

Project management in high-uncertainty environments: Lessons from the humanitarian sector.

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Two Types of Humanitarian Projects

Developmental Projects: Steady, long-term builds for resilience – like planting seeds for a future harvest.

Emergency/Relief Projects: Urgent, short-term rescues in the storm – alleviating suffering amid disasters, conflicts, or pandemics.

Our story dives into emergency/relief projects: The ultimate test of uncertainty.

Why the topic on uncertainty?

What is the biggest emergency you have ever handled in your project?

In crises like wars or disasters, uncertainty is life-or-death.

The world is increasingly uncertain:

- Climate disasters
- Conflicts
- Pandemics
- Supply chain disruption

What Fuels Uncertainty in Emergencies?

- Dynamic, unpredictable environments with scarce data and ambiguity.
- Operational hurdles: Insecure access, rapid shifts.
- But the real villains: Security threats (e.g., conflict zones), inherent uncertainty, and multiple stakeholders with clashing cultures and methodologies – turning coordination into a battlefield.

What is Uncertainty?

- ▶ Uncertainty:
 - Oxford definition: the state of being uncertain/ Unpredictability
 - In humanitarian context, it means making high stake decisions with incomplete, unreliable or constantly changing information.
- ▶ In humanitarian crises, it's not occasional; it's the air you breathe.

The Ukrainian Crisis (Known Example)



Nova Kakhovka dam : photo by People in Need, 2023 (Photographer: Alberto Lores)



UNICEF/Ashley Gilbertson VII Photo, in Chernihiv, Ukraine

Personal experience: Tropical storm Ana

<https://youtu.be/iOE1-YsbRuU?si=QeYafaV4eDrAccae> BBC News video

What resulted?

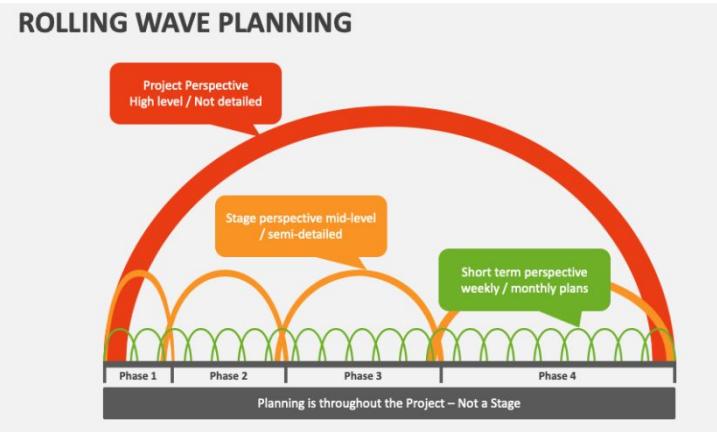
- Floods destroyed property,
- Death
- displaced thousands,
- sparked urgent needs for clean water, shelter, and healthcare – with the looming threat (and eventual outbreak) of a cholera epidemic.

No major security issues, but ever-changing stakeholders, cultural differences hindering communication, and epidemic risks made every day a pivot point.

Uncertainty in Project Initiation

- ▶ Urgent flood needs met foggy intel; stakeholders shifted rapidly with cultural barriers.
- ▶ Implications & Handles: Rapid needs assessments; craft flexible project charters acknowledging risks like cholera upfront.
- ▶ Example: "Emergency water and shelter needed for the residents"

Planning Amid the Storm



- ▶ Data changed amidst planning; stakeholders evolved often with cultural mismatches and cholera unpredictability looming.
- ▶ Implications & Handles: Embrace rolling-wave planning with contingencies; flexible budgets; centralize risk via active comms.

Implementation Under Fire

- ▶ Flood escalations and cholera outbreak disrupted plans; needs pivoted wildly amid cultural comms gaps.
- ▶ Implications & Handles: Reprioritize often; decentralize decisions; coordinate via open channels respecting cultures (key to our on-ground adaptations).
- ▶ Success Factor: Agile, empowered teams – open-minded to surprises like epidemics.
- ▶ Value Tip: Delegate authority early (post-onboarding) to speed responses in your unpredictable projects.

Monitoring & Evaluation

- ▶ Baselines washed away by floods; data collection risked amid cholera; needs shifted with cultural nuances.
- ▶ Implications & Handles: Real-time feedback; revise indicators; prioritize learning over compliance via community input (bridging cultural divides).
- ▶ Key Shift: Control → Learning – use active comms for cross-cultural insights on risks like epidemics.

End of Project / Transition



- ▶ Floods lingered; funding tapered amid ongoing cholera threats and stakeholder changes.
- ▶ Implications & Handles: Plan transitions over closures; capture lessons from uncertainties lens.

The Handover Quest – Exit Strategies

- ▶ Displaced communities had weak capacity; partners shifted with cultural gaps; risk of cholera relapse.
- ▶ Implications & Handles: Gradual handovers building ownership; communicate clearly across cultures to avoid voids.
- ▶ Key Risk: Avoid abrupt exits – use open-minded prep to prevent dependency amid ongoing uncertainties.

Key tools to navigate the chaos for humanitarian organizations

Global clusters - helps in collaboration for all the stakeholders.

Preparedness:

- Preparedness projects(systems, people & resources)
- Specialized courses.
- Structured onboarding to align teams swiftly.

Active, open communication to bridge divides.

Community participation

As a leader; Calm decision-making, Emotional intelligence, Trust and delegation, Cultural awareness, Open minded mindset

Wisdom from the Quest – Lessons with Adaptation

Extreme Uncertainty: Treat as baseline (like flood unpredictability) – adapt for startups or cyber threats.

Shifting Stakeholders: Navigate dynamics with active comms and cultural openness (core to my project).

Access/Security Constraints: Minimal in my case, but prioritize where needed – scalable to high-risk industries.

Universal Treasures – Lessons for All

Rolling-Wave Planning: Iterative magic for R&D or Agile worlds (essential in our 48-hour launch).

Decentralized Decisions: Empower teams post-onboarding for speed amid stakeholder shifts.

Learning-Focused Monitoring: Adapt outcomes dynamically, incorporating cultural feedback.

Value: Refine these in your toolkit – preparation and openness make uncertainty (like cholera risks) your ally.

From the lessons in this presentation, what's one humanitarian practice you could adapt to boost resilience in your own projects?



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THANK YOU!



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