LEVERAGING AN INFORMANT NETWORK FOR RAPID RELIEF RESPONSE IN DIFFA, NIGER

CASE IN BRIEF

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has responded to humanitarian needs in the Diffa region of southeast Niger since 2013. Facing a shifting context and challenging operational environment, the team built a network of informants that feeds into a mechanism for rapid programmatic responses as populations move or new needs arise. An internal team culture of open communication facilitates the program's analysis and adaptation. The IRC also leverages this information to influence the wider humanitarian community's response. Despite procurement constraints and government restrictions, the program has dramatically increased its scale and the diversity of support it provides to people displaced by violence and insecurity.

BACKGROUND

CONTEXT

There are currently an estimated 213,000 refugees, returnees, and internally displaced people in the Diffa region in southeast Niger. Escalating insecurity and violence in nearby northern Nigeria has been the main driver of this crisis: over 165,000 people fled across that porous border between late 2013 and late 2015. In Niger itself, Boko Haram attacks since early 2015 and forced relocations instigated by the government have resulted in internal displacement.

The influx of Nigerian refugees and Nigerien returnees has stretched already scarce resources in a region that has long faced chronic food insecurity, poor access to basic services, and recurrent droughts and floods. Displaced people are spread across remote host communities, with a very small proportion (approximately 2%) residing in camps. Humanitarian actors struggle to reach communities in need due to limited infrastructure, a volatile security situation, and fluid population movements across a large geographic area.

PROGRAMS

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been working in Diffa since June 2013, with a portfolio of work that has evolved with the shifting context. The initial focus on population monitoring and protection allowed the IRC to develop a robust network for collecting information from across the region. As the crisis escalated, the response launched activities related to food, non-food items (NFIs), nutrition, health, livelihoods, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

Donor funding has increased to support this work. Starting with a single grant of $330,000 in October 2013, the IRC's portfolio had grown to 13 grants and a total value of $8.1 million by December 2015. The funding has come from a range of donors, including: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida); UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); Swiss Agency for International Development (SDC); European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO); Stichting Vluchteling; US Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM); and US Agency for International Development's Offices of Food for Peace (FFP) and Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA).

The diversity of activities and rapid increase in funding have both depended on the response team's ability to track changes in the context and react quickly, working with the rest of the humanitarian community, despite challenges from procurement procedures and government restrictions.

IDP/refugee settlement in Diffa.

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES AND ENABLERS

INFORMANT NETWORKS AND RAPID RESPONSE MECHANISMS

The IRC's informant network has ensured that the team can track population movements and rapidly respond to emerging needs. Both of these components – the informant network and the response mechanisms – evolved over time as the IRC expanded its work in Diffa.

The informant network started small and grew quickly. In October 2013, the launch of the initial project included a partnership with a local NGO, the Niger Association for the Defense of Human Rights (known by its French acronym: ANDDH), to recruit seven monitors to cover 81 sites. Within a few months, the number of sites hosting displaced people had grown to nearly 200. To accommodate the growth, the response team switched to a system of "focal points": in each site where displaced people were present or likely to arrive, individual citizens were provided with a phone that allows them to call the IRC and ANDDH for free. As the program continued to expand and launch new activities, it also set up village protection committees to help with identification and protection support.

This network of focal points and protection committees rapidly transfers information on population movements and needs to the IRC's field team and senior management. While mostly supporting protection activities, the network has also increased the response team's security awareness.

The team has been better able to ascertain when it is unsafe to visit certain areas, and to maximize periods of relative security. The network has even served as a proxy for the IRC when security restricts access; in particular, the committees are able to carry out some program activities and provide information about services in their areas.

The IRC's contextual awareness was crucial to a scenario planning exercise held in January 2015. The day-long session pulled together team members from across multiple offices in the region to examine different ways the situation in northeastern Nigeria and Diffa might develop. Factors like the joint Nigerien, Chadian, and Nigerian military operations, Boko Haram's response, and potential subsequent population displacement all fed into the development of four scenarios; three of which actually occurred in subsequent months.

