A Case Study: Joint Needs Assessment after the West Sumatra Earthquake (September 30, 2009)

This case study reviews the background to the Joint Needs Assessment (JNA) methodology developed by ECB agencies and partners in Indonesia, and presents findings and recommendations from an After Action Review that examined JNA implementation following the 2009 earthquake in West Sumatra.

II. Background

- Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) Project
- Needs Assessment Task Force (NATF)
- Joint Needs Assessments in Indonesia
- Padang Earthquake

The ECB Project is a collaborative initiative led by 6 international agencies. The second phase of the project began in 2008, and seeks to improve the speed, quality and effectiveness of emergency preparedness and response in the humanitarian community by building capacity at the field, global organizational and humanitarian sector levels. The ECB Project places considerable emphasis on accountability of humanitarian actors to disaster-affected populations, and participating agencies see their main “value-added” to needs assessments not only in improving the timeliness, coherence and quality of assessment data, but also in ensuring that the views of those most affected are adequately represented.

During the first phase of the ECB Project, a rapid Joint Needs Assessment (JNA) methodology was developed by the ECB Project in Indonesia, in consultation with the Government and the UN Country Team. This methodology included pre-agreements between actors to deploy a common approach, a standard data collection instrument and an embryonic database for the management and analysis of data. Following a consultative and participatory action planning process, plans are in place to build on this learning in Phase 2. The intention is to provide additional support to further improve the utility, integration and coherence of the JNA system already developed and used in Indonesia. The JNA project teams will also share learning from the Indonesia experience widely with humanitarian sector, and use this learning to enable ECB agencies to develop similar systems in other ECB consortia countries.

The Needs Assessment Task Force (UNOCHA – NATF) The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has mandated the Needs Assessment Task Force (NATF) to lead a global effort to harmonize and improve needs assessment, across the sectoral clusters and between different NGO, UN and government actors. The NATF was formed in response to broad agreement among humanitarian actors and donors that the weaknesses in needs assessment practices have for several years’ hindered evidence-based decision making, and consequently effective humanitarian response.
The NATF work plan includes the following initiatives: develop Operational Guidelines, training materials, case studies and a systematic approach to assessing existing in-country assessment capacity and preparedness tools including pre-negotiated protocols that define clear roles and responsibilities amongst in-country actors.

The ECB Project seeks to engage with and support the NATF, both through the influence and reach of ECB’s global members, and by involving the ECB consortia in practical capacity building work at field level. Improving the JNA database tool will facilitate the collecting, collating and disseminating of assessment information in a user-friendly format, ensure compatibility with national and international systems (e.g. OCHA’s needs assessment dashboard), and provide opportunities for further real time learning during future emergencies. The detailed capturing of lessons learnt in Indonesia will provide the NATF working group with recommendations to move forward their work on the Operational guidelines, training materials & case studies.

The JNA in Indonesia

ECB agencies in Indonesia first worked together to conduct an initial rapid assessment following an earthquake in March 2007. Within 48 hours of the event, a coordination meeting with all ECB members was held in Jakarta and another was held in West Sumatra to discuss the situation and plan the response. This experience demonstrated the benefits of Joint Assessments and set the wheels in motion for the development of a JNA tool along with an associated database to facilitate collation and rapid dissemination of needs assessment information.

These processes have become somewhat institutionalized within a number of Indonesia-based agencies, especially those who have formally collaborated with each other through the ECB Project. The most recent example was following the earthquake in West Sumatra on September 30, 2009 where, within hours of the disaster event, government, UN and NGO leaders were sharing information about the disaster and organizing a joint assessment using a pre-agreed data-collection format. The following brief chronology details the sequence of actions:

The West Sumatra Earthquake – a chronology of events

September 30, 2009
Two major earthquakes strike in quick succession off the coast of West Sumatra.

October 1, 2009
The ECB Consortium meet and agree to carry out a JNA Assessment. Mercy Corps, the only agency with an existing office in Padang, was appointed lead on this initiative.

October 2, 2009
Mercy Corps host a coordination meeting with ECB agencies and local NGO representatives in Padang. The JNA tool is presented and the group identifies a rough geographical breakdown of assessment locations.
October 2, 2009 (continued)
The first OCHA coordination meeting is held and the request to use the JNA tool was repeated to all agencies. Mercy Corps agreed to be the focal point for collection and compilation of results up to the 5th October deadline set by OCHA for receipt of completed forms. This deadline was set to allow OCHA to complete their assessment report by their deadline. At subsequent OCHA meetings Mercy Corps presented short briefings on the methodology for using the tool.

During the first week: local NGOs, the Indonesian government as well as the Indonesian Red Cross (Palang Merah Indonesia - PMI) conduct their own assessments. The vast majority of local NGOs were eager to participate in the JNA and attempt to use this form in areas where they had not yet carried out assessments.

