Organization of Emergency and Disaster Risk Management - Lessons Learned and Case Studies from Different Regions

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Basic Thesis

- Regardless of the specific Disaster Management Structure there are a few common factors that determine the effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, of the response and initial recovery from large-scale natural disasters.
- A nation's Disaster Management Structure is only as robust as its "weakest link."
- The efficacy of Risk Management programs is most clearly seen when emergencies occur.

Case Study: Hurricane Katrina, August 2005

- U.S. Disaster Management System is highly decentralized.
  - Fundamental premise is that Local Officials remain “in charge” and that assistance is requested from other levels of government only when needed.
  - By law the basic responsibility for public safety rests with local – city, county – and state elected officials – Governors.
  - Role of the national government is to support states only following a specific request for assistance.

Variations in Disaster Management Structures

- Each locale may organize disaster system according to perceived local needs and risks
  - Fire Services
  - Law Enforcement Agency
  - Community Affairs
  - Staff to Chief Administrative Official
- General expectation that emergency operations will be structured according to a National Incident Management System

Impact of September 2001 Events

- Creation of Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
  - FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) became part of DHS, but FEMA's leadership not supportive of change.
  - State/local Disaster Management officials generally opposed to FEMA being part of DHS.
  - Massive expenditure of funds to enhance public safety – equipment, communications systems – with focus on "counter-terrorism".
  - Perception within DHS that FEMA was prepared for major disasters – 2004 Hurricane Season in Florida

Hurricane Katrina

- Impacts over 90,000 square miles and three states – Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama.
- Devastation in coastal Mississippi virtually total.
- Events in New Orleans/Louisiana ensure that the Disaster Management System is perceived as having failed.
- Every state impacted by large number of persons evacuated from Gulf Coast.

What Went Wrong?

- Local/state elected officials in Louisiana ineffectual and quarrelsome.
- Local and state organizations in Louisiana paralyzed by indecision.
- Federal officials ineffectual and quarrelsome.
- Media moved into the void and provided the images and message that “the system” had failed.

What Can We Learn?

- In any crisis, assume the situation is worse than initially believed and respond accordingly.
- Initial statements crucial.
- Elected officials play a critical role.
- Provide assurance that:
  - Seriousness of the situation is understood.
  - Someone is in charge.
  - All reasonable steps are being taken.
- Importance of developing a common operational picture.
- Set realistic goals and provide regular updates on what actions are being taken.
- Catastrophic events will inevitably overwhelm any Disaster Management System – the system's effectiveness is dependent on how rapidly officials begin to act and how effectively they communicate.

Common Challenges

- All disasters are initially local.
- Regardless of the system's structure – centralized or decentralized; civilian or military or some combination – need to be flexible and adaptive to unforeseen conditions.
- What happens initially will largely determine the outcome.
- The "perception" of ineffectiveness -- or effectiveness -- once created, is very difficult to change.
- How to create a "culture of preparedness."
- Unprecedented challenges confronting the world's disaster management systems:
  - Drought
  - Pandemic flu
  - Climate Change