility, he says, are truthfulness, expertise and dynamism. "If you get caught out not telling the truth, or not being open with people, or you don't have the expertise that you claim to have, or you say you'll do something and you don't do it very quickly, you lose your credibility."

Summary:

- **Affected communities represent the key stakeholder in most humanitarian work, and they should be consulted from the outset of any project activity, and should be part of the solution.**
- **Overcoming language and cultural barriers is an extremely vital step to achieving engagement.**
- **Understand the power dynamics of the situation and what motivates those who can influence the outcome. Influence mapping can play a part in that process.**
- **Obtain credibility with stakeholder groups and secure their trust in order to deliver on objectives; being truthful, demonstrating expertise and showing dynamism are key elements of that.**

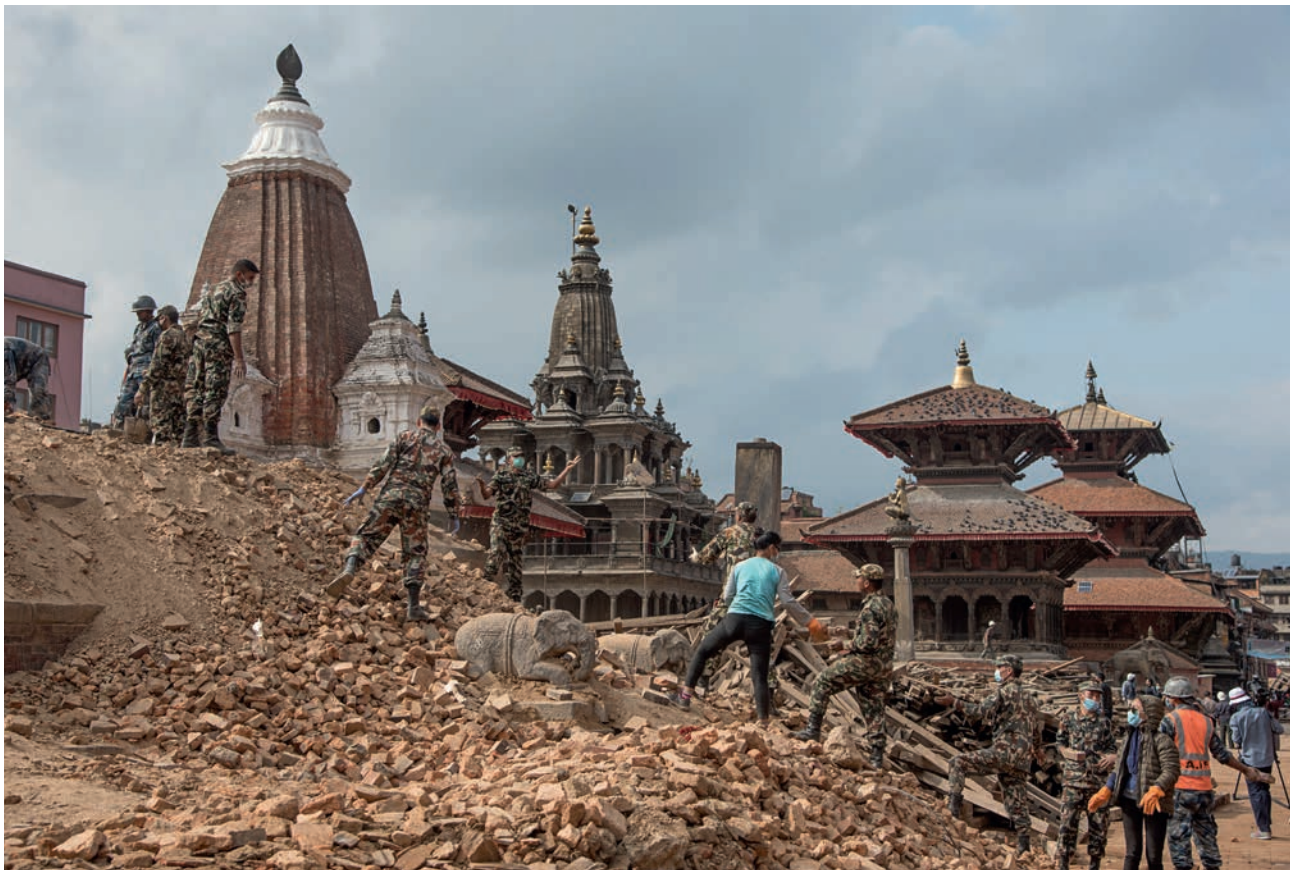
Building capacity

When the war began in Ukraine, RedR UK immediately kicked into action and launched a rapid learning needs analysis among responders to identify the priority capacity building needs of those providing humanitarian assistance to the people, inside and outside of Ukraine, affected by the conflict. The survey was translated into Ukrainian, and within days of the outbreak of hostilities, more than 70 responses had been received. A plethora of learning needs topics were identified from needs assessment and coordination to resource mobilisation, monitoring and evaluation – and even project management. These were all topics that responders – many of them with little humanitarian background – needed to learn about, and fast.