October 5, 2009
Mercy Corps develop a simple searchable excel sheet database. A total of 78 respondent sheets covering six districts is collected and given to OCHA.

During the second week: the World Bank deploy a team to discuss preliminary preparation for a Damage & Loss Assessment (DALA) with the Indonesian government. UNDP deploy a team to prepare for the Human Recovery Assessment (usually the post-disaster needs assessment) and identify university partners to train as assessors. The Humanitarian Response Plan (an appeal document) is launched based on preliminary assessment findings. The Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) and specific agencies share their assessment results during the second week.

Mid to End of October, 2009
OCHA draft, and circulate with ECB, a report that summarizes the various assessment efforts (the JNA being the most collaborative), that were conducted in West Sumatra. This report includes data from 89 respondents to the JNA.

UNDP release their assessment results 4-5 weeks after the emergency.

January 18-29, 2010
A field review is conducted in Padang and Jakarta. Focus groups and key informant interviews with Government agencies, ECB agencies, UN agencies, local NGO partners and beneficiaries are held. This culminates in an After Action Workshop in Jakarta with Government representatives from BNPB (National Disaster Management Agency), international NGOs including most of ECB consortium members, IFRC, UN Agencies, Health, WASH & Child Protection clusters, the World Bank, and one donor agency to discuss the JNA in West Sumatra and to work on a set of recommendations.

IV. Lessons Learned & Recommendations

What went well?
The 2009 West Sumatra earthquake brought together, for the first time, a broad spectrum of stakeholders including NGO, UN and government actors who were willing to work together on a JNA. The participants were eager to contribute to and benefit from a shared data set. This experience has yielded valuable lessons for all who were involved and provides useful learning for future Needs Assessments not only in Indonesia but also in other countries and contexts.
There was a strong willingness among the different agencies and actors to work together on a JNA. This willingness to coordinate and cooperate also allowed the different agencies to better share information beyond the JNA. Agencies mentioned that while they faced challenges in sharing data around the JNA (due to data collection issues discussed in the following section) they were able to share other helpful information related to the response with each other.

While many that participated in the JNA were not previously aware of the tool, the fact that a tool existed that had been agreed upon ahead of time by most of the actors as well as the government was viewed as positive. The existence of this tool removed the amount of time that is usually required to create a new tool or negotiate with the different actors which tool should be used. The fact that the clusters actively promoted the JNA was viewed as valuable. The emergence of a type of assessment mobilizer or motivator (between OCHA and ECB) was viewed as positive.

What challenges were faced and recommendations proposed?

**Challenge: The JNA tool**
- Considered too long and lacking a clear methodology for an initial rapid assessment. As a result the vast majority of participating agencies modified the form to make it shorter or skipped sections.
- Gaps in understanding included: *What was the appropriate size of the assessment team? What types of people should be on the team? What is the size of the sample required? Were there any general guidelines around how to carry out the JNA?*
- Insufficient staff trained on the ground to use the tool. Staff turnover as well as the fact that some who had been trained on the tool had not been deployed to West Sumatra contributed to this shortage.
- Confusion around the terminology used in the tool questionnaire and translation: some local NGOs’ received English instead of the Bahasa Indonesian version.
- Access to hard copy questionnaires during a time when there was limited access to electricity and thus photocopying equipment was a challenge. This was overcome by the shelter cluster coordinator bringing hard copies to Padang.

**Recommendation: Modifications for the Tool**

The tool for the initial rapid assessment needs to be shortened to a maximum of 4 pages if it is to be used during an initial rapid assessment (within 72 hours). Such a tool should be quick and simple to use by generalists. It should identify the most affected areas, key needs/gaps, and may point at areas that need further assessment at a later date.

In its current format, the JNA tool appears to be more appropriate for a later phase of the response. With inputs from partners, clusters and technical experts it could be modified to determine core indicators and adapted to suit various phases of assessments. These tools could be part of a tool kit which would provide options to emergency response staff, and be modified according to their specific needs and situations.
**Challenge: Data Compilation**

- Participating agencies did not always collect the full set of data requested, and only 89 datasets were submitted.
- Not all agencies were able to get their data in on the requested deadline and assessment groups were not able to use the JNA electronic database, currently in development. In the absence of a database that could compile and consolidate the collected data, Mercy Corps created a simple excel database.
- Given the data capture challenges, it was difficult to analyze the data.

A draft narrative report of Needs Assessments in the West Sumatra earthquake (which included the JNA but not exclusively) was released towards the end of October. This draft report was distributed to ECB agencies pending the input of the Indonesian government which to date had not yet been finalized. Apart from ECB agencies it is not clear if any of the other agencies or local NGOs counterparts participating in the JNA had seen this draft report.

**Recommendation: Ensure Efficient Compilation & Reporting**

The JNA database needs to be completed and online as soon as possible. The design and functionality of the database should make it simple to use with online and offline capabilities. As internet access can be problematic in the initial stages of a disaster, remote data entry and the use of cell phone/SMS should be considered.

