AN ILL WIND THAT BLOWS SOME GOOD: GROUPS AND TEAMS HELPING IN VANUATU AFTER CYCLONE PAM

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Natural disasters of the scope of tropical cyclone Pam, a category five event and reportedly the strongest storm ever recorded in the southern hemisphere, bring devastation and human suffering on a vast scale. Such was the case in Vanuatu and other South Pacific nations in March 2015. The relief effort that followed, while focusing on reducing the impacts of lost lives, infrastructure, and homes by providing emergency shelter, medical supplies, food and water also created the opportunity from different organisations to combine their collective efforts for the benefit of the people of Vanuatu. An unanticipated consequence of the working relationships which developed of necessity, was the chance to compare organisational cultures and modus operandi in a working environment and circumstances unfamiliar to most participants.

This paper records some initial responses from a participant observer’s perspective, as a member of the Australian Defence Force assisting with Civil/Military Cooperation (CIMIC) in the National Disaster Management Office, (NDMO), in Port Vila. It will contrast the approaches taken to group formation between actors in the Humanitarian Community, (HC), composed of a number of International Organizations, (IO), Non-government Organizations, (NGO); Government of Vanuatu, (GOVU), agencies with military members of various nations assisting with the relief efforts.

GROUPS OF TEAMS

In order to frame the context in which these interactions took place, an understanding of the distinction between the terms ‘group’ and ‘team’ needs to be briefly discussed.
Many authors use the terms interchangeably, drawing no distinction between the two...

In the eyes of such authors the work team is the work group... The conclusion is difficult to avoid. In the literature many authors continually refer to teams as groups and groups as teams, neither perceiving nor implying any distinctions between them. (Fisher, Hunter & Macrosson 1997, pp. 232-3)

A case in point is Tuckman’s (Tuckman 1965; Tuckman & Jensen 1977) emphasis of ‘groups’ to the total disregard of the word ‘team’ in his discussion of group development, even though it could be argued that a group which has developed to the performing stage, exhibits the features attributed by others to a team.

Groups

Erbert and his associates acknowledge the difficulty in distinguishing between groups and teams and cited Gouran’s 1982 definition of a group as being sufficient to capture the complexity of a group as “small collections of people forming complex networks of interpersonal relationships that can be distinguished in terms of the norms, the distribution of roles, status structure, patterns of authority and the interdependence of the members.” (Erbert, Mearns & Dena 2005, p. 25) While groups and teams share a number of common attributes (Fisher, Hunter & Macrosson 1997), the view accepted by this paper accords with the belief that all teams are groups but not all groups have become teams. (Avolio et al. 1996; Rothwell 2013) The distinguishing feature which emerges as the most important difference between groups and teams is the interdependence, or otherwise, existing between a group’s members. In teams, members rely on each other, (their respective skills, experience, personal abilities and attributes), and share intent and purpose in the achievement of common goals. While being derived from different ‘cultural’ origins, the experience in the NDMO reflects a successful merging of groups from military and civilian backgrounds into effective, functional teams.
Teams

While a number of factors determine whether a group is a team or not, they can broadly be grouped around two key dimensions: task, the work to be done, the job/s to be performed, that is, the objective/s to which productive efforts are applied; and relationships, which are taken to reflect the inter-personal connections in a group which has advanced in its development to the point where members approach tasks interdependently; they rely on each other not just to perform work, but also for supportive relationships which provide a level of cohesion and collaboration not evident to the same extent in workgroups.

NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT OFFICE

The NDMO provided a forum where the expressed wishes and priorities for disaster relief of the Government of Vanuatu could be disseminated to the Humanitarian Community. In turn, the representatives of the constituent organizations provided progress reports on their respective efforts in achieving these goals, a task made more coherent by a loose alignment of interests into functional ‘clusters’ of collaborating groups. In this instance primarily: Food Security and Agriculture; Education; Health and Nutrition; Gender and Protection; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene; Shelter; and Logistics overlaid with a coordinating function provided by the United Nations through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (UNOCHA 2015a) As of April 16, there were over 400 ongoing activities by more than 40 organizations in progress in Vanuatu reported by OCHA. (UNOCHA 2015b)

The NDMO served also as a forum bringing together representatives from the military forces participating in the disaster relief effort. The main military effort was the provision of logistic to assist the HC with aid distribution and civil engineering support to affected communities. Participating nations included New Zealand, France, Australia, Fiji and Tonga as well as the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force. In this environment, there was a distinct
contrast between the culture and operation of cluster members and groups representing members of the military. Members of the HC were often volunteers, drawn from around the world, and working under the banner of a number of well-known organizations. While some members had prior experience with disaster relief efforts, often in combination with significant technical ability, the combination of representatives in each cluster was unique in that, while some individuals might have been associated on a previous operation, others were new to the cluster, and sometimes unacquainted with disaster relief in general. In terms of a taxonomy, these groups might be classed as short-term teams, focused on the contribution being made to the achievement of a disaster relief ‘mission’ and specific, cluster aligned goals. (Hollenbeck, Beersma & Schouten 2012)

