Case study: Transforming surge capacity through training

Background

The Start Network's Transforming Surge Capacity project aims to transform surge by redirecting emphasis from an internationally-led focus to a regional and local one. As part of the project, the first pilot of a new training curriculum was delivered to 36 delegates from local, national and international NGOs in Manila, led by CAFOD and hosted by Christian Aid.

The pilot team began by asking how a one-week training could really deliver the project's stated outcome of "increased capacity of skilled surge personnel for civil society at international, national and regional levels". The sheer complexity of the humanitarian system - individual agency agendas, competitiveness in funding, caution towards working in partnership - makes this project ambitious. This case study examines the process of designing and piloting surge capacity training.

Rationale

The Transforming Surge Capacity project is part of the overall Start Network Disaster and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) which aims to "develop decentralised approaches to capacity building, which is aiming to improve the quality and speed of humanitarian response". Therefore, this training programme is not anticipated to transform surge capacity in isolation but rather to work in conjunction with other elements of the programme to create **collaborative ways of working** with local, national and international NGOs, the private sector and UN agencies; develop **regional platforms**; **share best practice** and resource materials; **broaden access** to learning opportunities; pilot creative ways of responding to surge need; and develop **shared rosters**.

One of the core conclusions from the 2007 Review of Surge Capacity report is that it is equally important to develop surge capacity at country and regional levels as it is at headquarters. From that report, senior humanitarian leaders identified that a key, if not **the** major resource in responses, is the workforce itself, who needed more attention than was commonly given. The recent State of Surge report seemed to reinforce this but also emphasised that it is not only people, but processes and systems i.e. the operating environment, that allow financing and supplies to be processed quickly and efficiently during surge responses. A number of opening comments from the State of Surge report also seem to suggest that surge is not a matter of either international **or** national engagement but rather **both and more**.

Designing the training programme

The aim of the training programme is to deliver improved coordination and collaboration on surge, as well as better harnessing complementarities in a climate where increasing disasters and decreasing funding add to the urgency of responses. The current landscape means that collaboration is challenging. Much of this project's work itself is being carried out by varying agencies, often in addition to day jobs, and therefore cannot necessarily be prioritised. This in itself led to challenges in designing the training.

The pilot training team - made up of those from humanitarian, emergency, surge, and learning and development (L&D) backgrounds - started with the project's goals in mind:

1. Exploring new ways for humanitarian aid organisations to work together effectively in disaster response.
2. Making humanitarian surge capacity more collaborative, localised and more engaging with other stakeholders.

Armed with the results of consultations with Start Network members, the team took a framework that was based less on technical skills and more on people management and 'soft' skills. The programme was designed to be a balance between training on practical skills and developing habits, sharing knowledge and understanding attitudes. This focus on softer skills is intended to contribute to better and more coordinated responses becoming part of the way of working on surge.

The team drew on contributions from Start Network member organisations and other organisations who offered some of their own curricular resource material. In some areas such as personal performance management and accountability in surge situations, where resources and current research data are limited, new workshop material was prepared.

The pilot curriculum:
- The humanitarian context - including the surge response architecture
- Women's rights - within a rights-based development framework
- Working with others - including negotiation skills and collaboration
- People management - including personal accountability and performance management
- Participation and accountability
- Culture and diversity
- Stress and wellbeing - including a mindfulness-based stress reduction programme
- What to expect on deployment.

Challenges to the curriculum design process:

Sustainability

The training mapping report highlighted that surge training was not common, and where it existed it was not standardised, and even the need for it was questioned. The project's desire is for a real commitment to standardised and mandatory surge training for all actors so we are all better at collaboration and coordination. However, one question raised is whether it is possible to make open access training adaptable to different cultures and contexts, and suitable for varying levels of expertise? More feedback on the pilot is needed before we can answer this question.

Research material

Finding surge-specific material was a challenge for both those with L&D and HR responsibilities in the team. The team also grappled with identifying what exactly the difference is between general humanitarian response and surge. We concluded that surge is an ability to scale up and the various components (people and operating environments) needed to enable that.

Time pressures

Pressing deadlines connected to administration and funding timelines, as well as the variable pace that each of the platform members are able to work at mean participation and flexibility is challenging, as with any programme design of this kind, even when great motivation is demonstrated. The variable working pace of member organisations meant variable rates of progress on the different components, for example the preparation of the regional platform rosters. This was greatly improved with the appointment of the Asia Regional Platform Coordinator for the Transforming Surge Capacity project. More information on regional platform rosters is available in the text box below.