RedR's own response was to rapidly develop and launch a range of modules covering the requested topics, while a simultaneous effort was made to recruit trainers in the region – a piece of capacity building in its own right.

The overall objective was to build the capacity of organisations and individuals within Ukraine, who were on the ground and could deliver aid and relief where it was most needed. That is a neat twist for an organisation that began life as the Register of Engineers for Disaster Relief, originally formed to deploy engineers who could help with the needs of Vietnamese boat people, but which has turned its focus increasingly to capacity building within countries where humanitarian work takes place.

The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 produced an Agenda for Humanity – often known as the 'localisation agenda' – which humanitarian organisations signed up to, and which commits them to invest in "strengthening the capacities of local and national actors" alongside other measures including affected populations at the centre of response and increasingly providing aid in the form of cash transfers. "The idea was – and they talked about it in terms of money, rather than people, although



Above: The destruction in Patan Darbar Square in Kathmandu, Nepal, after the major earthquake on 25 April 2015

I see them going hand in hand – that they wanted 25% of all humanitarian spend to go directly to local organisations," explains Jo de Serrano.

It's long been recognised that local capacity building is a highly desirable target in responding to humanitarian crises. Rather than fly in aid workers, engineers and specialists in many other disciplines from around in the world, it is much better if there are locals on the ground who can carry out the necessary work. They are already there in place, there are fewer if any cultural barriers to overcome, they ensure that money is spent locally rather than spent with overseas contractors and they build up the resilience of the country to cope with future emergencies.

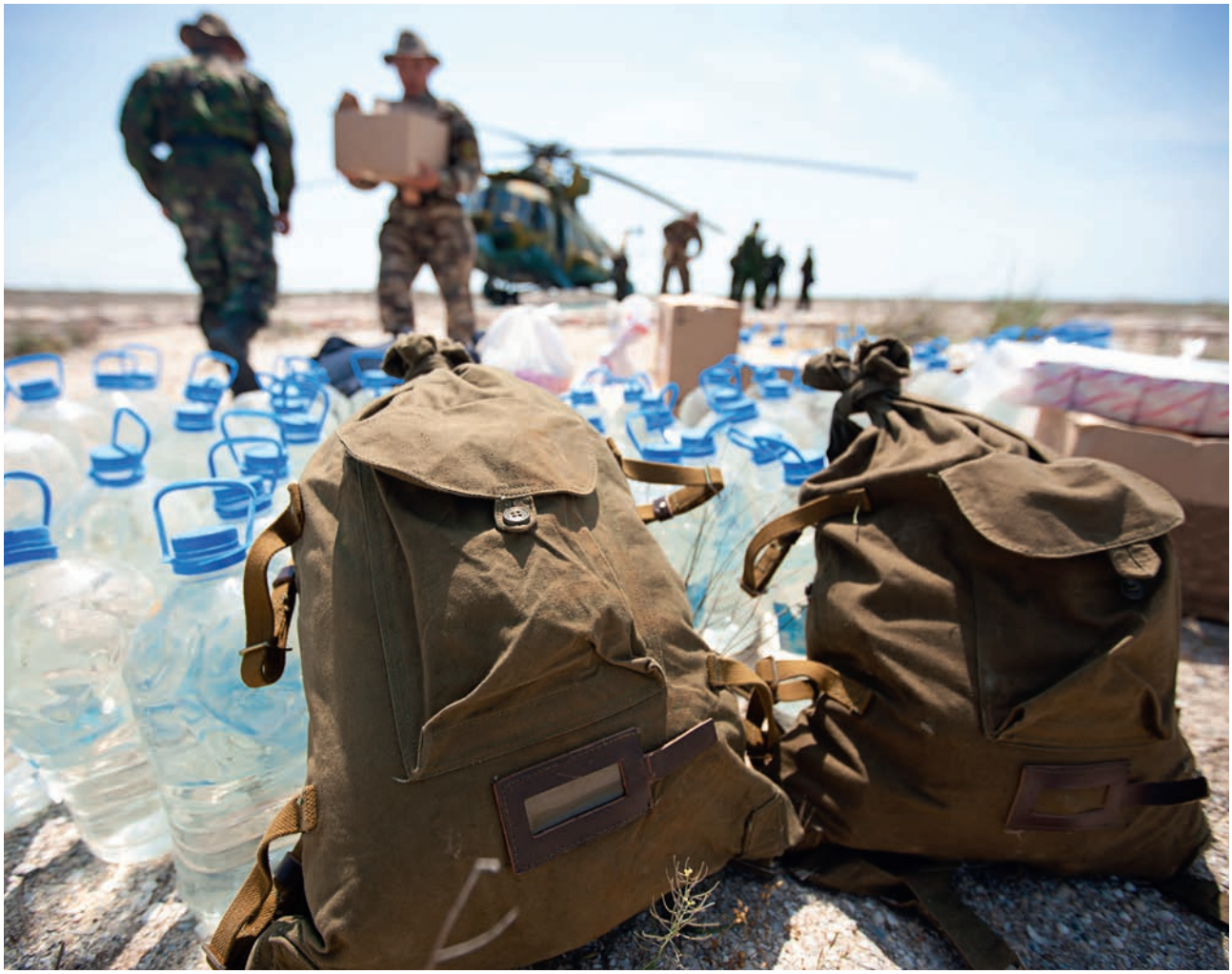
When Community Action Nepal teamed up with engineering firm WYG to help rebuild destroyed villages in the wake of the 2015 earthquake, a cornerstone of the approach was to build local capacity. "Our 'capacity building' approach to the project has improved the project management and seismic engineering skills of the eight Nepalese team members, who can now put this into practice on other projects without international assistance," wrote a member of the team. "They, in turn, can pass on this knowledge to other local professionals. Our profession is getting better at acknowledging that helping local professionals to increase their experience and the capacity of the local construction industry is the best way for us to contribute." "However," it was added, "it has been our experience that it is far from being the most common approach taken by government and non-government organisations. This project shows how the international response to a natural disaster in a developing country can produce sustainable benefits when working together with relief organisations."

