

Notes from an 'After Action Review' held at the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) Core Management Group (CMG) meeting, Copenhagen 21/09/06

These notes are from the third of a series of facilitated discussions held with the TEC CMG. They do not necessarily constitute agreements but are reflections by those who contributed. Symbols mean the following :*

- an observation or a recommendation*
- ✓ something that went well*
- ✗ something that did not go so well*

Notes from the earlier After Action Reviews, carried out in September 2005 and February 2006, cover earlier phases of the TEC; this one concentrated on the period covering the writing of the reports, especially the Synthesis report; the public launches of the report; and the start of the follow-up process.

Overall

✓ It was noted that, for all the inevitable problems and difficulties associated with such a large project, and at times distress along the way, the job was done, done well, and got attention at the time of the launch, laying the foundation for the dissemination and follow-up. The commitment and inputs from many individuals were impressive and crucial, despite a difficult process.

Timing

✗ There was a recurrent issue of timing. Time available was generally felt to be either insufficient or not sufficiently well planned. Time-lines often slipped, particularly in the writing of the various thematic reports. Thus very heavy pressure was put on the principle authors of the Synthesis team particularly to make up time, as well as working many more days than they were paid for. Leading up to the launch Secretariat staff were working unreasonable hours as the amount to be done and the time within which it needed to be done were unreasonable.

➤ There is a need for project-management to be embedded into a process like this, especially given the multiple stakeholders to be held to the process. There needs to be a fairly detailed workplan with key deadlines adhered to. Time needs to be built in for team-leaders to comment, re-write, etc. This also enables forward planning to encompass the services such as editing that are bought in rather than undertaken by TEC people. It is necessary to be realistic rather than idealistic, and to build in time for delays, but also to ensure that cut-off points are enforced.

* Attendees are listed at the end of this report, together with those from whom written comments were received.

TEC and the affected region, and other outreach

✘ The TEC did not invest enough or pay sufficient attention to stakeholders in the region in a number of ways. Although this failing had been recognised for some time, the CMG did not act on this and did not respond to calls for regional stakeholder involvement. At this later stage this meant not giving enough thought to how to feed back to governments in the region and how to give them a voice in responding to the reports. (See under Launches below.) Time should have been taken early on to get agreements with governments.

✘ There was felt not to have been enough outside engagement with, for example, the Office of the Special Envoy which was also a key player. The OSE's own busy-ness, like the TEC's, led to there not being clarity about what there was to share.

➤ It is regrettable that HAP and Sphere have not been more active in both the product and its dissemination, despite their attending the first meetings. If they had been it might have been easier for the TEC to grapple with the policy level that it has struggled to reach.

The reports and other products

✘ Arising out of a much earlier stage of the TEC, the lack of a common evaluation and report framework had negative effects at the stage of writing – for both the thematic evaluations and the synthesis report.

➤ The regular provision of the CD-ROMs was much appreciated and improved the coherence between the reports. But they could also have benefited from a common desk-study to underpin all the themes; it was noted that the literature review that was commissioned before the LRRD study successfully created common ground for that particular thematic evaluation.

➤ Although in the event a degree of commonality did emerge between the thematic reports, and despite the very loose association among them and the largely autonomous nature of the evaluations, the various thematic reports could have been more coherent. This would also have been helpful for the writing of the Synthesis. The Synthesis report is viewed as having added value to the thematic reports.

✘ Writing the synthesis while some of the thematic reports on which it was to be based were themselves being revised was unhelpful.

➤ As noted in the earlier AARs, the process at the very start was contracted. If there had been an earlier decision to impose a common framework then it would probably have led to a process in which the report-writers would have had guidance on the shape of the reports and this would have reduced the need for re-drafting and re-shaping that in fact occurred.

➤ Basic formatting and style also need to be specified in ToR and their use insisted upon in a situation of multiple reports, to reduce the need for re-drafting and re-shaping.

- Given the range of reports and the dispersed fashion in which they were being managed, it was bound to be difficult to get the texts written and agreed. This was probably exacerbated by having such wide consultation over them.
- ✖ There was an underestimate of the sheer volume of the reports that would need to be read and commented on. At a certain moment there were 3 or 4 big reports all looking for feedback at the same time - this made it all but impossible to get them out to other people in the TEC organisations to get their input.
- Because the CMG asked for the Synthesis Report to be re-structured after the first draft, the Synthesis authors were unable to build on successive drafts of the Synthesis report which ultimately impacted on the quality of the report.
- Particularly for the Synthesis report it was suggested that the CMG might have delegated the task of commenting and reviewing to a smaller number of people (ie, not the entire CMG), thus making the task more manageable for the writers, although this might have reduced CMG ownership of the product. Also there was felt to be value in wide consultation. Peer reviewers possibly need explicit Terms of Reference.
- ✖ The ALNAP *Quality Pro Forma* was not used for the thematic reports, although initially planned for as part of a quality control process.
- It was noted that the *Pro Forma* is not designed for synthesis-type reports, which are not themselves evaluations, and therefore should be subject to different quality criteria and possibly different review processes.
- ✓ The Q & A sheets produced in the lead-up to the launch of the reports were greatly appreciated, despite problems with the wording in the first version.
- However various factors made it difficult to be authoritative and to find suitable strong public messages. These factors include : some confusion about where the TEC sat in relation to the OSE; indecision about whether messages should be balanced or objective; difficulty in finding and agreeing messages that would work with both the public and in the sector at which the reports were basically directed; and the difficulty in getting a consensus amongst all those who had a say over what the messages would be.
- Different skills are needed for different products. The Key Message sheets, for example, needed the ability to write in an accessible way for a public audience.

