

Summary report on the webinar 'Learning from the Beirut Port Explosion Response'

13/04/2021 15:00 – 16:30 (EEST)

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1. Introduction

The goal of the webinar was to collect lessons learnt from the Beirut Port Explosion Response (August 2020 – April 2021). Urban crises are complex and acute, and therefore all actors need to be well prepared for the next urban disaster.

1.1 Prof. Thea Hilhorst (ISS, Erasmus University, Rotterdam): Setting the scene – A growing awareness on the specifics of an urban response

Thea Hilhorst, professor of humanitarian studies, highlighted the specifics of an urban response (and pointed at the growing awareness of these characteristics):

- Disasters rarely come by themselves. Also in Beirut we saw a case of compounded crisis. At the time political, economic and financial crises were compounded in addition to Covid-19.
- The complication of housing and infrastructure in urban areas adds an extra level of complication to humanitarian responses. People may not own the house they live in, may have mortgage issues, rent issues, insurance issues. We should ask ourselves whether these complicated and protracted issues are the responsibility of humanitarians.
- International NGOs were around for different causes. In a way Lebanon was prepared for disaster, yet coordination was difficult because of the decentralised government. However, we should keep in mind that spontaneous action is not necessarily less efficient than organised action. Civil society organisations were easily mobilized.
- Advocacy movements and social protests which are ongoing in Lebanon were missing from the humanitarian reports. It seemed completely separated. We should link questions on social justice to the role of humanitarians – at least raise the matter and reflect on it.

2. Presenting the findings

The Lebanese forums for local and international NGOs both had preparation meetings to discuss the success factors, challenges and gaps, and lessons learnt from the humanitarian response to the Beirut port explosion response. Here they are presented by the forum coordinators.

2.1 Maria Noel Chehade: Preliminary findings of the local actors by the Lebanon Humanitarian and Development NGOs Forum (LHDF) and partners

Success factors brought forward by the LHDF were that there was a strong and proactive civil society response; very good reporting and referral mechanisms; needs assessments made civilians feel included; existing organisations were able to quickly adapt to the appropriate resources that were needed; private funds and the Lebanese culture of participation led to quick bottom-up intervention; Disaster Risk Management (DRM) was already providing important role before the crisis; local NGOs noted that they are proximate to the field and therefore have relevant information and are able to gain trust of beneficiaries.

Challenges and gaps brought forward by the LHDF were the large amount of first responders; conflicting information immediately after the blast as well as in the first phase of the response; various needs due to parallel crises; the first response was emotional and rushed; effectiveness would have been better ensured if deduplication was better tackled; needs should be continuously evaluated; local NGOs often have to work under the audit of INGOs, thus partnerships are not equal; information was not shared equally across all actors to the detriment of local NGOs; funding terms with donors were not always clear from the start, changes made it difficult for local NGOs to adapt; lack of streamlined response; too many meetings; competition and distrust between actors.

Lessons learnt:

- We need sustainable solutions: new coordination mechanisms and long-term strategies and preparedness plans;
- Need for regularly updated mapping of partners and resources as a preparedness measure;
- Needs assessments should be ongoing and develop throughout the crisis;
- Lebanese culture, its specificities and the specific role of actors need to be better taken into consideration;
- As a preparedness measure it is very useful have a strong and active DRM unit;
- Local and national NGOs need to push for more streamlined expectations from partners and donors, while also investing in capacity building;
- Meetings should be precise and focused on how NGOs can be complementing each other;
- Reporting should be streamlined.

2.2 Soman Moodley: Preliminary findings international NGOs by the Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum (LHIF) and partners

Success factors brought forward by the LHIF were the rapid deployment of resources by civil society organisations; because a lot of NGO staff and communities were directly affected by the blast, some were able to respond immediately; rapid deployment of resources; donor flexibility; working with local partners is an added value for INGOs to better respond to needs.

Challenges and gaps brought forward by the LHIF were the arrangement of shelter and security of tenure; community leadership and engagement were lacking; duplication of needs assessments; collapse of economic institutions and supply chains led to poor availability of resources; what currency to disperse cash in; data protection of beneficiaries; outreach was challenging due to Covid-19; new civic actors are not well versed on humanitarian principles; insurance claims for affected population.

Lessons learnt:

- An intersectoral approach was essential to the humanitarian response;
- With the collapse of socio-economic institutions, need for needs-based rather than status-based response;
- Need to collaborate with new civic and community-based initiatives;
- Need to train these new civic actors on humanitarian principles;
- Constant readiness for proactive emergency response is needed.

3. Panel discussion: Could we have been better prepared for the humanitarian response?

To reflect on matters brought up in this webinar we invited a panel of experts:

- Prof. Kees Boersma (VU University, Amsterdam)
- Prof. Thea Hilhorst (ISS, Erasmus University, Rotterdam)
- François Grünewald (Groupe URD)
- Nelleke Dorsman (Dutch Relief Alliance, Dorcas)

This was the first big disaster in Lebanon. Because humanitarian responses are context-specific we have to learn from this first one in Beirut. Take-aways from the panel discussions concerned:

Local knowledge

Most of the first responders were not local organisations but ad hoc civil initiatives. INGOs need to stand by these civic responses and support them, without taking over their organisation, because then the value of improvisation is lost. Capacity-sharing should be central rather than capacity-building.

Neighbourhoods in urban areas show huge diversity. We should move away from the idea that this is a problem. Coordination should not be about integration, rather we should appreciate the value of fragmentation because of the ability to improvise. Thus, appreciation of local knowledge is important.

Urban challenges

The area that was affected was very complex due to different types of buildings. Moreover, the areas that were affected were not really communities. Therefore, a heterogeneous approach was needed. This is a classical challenge in urban neighbourhoods. Yet, most actors had no experience with humanitarian response in an urban context.

Preparedness

We need to keep working on preparedness and realise that it is not about capacity-strengthening but about co-operation. The preparedness strategy is to get ready as well as possible. We need to keep in mind to put more energy in preparedness strategies for the next urban crisis/disaster.

Responsibility

Pre-existing needs were exacerbated by the disaster. Which are the responsibility of humanitarians?

The political national situation was unstable and therefore the national capacity for disaster management was disabled. Normally humanitarians cooperate with the government in a disaster. In this case, the DRM's minister had resigned and the municipality of Beirut was overruled by the army. Therefore, traditional players with whom INGOs should interact were not present.

Today, there was a lot of discussion about improving the humanitarian response. However, while civil society may do its part, the state is truly accountable and responsible for answering to (and preventing) the disaster.