The challenge, says de Serrano, is that local organisations may lack the capacity to manage many aspects of the projects: proposal writing, creating log frames and so on. "In the worst-case scenario, they can't actually pass the due diligence that's required," she says. "So that makes it hard to give a million pounds to a local NGO. If you look at the due diligence that a big organisation would have, it's very robust, because they have to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent correctly." That's where RedR comes in, she explains. "We can work with local organisations to build them up to a point that they will be able to operate or dock into the humanitarian system more effectively. What you're seeing in Ukraine is what's basically called our Rapid Onset Localisation Team, and that's working with local organisations, to get them engaged within a humanitarian system in which they've been broadly ignored for a long while. Their voice is not being heard at the table." There's a certain amount of lip service within the UN system about delivering on the localisation agenda, says de Serrano. "Some people think that you are making life even more difficult than it already is. But you might get a better result."

Summary:

- **Building capacity among local actors on the ground can expedite the response to humanitarian emergency.**
- **The Agenda for Humanity decrees that 25% of humanitarian spend should go to local organisations as a matter of global best practice.**
- **Spending money locally can help build up resilience to future emergencies and make projects more sustainable.**

Agile working



Above: A military helicopter delivers humanitarian aid

In uncertain humanitarian situations, where so much is unknown, it's clear that a way of working with the maximum flexibility is called for. By definition, you have limited information available on which to base decisions, you don't know which way events are going to turn and there may be significant risks to manage. That has implications for scope, budget and schedule, as well as the resources required. In those circumstances, the notion of setting a rigid plan is clearly not tenable. In the humanitarian field, a sequential approach – with linear phases – may be appropriate for slow-burn development work in a relatively stable environment. But in emergency situations, a more agile approach is necessary. In an emergency, agencies and responders are expected to act before the full facts are known – they don't have the luxury of waiting. If decisions are made early on without the ability to constantly review and adapt as circumstances change, you are likely to find that you are supplying products and services that are no longer required, which is inherently wasteful and could cause unintended consequences. It also means you will not be able to deliver the outcomes that were identified at the point of initiation and which you may have promised to donor organisations.

Good projects have always been agile and adaptive – as the situation changes and more information becomes available. The snag, says John Cropper, is that this doesn't always square well with how donor funding works. "If you were choosing pure agile, where you agree the bigger picture, but everything else you

evolve, you just can't get funding like that," he says. "So what we try to do is, we put those agile principles around it, and we try to have rolling wave planning and stage planning, because that is easier to do within the funding constraints. We don't talk about scrum master and sprint, because that is wholly unhelpful for someone working in another language."

