

Benefitting from Lessons Learned

Address given

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A. I. D.

At the risk of preaching to the converted, I will give you a few examples of some general lessons OFDA has learned. But, chiefly, I ask you to recall your own experience.

For if you consider that we are all working towards the same aim, albeit with different means, you must agree that for OFDA to do without the benefit of views from the field is arrogant and wasteful, and in any case tells only half of the story which is no story at all. So we welcome this chance to tell you of our needs of you and to initiate, perhaps, a more lively exchange of information than in the past.

A systematic approach to collecting, analyzing and indexing of lessons learned in disaster assistance has been sadly lacking. It is perhaps the nature of the work that doesn't make for a great deal of reflection and looking back. But with OFDA's current emphasis on preparedness this is no longer acceptable.

In 1978, and in any other year, the question each of us must ask and answer is simply, "for me, here and now, what does it mean to be intelligent?" If for anyone in the disaster assistance or food aid process, the honest and realistic answer includes ignoring present sources of information, then it is clear that there is some failure of fit; and if we are not scrupulous in our efforts to detect, analyze and correct, we are apt to be inept.

The system OFDA is developing right now aims to do two things. Serve as

- a learning device, recording old and new lessons and evaluating old ones in view of more recent experiences and new policies.
- answer such questions as how many times in the past have we tried X, Y and Z, and have "found that it worked or did not work."

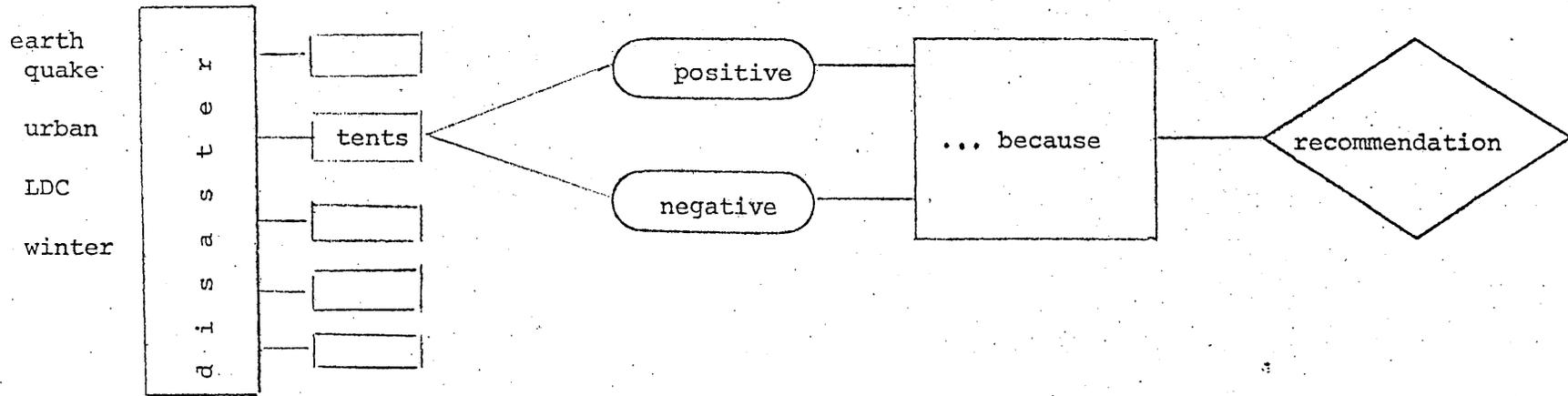
In talking to real and self-proclaimed experts in disaster assistance, you may run into two lines of thought. "No disaster is like another." "The same thing happens over and over again." Both may be true and false, but it is that kind of simplistic, muddled thinking that gets us nowhere. Generalities do not help. It is only in the analysis of an event that we have a chance to learn and correct. Systems require understanding users. Lack of intelligent use is as disastrous as lack of system.

