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Filling the gaps: An investigation of project governance in a non-governmental organisation's response to the Haiti earthquake

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Synopsis

The importance of governance is widely recognised in disaster relief but the concept of project governance has not been examined to any great extent. To address this we examined the response of one international non-governmental organisation (NGO) to the 2010 Haiti earthquake from a project governance perspective. Our aim was to assess the relevance of the concept for NGOs operating in disaster relief situations. Drawing on an extensive review of extant literature, the dimensions of project governance were first identified and a conceptual framework was developed as a basis for the investigation. The findings indicate that while the NGO does not explicitly recognise project governance as a concept, many of its dimensions are evident in the organisation's work. The research also shows that effective project governance not only fills the gap between corporate governance and project management, but also between disaster relief and project management.

The research challenges a number of widely held views regarding NGOs and disaster relief, including criticisms about lack of accountability, flat organisational structures, lack of decision-making and governance capabilities, and failure of project teams to adhere to managerial control and oversight.

Introduction and Background

Although the concept of project governance has attracted increased interest over the last decade, it has not been examined in any great detail in the context of disaster relief. The sector typically involves a diverse range of actors and practices, and as a result approaches to governance are often fragmented and unbalanced (Tierney, 2012). It is important therefore to investigate the relationship between project governance and disaster relief, and to examine the extent to which the concept of project governance has relevance for international NGOs.

The NGO response to the Haiti earthquake made for an interesting study because of the involvement of thousands of NGOs and voluntary organisations in the relief effort. NGOs have received mixed reviews for their work in Haiti; some have been criticised for exacerbating an already weak state administration while others have received praise for their long-term commitment to the country.

There were challenges brought about by the influx of non-traditional agencies and individuals, and by differing priorities and agendas. In many cases emergency response teams were slow to gain local knowledge, and there was a perceived lack of professionalism and weak accountability among those involved in the post-earthquake coordination effort.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

The response of NGO-X to the Haiti earthquake was chosen as a case study because of the organisation's extensive experience in humanitarian aid and disaster relief as well as international development. It has been dedicated to tackling poverty and suffering in the world's poorest countries for close to 50 years, and today it continues to respond to emergencies and to prepare people for disasters in vulnerable areas.

The research was based on a conceptual framework that linked the parallel themes of disaster relief and project governance to identify the key dimensions of NGO project governance as shown in Figure 1. It drew on detailed ex post evaluations and other reports that provided insights into NGO-X's disaster response. These were supplemented by a series of what Yin (2009) calls elite interviews with members of the organisation's senior management. These added depth of understanding regarding the systems, processes, behaviour and values adopted in the organisation's disaster response efforts.

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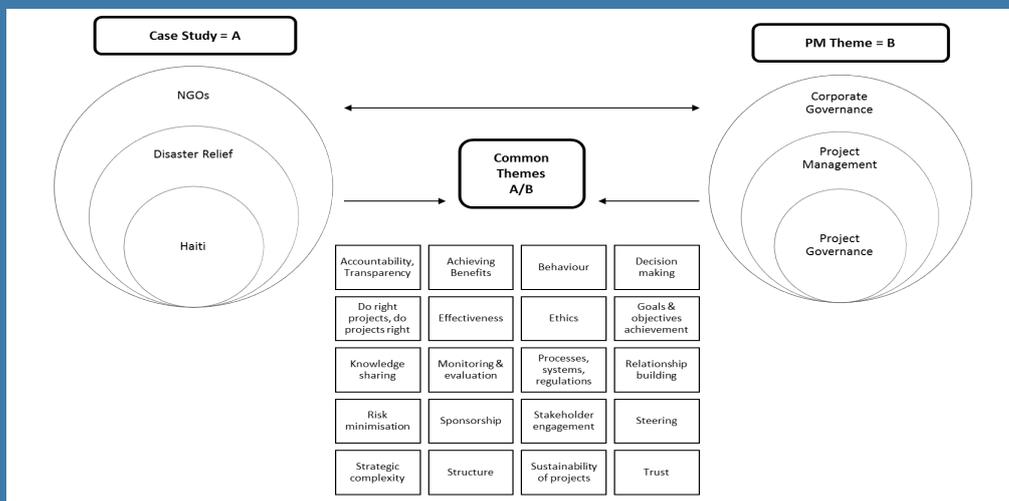


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for NGO governance study

Outcomes and Findings

While acutely aware of the importance of implementing corporate governance processes, NGO-X is largely unfamiliar with the discourse of project governance and the processes involved. Despite this, the project organisational structure within NGO-X aligns closely to a key project governance structure (Garland, 2009), and the role of the country director aligns with project management literature's assumption of the role of a sponsor. In addition to this alignment with project governance structure, a further eight dimensions of project governance were also seen to be embedded in the organisation's modus operandi.

The study challenges generalisations regarding NGOs and disaster relief, including criticisms about lack of accountability, flat organisational structures, lack of decision-making and governance capabilities, and failure of project teams to adhere to managerial control and oversight. As NGO-X showed in Haiti, these generalisations are not universal. Good practice does exist in NGO-X, but in order to promote it, the concept of a post-disaster central learning facility for NGOs needs further exploration.

The disaster relief effort in Haiti was a success from the perspective of NGO-X, despite initial challenges with roles and responsibilities and difficulties with cluster coordination. An effective project governance application was at least partially responsible for this success. Nonetheless NGO-X recognises that improvements need to be made in areas like monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and relationship building in team environments. Further research is needed to analyse these and other dimensions of project governance. In particular, given the complexities associated with stakeholders and project teams in disaster contexts, the dimensions of behaviour and relationship building are highly relevant and would add value to future project management research in the NGO and humanitarian sectors. The uncertainty and complexity of disaster relief increase the challenge of applying effective project governance, including decision-making and alignment of organisational strategic objectives. However, it is possible to design project governance that allows flexibility and adaptation while maintaining project outcome accountability (Pitsis et al., 2014). Therefore, given that project foresight is a significant challenge in disaster relief, NGOs should look towards Sanderson's (2012) theory of governing projects with more spontaneity while taking into account effective project governance, organisational maturity, and the expertise of

project team members.

As disaster relief/emergency response becomes an increasingly prominent feature of the global landscape, proper oversight and management of projects in the field is becoming even more pertinent. Disaster relief projects are a matter of life and death for millions of people, and while the organisations involved are acutely aware of this there is always room for improvement in how they link their project management with the disaster relief effort. Filling the governance gap between these is vitally important, as it enables organisations to go beyond their organisational concerns in order to address the strategic goals of the disaster response while engaging effectively with the daily challenges faced at project level. Steering a project in the right direction in the complex and volatile environment in which disaster relief occurs is challenging, but by attending to the dimensions of project governance, organisations can increase their chances of success. The evidence uncovered in this research suggests that individual organisations are already well on the way to achieving this through implicit rather than explicit adherence to many of the dimensions of project governance.

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