The launches to media and the sector

- ✓ It was felt that both launches (in Geneva and London) were successful - especially given the competing priorities on the international agenda on the day in question (outbreak of warfare in the Lebanon). Linking the launch to the ECOSOC meeting was a good idea as it attracted some people to the launch who would probably have been hard to attract otherwise. The report was picked up well by the media.
- ✓ In the run-up to the launches, staff in ALNAP, the ODI and CMG members provided excellent additional support (over and above those in the TEC Secretariat) for the launch.

- It is unusual for public communication to be part of the intended product itself and to seek public accountability (Objective 1 of the TEC) to be achieved through media work. However in the end there remained a degree of shyness about how to do it robustly.
- ✘ The launches were trying to do too many things - to feed back, to be accountable, to have discussion and to attract the media. The audience was unhelpfully mixed, and there was not enough clarity over short messages to satisfy the media.
- ✘ However the launches needed better active management while they were happening. For example, keynote speakers did not stick to their brief and presentations should have been shorter.
- ✘ In addition there were too many speakers and panellists who were, in consequence, squeezed for time. This particularly irritated spokespeople from the region who had come a long way. It also left too little time for discussion.
- It would have been better to have organised a separate press launch, satisfying media requirements, and a more inter-active event involving key stakeholders.
- ✘ Missions of the governments should have been briefed beforehand too and brought into the launch process (see above TEC and outreach also).

Follow-on and utilisation

- ✓ The early and continuing focus on communications and utilisation of the TEC reports, rather than just on their production, was positive.
- However more detailed planning was needed to be able to anticipate post-launch events and therefore the availability of TEC people for those events, especially in the region. In any case the intense work leading up to the launch and the fact that it was in the summer period meant that many potential spokespeople went on leave and the project temporarily lost momentum.
- To have taken time together to consider how to take the TEC's findings back into the organisations that make up the TEC would have helped the individuals with that responsibility. CMG members would benefit from guidance on how to keep their organisations informed and involved, to 'get the messages out'; this would have helped feedback be more systematic.

The design and components of the TEC, including the CMG and the Secretariat

- ✘ Outsiders, such as the ERC and some people in the region, expressed the feeling that too many people were involved, and that TEC consultants were too many in the field at some times.
- ✓ The design - with the CMG, Working Groups and thematic Steering Committees - was good, even though some groups were felt to have been more effective than others, with some variety in how they worked on different themes.

- ✓ The workshops that brought together the thematic team-leaders was seen later to have been very helpful. There was real value in the feedback workshops after the teams' field work.
- The team-leader meetings allowed them to influence each other. More mutual briefings and meetings between the independently managed parts of the TEC should have been arranged, which would have required a cooperation that did not happen sufficiently. This would also have had a positive effect in designing the process for the Synthesis.
- The CMG was largely composed of evaluation managers, who are in some senses independent of their organisations. The down side of this is that they are then not representative of the stakeholders nor fully able to get sufficient organisational buy-in. The whole process lacked stakeholder 'champions'. To have had the managers managing the process but supported by a wider advisory group, including some operations people, would have increased complexity but brought other advantages both in utilisation and analysis.
- ✓ The CMG's international character clearly created learning for the individuals concerned, and enabled new channels of inter-organisational collaboration.
- ✓ It was agreed that the existence of the TEC Secretariat independent of any other organisation was essential and its performance generally good. It enabled continuity, it acted as an anchor point, and was able to add value to the Synthesis report.
- ✓ Its location within ALNAP was correct, where it was also able to get some administrative support, although dedicated administrative support of an appropriate capacity was arguably necessary and should have been budgeted for.
- ✓ The Secretariat's separation from existing departments within the TEC's member organisations means that its costs are visible, although there will of course also be invisible and non-chargeable contributions from TEC members, the ALNAP Secretariat and the ODI.
- As noted in the previous AARs, ALNAP was able to pump-prime the TEC with funds it had available at the start. It is also picking up the tab at the end when there is an overspend on the anticipated budget. ALNAP should have a contingency fund for such start-ups.

Roles of individuals and independence

- Clear organograms of roles and relationships were not there. These are important for efficiency, transparency and accountability of the process. Had they been there, some of the occasional discomfort over roles might have been avoided, as well as disputes more readily resolved.
- Members of the CMG and of the Secretariat often 'wore more than one hat', which left them in an uncomfortable position. On the other hand there may be benefits from combining roles in individuals and thus reducing the complexity of processes. It is an

unavoidable result of the joint process that institutional positions and positions within the humanitarian community mean that individuals will wear more than one hat. Even peer reviewers have institutional relationships that need to be taken into account.

Attendees at the CMG meeting on 21/09/06 :

John Cosgrave (Independent)
John Mitchell (ALNAP Secretariat)
Margaret Stansberry (IFRC)
Maurice Herson (ALNAP Secretariat) - Facilitator
Mihir Bhatt (AIDMI)
Niels Dabelstein (Danida)
Rachel Houghton (TEC Secretariat)
Stefan Dahlgren (Sida)
Suppiramianam Nanthikesan (UNDP)
Susanne Frueh (UNOCHA)
Wayne Macdonald (UNICEF)

Written submissions were received from :

John Telford (Independent)
Rachel Houghton (TEC Secretariat)

A phone submission was received from :

Sherylin Thompson (TEC Secretariat)