OFDA's Lessons Learned System is a tool for management decisions.

The purpose of the system is to provide information on likely future performance based on the historical record of performance. The information is of two types. First, it provides warning of consistent performance failures which have occurred in the past and must, therefore, be recognized as likely in the future. Conversely, it identifies those performance areas where consistent successes have occurred in the past.

Allow me to take you through the five basic elements which help to make up the story of an event. You may wish to refer to the simple flow chart provided. OFDA's system describes a lesson to be learned in the following way:

LESSONS LEARNED FRAMEWORK



disaster context	activity/resource	performance characteristics	cause	enhance/avoid
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1. Brief definition of the disaster context: where, what, when and how.
2. An activity undertaken or resource utilized in some phase of disaster mitigation, preparedness, response or recovery.
3. Your evaluation of the performance of that activity or resource ... slowly, efficiently, wastefully ... which we decided to rate along a conventional 5-point scale, from very poor to very good.

Of course, some other performance characteristics which might be rated include such factors as self-help incentive, satisfaction to victim, assessment accuracy, control, etc.

4. The cause or reason why x performed poorly or well ... because of some factors in donor management, host policies, culture ...
5. Your recommendation for enhancing the good performance characteristics and avoiding or altering the bad ones.

To use a hypothetical example, let us take the case of an earthquake which might have occurred in the winter in a less developed country, in an urban setting. While any number of commodities or services were provided, for the moment we wish to learn how well we did in the delivery of tents and the problems encountered.

On the positive side of the performance evaluation, we know that we did well: The tents housed 80% of the victims, largely because of radio relay of information about camp locations; but, negatively,

delivery was slow which was mainly attributed to the fact that the host country insisted on using its army trucks. The recommendations might include working with the government to determine better alternatives for the future and to continue working on improving the public announcement system.

The OFDA system will be operational in December. The reason why we consider this system a learning device is that it will be subject to continual evaluation. As new material is added to the file, the earlier recommendations or "prescriptions" are evaluated in light of change in policy or new insights gained.

Timing

A critical issue in disaster assistance is, of course, the timing of aid. This is a fundamental issue. How timely probably must come before how well. Otherwise we are a little like the trapeze artist who bragged that everything in his act was perfect except his timing. Early Warning indicators of a variety of sorts can help us buy time. Our aim should be to anticipate the problem as much as possible to avoid more costly forms of transport later. Stocks should be pre-positioned before the rains set in. It may cost \$2.00 per pound to airlift food which is 10 times as much as for conventional transport in the same situation.

As in all emergency situations, we first check with those voluntary agencies operating in a given area to determine what supplies may be on hand (later these can be replenished). In the case of hurricane victims in the Fiji Islands in 1972 we found the nearest supplier in New Zealand which provided canned mackerel, non-PL-480 flour and salt. PL480 Title II commodities also mattered later on in the relief effort.

A few comments on emergency feeding

This is no time to innovate; food provided should be what the people are accustomed to eat. The aim is for reassurance and quick return to normalcy. This means locally acceptable foodstuffs, locally purchased (or brought in from neighboring countries). The shorter the distance, the fresher, cheaper ... At times neighboring missions can assist in purchasing from next province, state. Logistics must be thought through all the way to the place where the food is actually cooked. A common mistake: someone forgets an element in the chain of absolute essentials. Everyone needs a pot, or a cooker, or fuel, or ... Questions which need answering: How is the food distributed? Who decides who gets the food? Do people accept it as fair? How can the government do a means test? What is the selection process? What is the relationship of victims to those in surrounding neighborhood? Who is qualified to receive free food? How long does one have to be homeless to be called homeless? What is the impact of free distribution of food on the commercial market? One of the most common mistakes is not to tell the victims how much food they are going to get and when. One day or three weeks?