Stage planning means reducing planning to much shorter time horizons. "It could be a month, it could be a quarter, it could be just one day," he explains. "I spoke with the operations director of a hospital in Syria; he said in their case it was just 24 hours – you can't predict beyond that point. But you can use that on the ground – if you just get together for 15 minutes, plan the day, and then meet at the end of it and just say how have we done? That's better than not doing it."

Risk management can also be implemented in stages, says Cropper. "Risk management in a fast-changing environment is very difficult. What might go wrong? Pretty much everything. OK, well, that doesn't really help us. If you say instead what might go wrong in the next three months, or the next month, or the next week, that's a much more grounded conversation."

Jo de Serrano adds: "You would probably be quite explicit when you were writing your proposal to your donor at the outset, saying: we will adapt this approach depending on what's happening on the ground." You would also address how often you will go back to the donor about changes you want to make, and what that means for funding, she says. "I don't think anyone thinks the plan they start with is going to be what's finally delivered."

From a military perspective, Langley Sharp says: "With the complexity of the world today, linear plans are almost non-existent. We have a saying that no plan survives contact with the enemy." The more iterative agile approach involving a series of sprints is far more logical in today's world, he says. "You still have a mission with an end state, you still understand where you want to get to, and you still have certain planning and working parameters. But the ability to develop a plan, to enact that plan, see how that affects the situation, you learn from that and then you sprint again."

Another aspect of flexibility has been the growing trend since the COVID-19 pandemic for some aspects of humanitarian work to be carried out remotely, says de Serrano. "Before COVID-19, we were primarily face-to-face delivery," she explains. "Obviously, we had to switch that around during the pandemic. And what we're finding at the moment is that the return to face to face is very slow, people are quite happy online, especially as we can offer blended learning as well."

In Ukraine, says de Serrano, her organisation has been able to attend UN Cluster meetings online, as they are now increasingly conducted in hybrid mode. "So actually, we've been able to talk to the people who are responsible for water and sanitation or shelter and talk about their capacity development needs. We have probably had better access to those people than we would have had before."

Summary:

- **In most emergencies an agile approach is more favourable; it enables, for example, rolling wave planning and revisions of budget and schedule as more information becomes available.**
- **It can be difficult to obtain funding for projects designed to be delivered in an agile fashion.**
- **Watch your jargon: references to agile terminology such as sprints and scrum can cause confusion for someone working in another language.**

Managing people

Project management offers many opportunities to cross sectors and utilise skills in a different context, but humanitarian work is somewhat exceptional. There are many reasons why it's seldom practicable to switch from a role in banking, say, to an equivalent position in a humanitarian agency. Those working in emergency response and conflict zones are expected to have significant prior experience of living and working in extreme circumstances, which could range from places with very low levels of development to being under fire.

"First of all, you have to be prepared to deal with threats to your own security," points out Jo de Serrano. "If you're in an earthquake situation, there might be more tremors afterwards, and it could be a risk to you. I was in Antigua for Hurricane Irma and while I was there, Hurricane Maria went over the top of us. So we had to kind of hunker down for that. Generally, you're looking after your own safety and security, you're not getting a lot of sleep, you're running around and you might be living in accommodation that you're not used to. If there are no hotels available, you may find yourself in a tent with a kind of Portaloo. These are not internal displaced person camps, but ones built for the humanitarian community. As a person operating in that environment, you have to be quite robust."

Working in humanitarian crises can be enormously stressful and can mean witnessing scenes and events that are traumatic. There's an increasing recognition that organisations working in this field have a duty of care to employees who are deployed in these situations, says de Serrano – not just that they are not going to be in physical danger, but also for their overall health and wellbeing. "Many organisations have an employee assistance programme, where you can call up and speak to a counsellor," she says. As a team leader or project manager in this context, you might take hostile environment awareness training to recognise some of the coping mechanisms people develop in response to these situations, such as drinking too much or other risky behaviours."

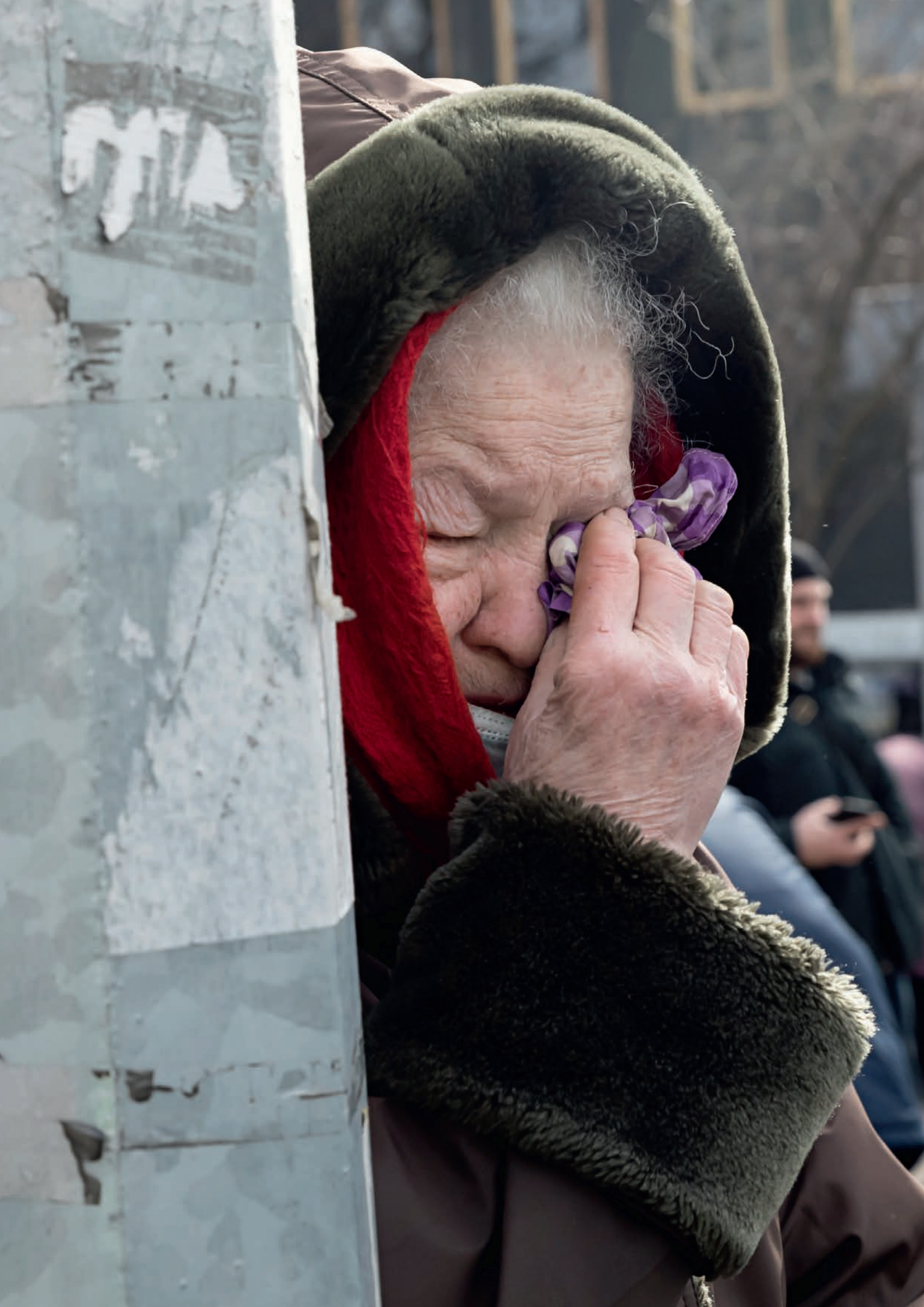
Langley Sharp says that leading people well in these circumstances is largely about knowing your people and understanding them as individuals. "If you know your people, then you will be able to understand how they're acting in certain situations. And when they're acting out of kilter, if they're not being themselves, and when an individual is under particular acute pressure, you as the leader have to adapt the situation either to pull them away or provide them extra support." To do that, you need to have personal resilience yourself, he explains. "To be an effective leader, you have to be in an effective emotional state yourself. The reality is that you'll be in that crisis situation, you'll be under pressure, you'll be under emotional stress and strain. So it's about knowing yourself, and understanding your limits and your emotions so that you can manage those, which can be difficult."

According to Dan Connors, the British Army has developed its own approach to helping those who have suffered trauma, largely as a result of Afghanistan. "It used to be that people were moved away from the site of the traumatic incident, which meant they lost their friends and the people they might open up about. So, typically, where they can and it's safe to do so, they'll keep individuals together. Encouraging people to talk about it fairly closely to the event is strongly encouraged in the military now. And if you close an operational tour, there will be a period of decompression between leaving the theatre of operations or going back to your family. Typically, you'd stop off for two nights at the British base in Cyprus. And that would allow a bit of rebalancing before you had to go back to being partner, mother, father or sibling."

Right: Ukraine residents abandoning their homes

Summary:

- **Organisations working in humanitarian and emergency situations have a duty of care to their people, who may suffer harm and trauma from the events that take place.**
- **It's important to understand the individual strengths and vulnerabilities of members of the team.**
- **Encouraging people to talk about trauma and giving them a safe space to decompress can be an effective way to manage those who have been affected.**



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