Saving more than money

In the face of humanitarian crises, the procurement team at the United Nations Office for Project Services stands ready to help those in need. Patricia Moser tells Rachel Sharp how her team operates and succeeds in such an environment.

WHEN A global crisis hits – such as the 7.0-magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010, devastating homes and businesses, or the 2011 Syrian uprising that developed into civil war – the world responds. Emergency response initiatives are set up, the world’s media brings the crisis to the forefront of public consciousness, and the general population donate money and resources to help those in need.

But there will always be another emergency elsewhere. As a new crisis emerges, the focus shifts, the hype dies down and the latest disaster takes centre stage. But this does not mean the existing catastrophe has been resolved. Very few people are aware of the bigger picture and how, behind the scenes, once all the public hype has died down, the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) continues to provide long-term support to rebuild the fractured communities left behind.

UNOPS stands on the front line of global crises, working to rebuild communities in some of the most fragile and far-flung reaches of the globe. Holding a unique position within the UN as the organisation’s only self-funded agency, the procurement team works with a number of other agencies and global partners to deliver results.

But this is not procurement as many know it. UNOPS procurement means something different altogether because a function with a scope and scale of such magnitude means the difference between life and death to the communities in the 80-plus countries it currently touches.

One step beyond

For Patricia Moser, director of the procurement group at UNOPS, the role of the function can be summarised as “supplying value, delivering results, changing lives”.

Supplying value and delivering results may be nothing unique to a procurement team, but to have the weight of responsibility for changing people’s lives on the shoulders of the function adds a level of duty not associated with the average role.

“The team is continually working with our personnel on the ground all over the world. In the morning, we may be working with the team in Honduras and in the afternoon we may be working with our office in Jordan,” says Moser.

One of the situations currently top of the agenda at UNOPS is the Syrian refugee crisis. Some five million Syrians are estimated to have fled their country since the start of the uprising in March 2011. Neighbouring Turkey is estimated to host 2.5 million of these refugees, according to statistics released by Amnesty International. As the migrant crisis enters its sixth year, these people are in need of stability and temporary homes.

One of the world’s largest refugee camps, Azraq in Jordan, was built as a temporary structure to house up to 130,000 people escaping the conflict in Syria.

When the safety and security of the refugees and humanitarian workers in the camp came under threat, it was UNOPS that was called upon to support the Jordanian government by procuring equipment to enable vital security services to be implemented and security facilities to be constructed.

As part of that project, UNOPS was responsible for procuring the likes of solar power systems and generators for offices, as well as accommodation units for security teams.

Agility takes on a new meaning in situations like this when many things cannot be predicted or planned for. After all, there is no single means of preparing humanitarian response to an earthquake that no one anticipated or to acquire temporary shelters in response to a civil war a nation hoped would not take place.
As a centre-led procurement organisation, Moser and her team try to categorise their purchasing and help to rebuild the community from a central office. Meanwhile, local procurement teams in the field go out and physically procure the goods needed.

In the case of the Haiti earthquake, UNOPS was contracted to rebuild 16 neighbourhoods. This involved sourcing local bamboo and alternative materials to use in construction while, behind the scenes, there was a focus on ensuring that more sustainable homes were built.

“We work with the teams on the ground as much as possible,” says Moser. “We focus on restoring the community and developing a more long-term future for those in need.”

So how does procurement fit within the wider UNOPS framework and set out on its goal of changing lives? Before a project gets underway, UNOPS starts by reaching out to and connecting with donors and governments.

“UNOPS is known for being a can-do organisation because of our expertise in project management, infrastructure and, of course, procurement, so many governments and donors reach out to us,” says Moser.

The concept of a stakeholder is in itself somewhat unique to UNOPS. More often than not, stakeholders are donors, whether they be major foundations providing financial backing, UN member states or government stakeholders.

But, what works in one area does not necessarily work in another. Working with government stakeholders varies widely depending on the context of the crisis in question, just as the scope of goods and services to acquire varies dramatically around the globe. In the past, armoured vehicles have been required to withstand landmine blasts and agricultural equipment has been needed to help rebuild fractured communities – the list is endless.

Yet, as with all procurement teams, success is based on the capability to constantly evolve, and when the function has an impact on the living conditions and human rights of people around the world, the need for this is all the more heightened.

**Hands-on approach**

Moser’s mantra since taking up her role at UNOPS has been that the head office team must ensure its relevance in the field. This has resulted in a different approach with Moser and her team working to engage continually in the field and provide value. From the category team creating long-term agreements on a global, regional and local level, to revising the policy manual to be more reflective of the reality of field operations as well as providing training to procurement personnel on-site, the function is focused on supporting the field teams.

UNOPS procurement has also embraced new technologies to enable to organisation to deliver assistance to those in need. UN Web Buy, for instance, works a little like Amazon. This platform is currently being rebuilt to create a more robust and leading-edge system, which will not only create an easier and faster way to order products and services but will allow the team to fulfill the humanitarian needs of UNOPS partners with items such as vehicles, solar panels, generators and mobile health clinics. It will also offer significantly more products, available both globally and locally, as well as provide a portal for promoting small and medium, as well as diverse, suppliers.

Tapping into this bank of goods rather than sourcing everything from scratch saves time, and time in the framework of the UN’s projects can mean lives.
Procurement’s strategic tasks of price negotiations and delivering a project to deadline can often seem a far cry from the work taking place on the ground and seeing the impact that goods and services such as food, medicine, security and shelter, can have.

“Sometimes it is very easy when you sit in the head office of UNOPS to not see the impact of our work,” admits Moser. “You do have some level of disconnect.”

Bringing the office and the field together is necessary to help meet the team’s goals. When Moser took the helm, staff taking trips to get among the action was a rare phenomenon.

Closing the gap between the field and office teams, as well as the divide between the role of procurement and the wider role of changing lives in UNOPS, is something that is near the very top of her agenda.

UNOPS has begun piloting an exchange programme sending head office procurement staff on missions into the field, and bringing a field person into the office environment in exchange. “Being able to see for themselves the connection between what they are doing and the impact this is having on the world can give people a sense of realisation that what they have done really matters, that the deal they have negotiated really matters,” she says.

**Mutual appreciation**

The bond created between the field team and the office-based team works both ways. As well as promoting to the office staff the effect they are having on people in need, the field staff become more aware of how the office team is helping and can provide further assistance to make the ground work possible.

“This mutual learning helps us to really work together and serve people in need,” says Moser. “I work with some really dedicated, passionate people – I’d say this is the best team I have ever worked with.”

It might be assumed that the human implications of projects such a grand scale would render the business case and the considerations such as corporate social responsibility policies to be of secondary importance, but this could not be further from the truth.

Sustainability lies at the heart of UNOPS. The organisation embeds sustainability into category strategies and individual procurement, with the requirement that goods and services must only be sourced from suppliers that comply with the UN Supplier Code of Conduct.

As well as driving sustainability throughout its projects in terms of sourcing goods and services and implementing them in areas of need, goods are selected with the specific aim of enabling communities to be able to maintain a sustainable future when the team has gone.

According to Moser, it is this focus on sustainability that again drives the procurement team to make a difference and change lives.

“We have to support the rest of the world in ensuring we develop the skills of people and of suppliers where our work takes place, so that eventually the UN wouldn’t even need to exist any more,” she says.

“A lot of people just think we go out and build a bridge, which yes we do, but what we are actually doing is building a connection between communities, and it is in this way that we are striving to change lives and trying to realise the UNOPS vision of serving people in need,” she says.