

International NGOs collaborating on humanitarian surge in Asia

Case study of the Transforming Surge Capacity regional platform – June 2017



Relief distribution in Hunan Province, China, August 2016. Picture: Plan International.

This case study traces the collaboration of seven international humanitarian NGOs in Asia as part of the Transforming Surge Capacity project. It identifies the enabling factors that have allowed the involved organisations to collaborate and produce an innovative inter-agency roster for Asia. It also captures what partners have learned from collaborating at a regional level.

While the frequency and complexity of humanitarian disasters have increased over the last years, funding for adequate response has not kept up, leaving humanitarian organisations competing for limited financial resources. A 2015 [report](#) on the state of surge capacity, as well as on the [Nepal earthquake](#), both highlighted instances of duplication and “competing for space,” a failure to maximise resources that humanitarian actors can ill afford to lose.

The [Transforming Surge Capacity](#) (TSC) project was set up to improve collaboration among eleven international NGOs¹ and test out more collaborative and localised approaches to surge response in humanitarian crises. The project is part of the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP), which the [Start Network](#) has been implementing over the past three years. As such, the project fits into discussions held during the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, stressing the need to move away from competition between organisations towards an ecosystem of actors that complement each other.

The Transforming Surge Capacity project operates in Pakistan and the Philippines, with a regional hub led from Bangkok by Plan International, and an international platform in the UK. Its Asia Regional Platform is carrying out collaborative activities among 7 agencies, including setting up and using a regional shared roster, which allows those organisations to share a pool of qualified, deployable staff to respond to disasters. The platform also organises joint surge trainings, as well as simulations, to build the capacity of staff enrolled in the shared roster, and promotes sharing of good practice and joint learning between humanitarian organisations.

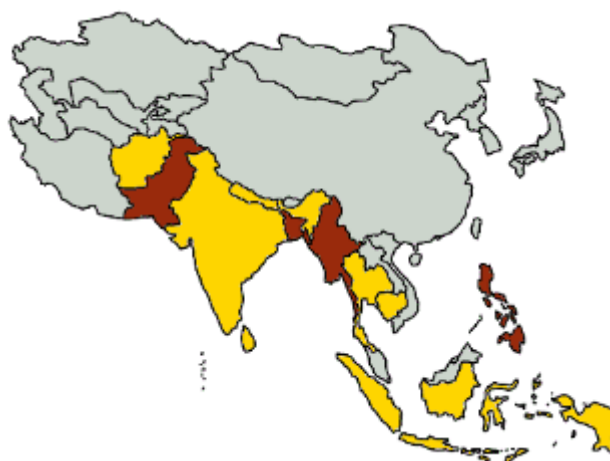
This case study outlines the journey of the regional Surge platform, how the group has managed to produce its innovative collaborative outputs, and how participating organisations benefitted from it.

Training, rostering, deploying: The Asia Regional Platform’s key products

Through building trust and collaboration, the Transforming Surge Capacity project managed to create tangible outputs, showing that humanitarian agencies are ready to pool their resources and act collaboratively for more efficient surge.

The Go Team Asia shared regional roster

It was clear from the start of the project that the Asia platform would set up a regional shared roster. What wasn’t clear was the shape such a roster could take. Concerns prevailed about which terms and conditions to agree on for joint deployments, or whether agencies would be willing to share their staff during emergencies. After extensive consultations with regional surge practitioners, agreements were however reached, in line with the sector’s best practice, and member agencies actively advocated the roster to their senior management. This allowed the creation of the groundbreaking collaborative roster [Go Team Asia](#), with involvement from all seven partner agencies.



Geographical coverage of the regional shared roster.

By the summer of 2016, a Multilateral Agreement was signed by Humanitarian Directors from all agencies, the first batch of roster members was trained, and Go Team Asia was launched. Since then, it has grown to 50 members across 9 countries in Asia, covering a total of six skills areas: logistics and supply chain, cash programming, inclusion/protection/gender, WASH, MEAL, and FSL.

¹ ActionAid, ACF, Christian Aid, CAFOD, CARE, International Medical Corps, Islamic Relief, Muslim Aid, Plan International, Save the Children, and Tearfund.

The roster enhancing HR practice

One of the biggest hurdles to setting up Go Team Asia was the existence of vastly different HR policies among members in the region. The agreement supporting Go Team Asia thus needed to be flexible enough for those to coexist. This was a good example of productive regional HR collaboration in itself, and laid solid bases for further surge collaboration in the region. Indeed, a conceptual model and a framework of policies now exist for future agencies to draw on.