In Cyprus in 1974 restaurants were going broke since there were no tourists. Our advice to the government had been to introduce a voucher system to be used in restaurants as ration stamps. They did not take the advice but proceeded to mass feed with big kitchens. Since class consciousness is strong, it surmises that poor people are not good enough to eat in restaurants -- we still think that might have been the better solution.

Need for mass cookers presents special problems. Institutional stoves are too small. There is also the matter of fuel -- you don't want people to burn up the few trees that there may be there. Wes Emery mentioned our stockpiles. They contain stoves which will be sufficient for 50 people each. In combinations of 2 they can feed up to 500 people with continuous use and staggered meals. If you can keep the cooking to one meal of groundnut stew, one simple meal, multiple two-stove units can work.

In general, the following maxims hold: the sooner you can end mass feeding, the better. Free distribution of staple food is preferable to mass feeding given that the essential utilities exist. Water and food are always urgent needs that can't be postponed. Governments usually do not have the funding authority to respond promptly. Ergo -

PL-480 funds do not provide for ancillary supplies such as sugar, salt, locally available peppers, and other fresh vegetables. It is here that the ambassador's discretionary fund -- the \$25,000 authority -- can be used very effectively. In picking up a theme Mr. Raullerson introduced in his opening statement, the rationale operating in most disaster situations could be really quite simple: how do I help meet the victim's disaster created needs keeping his short-range need in mind, and doing the least harm possible in the process.

Project Outreach is providing us with most welcome transportation funding, but only for the purposes it was intended for: landlocked countries.

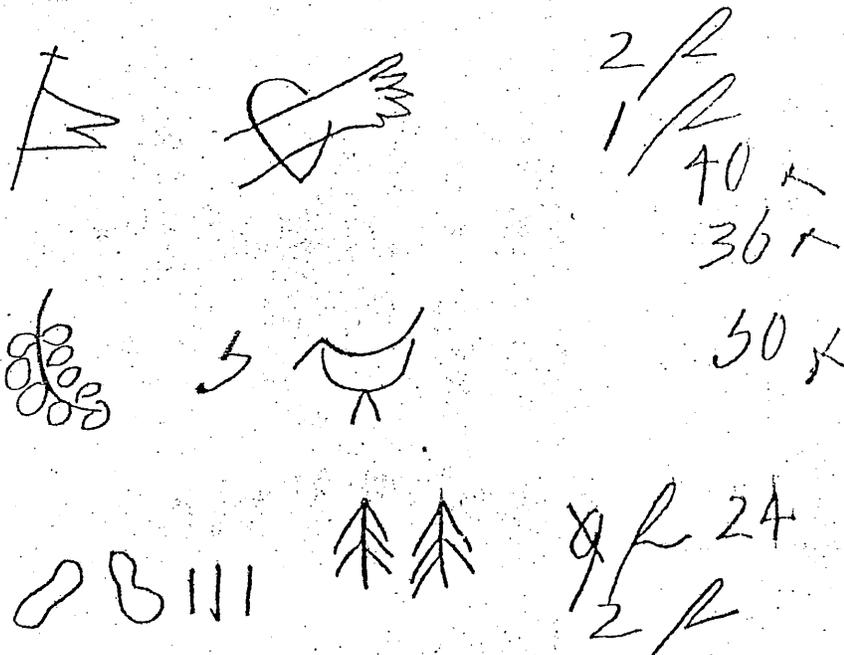
Consider for a moment this complex case which lends itself to analysis and a recommendation even if phrased in terms of "there ought to be a law!":

There is an on-going drought in some sections of a country; there is a FFP program throughout the country; the government is not declaring a drought emergency chiefly because the law requires that funds be released

automatically in case of an emergency; there is an economic crisis in the country; the volag delivering food has an agreement with the government in the regular program to transport food. There is no money available for transport. Where do you go for funding?

