

Emergency Capacity Building Project 'Case study of good practice'

Standard Case study

Mercy Corps – Office in a Box

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1. Introduction

Mercy Corps (MC) currently operates in 39 countries providing humanitarian relief transitioning into development. Of its 1500 employees in the field, over 1300 are national staff. In 2000, MC established a Global Emergency Operations Unit to initiate and manage new and ongoing emergency responses. The Unit was also charged with enhancing MC's overall impact on emergency standards, policies and practices; and leading teams in the start-up of major emergency responses. However, as GEO was responding to emergencies and therefore unable to begin designing policies and procedures, a separate team was assembled and tasked with completing the office in a box.

Investigations showed that typically, in setting up new field offices time was spent on researching and devising systems relating to the core operations functions of administration, finance, logistics, IT and security. This took attention away from crucial programme development issues and resulted in duplication of effort among field offices. Systems put in place could sometimes be poorly designed and might not be fully compliant with donor requirements.

The issues around program start-up in situations with limited back-up resources were critical. In addition to the impact on program quality, other key concerns were consistency and responsiveness to donor requirements.

Setting a goal of providing staff with fluid and flexible tools that would enable them to achieve rapid relief program start-up, and effective, compliant management of entrepreneurial programming, MC developed an elegantly simple solution. The Office in a Box (OIB) is a cost-effective tool designed primarily for use during the start-up phase of new field offices, to guide and support the establishment of effective core operational functions. It is also available for use in existing field offices to strengthen operations capacities.

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Extensively researched and piloted, the OIB was formally rolled out in March 2006 and has already proved an invaluable tool.

2. About the Office in a Box (OIB)

The OIB is a field resource containing a set of guidelines and manuals, and a collection of tools and document templates which are crucial to program start-up and operations management. The manuals detail MC policies relating to the core operations functions and explain how to use the accompanying tools and documents.

The OIB contains the following items:

- Field Office Checklist
- Field Asset Manual
- Field Warehouse Manual
- Field Administration Manual
- Field Procurement Manual
- Field Security Manual
- Field Fleet Manual
- Field Finance Manual
- Tricks of the Trade

The manuals and documents are generic to all field office operations and are necessary to function effectively and comply with donor regulations. The contents were field tested in Indonesia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran and Uzbekistan.

Formally launched in March 2006, the OIB resides on MC's digital library and is accessible to staff via the internet, in CD format or hard copy, either as a whole or in individual parts. It is currently in use in Nepal, Sudan, Ethiopia, Niger, Uganda and Pakistan.

Primarily intended as a resource of compliant and relevant tools ready for use during an emergency response, the OIB has also been used in existing field offices to strengthen operations capacity. In these situations the Start-Up Checklist is an effective evaluation tool.

3. Background

Over a period of two years, the design team of eight people created the various components of the OIB by combining best practices of MC field offices with requirements imposed by donor regulations. Extensive input was gathered from the field and a thorough vetting process by HQ and field staff preceded implementation.

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The release date of OIB and associated training were timed to coordinate with Global Response Team initiatives and field training workshops. As new field offices adopt the OIB, further training is required for the staff involved in using it.

To maintain its effectiveness the OIB requires regular updating and five HQ staff have part-time responsibility for this.

4. Evaluation of success

The OIB has reduced the amount of time and effort spent by program managers on developing operations systems, allowing them to focus on matters of program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation which have an impact on quality.

An example of the inefficiencies that the OIB solves is the repeated creation of documents such as contracts, purchase requests, emergency contact sheets and so on, which are used during the regular course of business for all field offices. By providing generic templates the redundant work involved in drawing up these documents and the systems they support, is eradicated.

The ready-to-use resource has strengthened systems within the organisation by preventing gaps and poorly designed or inefficient procedures. Tried and tested at diverse locations, the OIB brings a consistency and rigor which have increased the organization's ability to respond to donor requirements as well as improving accountability and transparency with local communities, governments, businesses and employees.

Staff trained to use the OIB benefit from its development value as it incorporates best practice and lessons learned from other parts of the organisation, and builds knowledge of compliancy issues. Establishing systems that are consistent over the long term and across different field offices supports the career development of national staff by increasing their options for temporary assignments, Global Response Team placements, and nationalizing of expatriate positions. As a result of these factors, there has already been a significant impact on recruitment and retention.

Making effective use of technology, the OIB operates as a vehicle for organizational learning. It enables MC to gather, share and build upon experience, best practices and lessons learned. Regularly captured and disseminated through the updating process, this institutional knowledge feeds through into the day-to-day management of programs with a consequent effect on quality.

5. Conclusion

Already used in 12 countries where MC is operating, the OIB has proved a cost-effective resource in simplifying the establishment of efficient and effective operations systems, and freeing program managers to focus on the needs on the ground. It has strengthened

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organizational capacity in operations management, improved retention rates, increased responsiveness to donor requirements, and positively impacted program quality.

Speaking of OB1, CEO Neal Keny-Guyer praised it as a “fantastic package of tools required to set up and operate a field office” and applauded the way in which it freed staff from a systems focus and enabled them to become “social entrepreneurs”, able to “take the risks necessary to design innovative program strategies”.



Mercy Corps / Office in a Box

This case study originated from [Mercy Corps](#), and has been prepared by People In Aid in partnership with the Emergency Capacity Building Project (www.ecbproject.org).