Audrey Fernando, Global HR Generalist for AMRU at CARE International, explains the value of having strong agreements in place between organisations: *“As a member organisation, being able to agree on a Memorandum of Understanding, on what agreement template we use, and on how we manage costs; those are very good practices.”*

The success in setting up a collaborative regional roster gave participants confidence that such collaboration is possible. *“We managed to get seven organisations to put their resources together in one roster, which is innovative in itself,”* says Vanda Lengkong, Regional Head of Disaster Risk Management at Plan International.

“We started off thinking, ‘there’s no way, it’s going to be too challenging [...]’, but we managed to find interests in common. We don’t have to be as complex as we are.”

- Mim Pornprapunt, Regional HR Manager for South and Central Asia, Save the Children

Going further, the good HR practices developed during this collaboration led individual agencies to improve their own HR practices, too. Audrey Fernando from CARE notes that: *“After joining the surge team and working on job descriptions, selection processes, payments, etc. – that’s when I said that we really need to think of a talent roster at CARE. It’s being done right now, and that’s a learning I had from this roster, that I’m moving to the talent pool.”*

The roster enhancing surge practice

While Go Team Asia allows participating agencies to expand their pool of resources and fill skills gaps, it also enables them to learn from each other’s ways of doing surge.

“We don’t have all the talent we need in our expertise roster,” says Audrey Fernando from CARE International. *“Sometimes the nominated staff may not be available on time, so we see [Go Team Asia] as a method of filling gaps that we have.”* Participating agencies have indeed already started incorporating Go Team Asia in their internal roster systems.

The shared roster can even sometimes be an organisation’s only source of surge. Mudassar Shah, Disaster Response Personnel at Islamic Relief, notes that: *“For Islamic Relief, in a few countries, there aren’t even any local rosters; it is directly the shared roster. It is very viable, and very much related to the changing environment.”*

“It becomes another source of surge that each organization can tap into, and that’s casting the net much wider.”

- Mim Pornprapunt, Regional HR Manager for South and Central Asia, Save the Children

For Islamic Relief, Go Team Asia is also proving a source of learning for the improvement of the organisation’s own surge mechanisms. As Islamic Relief was about to launch its own external roster, its participation in the project made it realise that it hadn’t anticipated some major management challenges in such an endeavour. Learning from the experience of setting up Go Team Asia, Islamic Relief thus decided to postpone the launch of its external roster until necessary adjustments were made.

“TSC [the Transforming Surge Capacity project] helped us in understanding those problems ahead of time,” says Mudassar Shah from Islamic Relief. *“We were about to launch our external roster, but after TSC discussions, we realised the challenges were enormous, and that we were not ready. So we postponed the launch and said that unless we had certain policies or arrangements, we wouldn’t launch.”*

Mudassar also reports learning from the Asia Regional Platform’s discussions on hardship allowances, which led Islamic Relief to re-think its approach to roster members’ wellbeing. *“Islamic Relief has a 10% hardship allowance, but the platform agreed on 15%, so we were the agency that didn’t agree,”* he explains. *“But for the sake of the project, we agreed to it, which also generated discussions within our organisation,”*

taking into consideration other agencies' practice about staff compensations and wellbeing."

Go Team Asia's first deployment: Collaboration in action

Go Team Asia's [very first deployment](#) took place in late December 2016. Madan Gyawali, a logistics specialist from Save the Children Nepal, was sent to India to help Christian Aid with its response to Cyclone Vardah. Christian Aid was facing a skills gap in logistics during its response, and needed someone to assist immediately in setting up a supply chain².

Not only was Madan able to build the local team's logistics capacity in only two weeks, but he also reports having taken home a valuable experience of forming local partnerships, and distributing relief to communities. Christian Aid's response was thus made more effective by collaborating with Save the Children, while Save the Children learned from Christian Aid's work with local actors.

"Examples from the deployment show that we don't always have to compete against each other," says Mim Pornprapunt from Save the Children. "That's what collaboration is about; everybody wins something from it – you don't have to compete."

By making surge capacity readily available for organisations, the project also helps improving humanitarian responses in the long run, by creating a space for mutual learning that will benefit agencies beyond the duration of the project.

"You can learn from the person who's being sent to you, and if you're sending somebody to another organisation, that person can learn from the organisation. It's a two-way process."

- Vanda Lengkong, Regional DRM Manager, Plan International



Madan Prasad Gyawali during his deployment to India.

