

Local organizations response in disaster: A case study of a successful response to the needs of the community

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Abstract

Providing aid and responding to the needs of individuals and communities is a major task in disaster. In order to do this, information about what people need and in what time is crucial, as well as an organized way to deliver this aid. We studied a cultural non-profit organization that provided aid in the Valparaíso wildfire, April 2014. We examined how they organized the delivery of aid to 100+ families and defined the needs of these families. We discuss the lessons learned aiming to understand the needs of people exposed to disasters.

Keywords: disaster, local organization, donation, NGO

Introduction

In this paper we describe the experience of a local non-profit organization (NGO) that delivered aid during the wildfires in Valparaíso during April of 2014. We focused on how they organized the help and the response to the immediate needs of 500 families. We present our preliminary findings, in which we describe the way they collected information about the families and how they delivered the aid. We discuss how this experience can be used to potentiate the help that local organizations can provide during disasters.

In order to do this, we start with a description of the event. We then briefly describe the NGO, their work and the process to organize the aid during the fire. In the methods section we describe the process of data collection and the data that was collected by the NGO to evaluate the needs and help the victims. We then present descriptive data of the families and groups that were helped and the type of requests made by them. We end with a brief discussion of how this experience can be used to handle donations and help victims during disasters.

On April 12nd, 2014 a wildfire started that affected the city of Valparaíso, Chile and surrounding areas. A total of 965.2 hectares were burn, of which 28.8 correspond to housing areas (Onemi, 2014). The final estimation from the Chilean government was, that after the 5 days the fire lasted (El Mercurio, 2014), close to 18,000 people were affected and 15 people were killed. Damages were estimated in 34,000 million dollars. This fire is considered to be one of the largest and most damaging that has ever affected Valparaíso (Cruz Roja, 2014).

Due to the magnitude of the wildfire and the big challenge that proved to be to control it, due to the strong coastal winds, the highest warning of evacuation for the population was issued. Many families had to escape from their houses with no time to collect their belongings. The fire alert lasted for 97 days. The zone of catastrophe was declared, and lasted for 32 days. During that time the army had the control of the city (Onemi, 2014, El Mercurio, 2014) and worked to support the emergency response and during the recovery phase.

The delivery of aid was organized through the local government (Municipalidad de Valparaíso) and the National Emergency Office of the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security (ONEMI), with the help of several private citizens who traveled to Valparaíso to either donate materials or work as volunteers, and from NGOs who responded to the disaster. Some of these NGOs have as their main activity to respond to these events (e.g., Red Cross, Techo para Chile), while others perform other actions but expanded their activities in order to provide help and respond to the disaster. These latter ones have been denominated Type III according to the classification proposed by Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) and is the focus of this study. These Type III organizations are described as established ones conducting non regular tasks as a way to respond to the disaster. This is the case of Trafón Cultural Center, an NGO that opened its doors in January 2013 in Valparaíso. Trafón is defined as an “*open space to work with the community. Trafón is a platform to cultural managers and artists*” (Trafón, 2014). As NGO they plan to promote cultural activities in Valparaíso and provide a space for the work of artists. Once the fire started Trafón assumed a new role and organized the delivery of aid to a group of families and communities. Their space was used to store donations and as an official shelter approved by Onemi, transforming it in order to be able to receive volunteers, victims and donations.

Given the magnitude of donations and the number of people who were affected, Trafón conducted a social survey to register family's needs and the donations delivered to each family and/or community. In this survey they included general identification information (including address and hill affected), and collected information about what they needed, that was organized in different topics: food, coat, personnel and cleaning hygiene, others. They also asked whether they had some special needs and if there were members in the families with disabilities. They collected about 1700 surveys during that period of time, and reached a number close to 6,000 people. In this paper we describe how Trafón organized the aid in order to respond to the needs of the families, and the particular requests from the families and communities. This latter information should help to inform what items should be provided to the victims during the early stages of a disaster.

The cultural Center Trafón is located in the bottom of a hill in Valparaíso (*Cerro Monjas*). This center has a size of 2,000 square meters and it is used to organize music and theatrical performances. It also conducts seminars and workshops open to the community, all of these related to cultural topics. The work of Trafón has been recognized by the Municipality, due to its work as a cultural center but also for the restauration of the building where is located, This restauration is an ongoing process and the space where the Center is located is still being

remodeled. The Center is conceived as an open platform to cultural managers and artists that is close to citizens and the community, promoting values of self-management and associativity. Inside their 2,000 square meters they have an essay room, a theater room and a classroom for conducting the workshops. This public service orientation, their affiliation to this community, and their emphasis towards working with the local communities may help explain the role they assumed during the disaster, as has been proposed by Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) when describing this Type III organizations (Dynes & Quarantelli, 1968; Webb, 2000). Most of these Type III organizations are local, have close ties and affiliations with the community affected, providing them with unique qualities that are relevant to respond to the needs of the victims. These are important assets for the delivery of aid during a disaster.