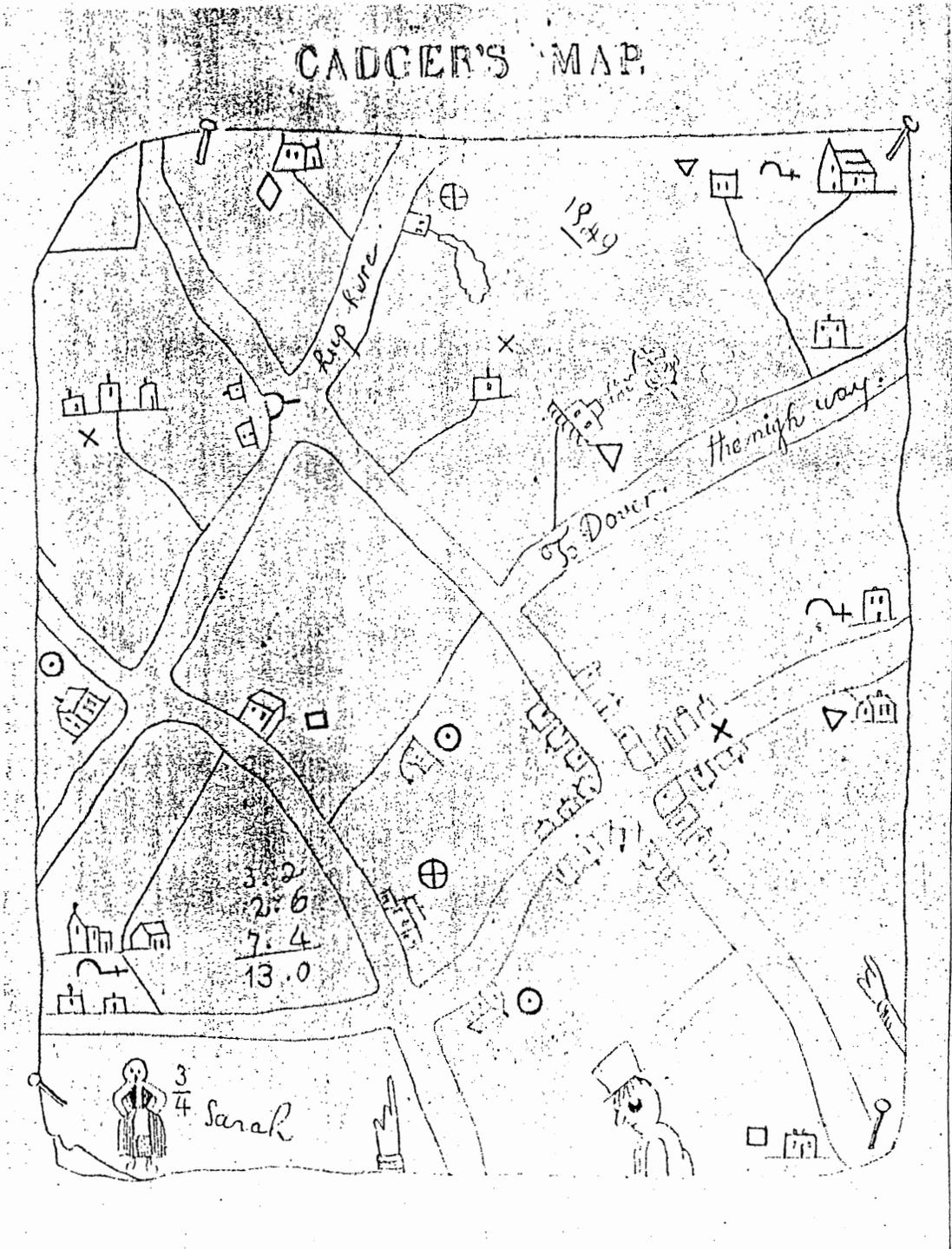
There are many different ways of effectively recording and passing on knowledge.

As these accounts kept by illiterates show, you don't have to be able to read or write to keep the score.