Training: Capacity building with Go Team Asia

An essential part of collaborative surge in the region is joint, surge-specific training for Go Team Asia members. Two trainings were conducted so far; in August 2016 and January 2017. The trainings were collaborative in nature, with no single agency leading the process, and trainers from different agencies guiding different modules.

The contents, which focused on collaboration, people management skills, cultural awareness and wellbeing techniques, were not only received positively by roster members, but are also being implemented by agencies internally, to complement their own surge trainings.

Improving partners' internal training

"There are several practical aspects on which we learned a lot from TSC – capacity building for example," says Mudassar Shah, Disaster Response Personnel at Islamic Relief.

"We used to mainly focus on technical areas, but with discussions, we realised we needed to focus on soft skills as well. We adopted a few of the modules from the project: Stress management, diversity, working with others, wellbeing..."

Christian Aid, Plan International, Muslim Aid and CARE also reported changing their trainings after learning from the project. They put special emphasis on wellbeing and mindfulness, which they said they found innovative, despite tending to overlook them in favour of sector-specific training.

² Comprehensive information on this deployment can be found in this [case study](#).

“In the region, we adopted some of the mindfulness sessions to complement Plan’s emergency response team’s stress management session,” says Vanda Lengkong from Plan International. “We also adopted the teamwork approach to our emergency response. We take some of the sessions that we think are useful for our training.”

Shared spaces such as the joint trainings, or the recent [simulation on collaborative regional surge](#), can be a gateway for developing and mainstreaming a collaborative mindset. *“It’s good to learn how agencies work and respond to a same situation,” says Ram Kishan, Regional Emergency Manager at Christian Aid. “[...] Working with agencies on common problems also allows to put time and resources together to find common solutions.”*

Joint training, rostering and deploying means learning to collaborate

Beyond setting up the roster or conducting training, some agencies reported that collaboration in itself was a novelty for them, and proved a source of good practice. Mudassar Shah from Islamic Relief says: *“This project is a first experience for us to work in collaboration, particularly for surge.”* Ram Kishan from Christian Aid adds that *“working with people with different experiences made us realise that we should find a common line for certain situations.”*

CARE too, notes that although they already had previous experience of collaboration, this type of sustained relation building among aid agencies was new to them:

“Most of the time, we do see symposia and one-off workshops kind of things, but this ongoing relationship is something I haven’t had the experience of.”

- Audrey Fernando, Global HR Generalist for Asia,
CARE International

Islamic Relief and Christian Aid even formed relations that now allow them to collaborate on other levels, bringing about their organisations’ wider aims. *“This platform brought us closer together. We can now communicate, and not just in the Asia region. For example, Ram [from Christian Aid] is currently in Nigeria, where we have plans to open an office, and he is there to help us. It’s the same for Christian Aid, who*

requested information from us on Nepal,” explains Mudassar Shah from Islamic Relief. Representatives of CARE and Save the Children also recall having become genuinely friends, enabling them to exchange on many other levels on behalf of their organisations.

“We’ve created these informal networks and friendships where we can reach out to each other and talk.”

- Audrey Fernando, Global HR Generalist for Asia,
CARE International

She continues: *“[...] I’ve had questions and discussed about HR at a larger level, or Save the Children reached out to me asking if we have a policy on this or that. We’ve created an informal network of people willing to share resources and talk.”*



Go Team Asia training in January 2017.

Building trust and ownership for collaborative outcomes

“NGOs have tens of thousands of different groups where we discuss, and discuss, and discuss... And discuss. But nothing practically ever comes out of it. [...] This is the only [project] that I’ve seen where something tangible, that everyone can benefit from, comes out of it. Which is why it is so great; it has a real lasting impact.”

- Sumant Kumar, Regional HR and OD Business Partner,
Plan International

All members of the Asia Regional Platform noted the level of genuine trust that was built as part of the project. They were able to put their own agendas to the side and talk as a whole consortium about the future of the humanitarian sector. This part explains how such a level of collaboration could be achieved.

Regular meetings and participatory exchanges

For Regional Emergencies Managers and HR Managers of the seven member agencies of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), the first months of the project were not easy. Early meetings in 2015 were quickly disrupted by the Nepal earthquake, which led most members to be deployed, and bringing regional project activities to an almost-halt. However, holding regular meetings with clear and relevant agendas meant that members were finally able to resume their collaboration in late 2015.

Having a dedicated team to run the Asia Regional Platform was pointed out by many agencies as fundamental to ensuring its collaborative mindset. *“The most important thing is to have a dedicated team. If you don’t have one that is coordinating, and is a coordinating factor, you can’t achieve anything,”* notes Mudassar Shah from Islamic Relief.

