

## Shelterbox Activity – Interview Notes



<http://www.shelterbox.org/>

We spoke to **Celine Chhea** from **Shelterbox** in March 2015. She works as a logistics assistant for the charity, which is based in Cornwall. She had just returned from an aid deployment in Malawi, and was also working on the relief effort following the devastating **Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu**. We asked her some questions about what she, and Shelterbox do on these deployments, and how they organise themselves **logistically**.

**Vanuatu is an evolving incident – what are the priorities after an event happens? What geographical analysis is carried out to see what aid is needed, and where it might be likely to be needed?**

Communications following an event are vital.

We deal with a range of very different disasters and locations – each is unique, and our approach is therefore very different. Even though we may have been to the same location before, different events create different problems for us.

Flowchart has been drawn up for the procedure that is followed after an event, and this provides some guidance.

Shelterbox monitors a number of channels of emergency updates, and gets alerts of incidents that have happened.

As soon as Shelterbox hear about a major event, they swing into action, even if their assistance has not yet been requested, as this sometimes takes a while to be required.

They pull up maps of the area, and start researching what is happening on the ground.

- Damage: what types of damage and how widespread?
- Infrastructure: How has the infrastructure in the area been affected by the event?
- Structures: have particular types of structures been affected? Will there be lots of homeless people?

Logistical bottlenecks of issues on the ground may exist, so they look for ways to overcome any of these.

With international events, they need to research the logistics of getting into the country – e.g. what permissions, visas etc. are needed for those people working for Shelterbox, who may be of different nationalities.

Visas were sometimes needed, but were generally sorted in advance, or fast-tracked given the nature of the deployment that they were involved in.

How easy is it to gain access to particular locations?

**Logistics is involved in all of these decisions.**

Teams of people have been trained and are on standby, or are on lists of people who can be contacted if required.

Contacting people with **particular skills** comes next.

e.g.

Roads may need engineers and surveyors

Hospitals may need medical support and specialists in particular types of medicine (the Ebola deployment was an example where this was particularly important)

Post disaster recovery requires certain assistance too: search and rescue teams with listening devices, or search dogs, water engineers, large scale equipment, planning and reconstruction consultants.

**What were the particular characteristics of the Vanuatu incident that you had to consider?**

The first thing was the apparent scale of the event. It quickly became apparent that a massive part of the country had been affected to varying degrees. As the country is an island chain, this meant that communication might be a problem. There was only an airport on some of the larger islands, so boats would also be required for the deployment, for example.

**ShelterBox workers had to become familiar with the country in a few hours.**

Certain islands and provinces were targeted.

For the airports, we needed to know: what size – what is the length of runway – what size of planes can it take?

What is the coast like, and what's the depth of water. Can a large ship carrying aid dock.

**What other factors have affected logistical decisions made following events that ShelterBox have responded to?**

Piracy issues sometimes affect our operations.

In Nepal, the mountainous terrain and poor roads can cause problems

(NB: the interview was carried out before the recent earthquake in Nepal)

**Google Earth** is sometimes used to get a 'feeling' for the terrain which surrounds an area.

We also use **Null School's Earth visualization tool** to explore the winds that might be affecting the area during the time we are there.

Winds may affect access to particular airports or generate swell for maritime vessels.

High and low tides for docking at port, and working out which vessels of particular size and draft can be used from those which may be available to us.

We are juggling weight and size of particular items to ensure that they are carried on the most appropriate vehicle.

Looking ahead – weather forecasts are important....

Plans change as circumstances change – we have to be flexible

Celine told me about Malawi, a place she had just returned from on a deployment.

In Malawi – the main disaster in this case was flooding: a type of disaster which had affected the area before, so that they had prior knowledge in the form of previous deployments and mapping to refer to – although with a recognition that the situation on the ground may have changed since then.

This is a disaster prone area. Earthquakes could happen in Malawi as they have happened before

Neighbouring countries are not in a stable situation, so there could be an issue with getting aid in by road.

Borders are in conflict areas – and within the country there are areas which are safer than others.

Risk of debris and water sanitation being compromised – made the provision of potable water a priority.

Electricity supply availability and disruption was another factor, as flooding can disrupt this.

