

DISASTERS: THE SOCIAL IMPACT

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I wish to address the social impact of disasters in a practical and chronological way and to stay away from the formal scientific jargon. This does not mean that a scientific approach is not needed, especially when researching the impact. We have an obligation to maintain sound scientific knowledge and to be able to justify our informed decisions on this. Therefore the purpose of this presentation is:

- to stimulate your interest and chain of thought in such a way that you feel the urge to broaden your knowledge on scientifically based information,
- to identify the need to contribute to this knowledge base in a formal way and
- to become lifelong learners in this fascinating subject

It is also essential to recognise that social effects can be seen through all the phases of disaster management. From mitigation to long-term follow-up after an incident.

MITIGATION

People live with their "hearts and wallets" and very seldom make decisions about settlement in an informed disaster mitigation way. It is also true that the information to become knowledgeable on potential disasters is not freely available ahead of time.

The new envisaged legislation (Open Democracy Act) to follow the Constitution of 1996 and specifically Section 32 of the Bill of Rights (on everybody's right of access to any information held by the state, another person or private institution if the information is required to excise or protect your rights), will provide mechanism to gain access to such information. The challenge for Managers in the field is to provide good information to the people in such a way that informed decisions can be made.

One must not under-estimate the social impact of making such information available and even more so when the severity of a potential incident is further emphasised through emergency exercises. At cognitive personal, social unit and community level it requires information that will link into their own knowledge base and this will be interpreted in that frame of reference. This is often "clouded" by recent "news" coverage of disasters in the media. The results could be unwarranted overreaction or excessive stress build-up in society. