



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

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Abstract

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

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the concept of project governance has attracted increasing interest in the field of project management (Turner, 2006; Garland, 2009; Biesenthal and Wilden, 2014). In the context of non-profit organisations in particular it has been shown to fill the gap between corporate governance and project management (Renz, 2007). However it has not been examined in the context of disaster relief or recovery. This typically involves a diverse range of actors and practises, and as a result approaches to governance are often fragmented and unbalanced (Tierney, 2012). For that reason it is important to investigate the relationship between project governance and disaster relief, and to examine whether the concept of project

governance is utilised or even understood by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The study takes the form of an exploration of project governance in the context of the response of one international NGO, known as NGO(X), to the Haiti earthquake of 2010. NGO(X) was chosen for the study because of its extensive experience in humanitarian aid and disaster relief as well as international development. NGO(X) has been dedicated to tackling poverty and suffering in the world's poorest countries for over 45 years, and today continues to respond to emergencies and to prepare people for disasters in vulnerable areas. NGO(X) is funded by members of the public, governments and other donors.

The paper begins with an outline description of the Haiti earthquake disaster and of criticism regarding NGOs' perceived lack of professionalism and weak accountability amongst those involved in the post-earthquake coordination effort. Project management practice in NGOs is then discussed, followed by a review of project governance and its underlying themes

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and assumptions. Following an examination of how project governance fills the gap between corporate governance and project management, we then look at project governance in the specific context of disaster relief. The dimensions of project governance are then identified from an extensive review of relevant literature, and this forms the basis for a conceptual model which is used to explore project governance in NGO(X). The case study findings are then presented, leading to determination of the key dimensions of project governance that have specific relevance in the context of NGOs in disaster relief. The paper concludes with a summary and assessment of the key findings and the identification of avenues for further study.

2. The Haiti earthquake

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12th 2010 resulted in 222,750 deaths, 300,572 injured, over 1.5 million people homeless and 1342 sites of internally displaced persons (Kirsch et al., 2012). In comparison, a stronger earthquake in Chile a few months later killed 1000 people, and in a similar earthquake in the 1990s, less than 100 people died (Pierre-Louis, 2011). In the case of Haiti the total estimated damage was in excess of the country's total GDP for 2009. 23% of the country's schools were damaged and 60% of its hospitals were severely damaged or destroyed. This included the Ministry of Health building which collapsed killing 200 staff (IASC, 2010).

At the time of the earthquake almost three quarters of the Haitian population were already known to live on less than \$2 a day (World Bank, 2009) and the country was ranked 149 out of 182 in the 2009 Human Development Index (UNDP, 2009). Pre-earthquake, Haiti suffered political instability, a history of on/off foreign assistance and embargoes preceded by two centuries of dysfunction as a state (Easterly, 2006). The earthquake compounded the extreme human vulnerability that already existed in Haiti, however Tierney (2012) claims that in Haiti's case the historical, socio-political, environmental and economic factors contributed more to the increased loss of life and damage than the earthquake itself.

The Haitian government, already inept and volatile, was weakened by the loss of thousands of civil servants to the earthquake and was powerless to respond sufficiently (Kirsch et al., 2012). The United States (US) prohibited the channelling of funds directly into this political environment, with the majority of aid being channelled away from Haitian authorities towards NGOs and private contractors (Kirsch et al., 2012; Tierney, 2012; Ramachandran and Walz, 2015). This resulted in NGOs, banks and private firms becoming the "preferred recipients of aid" and NGOs evolving as "key players in nation building and governance" with accusations of unusual political influence soon following (Ramachandran and Walz, 2015, p14).

Documented challenges experienced in the Haiti aftermath include insufficient leadership and support, struggles within the UN cluster and coordination systems, delays, corruption, planning issues, policies, incompetence of some NGOs, time limitations, land ownership issues, political uncertainty and health issues (Altay and Labonte, 2014; Ismail et al., 2014). Furthermore, lack

of access, security, leadership, logistical support and a frenzied media were cited as major impediments to the recovery operation (Kirsch et al., 2012).

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 (Schuller, 2009; Zanotti, 2010). The relationship between NGOs and Haiti began decades before the 2010 earthquake, with thousands of NGOs of various sizes already operating in the state (Zanotti, 2010). However there are inconsistent figures in circulation regarding the number of active NGOs in Haiti post-earthquake, ranging from 20,000 as an official high estimate from the Catholic Institute for International Relations, to 343 listed by the Haitian Ministry of Planning (Ramachandran and Walz, 2015), whilst other sources estimate 2000 agencies were active at the height of the response (IASC, 2010).

Further challenges were brought by the "overwhelming influx of non-traditional agencies and individuals" (Kirsch et al., 2012, p.200). Different agencies or NGOs had different priorities and agendas, which often exacerbated the work of many NGOs (Hooper, 2014). Well-intended NGOs and volunteers faced criticism for not considering the long-term needs of many survivors and for complicating the relief efforts of established and larger NGOs (Jobe, 2011; Tierney, 2012). Added to this, emergency response teams were slow to gain local knowledge, which had they done so, would have increased effectiveness more quickly (Brière et al., 2015). The consequence of all this is a view that "the humanitarian response in Haiti has not turned out to be one of the humanitarian community's proudest moments" (Altay and Labonte, 2014, p64).

3. Project management in NGOs

The inadequate immediate response and poor general coordination of the relief effort in Haiti was not an exception amongst those involved in the humanitarian sector. These are accepted as the norm when NGOs are coping with the added complexities and extreme conditions of disaster relief such as those experienced in Haiti (Ika et al., 2010; Hermano et al., 2013). However the humanitarian sector is recognised as unique within the project management field due to its modus operandi of social transformation which is different to traditional project management environments (Crawford and Bryce, 2003; Renz, 2007). NGOs have become more project-oriented in recent years (Ika et al., 2010), and this presents a great opportunity for the humanitarian sector and project-based businesses to learn from and engage with each other (Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Golini et al., 2015).

Literature that specifically concentrates on project management and governance within NGOs is limited (Crawford and Bryce, 2003; Golini et al., 2015). This is likely to be because NGOs are mainly concerned with governance at a macro and board level (Wyatt, 2004), although there have been attempts to identify a project governance gap at project-level whilst exploring the concept of project governance within NGOs (Renz, 2007).

Humanitarian NGO projects carry many distinct features and challenges (Khang and Moe, 2008), with research on these

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