



It's People that Count!

By Chris Cattaway, PMP, principal advisor PM4NGOs

I started as an engineer designing and integrating hardware and software for the first trans-oceanic fibre-optic telephone cables. Perhaps that was what gave me the travel bug and I visited Africa, Asia and Australasia, before returning to the telecommunications sector, and some extremely interesting system architecture and tendering work.

But it wasn't enough, I wanted to do something that involved travel to developing countries and had an impact on people rather than just changing a cell in an accountant's spreadsheet.

I ended up working for Médecins Sans Frontières in the refugee camps in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo where, sadly, the same conflict is still in the news. I then spent time in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, which still provides so many of the horrific stories in today's news. So, I have no illusions about my capacity as an aid worker to save the world. However, my experiences have been extremely rewarding, and I hope that I have made a difference to the lives of, at least, some of the many people I have met through my aid work.

For the past 14 years I have alternated between the private sector and the aid world. I worked in New Zealand as a project manager of a country-wide telecommunications roll-out project. I then went to Burundi and Ethiopia for Oxfam and managed earthquake responses in Gujarat, India and Bam, Iran, for Save the Children.

Along the way I picked up a PMP, an MBA, and worked as a consultant for an international IT equipment manufacturer in the Philippines.

More recently I have been working as a consultant at Save the Children's head office in London, managing a global capacity-building project to increase the organization's ability to respond to emergencies. This, as you will see later, is mostly about investing in, and empowering people.

I like to think I can work equally competently in the commercial world as I can in the NGO world – and my belief in this cross-over of skills should be evident by the end of this article.

But let me start by asking a question: 'What initiates a project?' In your world this may well be a business imperative or a client request. In the world of NGOs it may well be an event. A volcano erupts, rains fail, refugees may flee from natural or man-made disasters. When a project crops up in your portfolio you have to determine how this helps achieve corporate goals. When a 'project' pops up on the NGO portfolio it's a need that has to be met fast and not at the expense of any other 'project'.

Last summer, I was privileged to be asked to head up Save the Children's emergency response to Cyclone Nargis which hit Myanmar in early May. I arrived one month after the cyclone struck and had the job of making order from the chaos after the initial relief distributions and setting up a longer-term rehabilitation programme.

This is the context: an affected area the size of Wales with 84,537 dead, 53,836 missing, 20,000 injured and 2.4 million people affected. You need to act very quickly initially...

Due to the political environment, Save the

Children (SC) was one of the very few agencies on the ground. You may recall that the Burmese authorities refused entry to aid workers for a couple of weeks. SC never had any problems getting people in, but, as the biggest agency on the ground, had a big responsibility to address the life-critical needs of as many survivors as possible.

The stories I heard were so sad ... A man clinging to a palm tree with his wife and three young children. One by one each of them was washed away and only he survived. He said he found the bodies of his wife and two eldest children, but didn't find the baby's body. He said he would have liked to bury her with her mother. He now works as a guard at one of Save the Children's offices. He said that he would have lost the will to live unless he was doing something to help other survivors.

57% of the cyclone's victims were children, and twice as many women perished as men. You can imagine the additional problems that can arise when so many mothers are killed.

The first few days after a disaster is about distributing essential life-saving items: food, water, shelter materials. Even though you need to move very quickly, you still need to register everybody, and record who has received what – to ensure that everybody gets what they need and to be accountable to donors.

It's important, from as early as possible, that you allow people to articulate their own needs and priorities, and assist them to begin to look after themselves again. And, practically, you need the help of communities. There just are not enough aid workers – so ensuring effective and meaningful

involvement of the survivors themselves to assist in the work is important.

There is too little time to go through a conventional project initiation phase. But the fundraising kicks in within a couple of hours of the disaster happening, and, through experience, you have a good idea of what life-saving interventions will be needed initially.

Because there are so few agencies in Myanmar, Save the Children received the largest share of the donated aid money. Within a couple of weeks, we were planning a longer-term programme at the same time as distributing relief items.

To implement the extra work, Save the Children's in-country staff headcount increased from 500 to 1,300 in just three months, which raises huge issues. Overall, across all agencies, an estimated 15-20,000 staff will be involved in rehabilitation projects following Cyclone Nargis – most of whom have never worked in this sector; many of whom have never even worked before. High capability, but low capacity, geographical remoteness, and urgency of task means capacity-building is essential, and travel to attend conventional training events is not feasible.

We designed a learning programme – \$2.2m requested – to target 6,000 people over the next two years through 100 learning facilitators who will catalyse peer-peer learning. All capacity building work will have to be done in the Burmese language, and contextualisation is critical.

Setting-up a programme this big should draw on many tools and rehearsed procedures. This is true and very effective in some areas (eg, fund raising) but very weak in others.