The database will need to be complimentary to databases used by coordinating agencies such as host governments or the United Nations. There was a strong expressed preference for a local developer who could attend meetings with the government, NGO’s and UN agencies to help develop clear specifications for the database.

It was suggested that BNPB and OCHA play the central role in coordinating the compilation of data and reporting it onwards. A designated JNA team could then compile the data and that the clusters take this data and provide an analysis. The findings would then be reported through the clusters on to other NGOs and ECB agencies.

**BNPB approval and adoption of the JNA tool is yet to happen**

The Indonesian National Agency for Disaster Management (BNPB) is aware of the ECB JNA tool and has socialized it internally within the agency, with the support of UNOCHA in 2009. However the endorsement of the ECB JNA tool from the BNPB is still in discussion. While the BNPB is still reviewing the existing assessment tools within the various government agencies, it will take time to complete the process due to limited BNPB staff availability and the wide range of responsibility within their remit causing competing priorities on their time. In the meantime ECB Indonesia and UNOCHA will continue dialogue with the BNPB for endorsement of the tool.

**Recommendation: Secure BNPB Leadership & Endorsement**

Support from the BNPB is key to the successful use of the JNA in future emergencies. The BNPB currently have a two page rapid assessment tool that focuses on data around casualties. In some instances local NGO and government actors perceived the two tools as competing with each other. The two tools are quite different with the ECB tool collecting multi-sectoral data on needs while the BNPB tool collects data surrounding the numbers of casualties and damage to infrastructure. If the JNA tool was used during the first 72 hours, it would be a combination of both, and remain quick and simple to use.
Continued: It is recommended that the BNPB would support the tool, and clearly assign the major roles (such as assigning an assessment coordinator) to specific actors/teams. Once international agencies arrive at a disaster OCHA could play a supporting role to BNPB as most appropriate. OCHA could provide technical assistance with the coordination, compilation, and reporting of the JNA data.

**Challenge: Lack of Clear Communications**
- It was not clearly communicated that this was the first time that the JNA would be used on such a scale. Participants thought that the JNA was a tried and tested tool and therefore invested a considerable amount of time and resources conducting the JNA, but did not obtain the quality of assessment data they thought they would be forthcoming. These agencies felt that if it had been made clear that this was a type of larger trial run then their expectations and subsequent disappointment in the results could have been tempered.
- Communications should have been stronger after the initial decision to use the JNA. Participants should have been clearly informed of next steps, of what happened to the data, the results, and draft findings should have been shared with them. Many had not seen the draft report nor had any idea of what had happened to the data after submission.
- The database that was submitted to OCHA mentioned ECB and included the Mercy Corps logo, but not the logo of other participating agencies. The lack of joint agreement on how to brand the tool lead one agency to withdraw their data.

**Challenge: Restricted Resources**
- Resources restrictions were seen as limiting the scope of the JNA. For example transportation and manpower shortages meant that some of the harder hit, difficult to reach areas, were not reached and instead assessments took place on the main roads that were open and accessible.

**Recommendation: Conduct Effective Trainings**
Once the JNA tool is finalized in conjunction with BNPB, OCHA, and NGO partners it is important to provide training on the tool. This training could be conducted by NGO partners in conjunction with OCHA and BNPB. Local NGOs in Padang felt that they could play a key role in providing trainings to their local volunteers. Many have community groups in place that they already work with that they could train to do the JNA. It was also recommended that academic institutions receive training as they may be able to play a key role in future assessments.

It was suggested that the key agencies should have at least 1-2 people on the ground that were familiar with the tool, and its methodology, and could provide refresher trainings before the data is collected in the field.
VI. Next steps: for the JNA in Indonesia

The participants of the After Action Workshop in Jakarta committed to several next steps to move forward the work on the JNA:

- In order to address the issues with the current JNA questionnaire ECB and OCHA will work together on a new format. OCHA will take the lead by examining other rapid assessment forms in use by various agencies and institutions and will draft options for a new tool by the end of February.
- A meeting with the clusters to finalize the tool and share information on multi and single cluster tools, as well as information management systems, will take place in April 2010.
- The ECB Indonesia consortium team will work closely with the OCHA Information Management working group in country to identify needs and specifications for the JNA tool and database. The goal is to have a database ready for testing by humanitarian agencies in Indonesia by the end of May and a working version following a workshop in Indonesia during late June.
- The training components of the JNA will be drafted once the tool is ready for testing and use. OCHA and ECB will work together on joint funding proposals to carry out trainings.
- The ECB Consortium and OCHA will begin meeting with BNPB from February onwards to begin further collaborative development of JNA initiative.

Through these steps participants of the workshop are working towards creating an effective JNA tool, database and clear procedures in advance of any major future emergencies.

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