

How do you restore an apocalyptic post war zone?

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VNG actively involved in reconstruction of Beira
Expert meeting, July 15th 2019



A kitchen window blown from its frame; rain slanting horizontally inwards; part of the roof torn into the sky; tropical storm Idai struck the home of Peter van Tongeren on 14 March this year. The experience added an extra dimension to his subsequent role in the reconstruction of Beira, the city in Mozambique where he lives and works.

Van Tongeren, VNG International associate expert for the RVO and DEALS programme, told his tale during the lunch and learning session at VNG on 15 July. Some 25 people, mostly VNG staff, attended. Irene Oostveen of VNG International described the themes of discussion: the (managerial) role of municipalities and VNG in the event of a disaster, setting up a post disaster needs assessment and the follow-up steps towards recovery.

The port city of Beira is Mozambique's second most important city, in economic terms. In an area of swamp, Beira often struggles with problems of flooding. Among the 500,000 residents, many earn low incomes. In 2013, the Netherlands assisted with a masterplan that included improvement to the sewer system. "As a result, fewer people are now required to sleep on tables, following heavy rainfall," explained Van Tongeren. His own current task is focused mainly on assisting the professionalisation of the land registry and water authority in Beira.

Bucket list

On Monday, three days before Idai struck Beira, he received the first signals of a storm threat. I thought to myself, "Here we go again. This won't be the first time, and last time mainly caused flooding. But when I took a look at the map, and saw that the track of Idai would take the storm over the centre of Beira, and that it was a level four storm, with wind speeds of up to 200 kilometres an hour, I discussed the situation with mayor Daviz Simango, who from that moment onwards considered me a storm expert."

Via Facebook, the most widely used means of communication in the country, the municipality warned the public of what they were to expect. Above all the residents of Praia Nova, an impoverished district right by the coast, were warned to take preventive measures or even to abandon their homes. Expats advised each other via app groups to stock up with extra water and food. On the day itself, everyone was sent home from work at eleven a.m.

During the course of the day, wind speeds continued to rise. Van Tongeren screened a film he had taken from his own home, in the afternoon. The pictures show windswept trees and windborne litter. During the course of the evening, his house suffered more and more damage. Until well into the night, Van Tongeren and his wife were hard at work attempting to limit the consequences of the tropical storm as far as possible, with tarpaulin, buckets and mops.

"It was a scary experience," explained Van Tongeren, looking back. "You constantly wondered: what happens if I get injured? In weather conditions like these, there is no getting out of the house. Someone told me I could now scrap tropical storms from my bucket list. But I can tell you, that never even featured."

International donor conference

The next morning, when the winds had settled down, he took to the streets. The destruction was indescribable. Roofs had been blown off houses everywhere, trees were brought down, electricity cables were broken, cars were crushed, and roads half destroyed. A staggering 70 percent of houses in Beira were damaged and 3,000 trees had been blown down. After a few days it was known that an area of 3,000 square kilometres was flooded, because of continuing rainfall and flooding of rivers. Estimates suggest that there were a total of between 500 and 1,000 deaths. A few weeks after the disaster there was a cholera epidemic. "It looked like an apocalyptic post war zone," said Van Tongeren. "There was no electricity, no water, no mobile telephones ... Beira was practically unreachable by land; it had been turned into an island."

Van Tongeren described the two phases of disaster aid: humanitarian, and reconstruction. During the first phase, organisations like UN Ocha and Doctors without Borders are the key players. That happened in Beira, too. The Netherlands, on the request of Mayor Simango, took the initiative of calling together the ambassadors of the EU countries, the World Bank and UN in the capital city Maputo, to discuss their role in the recovery phase. Van Tongeren attended the meeting at which mayor Simango held a speech. The idea of the Netherlands government to organise an international donor conference to pay for the repairs emerged at that meeting.

The first step on the road to recovery is a post disaster needs assessment (pdna). The assessment examines the scale of the damage and identifies what is needed to achieve recovery. Ben Lamoree, who is working on a new masterplan for Beira, established a taskforce that included Van Tongeren, together with representatives from among others UN-Habitat, UNDP and the engineering firm Arcadis. Van Tongeren himself focused on damage to municipal buildings, such as district posts, markets and schools, next to being coordinator and liaison with the municipality.