Following rapid-onset emergencies, teams are brought together very quickly, with many consultants who are often new to the organization. So there are many differences of opinions and levels of experiences about how things should be done. There are mature standards and acknowledged best practice in most of the technical areas, but standardisation in project management is very weak in the sector.

On this scale, the only way a response can

possibly come together is having the right people. Attitude is arguably the most important attribute.

But having said that, you need the right people with the right competencies (knowledge and skills as well as attitude) and experience.

Figure 1 shows the conventional life cycle diagram from the PMI PMBOK Guide.

NGO projects have many similarities to projects in other sectors, but the initiating phase is arguably the most different – the participatory angle is one reason.

In most sectors, project managers are usually told what deliverables (outputs) they are tasked with producing (eg, an office building). NGO project managers, additionally, often have to decide what to do, as well as how to do it. In NGO projects, the deliverables are only the means to an end, not the end of the project itself, and NGO project managers are usually responsible for the outcomes as well as the outputs (eg, building a temporary health centre is the means to reducing child mortality – the NGO PM will be responsible for choosing the intervention, and the deliverables, and the outcomes).

As yet, in the NGO sector, there is less distinction between programme and project; and, anyway, strengthening capacity in the fundamental project management paradigms and principles will assist at all levels of the project management hierarchy.

I need to tell you a little about what motivates NGO workers. It's certainly not the money. Most are committed to their cause, some maybe even obsessed. For many, they work in the NGO sector because they do not want to work in the commercial world – which some associate with bad things – like exploitation and globalisation

There is also an attitude that 'we are different'.

While we may be able to argue rationally that they are not so different, the argument doesn't always work, so we in PM4NGOs have acknowledged that NGO projects are different by adding another life-cycle stage to the PMI Model.

This Conceptual Design stage includes participatory needs assessment and analyses, and recognises that PMs are responsible for outcomes as well as outputs, and incorporates a technique used extensively in the NGO world – the Logical Framework.

Logical Framework Analysis was actually invented by NASA (Figure 2). There are many variants, but, in some form every major donor requires a log frame in project proposals. For some NGO PMs, it is seen as a bureaucratic nuisance. But many others use it effectively throughout the project life-cycle as a mechanism for communication, as a way of reaching common understanding and agreement among stakeholders, and as a means of monitoring that the project is achieving its objectives.

It helps to ensure that we are doing the right 'things', as well as doing those 'things' right.



Chris Cattaway meets the stakeholders

Stakeholder participation is very important but I doubt that your stakeholder meetings are like the one in the adjacent photograph where we were discussing the priorities for cyclone survivors and, ultimately, the allocation of millions of dollars of funds over the cyclone-affected area.

The one thing that local populations don't need is some outsider telling them exactly what they need, so my priority here was to listen.

This meeting actually led to a massive re-focus



and about \$6m of new, unforeseen, programming to be initiated, which, over the next few weeks, distributed thousands of tons of food and provided necessary inputs to permit the survivors to restart their livelihoods.

The scale and extremely ambitious time-frame were unprecedented and it's probably one of the highest potential risk decisions I have ever taken, but, after listening to these villagers, there was no choice: it was clear that they needed help urgently.

What were we discussing?

The affected region was predominantly rice growing, with some fishing. Rice seeds had been lost or damaged, More than 200,000 Water Buffalo were killed, many of those that survived were traumatised and wouldn't work. The Government sent more from other parts of Myanmar, but they were not acclimatised to the region and died.



Many power rotovators were damaged and there was no money to buy fuel for those that had been salvaged .

Most people had no food stores, and very little money. Planting a crop was their only hope of earning money in the next year, so they needed help quickly. Without any help, their survival for many months, or even years, would be entirely dependent on aid.



Children in a temporary school building we constructed

Who is my customer?

One of the differences between NGOs and the corporate sector, which, I feel, those in the corporate sector sometimes find hard to grasp is the idea that the customer (or most important stakeholder) is not necessarily the person who pays the bill. This leads to much debate and complications about where loyalties lie.

Most of the biggest institutional aid donors are government international development departments – which exist to support their government's foreign policy – but do foreign policies always serve the immediate best interests of the children we want to help?

Many project components are extremely common to all sectors. The children and teachers in the adjacent picture were waiting for 'school kits' which were on order. The order was for around \$1.2m and sufficient quantities of acceptable quality items were not available in country, so had to be tendered. This takes time, which means that these children have to make do.



The Triple Constraint

There is always that same compromise over time, cost and quality. More than 4,000 schools were destroyed by the cyclone. Being able to attend school is so critical to children following a disaster, both to regain a sense of routine and normality, and because education is so precious.

