IsraAID's Emergency Response Team in Myanmar

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Introduction

I wanted to intern for IsraAID before even applying for Tel Aviv University's Emergency and Disaster Management EMPH. As Israel's only humanitarian aid NGO specializing in emergency response, recovery and rehabilitation, I understood that interning with IsraAID would provide me with the practical experience I was looking for to complement my academic studies at Tel Aviv University.

I began my internship with IsraAID in April 2015 and was given the standard intern duties- to update the website, to manage the social media outlets, to write content for various publications. Occasionally, I was tasked with writing a project proposal. This was my favorite part of my internship, as I perceived this to be my most important contribution to the organization.

At the end of July, flooding in Myanmar displaced thousands of people, damaged hundreds of thousands of homes, and destroyed millions of acres of cropland. Over 1.6 million people were severely affected by the massive flooding.

In the beginning of August, I received a call from my boss asking me if I could go to Myanmar to manage IsraAID's emergency response team that was currently being recruited. Without asking for details or clarification, I immediately accepted. This was my dream job, and it was offered to me just days before my graduation.

Task description

IsraAID's emergency response team landed on the ground in Myanmar on August 24th. As this was my first emergency deployment, I started off as the team's "operations manager" while I was trained to become the "head of mission". To be blunt, the differentiations between these job titles are futile. The one thing I didn't do as Operations Manager that I do now as the Head of Mission was initiate meetings with whom we refer to as the "Big Players"- UNICEF, UNFPA, OCHA, UNDAC and WFP (as it would take me some time to learn the "language" and the "politics" of the UN).

After a few weeks of running various needs assessments in states and divisions across Myanmar, we began to understand that Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) as well as Psycho-social Service Support (PSS) were the areas in which IsraAID could offer assistance to communities in the most impactful and effective manner. My team and I began to tailor our response in order to start tending to the WASH and PSS needs of communities around the country. Even with countless NGOs and UN agencies on the ground, our work was seemingly endless (I thank god for OCHA and the coordination they enable).

My job description, in short, is to manage a team of emergency response specialists in order to maximise IsraAID's added value in a carnival of NGOs, UN agencies and government ministries so as to ensure that we offer services and expertise to flood-affected communities and to local NGOs that were not previously available or accessible in Myanmar.

My job involves scheduling and coordinating meetings with various government departments, UN agencies, INGOs, local NGOs, and leaders of IDP camps; scouting for, and hiring local staff members (interpreters, drivers, logistics coordinators, etc.); writing project proposals and appeals for

funding from the UN; planning, coordinating and implementing various projects and training workshops (either independently, with local NGOs or with UN agencies); managing the logistics and coordination of all team members intra-organisationally and inter-organisationally; managing the budget and the bookkeeping; ensuring monitoring, supervision and follow-up of all completed projects; and ensuring professional-level reporting and record-keeping of all IsraAID activities.

Description of personal experience

I'm over nine weeks into the mission and we have no end in sight. My team's approach has appropriately shifted from the response phase (which focused on improving hygiene conditions, water quality, and water-borne disease awareness in remote villages) to the recovery phase (which now focuses on improving psycho-social support, provision and monitoring techniques of government social workers, mental healthcare workers, local and international NGO representatives and various community leaders).

Overall, my experience was a positive one, yet I cannot write an accurate report without sharing my critical observations as well. The unpredictable and continuously changing nature of emergencies demands emergency response teams which are flexible and dynamic. Indeed, I explained to a number of friends (both in Israel and in Myanmar) who asked for jobs or internships with my team that the nature of the work is not suitable for everyone. To be very honest, I'm not sure I would have been cut-out for this job, had I not been through the Israeli army and through Tel Aviv's Emergency and Disaster Management EMPH program. My life experiences forced me to become a flexible and dynamic person who is capable of working efficiently under high pressure; by nature, I was not actually like this until recently.

I am both in awe and in shock of the reality of emergency response and recovery for a number of reasons. I've learned more in these past couple of months than I imagined I was capable of learning in a year, and there are some things I wish I hadn't learned.

I will begin with the positive aspects of my experience:

- **Grassroots organizations can have a huge impact on affected communities:** Myanmar, with all of it's interethnic conflicts and government corruption, has a (mostly) compassionate population of people, many of whom organized themselves in order to provide some assistance to flood-affected neighboring townships or villages. People who know the local culture, the language, and the politics of townships often have highly effective responses to emergencies. More over, people who have been personally affected by an emergency are impassioned and empowered to help their neighbors, friends and families.

- **Coordination and communication affect EVERYTHING:** This doesn't necessitate the involvement of OCHA, but OCHA offers a huge help when it is properly organized. I only came to understand the importance of communication and coordination when I had to implement training seminars for IDP camp leaders in Hakha, a remote mountain city in Chin State. Though Hakha is the capital city of Chin, there is no wifi in the city and the cellular towers were damaged by the floods. This situation reduced communication to landlines, which were of little help as my colleagues rarely remained indoors (or at one place for more than one hour). In Hakha, it took two days to plan a workshop that should have been planned in half of a day.

- **Any response must be tailored to the cultural and social context of the beneficiaries:** It is critical to design a response that fits the cultural and social context that it will be implemented in. I learned this the hard way. One of our first initiatives was a distribution of food and hygiene kits in an extremely isolated village in Ayeyarwaddy Division. I learned from locals that family size was between 5 and 8 people, and this allowed me to prepare the family-sized kits accordingly. What I failed to understand, however, was that this particular village was made up of a majority of children. Parents of all ages seemed to have children between the ages of a few months to a

few years. My hygiene kits included a sufficient number of adult toothbrushes, but not a single child-toothbrush. An initiative can enjoy the purest of intentions, but if it is not designed to fit the context in which it will exist, it will fall short in terms of efficacy. This is a lesson I will *never* forget.

- **Any response must account for communities' most vulnerable population sectors (the elderly, the young, women, handicapped):** This is a similar lesson to the previous one. I visited a number of villages whose villagers continued to defecate in the field, further polluting their water sources, because some people could not access the temporary latrines that were built to avoid this precise situation. The elderly and handicapped of Tit Chauk villages simply could not access the latrines that were built after the floods, and had no other option but to use their fields. Too often, vulnerable groups of populations are excluded from the benefits of foreign interventions.

- **Most people, regardless of education or social status, become empowered if you give them the opportunity:** in general, people in Myanmar tend to be soft-spoken, passive and tight-lipped. Even after days of working with a given interpreter or driver, they would continue to speak only when spoken to, and to hold back form sharing personal opinions. Interpreters would always be involved in program implementation (regardless of the program itself), and I liked to invite our drivers to participate as well. Especially with initiatives like organising a distribution, local staff members enjoyed becoming actively involved to help their fellow Myanmar people. Generally, the more long-term the project, the more engaged the staff members become. Occasionally, people assume leadership roles and begin making suggestions and sharing opinions on how to move forward with certain program aspects. In my experience, most people will become empowered when given tasks they are not normally exposed to (if they find meaning in the task).

- **Religious faith is a huge determinant in personal and communal resiliency:** I have yet to decide if this is a positive or negative experience, but considering the large number of people in Myanmar who place their faith in Buddha or Jesus, I decided to categorize this as a positive lesson learned. Some of the most severely-damaged areas of Myanmar also happened to be some of the most religious areas. I observed a strong correlation between people who were able to cope with the massive loss they had experienced and their belief in some god.

The less positive lessons of my experience were equally as formative for me:

- **Even the most skilled, well-staffed organizations are powerless without funding:** this is all too true for IsraAID, but applies to every organization, including the UN. After a Protection cluster meeting, I was approached by a UNICEF officer who asked if I would be willing to consider working in Chin State (which is known for its extreme remoteness and lack of infrastructure and thus access). She explained that women and children in IDP camps were starting to suffer emotionally because they had nothing to do all day; some felt unsafe and insecure in their new residences which were fairly exposed and offered very little privacy. When I asked why UNICEF couldn't initiate a program for the children in these IDP camps, and she explained that they had no funding for an initiative such as that one (to be honest here, I believe it is possible that UNICEF in Myanmar actually lacked the expertise to deal with PSS issues in the context of a lack of protection, but it is also possible that funding prevented such programming).

- **Some NGOs are competitive, not cooperative:** I never could have imagined that competition could exist in fields such as humanitarian aid and emergency response. Kobi once called me naive, and I now understand that I was (am still am, in many ways). While plenty of NGOs are happy to share information and approaches, many are not. There are a few organizations that are completely shut-off from other NGOs, which is an unfortunate reality as inter-agency cooperation can offer significant improvements in relief efforts.

- **Working in a developing country is a constant struggle for many reasons:** mostly due to cultural and political differences as well as technological and infrastructure challenges. Although I doubt it is so for all developing countries, the adherence to time frames in Myanmar is generally very lax, especially in villages and more rural areas. Politics (both governmental and organizational) dictate nearly everything an individual does here; the government and organizations are highly centralized and bureaucratic, which meant that I had to connect with an organization's CEO or a state department's deputy officer in order to make inter-organizational decisions. As in most developing countries, technology in Myanmar is basic and wifi internet access is limited to only the most expensive hotels and cafes in the larger cities. Coordination is highly contingent upon channels of communication, and adapting to such restrictive technology and communication in Myanmar was one of the biggest adjustments I had to make.

- **As a manager, you must meet the constantly changing needs of your project beneficiaries, your own staff members, and your partner organizations** (which is sometimes practically impossible): Over the past two months, I sometimes felt like a highly-skilled, capable manager. Other times, I felt like an under-paid babysitter of spoiled children. I've never had more mixed emotions about one experience. IsraAID seeks managers who are "superhuman", to provide for the needs of everyone within their networks. During my fist few weeks, I struggled with what initially seemed like impossible expectations and tasks. I don't think I ever actually got used to it. After a certain point in time, however, I think I somehow came to accept the never-ending and constantly evolving demands of my colleagues and of my work in general.