The week after the planning exercise, the team sent proposals to emergency funders to support a rapid response mechanism. With dedicated funding and staff on this mechanism, information received from the focal points and committees network can now trigger multi-sector assessments using household surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. A scoring system flags critical issues and prioritizes hard-to-reach and highly vulnerable areas. These assessments have led to rapid food, NFI, and WASH activities, as needed.

Diagram: Information flows in the IRC's Diffa response network.
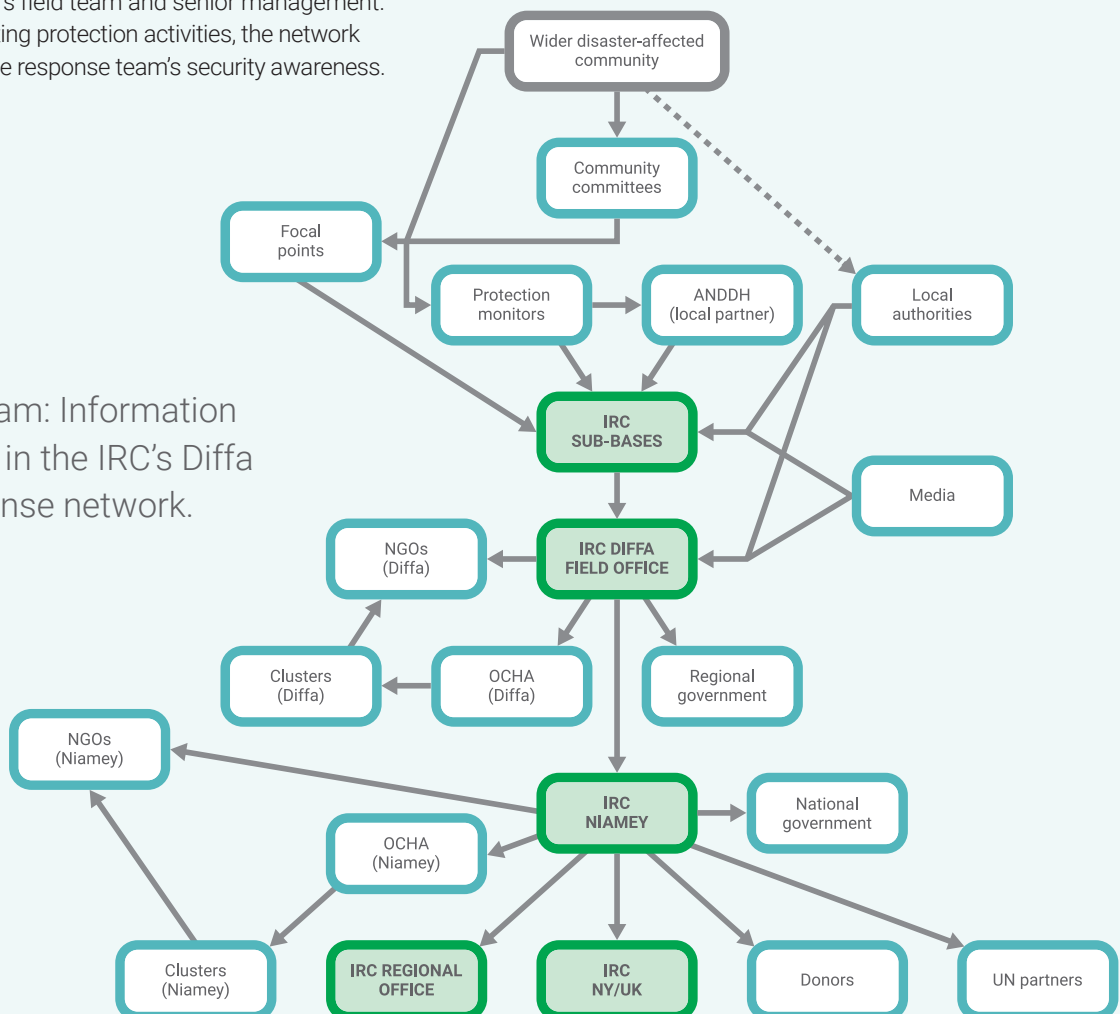
INFORMATION, RESPONSE, AND INFLUENCE: LAKE CHAD ISLANDS

In March 2014, the community focal points alerted IRC about increasing movement towards Lake Chad and that nearly half of the people who had arrived in Diffa were staying on islands on the lake. Recognizing the information gap, the response team launched an assessment with the support of local authorities. It revealed over 10,000 newly arrived people on the islands and massive unmet health and water needs. At that point, no international NGOs were working on the islands.