The translation of the bottom row, for instance, would read: Three days after Ascension (the footprints left behind) 2 fir trees sold for 9 florins and 24 kreuzers, of which 2 florins have been received.

Pictographs are used chiefly as memory aids in passing on oral information. This plan of a hawker and beggar in London is a guide for himself and his fellows. The signs have only local significance and usually mean something only to those in the know.

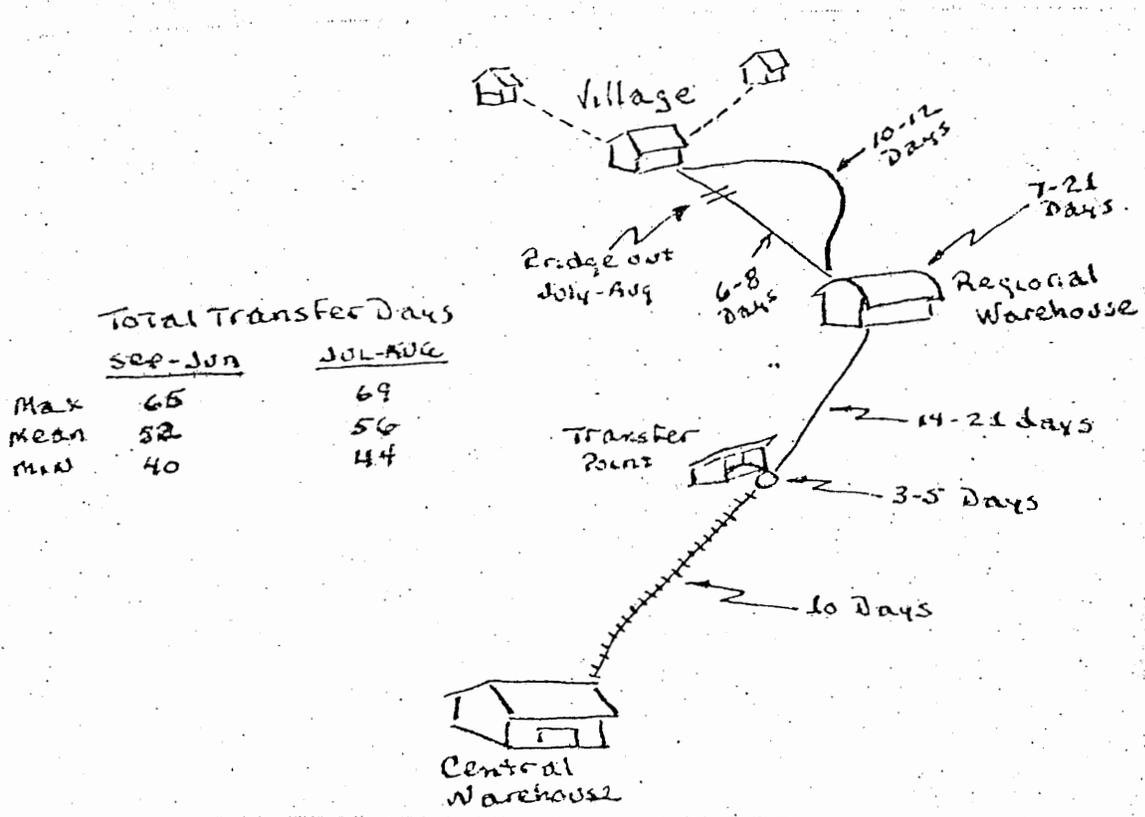


LEGEND

- X No Good, too poor and too sly
- ⊕ Pious folk, but all right on the whole
- ▽ Hard cases, over-exploited by too many beggars
- ㄣ Stop -- if you have something they need, they will buy it from you
- ⊙ They are pretty experienced and smart, risky, be ready for a month in goal
- Steer clear, you can easily get caught. Mind the dog.
- ㄥ Go this way, it is better than the other way where there is nothing to be had

Effective? Yes. Universal? No.