Childhood is so short, particularly in poor communities where parents may not be able to afford school fees, and where children may have to stop school to go to work in order to support their families as soon as they are old enough to do so. If a child loses even a few weeks of his or her education, there may never again be an opportunity to catch up. The heavy monsoon rains fall at this time of year, so building school rooms quickly was essential. The structure for these buildings in the adjacent picture takes the villagers one day to build using materials and skills already available in the communities.



How many of your construction contract clients would accept this quality? However, the availability of local materials and skills for the structure, and the availability of plastic sheeting makes these structures a very pragmatic choice to get children back to school as quickly as possible. The sad thing is that, due to the political situation, there is unlikely to be enough follow-on money to replace all of these buildings; temporary has a habit of becoming permanent.

In March 2007 project management staff of 12 well-known NGOs and the Project Management Institute's Educational Foundation (PMIEF) formed a working group which is known as Project Management for NGOs (PM4NGOs). Learning for International NGOs (LINGOs), itself an NGO which makes knowledge sharing and learning resources available to NGO staff around the world using context-appropriate IT platforms, currently hosts the working group. This initiative seeks to build project management capacity throughout the NGO sector.

This year, six major International NGOs and PMIEF have contributed funds.

We are now in discussions with these and other NGOs as well as with major donors for the longer-term funding. The Working Group has developed a five-stranded strategy which we believe will bring about sustainable improvements to project management practice in the NGO sector over coming years.

The strategy is summarised in the diagram and a larger more readable version will be on the pmtoday web site and the online magazine.



It's important that the beneficiaries of this initiative are the people that the NGOs are trying to serve. It's people that count! Our work must deliver value to the end-user/customer. Any notion of increased efficiency, rather than leading to increased shareholder value/profit, will be realised in terms of better impact, both in terms of quality and quantity.

We recognise that all NGOs have invested, to some degree, in project management training and processes – yet it is generally recognised that in some aspects, PM in the NGO sector is weak.

We believe that the only way that project management will improve is if the managers at the coal face are empowered through having the right competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes), having organizational systems and processes to support them, and managers who are confident to delegate to them knowing that they have the right competencies for the job. This all relies on having informed managers at the top of the organizations and competent project managers in the field. Again, it's the people that count!

Although there are many similarities to other sectors, NGO projects do have their peculiar characteristics – not least the conceptual design phase that I mentioned earlier.

We need a community of practice spanning the globe bringing together field-based NGO project Managers, and eventually PMs from other sectors who can offer subject-matter expertise, and act as coaches, while, just as importantly, learning from professional project managers who are delivering projects in circumstances that many people could not even imagine.

But if we really do believe that 'It's people that count', then we need to invest in them, and provide them with the incentives to develop and to perform. We need to set expectations – both ways. We need to be able to compare competencies to a common, APPROPRIATE and MEANINGFUL benchmark so that when we recruit we know what we are getting, and we can then measure and manage performance – and, when necessary, manage-out unacceptable performance.

Many kinds of changes are needed to alter the way that NGOs work. Cultural, mindset and systems and processes. Project management skills, at all levels in the organizations need to be brought up together to avoid situations developing where one group is seeing the light, and getting frustrated because others aren't. This is about developing organisational Project Management Maturity.

PM4NGOs cannot make these changes, but we can generate the evidence, eg, case studies of best

practice, to empower the top managers and trustees of NGOs to make the necessary decisions and to implement programmes which will bring about the necessary changes as effectively as possible.

There is so much to be learned in both directions, but currently the NGO project managers and PMs in other sectors lack a common terminology, and rarely share the same spaces where knowledge can be exchanged.

We know that very few NGO PMs possess the certifications that are valued in other sectors, and, probably few commercial sector PMs understand the values system that is so overwhelmingly influential in NGOs. So currently, this may be leading to a credibility gap. We want to bridge this gap, and create spaces where we can assimilate the best that is on offer in all sectors.

At the start of the initiative, we were very fortunate that several PMI volunteers assisted us to map conventional PMI paradigms and NGO world paradigms – which gave us, for example, our NGO PM Life-cycle as a foundation for future work. But we want to extend this to all the professional PM bodies so that their standards and frameworks offer an NGO PM viewpoint.

From the outset, we felt we needed a track record, and to meet field-based project managers, directly, to learn from them. So, we have developed

a contextualised curriculum which uses language and examples which resonate with NGO PMs' own experiences, and have taught it to more than 200 people both face-to-face in classrooms in The Philippines, Uganda, Moldova and USA and in virtual classrooms using technology which has been optimised for low-bandwidth environments and made available by LINGOs. We run regular free webinars on topics of interest to NGO PMs.

You can find out more via www.pm4ngos.org, or by joining the pm4ngos groups on LinkedIn or Facebook. *Project Manager Today* will be encouraging NGOs and NGO project managers to share their stories over the coming months.