Military members, though responding to a similar call for assistance with disaster relief as their counterparts in the HC, were products of extended periods of generalist and specialist training which prepared them for the roles they were being called upon to perform. They wear uniforms and observe routines and practices which distinguish them from members of broader society. Members are also prepared to work in groups with which they may not have previously been associated. Teams are a vital element of military organisations, (Salas, Bowers & Cannon-Bowers 1995) from the ‘boot on the ground’ in a unit involved in combat, and the logistics personnel who support them at sea, in the air and on the land, to the most senior commander’s headquarters staff; groups and teams are essential elements required for task achievement. The literature focusing on military teams has evolved, particularly in the area of team cohesion. (Bartone & Adler 1999; Bartone et al. 2002; King 2006; MacCoun, Kier & Belkin 2006; Siebold 1999, 2007, 2011; Wombacher & Felfe 2012; Wong 2006; Wong et al. 2003)

Uniting the efforts of each area into a successful common enterprise is more successful when these differences are respected and valued. In the NDMO, this was achieved, at least in part, by the efforts of Civil/Military coordination by staff of the UN and the Australia Defence
Force, and the goodwill and cooperation of members of the respective clusters. In achieving this outcome, the formation of groups composed of military and non-military members, proved an essential aspect. In this respect, Hollenbeck and his colleagues’ taxonomy suggests the resulting amalgam constitutes ‘multiteam systems’, where ‘Two or more teams that interface directly and interdependently in response to environmental contingencies towards the accomplishment of collective goals.’ (Hollenbeck, Beersma & Schouten 2012, p. 96)

HELP-SEEKING AND HELP-GIVING

Help-seeking and help-giving following natural disasters occurs at a number of levels: inter-national; inter-governmental, inter-organizational; inter-group; and between individuals. At an inter-international level, Vanuatu sought assistance with immediate disaster relief following the devastation wrought in the wake of Cyclone Pam. The international community responded with help arriving from the HC, the UN and military forces from France, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and Tonga. In addition to this, aid was donated by a number of national governments including the above and China, the United States of America, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea to mention a few. The organizations that responded also provided, and asked for help from each other to achieve their goals through the United Nations’ well-established ‘cluster’ mechanism. Groups form an essential foundation to this process, and in Vanuatu at least, it functioned particularly well. (Lubrani 2015)

At first glance, the cultural differences between the HC and military organizations might appear to be significant. There are however, several commonalities at an institutional level: shared belief in the organization’s raison d’être, personal identification with the organization and its symbols and a commitment to helping. These features are is imbued in organizational culture and evidenced by a spirit of comradery, self-sacrifice and service to others in times of need, common threads which align the interests of the various groups within the NDMO and created an environment in which groups combined to form blended entities.
Grodal and colleagues suggest that establishing routines of help-seeking and help-giving helps institutionalize these behaviours within organizations. (Grodal, Nelson & Stino 2015) In the NDMO, organizations provided aid and assistance to the GOVU. In the aftermath of the cyclone, infrastructure was often severely damaged and the provision of services disrupted. In order to fill this void, and to support aid distribution until commercial enterprises were able to provide transport, military means were sometimes the only available way of moving aid consignments to locations where they could be distributed by the GOVU to the local population. The HC were reliant on military assets help to achieve transport of stores and personnel to locations outside of the main point of disembarkation in Port Vila on the scale required. By virtue of the deployment of ships and aircraft, military forces were in the position of help-givers and providers of assistance to both the HC and the GOVU. The mechanism established to facilitate coordination of humanitarian supplies was a series of meetings which became a routine process bringing together groups from the HC with representatives of the military organizations to allocate tasking to the available assets. As Gordal and colleagues note: ‘… understanding helping as a routine requires consideration of help-seeking and help-giving beyond the initial point of consent by the help-giver. Indeed studies of routine emphasize the unfolding of behaviour over time.’ (Grodal, Nelson & Stino 2015, p. 139) As the relief operation unfolded, the routine which developed around the process of help-seeking and help-giving enabled processes to develop which facilitated the effective provision of disaster relief to the population of Vanuatu. Routine developed in meetings also shaped a cooperative environment in which expectations formed by help-seekers in terms of the form and timing of help able to be given by military organizations resulting in successful outcomes for the disaster relief operation.
CONCLUSIONS

The ability to bring together groups from different organizational backgrounds to achieve a common purpose emphasized the need for Civil/Military cooperation in the provision of disaster relief. The NDMO provided the environment in which the needs of the GOVU were identified and the efforts of the HC were prioritized and allocated to military assets for the transport of essential humanitarian supplies to communities in need. On the one hand, groups representing stakeholders in humanitarian organizations, formed into functional clusters to both give help to the people of Vanuatu, while at the same time, seeking assistance from military organizations, based on teams of specialists providing logistical support. The resulting blend of teams and groups sharing a common goal informs group theory by introducing the theme of help-giving and help-seeking as a consideration. In this environment, it was observed that the typical task focused orientation of military teams was broadened and enhanced by a need to address the underpinning relationships essential to cooperative provision of effective disaster relief in the HC. The resulting synergy achieved a superior outcome than might have otherwise been possible. These initial observations identify the need for further research in order to extend the help-seeking, help-giving construct into as a consideration in situations where groups and teams from divergent backgrounds are required to cooperate to achieve goals.
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