Building back better

To map out the damage, use was made of satellite images of the situation prior to the storm. The taskforce distinguished between damages: physical damage and losses: additional costs, for example for clearance work. Overall costs amounted to around 350 million dollars. The recovery costs will be many times higher. The underlying principle is that of building back better – with more storm-resistant buildings and infrastructure. In addition, the goal is to introduce sustainable and nature-based solutions, such as planting as a form of flood defence, rather than dams. Number one priority is coastal protection. Idai hit Beira at low tide, so the scale of actual flooding was limited; if it had been high tide, the disaster would have been many times greater.

At the international donor conference, which was held in Beira end May, almost 1.2 billion dollars of aid was promised (Mozambique had requested 3.2 billion). Both at national and local level, there is a reconstruction body. To date, it is unclear who will be placed in charge of both the recovery and the distribution of the recovery funding. Beira is an opposition municipality, and as a result relations with the national government are not always smooth. Many of the donors prefer to avoid having their funds pass through the hands of government, based on poor experiences, in the past. On the other hand, it is questionable whether the municipal authorities have the capacity to coordinate the recovery work. Beira itself has a very limited budget of just 16 million euros, as compared with 3.5 billion available to Rotterdam; a city of comparable size.

Sint-Maarten, which was struck by hurricane Irma in 2017, has been taken as a role model for recovery work in Beira. There, too, the principle of building back better has been applied. However, in practice, not everything has gone smoothly. Recovery work seems endless, much to the frustration of the local population. After almost two years, not a single new roof has been placed on a single building. Much of the recovery funding has remained in the hands of consultants and the World Bank. Businesses on Sint-Maarten have set to work on recovery activities with a will, but the commercial sector in Beira is less effective.

Unexpected forces

Remarkably enough, the initial recovery work in a city which does not normally function particularly efficiently has been tackled with remarkable verve. It seems that the tropical storm released unexpected forces. According to Van Tongeren, it is difficult to retain the sense of urgency that is felt at first, because everyone wants to get back to their normal life, as quickly as possible.

During part two of the lunch meeting, the participants were invited to discuss a dilemma put forward by Irene Oostveen. It related to the future of the impoverished Praia Nova district, with its Oceanside location. This mangrove swamp is primarily the home of fishermen. In addition to a market, the district, with some 5000 inhabitants, is above all hallmarked by prostitution and drug abuse.

At high tide, large parts of Praia Nova are under water. Plans have been drawn up to relocate the district, but never implemented. The question is what is the best option for the district. There are two clear options for protection against the ocean: an existing wall that protects part of the area could be extended (costs: 5 million dollar) or a new wall could be built to protect the entire area (costs 25 million dollar).



Groep 1 suggested suppletion of the entire area. This would require sand from the navigation channel to the port, which also has to be deepened. In this new situation, coastal protection and urban development could be integrated. An alternative is to make the area into a sort of Maasvlakte, offering space for industry and tourism. The revenue could be used to relocate the residential area. One problem identified by the group is that money will first have to be spent, before any revenue can be generated.

Groep 2 suggested that the existing wall should be extended, as a precursor to discussions on what to do with the part of the district that remains unprotected. Given that this is an A-location, it is not possible to turn people away, or to force them to leave. To improve the area, however, two models could be followed: the Barcelona model according to which the municipality purchases small individual plots of land for improvement, the influence of which will then gradually spread, or the Mumbai model, according to which the future of the area

Groep 3 looked into a new dynamic approach for the area, via public-private participation. Following construction of new improved coastal defences, Praia Nova could be turned into the new economic heart of Beira. The revenue could then be used to finance the relocation of the current residents. The new economic activity would benefit the whole of the city. VNG International could act as process supervisor for this plan.

Groep 4, like group 2, was in favour of extending the existing wall, and then discussing a structural solution for flood problems, with all stakeholders. To identify the best activities for Praia Nova, a market analysis would be carried out. This would certainly include fishing.

Postcards

Maarten Gischler of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that official development aid is directed primarily at the people living in districts like Praia Nova, whereas in its plans, the municipal authorities have systematically ignored precisely those people. "Whenever project development is talked about, the group of local residents seems to simply disappear. Instead, they should be an integral part of the plans for the future, rather than being viewed as collateral damage."

He also pointed out that much of the damage in Beira had affected homes and businesses, assets that most of the donors were not willing to invest in. An additional problem was that many of the people in Beira lived 'informally', and that the vast majority of both local residents and businesses are uninsured.

The groups recorded their solutions on postcards that were addressed to dear or sometimes dearest Peter. Van Tongeren said he was delighted with the outcomes and promised to take the postcards with him to Beira, where he would present them to the local mayor.



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