Text from François Grünewald, Panel 2. on Impact assessment

After the Tsunami, a massive and extremely generous response from all over the world triggered what some journalists called "wave 2'. Issues on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact are now high on the agenda, in addition to questions related to coordination, the role of the national/local institutions and the transition from relief to development. Despite the specificity of the crisis, a sense of "déjà vue" soon developed as the well known strengths and weaknesses of the relief community became apparent.

This raises the following methodological question: what parameters can hamper the quality of four key phases of the project management cycle (PMC): diagnosis, design, impact assessment and institutional learning?

Diagnosis

The first weakness is clearly identifiable: most agencies rush into "needs assessment" and forget that a proper diagnosis implies also a good situation analysis and a proper capacity appraisal. Many flaws in the response would be avoidable if the diagnosis were comprehensive. This said, strong constraints weigh on agencies' capacity to do so:

- the size of the affected area;
- the overwhelming level of destruction;
- the speed factor (related to the speed of the phenomenon, the speed of TV reporting, the quickly emerging debate on the relevance of "rescue" operations in this type of crisis, the need to be quickly visible on the scene and the vivid debate on early warning);
- the emotion factor (strong media pressure, use of the new IT –mobiles, SMS- that brought information "live", an immense feeling of compassion, an easy identification wit the area, fears attached to the post-disaster epidemic syndrome, important attention to PTSS, and the fact that the crisis took place just after Christmas);
- the difficult access to areas and information.

Design

The weakness of the diagnosis made it difficult to respond in the most appropriate manner. In particular:

- many agencies launched their programme on the basis of insufficient information concerning the specific nature and scale of needs and the context;
- the activities undertaken by local institutions were in many instance underestimated;
- the rapidly changing estimate of the disaster's impact and of the number of casualties brought about difficulties that are typically met when there is a call for rapid scaling up and an acute need to target and prioritize the response.

Thus the aid response was very much a "kit-based approach". Was this approach relevant and justified? When should speed undermine thorough analysis and strategic thinking?

Evaluation and Impact assessment:

The first methodological difficulty is that the focus of an evaluation can vary: on impact and results on the one hand, on processes and structures on the other. The choice of the methodology is thus very much determined by the evaluation Terms of Reference.

A proper impact assessment should normally consist in a comparison between a situation with intervention and another one without intervention (i.e. a "control"). In humanitarian action, this is ethically not acceptable and, in most instances, the impact assessment is a comparison of the situation "before" and "after" the project. A strong bias is inevitably introduced at this stage because the evolution of the situation is fashioned by many factors other than the project. All too often, the evaluation unfortunately is limited to a compliance analysis, neglecting impact assessment.

An impact assessment should take into account the high level of diversity of the region:

- diversity (socio-economic, geographical, political...) existing prior to the crisis,
- diversity in terms of the magnitude of the impact;
- diversity in terms of host governments' policies regarding the response to the Tsunami;
- diversity in terms of the level of resources mobilized.

An impact assessment should carefully analyse the macro, meso and micro levels and the interactions between them, and take into account the rapid changes in the situation.

How can this be done? And, more generally, how can the overall management of the quality of operations be improved? Many "schools of thought" have proposed different approaches to quality management: OECE/DAC criteria; WHO guidelines; Code of Conduct; SPHERE standards; Quality COMPAS; etc.

But let us focus on the issue of indicators. (Indicators are variables that, associated with a set of references or norms, can inform whether a criteria is met or not).
An indicator should combine many characteristics to be usable: the SMART characteristics (specific, measurable, accurate, reliable and time-bound) are one set, but there are others.

But one must be careful in the selection of indicators. In particular, there are many possible flaws in using quantitative indicators, both at the data gathering and analysis levels. When calculating percentages based on population figures, for instance, we seldom know the total population, which makes it practically

impossible to obtain a reliable percentage. Unfortunately, this type of figures are very often present in Appeals and Reports...
The reliability, credibility and relevance of many indicators is often questionable. How have they been selected? What is their sensitivity to changes and what kind information do they generate?

From evaluation to institutional learning:
The result of project evaluation (impact/results/processes/structure) should ideally be four-fold:

At the project/programme level:
- possible modifications in the course of events (especially if some unwanted effects arose);
- downwards and upwards accountability.

At the institutional level :
- improvement of the management of the project management cycle (including improved diagnosis, etc.);
- creation of institutional memory.

We will focus here on the importance for evaluation and impact assessment to help improve overall management of the disaster response cycle.
Key issues in this regard include:
- How does an understanding of pre-existing vulnerabilities enable aid agencies to be better prepared to respond rapidly and appropriately?
- How can the aid sector improve its response (from its Search and Rescue to its reconstruction components) by being better prepared?