There are three main reasons why studying Trafón may inform research in the field of donations and emergency response. First, although Dynes and Quarantelli (1968) suggest, Type III organizations may be the most common, their members usually blend and take action through collaboration with other organizations and are not easy to detect. In this case Trafón was clearly recognized for their help during the fires. Second, they were recognized as a success story by the Municipality and local organizations, therefore, describing their experience may help to inform delivery of aid for future events. Third, early on the process, Trafón decided to start registering information systematically. That information is an important asset to understand the needs of families and local communities and the delivery of aid and their work.

Methods

Data Collection

We visited the Municipality of Valparaíso after the wildfire to interview the emergency manager and to have better understand how they organized and delivered the aid during the wildfires. We had previously learned they encountered several challenges because of the excess of donations and volunteers that reached Valparaíso during the fires. Through them we learned about Trafón. The emergency manager recognized the work of delivering aid and handling donations, and suggested they could be a very good source of information since they were very well organized and proved to be of great help for the delivery of aid.

As a cultural center, Trafón is the biggest one that is active in Valparaíso reaching communities from several hills (www.trafon.cl; Facebook: <https://es-es.facebook.com/pages/Centro-Cultural-Trafon/147828765367433>). Thus allowing them to reach a large geographical area and many victims affected by the wildfire. During the time the wildfire lasted, they updated the data about what kind of donations they needed for families and communities affected by the fire and uploaded a daily report providing that information to the community, all this information was available in their webpage and Facebook.

To obtain information about their experience, we visited them and discussed who they were and what they did. We also talked about their experience during the wildfire and the way they organized the response and handled donations, volunteers and needs. We visited Trafón

for the first time in October 2014. In that first meeting, several important topics emerged such as the magnitude of the affected and helped families and communities by Trafón, how they organized to provide support to the affected victims, and how they built networks with other centers (as *Red Popular de Alimentación* for feeding people with no resources to cook) in order to respond to the needs of these people. They also found early in the process the need to have better information from victims to help them. That is when they designed and conducted surveys with the victims they reached aimed to register who they were, their needs and what was donated. They also collected information from local organizations that requested help from as well. In a later visit we scanned all surveys available and report the process of coding for 500 surveys.

Survey description and coding scheme

The structure of the survey included several information. They asked for identification, family composition and address. They asked for: name, age, national identification number (in order to avoid duplicates), address, affected hill (for organizing the delivery of aid), phone number, date, composition of the family group (how many children, adults, elderly people), and needs. Trafón asked them to specify their needs and categorized these in the following groups: food, construction material, hygiene, clothing, among others. The survey included additional questions about bedclothing and especial needs (eg., medications, school supplies). The survey was completed by each family and community representative everytime they visited the Center. With this information Trafón put together kits that took into consideration family compositions and request, but also donated items.

We coded the surveys, excluding the special cases, using the PAHO categories (PAHO, 2014), these are: food, water, shelter, construction material, personal hygiene, educational material, medications and other non-classified. This is used to describe the type of requests made by the victims. All surveys have been entered into an excel file and are currently being analyzed.

Results and discussion

Trafón requested all individuals, families and community leaders coming into the Center asking for help to complete the survey and provide contact information to deliver the requests. Using this information they assembled the kits using the available donations in two ways. First, they use the item requested if it had already been donated, and in second place, they used non requested items to make exchanges (*trueques*) in the local market or other places where the item could be purchased for needed items not available. To deliver the request they used *cuadrillas*. They were individuals who delivered the requests to the families. These were mostly volunteers who were eager to help. Trafón organized a daily donation route for inaccessible hills for the delivery of items and included information, in each survey, whether the items were delivered or not.

In the following table we summarize information of the types of kits assembled by Trafón using the family composition criteria.

Table 1. Types of Kits made by Trafón

Kit	Family of 4 members	Family of 5 or more
Food	Tea, Sugar (2 kg), Oil (1 l), flour (1 kg), rice (3 kg), noodles (2 kg), tuna or mackerel (2 cans), tomatoes sauce (900 g)	2 Food kits
Personal Hygiene	3 toothpaste tubes, 1 deodorant for man and woman, 1 shaver, 1 soap, 1 shampoo, 1 conditioner, 4 toothbrushes and body lotion	-
House Cleaning	1 detergent, chlorine, dish detergent, paper towel, toilet paper, napkins	-
Education materials	Backpack with 5 notebooks, a ruler, container with pencils, erasers, pencil sharpener, luster paper, cardboards and a block for drawing	-

* In case of groups with children, pregnant or elderly people they brought additional milk (1 kg or 3 liters of liquid milk). Also they gave new underwear divided by size for those specific groups.

** According to the age of the children Trafón included toys.

*** They also started to donate tableware kits and individual pieces to families.

Source: Own, based on Trafón interview (October, 2014).

In table 2 we summarize the information regarding the size of the families and groups that requested particular items, information that came from individuals, families and community leaders. As can be noted in the table, information about the pets were registered as well, an important issue that emerged during the process.

Table 2. Family and/group composition

Number of members per group	Number of kids	Number of adults	Number of pets
1	0	1	0
2	0	2	3
3	1	2	1
4	1	3	3
5	2	3	4
6	2	4	4
7	2	5	3
8	3	5	0
9	4	5	0
10	4	6	0
11	5	6	0
12	5	7	0
20	9	10	0
30	15	15	0
31	15	16	0
40	20	20	0
100	50	50	0
150	75	75	0
Grand Total (average per category)	3	4	3

* For families with 20 or more members we consider the original data from the surveys, which was applied to neighborhoods councils and not only to families. When this is case, the survey recorded how many family were part of the neighborhood council.

Source: Own, based on 477 codified surveys and 422 validated data.

In table 3 we present a summary of the donations and requests using the PAHO categories. As can be seen the most common requests were for food and personal hygiene. There were several non-classified donations (special clothing and toys) that suggest that there other needs that may not be considered as priority by organizations.

Table 3. Donations and requests

PAHO Category	Count Recorded	Percentage (%)
Food	424	34
Personal Hygiene	383	31
Non classified	179	14
Sanitation	131	11
Education	90	7
Construction materials	18	2
Water	14	1
Shelter/housing	4	0
Medications	3	0
Grand total	1246	100

Source: Own, based on codified surveys

Conclusion

In this paper we described the work of a local NGO that performed new tasks during the fires, in order to help the victims affected by the fires. During this process they were able to organize the aid in order to target the specific needs of the victims. They also were able to receive donations and used them in a way that would help to satisfy what the victims needed. Interestingly, we found that although several requests were in target of what PAHO has proposed as items for victims of disasters, we found some others that did not fit this classification but were high in the rank of requests. Among these, specific items of clothing and also toys for the children. This latter information may suggest that addressing leisure needs for the victims, in particular the children, should also be taken into consideration when assisting victims and families exposed to disasters.

The way they organized their response to families and how they handled the donations can be very helpful to potentially deal with donated items that will not be used. They used donations in a way that allowed them use these, even if these were not requested. This is a particular sensitive matter in this case, because the fires in Valparaíso attracted a big number of donations and volunteers to the area, making the delivery of aid challenging for the National Emergency Office of the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security (ONEMI) and NGOs who responded to the disaster. The excess of donations and volunteers created such a big problem that, by April 14 the local government asked to stop sending donations and volunteers to the zone (AND radio, 2014). Nevertheless, the donations and volunteers continued to visit the area even after several requests, a problem denominated convergence of materials and volunteers. Convergence of materials and volunteers have been longed described in the literature and has proven to be a major challenge for the delivery of aid (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Holguín-Veras, Jaller, Van Wassenhove, Pérez & Wachtendorf, 2014). It is a considered to be a major problem for the delivery of aid and a challenge in the way the donations and volunteers should be handled.

In fact, up to date, there is no solution and it is recognized that this will be a problem that will continue unless we develop more creative solutions and interventions. Recovering the experience of successful organizations in organizing and using donations, may serve as input to handle this material, but unfortunately not to prevent material convergence.

Understanding how the families decided to ask for help in particular places and how the delivery of aid provided by this Cultural Center have helped to cope with the disaster, should also be studied. There were accounts from individuals who did not want to leave the belongings left, due to concerns of looting and theft. Delivering the aid to these individuals may have been relevant for them, but also prevented them from leaving a place considered to be unsafe by authorities. These are problems that cannot be easily resolved and probably require further study.

In summary the present work describe how a local NGOs provided help to victims of a wildfire and the information of needs that were requested by the victims. These requests are surely a great input to plan help and respond to the needs of victims of disasters.

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