As all members of the group are based in different countries, and frequent travel is the norm, creativity in working over long distances and getting member input via various channels (including email and Skype) allowed them to contribute their perspective regardless of circumstances. This greatly benefited ownership of the project and partners’ satisfaction with the shared outputs.

Making sure all voices are heard

Members of the regional platform remarked that, despite Plan International officially leading the platform, not a single agency imposed its leadership during meetings. *“[...] The management team is respecting our views and equally approaching us. I feel like my views and recommendations are going to be taken into consideration,”* says Mudassar Shah from Islamic Relief. A rotational chairmanship was indeed put in place, and highlighted by Ram Kishan, from Christian Aid, as *“important to ensure collective thinking and that not one agency is leading.”*

Participants also noted that all organisations, regardless of their importance or size, were given an equal voice during meetings, preventing the domination of the space by a single agency.

“The biggest fear was on whether, [...] if the big agencies engage, they might take all the space. But those fears proved wrong. Everyone had equal space, and the big and small agencies were all able to work together.”

- Ram Kishan, Regional Emergency Manager,
Christian Aid

The platform also avoided the lack of dialogue that can stem from male-dominated conversations. *“Myself and Kangan [a fellow TAG member] thought our female voices were not being heard,”* recalls Audrey Fernando from CARE International. *“So we spoke to the facilitator separately. [...] They understood, and then we changed things so that we could openly vote for what we wanted, instead of having to talk over each other.”* This example took place at the very first platform meeting, immediately setting the tone for open and democratic dialogues for the rest of the project.

A mix of talents around the table

The way the platform achieved such participatory and open exchange is not only through concrete actions, but also because the group was, by nature, formed of very diverse staff members, each of whose input was individually valued.

One innovative aspect of the platform is that it gathers both Disaster Risk Management and Human Resources staff; two sectors that need close linkages for effective surge. This not only helped producing a solid roster, but also ensured those outputs satisfied all staff, across organisations.

Ram Kishan from Christian Aid notes the value of HR staff members’ input to the platform, arguing that *“when dealing with surge, HR plays an important role.”* He goes on explaining that Disaster Risk Management staff might have high ambitions and make substantial plans for collaboration, but that HR staff had been useful in reminding them of any liabilities, and setting more realistic goals. *“That really helped, to have people with different skills on board,”* says Ram.



Face-to-face TAG meeting in Bangkok, April 2017.

Lastly, the platform drew on agencies' specific strengths by involving each of them in parts of the project where they could make the best contribution. Ram explains that parts of the project were made possible by some particular agencies' substantial experience. *"The reason we were able to develop an MoU for example, was because we had CARE and Plan who were able to develop it,"* he says.

The result: Key ownership and commitment

These ways of working were key to achieving true ownership from participating organisations, leading them to willingly break down usual barriers to collaboration. As Sumant Kumar from Plan International notes:

"Everyone involved in the project believes in the project, and has tried to break down their own barriers to work together. You don't always see that in this type of collaboration. Usually, everyone tries to protect their own organisation. Here, people really put the needs of the project first, as much as possible, and that's rare."

A positive and unexpected outcome from this collaboration was also the extent to which relationships were formed within the regional platform. *"Now, we're not only colleagues, some of us became friends. I really see the change in TAG meetings; it used to be quite formal, and now it's very free. We all know each other. We used to refer to each other with our organisations' name, but now we're on first name basis,"* says Vanda Lengkong from Plan International.

"Solidarity is there among the partners. It is a very well knit, well bond partnership," adds Amar Nayak, Asia International Programme Manager at ActionAid.

Recommendations: How to sustain collaboration

After successfully setting up this innovative shared roster, member agencies are keen to sustain it beyond 2017 (the formal end of the project). The regional team and partners are currently working on different business models for the roster, with financing options such as the Roster Coordinator being hosted by participating agencies, or a pay-per-use system for the roster.

Collaborating on surge has also made platform members reflect on the fact that, for collaborative surge to be successful, more can be done to join up **preparedness** and **capacity building activities**, as well as to link country level and regional level collaboration.

Members reported that this project has only been a starting point for deeper collaboration in humanitarian action. More sustained investment by humanitarian agencies and donors is needed to ensure the fruitful relationships that have been built in this project are not lost, and that ways of working in the humanitarian sector are truly transformed for the benefit of people affected by disasters. ■

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