Philippines surge roster

To meet the rapid demand for additional human resources needed during a humanitarian emergency, the Transforming Surge Capacity project steering committee in the Philippines is building a joint roster of experienced humanitarians, technical specialists from the public and private sector, and individuals from voluntary organisations wanting to work with NGOs responding to an emergency. Individuals will be invited to join the roster by their current and former NGO employers, or by relevant professional associations or private sector organisations that Start Network members have partnered with. Roster members will build individual profiles listing their skills and experience and in the event of an emergency or anticipated emergency, will be contacted through the platform by email and app, and asked to confirm their current availability.

NGOs who are members of the surge roster platform will be able to search the register for individuals with profiles that match their need and who have confirmed availability so they can rapidly scale-up their staffing through secondment and direct recruitment. NGOs will be required to join the roster by submitting an application form proving they meet certain criteria such as a being an NGO with a humanitarian mandate operating on humanitarian principles, which will be reviewed by the Transforming Surge Capacity project steering committee.

It is envisaged that up to 10,000 individuals will be able to add their profiles to the roster and that up to 200 NGOs will join.

The roster will exist on a web-based software platform that will only be activated during an emergency so that it cannot be used as a day-to-day recruitment tool. The roster will also contain a range of registers for each section of the humanitarian sector and work themes e.g. logistics, shelter, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), HR and protection.

This information is based on the tender for the Transforming Surge Capacity Project: Philippines Surge Roster And Platform.

Piloting the training

During the first week of pilot training, the range of experience and expertise amongst delegates facilitated peer learning and a rich exchange of ideas.

Indicators for the initial monitoring and evaluation (M&E) process include the responses to the question "what will you take back into the workplace from what you have learned" for each module. The following are examples of intended changed behaviours or attitudes:

- I am much more aware of the range of cultural diversity modalities in the surge situation
- I will include the issues of staff management and wellness in after-action-reviews
- I will take the concept of operational understanding of accountability from a power perspective (i.e. understanding which stakeholders hold the balance of power)
- I will share the Red Cross Code of Conduct with my workmates.

The workshop programme has now been refined in line with feedback from pilot participants, host organisation Christian Aid and other platform members, and the facilitators themselves. Following the delivery of the second pilot training in Bangkok, a parallel train the trainer curriculum will be designed to ensure local delivery of the training by those with local expertise which will maximise the opportunity to increase capacity.

Lessons learned

Innovation: A good place to start with a reflection on the pilot's potential impact is aligning the pilot feedback with Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) Commitment 7: **"*Communities and people affected by crisis can expect delivery of improved assistance as organisations learn from experience and reflection".* We cannot 'transform surge' in a three-year project, however this pilot is about testing new ways of doing things, generating innovative ideas and learning from experience. This project sits in a portfolio of Start Network projects focused on inter-agency collaboration, giving a real opportunity to provide evidence and test new approaches to surge response.

Technical skills: Those on surge rosters will always need the approved technical skills to ensure they will be able to function effectively in high-pressure environments. This training will contribute to any behavioural changes needed to move toward better collaboration and coordination, and to ensure people can function effectively in high pressure environments. There was previously no specific training available offering professional development in surge areas.

Soft skills: We hope this training contributes towards a sector that is more flexible, adaptive, and sensitive to different contexts and ways we operationalise surge practices. These so called 'softer' skills are incredibly hard to put into practice. However, this pilot training encourages an acceptance that a minimum level of knowledge and skills is needed (i.e. on codes of conduct, accountability, wellbeing, communicating with communities, etc.) for a quality and effective response, as well as an awareness that their absence leaves disaster-affected people and staff vulnerable. All too often, teams swell quickly with little consideration of the skills needed to effectively do so – the aim of this pilot is to promote acceptance that these competencies are needed if we are to truly transform surge.

Localisation: The programme also contributes towards localising surge by training staff at the regional level; the State of Surge report highlighted a lack of training at the regional level and the practice of deploying experienced international staff who were considered to be more reliable and effective.

We expect the next State of Surge report to show how the system has evolved based on the learning from this project. This training will provide learning not only for participants, but more broadly on how to build learning into better ways of working across the sector.

What next?

There is a long way to go to transform surge, however if the levels of enthusiasm and engagement at the Philippines training were the only measure of meeting the project's objectives, we would have no further work. The task now is to generate that level of engagement on learning and improving surge again. Ensuring sustainability means developing train the trainer resources to improve local capacity and capability for surge delivery. Another consideration is a more transformative approach for surge-specific learning including online learning, downloadable webinar sessions, standalone resources for in-between assignments or adoption of mobile phone app technology. It is clear that this training was part of a wider project working towards creating an enabling operational environment.

This case study was developed by Ann Start, pilot training co-designer and facilitator and Vicky Shearer, Emergency Response Team Manager, CAFOD.