- **In emergencies, the situation evolves constantly, necessitating a dynamic and malleable response** (as well as dynamic and flexible team members, which are hard to come by): the quality of aid work is dependent upon the effectiveness of those implementing the work. Proper planning is critical, there is no denying that. But planning must be flexible and able to be adapted to changing conditions. If it is not, it is merely a matter of time before certain plans become obsolete. Response teams, too, must be flexible and adaptable. Although it is quite easy for a job candidate to express that he or she is dynamic and versatile, it is not as easy to operate this way, especially under conditions of great stress.

- **When it comes to seeking government approval for projects, money sometimes speaks louder than humanitarian action:** Although many of my experiences working with government employees in Myanmar were positive ones, some were not. Dealing with the Department of Central Administration (at the township, district and state level) proved to be extremely difficult and frustrating. This department has a reputation of being distrusting of foreigners; it is comprised mostly of retired military professionals who have limited political experience. More often than not, I was indirectly asked for a bribe in order to get approval for what ever I was requesting from the Department of Central Administration. Because the IsraAID budget comes solely from donor funding, I never offered a bribe to a government official. This was a tough decision to make, as offering the bribe probably would have allowed me to follow through with certain initiatives that I otherwise would not have been able to implement (this potentially was the "good" thing to do, but was in my mind too un-"right" to offer).

- **Burnout is a real phenomenon:** When I learned about the concept of burnout, I subconsciously felt that it was something that only very sensitive or weaker-willed people experienced. This is *not* at all the case, as I have seen people from all walks of life experience it, myself included. Burnout is difficult to avoid and even more difficult to overcome, yet I find that gathering my team together for a good meal and a few drinks can help relieve the weight of exhaustion and can distract (even temporarily) people's minds from the ever-present demands of work. When possible, a day off to enjoy what ever city or town is in proximity is even more effective (but very rarely possible).

- **The government of Myanmar cannot meet the needs of it's population, in emergencies as well as in routine time:** Perhaps it is the history of generations of insulation, the military repression, or the lack of industry that has made the government of Myanmar quite poor (in terms of financial resources as well as service provision capacity). With an abundance of natural resources (semi-precious stones, coal and lumber), the country should be quite wealthy. What ever the cause, the government cannot meet the needs of it's people. This stands true especially in emergencies. When Cyclone Nargis devastated a majority of the country in 2008, many NGOs and INGOs were highly critical of the government response. After the flooding in July, 2015, the government response was strong in some respects and weak in others. The general consensus amongst the international community in Myanmar is that the government response has been the strongest in terms of Shelter. It has failed to offer adequate support in the field of Protection, however, as interests such as security, safety, and privacy are largely left to community leaders. Perhaps this is not a shortcoming of this specific government, as it is too true that in emergencies, needs *always* outweigh resources.

- **People fear their government in Myanmar:** Myanmar's history of repressive military governance has created a culture of apprehension towards the government. Even today, with a "democratic" regime, people are reluctant to discuss politics in public and refuse to directly criticise the government. Even journalists are careful with their works. Government workers too, are fearful or their higher-ranking counterparts. This is an incredibly interesting cultural phenomenon for me as an American and Israeli citizen who was taught to think critically and express opinions openly.

- **Emergency preparedness is critical to mitigate damage to human life and property, yet poorer countries (who are usually more vulnerable to emergencies) often lack preparedness plans altogether:** Flooding in Myanmar is an annual occurrence. People around the country are used to the raising of water-levels during the rainy reason but expect them to lower fairly quickly. This year's rainy season was an anomaly; communities across the country were not prepared for it. Every village head, monk, priest, doctor, headmaster, social worker, and parent I met with told me that no one ever expected flooding of such magnitude to occur, so no one believed there was any need to prepare for such an impossible situation. Even leaders of the wealthier villages and towns expressed that their resources were so limited that it was illogical to invest money in such an improbable initiative. As is too often the case, people and organizations across the country are now seeking expert advice on how to create emergency preparedness plans for the next flood.

- **In countries where mental health and psychological wellbeing are not prioritised by the government or by local cultures, there will be no relevant service provision, and psychological trauma will turn into a long-term, chronic illness:** Myanmar has only a few psychiatrists and psychologists, and they are located only in the largest cities. Awareness of variations of psychological distress is not part of the culture, and many people live out their lives with undiagnosed disorders and illnesses. "Madness" is the phrase most commonly used to "diagnose" mental health disorders, especially in towns and villages which lack access to even the most basic of mental health care workers (such as counsellors or social workers) and their services. In the context of emergencies, psychological trauma is a normal reaction to abnormal occurrences. If left untreated, trauma can quickly shift from an acute disorder to a chronic illness. More often than not, simple and timely interventions can prevent a lifetime of emotional and cognitive ailments. Because this concept is not part of the social, cultural or political context of Myanmar, it has not been incorporated into the government's response, and has largely been left out of most NGO response as well.

Appendix: photos

From Ayayeyarwaddy (food and hygiene kit distribution, hygiene promotion)

From Magwey (Training school headmasters in hygiene promotion, disease transmission prevention and construction of sinks from locally-found materials; water-quality testing and training; hygiene kit distribution)

From Sagaing (toilet bowl and pipe distribution, repair of schools water purification system)