Over the course of a weekend, the IRC team developed a concept note for a response, submitted it to UNHCR, and received approval with a budget of $100,000. The response launched the following week. It provided people on 117 islands with access to clean water and better health services, through a mobile boat clinic and provision of medical supplies to health clinics. The assessment and intervention also had a multiplier effect, as it attracted the attention of other agencies to the previously underserved islands and to the possibilities of mobile clinics.

This experience marked a turning point in the IRC's Diffa response in three ways: it expanded the number of sectors in which the IRC worked; it was the first rapid emergency response launched; and it demonstrated the potential of information sharing as an advocacy tool to increase the responsiveness of the wider humanitarian community.

Aid delivery in Lake Chad.

INFLUENCE ON WIDER HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

The informant network has proved valuable beyond the IRC's own projects. As demonstrated by the Lake Chad response in March 2014 (see box), other humanitarian actors have made effective use of the information gathered and analysis conducted by the IRC team. Given the operational and security challenges in Diffa, few agencies have as much on-the-ground presence and often lack updated information on population movements and needs.

The response team shares information through weekly reports, and switched to daily reports during the peak of the crisis. Multi-sector assessments are also shared and distributed by OCHA to the clusters and other humanitarian agencies. Together, these reports and assessments have helped to set the agenda with key actors such as UN agencies and donors, highlighting the volatility of the situation and advocating for appropriate and flexible responses to emerging needs.

Furthermore, the IRC leadership team has maintained regular formal and informal channels of communication with UN agencies, donors, and local authorities. Regular updates keep donors informed of the evolving situation, which in turn makes it easier for the IRC to renegotiate projects and contracts as well as secure funding for new projects to meet emerging needs.

In a few instances, the information provided by the IRC has prompted a response by another international NGO. However, there have been challenges with follow-through on commitments to launch activities that are made following the distribution of an IRC multi-sector assessment by OCHA. A functioning official coordination system was missing for some time, which made it difficult to hold actors accountable, though that situation is improving.

> "At the beginning our projects were based on logframes. We're now doing the job based more on context than on logframes. To do this, we need to have regular communication with donors… but what we really need is a contingency plan that identifies alternative pathways so that if the situation changes we have automatic approval to change the way we work."

Deputy Director for Programs

OPEN COMMUNICATION AND TEAM CULTURE

Team engagement is critical to working adaptively and navigating the uncertainty of an insecure environment. The IRC response team has managed to promote this engagement in a variety of ways.

First, the leadership has promoted open communication by actively seeking and valuing information obtained by field staff, and demonstrating commitment to act rapidly on it. This has also meant modelling adaptability in the way the leadership team works. Management staff have sought to find or create flexibility in rules and policies to ensure field staff are able to do their work; this has included, for example, almost doubling the financial authorization level of field coordinators, as well as developing a system of electronic approval and payment from the capital to allow for quicker action.

Second, leadership has sought to show its commitment to supporting staff. When an attack on Diffa town seemed

imminent in February 2015, the IRC evacuated local staff and their families to safety in Zinder (see box). Combined with hazard pay for staff working in Diffa, this sort of action has helped the IRC retain staff when many other organizations have lost significant numbers. In more mundane examples, staff have observed that rapid promotions are possible as recognition of good performance and team work. Field staff efforts are also recognized by the Country Director through regular encouraging messages and the communication of positive feedback received from the IRC headquarters and donors.

Finally, open communication among team members has helped to foster flexibility. For example, in the Diffa field office, daily briefings dispelled rumors and helped build team spirit. These measures have supported an environment where staff at all levels remained committed and willing to work in flexible ways, despite the highly insecure and volatile context.