A modern pictograph version of a lesson well learned for preparedness is the following drawing which helps to describe the in-country logistics capability, here the main points of the transportation network -- when to effect transfer to maintain all safety levels downstream. This is calculated on the basis of lead times, starting with the end user and backing up to the issuance from the central warehouse.*



* Fred Cole. Commodity distribution system: a prototype for the Sahel.

"We know from the diagram that there is a seasonal variance and that each route and transfer point (save the RR) has associated with it a maximum and a minimum number of days. If we arbitrarily state that the villages are to be supplied on the first day of each quarter, the April quantity for this village will have to leave the regional warehouse on 23 March (using maximum times) and will have to leave the central warehouse 36 days prior to that.

Smoothing out the different lead days from any transfer point to multiple sites downstream is simply a function of using the longest intervening lead time while taking into consideration safety stock levels and stock positions as periodically reported.

The benefit of utilizing the distribution system itself as a logistics tuning device is simply to encourage continual feedback and the resultant visibility of variable factors."

Downstream, of course, is used metaphorically referring to the flow of material and not to the flow of the river. Government speech, like any specialized speech, is full of ambiguities.

Ambiguities in interpretation at times create interesting problems.

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A nurse at the Waterbury State Hospital was in the yard walking a couple of patients who were recovering from mental problems. A passing bird dropped a calling card on the bald head of one, and the nurse, solicitous for his emotional balance, told him not to worry-"just stay right here and I'll go in the building and bring a piece of toilet paper."

When she had disappeared the old man said to his companion, "Ain't she a damn fool. That bird'll be a quarter a mile away 'fore she gets back."

this might be considered a practical example of ambiguity in field emergencies.

Common faults with existing documentation

These observations apply to both AID/W and reports from the field

- important elements missing (various reasons: data simply not available or it was not provided because the causes were too touchy, too complex, too embarrassing, too "self-evident", too time-consuming to sort out)
- ambiguities
- inaccuracies
- imprecision
- cablelese

A common problem with communications from the field is that too many

assumptions are made by the writer. One should not have to interpret a cable. This could mean a loss of 1-2 days. Please keep in mind that OFDA personnel handling a given case one day may not be the ones who have to deal with it another day. Duty officers change weekly. Caution also should be exercised in punctuation in translations from documents -- commas and periods are used differently from language to language; this is, of course, important in numerical renderings too. Currencies should always be converted to the dollar value, or both values provided.

The nature of an ISR system

The success of an information storage and retrieval system can be evaluated by the user with the following criteria in mind: coverage, recall, precision, time, presentation and the effort it takes to obtain the desired answer.

The core of an information system is the index. This term covers all techniques and methods whereby coded information is stored away so that relevant references on any subject can be retrieved and presented. An inverse relationship exists between recall and precision. While performance of a system is largely dependent on the decisions taken at the indexing stage, the actual performance in relation to a particular search can be effected by the search strategy. If the search program is general, then high recall can be obtained; if the program is very specific, then there will be a fall in the recall ratio but a rise in the precision ratio. Rephrased: In a system where input is of high quality and indexing precise, the amount of relevant information provided in response to any question will be inversely proportional to the specificity of the question.

But we need to know your side of past and current experiences. We need to become more intelligent in the use of man's knowledge. Once this has become second nature and a constant habit to the management of OFDA, we must share that with others with a need to know which should help to correct any misunderstandings about an event and truly enrich the communication process.

In tomorrow afternoon's special interest session on disaster assistance we want to explore an appropriate means for your recording, storing and perhaps dissemination of lessons learned. We want to learn of your experiences, triumphs and frustrations in disaster preparedness and relief. If a problem was an extraordinary, isolated, unique event to your area, it may nevertheless occur in some other area again. If, however, it is a constant everyday phenomenon, it merits at least equal attention.