Weather forecasts for the next few weeks were required if possible, and certainly short term forecasts were essential to ensure that they could assess which areas might get worse faster. Knowing how rivers flow was also important here, so a few physical geography topics were also relevant.

Ground could change over time, as river levels were swollen by further rainfall.

Topography mapping and **digital elevation models** (DEMs) are used to get accurate terrain data.

We need to know: where is the higher ground to move to if required as flooding worsens, or to operate from to minimise disruption to operations?

Water bodies were also important in countries that were landlocked or otherwise limited in accessibility, as boats are sometimes used in these situations.

The isolated nature of the places that were being accessed by the aid agencies was another issue to overcome.

Here is a video, featuring Celine herself, which you may want to watch, as it provides further perspectives on the requirements for getting aid to an area quickly:

Malawi: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kC-P02eNMZU>

It's one of many videos on ShelterBox's YouTube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTstE9HC4gHSxJ\\_FK4VH-eg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTstE9HC4gHSxJ_FK4VH-eg)

I'm assuming you have a plane that is chartered / offered by airline, and that you need to get material to it in time for a particular take-off slot?

Shelterbox can access warehouses with material ready and waiting to be loaded onto pallets and onto vehicles.

This article here says aid was already prepositioned  
<http://www.shelterbox.org/news.php?id=1541>

Teams and other agencies work together.

Partnerships with these other agencies are sometimes essential, to allow each other to get maximum access and impact.

Humanitarian news media outlets would report the main aspects of the events, and these are used to aid deployment.

Relief hubs are established for the response teams to operate from

Communications are difficult sometimes, and hard to contact all teams on the ground. Some places may still not be reached some time after an event.

Local government facilitates emergency aid.

Often use existing commercial routes – have built up a good relationships with freight forwarders – DHL, for example who have a dedicated Aid and Relief department – discounted freight costs are paid, and sometimes may be free of charge for freight, but can't be relied upon to be free.

Chartered flights are sometimes needed – has to be economical, and the best / only available option for getting the aid to the place where it is needed – have to report back to donors to ensure that money that has been raised by fundraisers has been spent wisely and to encourage further donations – responsible for best practice in freight forwarding

Negotiations often required, which involves Shelterbox staff.

**Why are logistics important here?**

Logistics cluster is vital for the rapid distribution of aid – they have pre-positioned aid with a UN hub. Supplies are stored in locations like Dubai and Accra.

During the recent **Ebola** emergency, Shelterbox had access to a non-chartered aircraft sponsored by WFP – agencies could get on if required. Charity has to keep the costs of transport down, but will charter planes if necessary, in order to get aid there. It can take hours to load a plane, and the weight may also limit which airports it can land at.

Shelterbox pays for space / weight on the flights that are used.

Customs clearances need to be done correctly – administration is important.

**Co-ordination is a major role of the job**, as well as researching preferred routes and terminals for aid that is sent by sea.

How did you get into the job – what qualifications and previous job experience did you have?

Worked for a surf company, in their logistics department. Organised international shipments of products.  
Experience in logistics provides a sound skills base to work in other areas.

Involves a lot of ongoing research to understand – route / commercial / costings / chartering

Maps are used a lot in her work. ***“Knowing geography helps a lot”.***

She is often asked “where is this location, and where is the closest aid – how long does it need to take?”

Day to day between trips abroad, she is involved in preparations for future deployment and helping out with other aspects of the charity’s work.

*Are the Shelterboxes adapted to meet changing circumstances or the same each time?*

Palletised non-food items are added to this separately.

One Shelterbox will help one household.

Water purification tablets and tents are provided separately.

Shelterkits are also provided: these include tarpaulins and repair tools and allow people to set up a quick camp and shelter.

UN tents are also provided for some deployments. They are robust and can protect families in poor weather.

For more on Shelterbox’s work, why not listen to team members on the ground on their SoundCloud page: <a href="https://soundcloud.com/shelterboxinternational">https://soundcloud.com/shelterboxinternational</a>
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*Please note that these notes were taken during an interview. Any errors, simplifications or specific wording are the work of the author, rather than the interviewee. They do not necessarily represent exactly what was said during the interview.*