> "
> Any change in context inevitably requires changes in the implementation of activities and our approach with the beneficiaries. This is the surest way to achieve the objectives we assigned ourselves."
>
> **Member of field staff from Diffa office**

CONSTRAINTS AND INHIBITORS ON ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

STANDARD PROCUREMENT PROCEDURES

The IRC's standard procurement procedures have been a burden on the Diffa team's ability to respond rapidly. NFI distributions, construction of WASH facilities, and other activities have required significant and speedy procurement. The IRC has an emergency procurement policy that can

be activated with approval from headquarters, but the Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit determined that the number of people affected in Niger was too few to qualify the emergency response for relaxed procedures.

That lack of approval means the Niger team has been required to hold open tenders, taking at least three weeks, for procurements over $20,000. For some large procurements, the team has sought individual exemptions to hold quicker bid processes, rather than the lengthy open tenders. More recently, the IRC in Niger has created Master Purchase Agreements which pre-approve vendors who can deliver goods at pre-determined prices within three days. These agreements (used for NFIs, transportation, and latrine and borehole construction) have since helped to increase the IRC's responsiveness.

GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS ON DATA SHARING

Data sharing has proved to be a sensitive issue with the Nigerien government, despite a generally positive relationship throughout the response effort. Government data is typically released more than two months after it is collected; given the fluidity of population movements, efforts to map service coverage cannot be effectively aligned with population data. At the start of the Diffa crisis, the IRC began monitoring and reporting on population movements, sharing estimates on the numbers of new arrivals with the wider humanitarian community in order to fill the information gap.

However, the government has since prohibited the IRC (and any other non-state actor) from reporting unofficial population data. This has reduced contextual awareness among humanitarian actors in Diffa, hindering the overall humanitarian response.

PROGRAMMATIC AND OPERATIONAL SHIFTS FOLLOWING BOKO HARAM ATTACKS IN FEBRUARY 2015

Boko Haram attacks in February 2015 turned Diffa into a warzone. Through security and media monitoring, the IRC observed increased military (Nigerien and foreign forces) and Boko Haram movements in early February. On February 3rd, the team closed the Bosso sub-base and relocated staff; two days later, Boko Haram attacked Bosso. As violence began to threaten Diffa town, the IRC evacuated all but three essential staff from Diffa to Zinder. Core staff began working from a newly opened office in Zinder, remotely supporting activities in Diffa thanks to the partnership with ANDDH and the network of focal points and village protection committees.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the IRC made both programmatic and operational shifts. Donors such as ECHO, SDC, and UNHCR allowed the projects they funded to shift focus away from longer-term livelihoods activities to essential

lifesaving aid. In the case of SDC, it took approximately a week to secure approval for the programmatic change, including a major budget realignment, reduction of the implementation timeframe by four months, and launch of entirely new activities. Meanwhile, funding from Sida, unrestricted funds from the IRC, and the flexibility of other donors allowed the launch of the rapid response mechanism.

Operationally, significant investments were made in the purchase of new vehicles and communications equipment. Arrangements were made to allow for faster procurement. The IRC's adaptation following the volatile situation and quick restart of work convinced donors of its capacity and led to subsequent funding streams to further develop the emergency response activities.

SUMMARY

In an uncertain and volatile context, the IRC has built systems to collect information and put it to actionable use. The informant networks of focal points and protection committees have contributed to the IRC's own responsiveness, especially through the dedicated funding and staff of its rapid response mechanism. It has also been able to influence other humanitarian actors: as of December 2015, the IRC was one of only four international NGOs on the Humanitarian Country Team, with its weekly reports and multi-sector assessments promoted by OCHA. This information sharing has helped create an enabling donor environment, further facilitating adaptation.

Despite these adaptive capabilities and enablers, the IRC efforts in Diffa have struggled with many of the same procurement procedures and government restrictions that plague other response efforts. Few program contexts are perfectly suited for adaptive management. What stands out in this case is the interconnections between various adaptive capacities to create a more enabling environment, and to compensate for the inhibitors that exist.

Villagers in Diffa line up to collect water from one of three wells constructed by the IRC in the remote villages of Gagamari and Chetimari.

Written in April 2016 based on interviews conducted in October 2015.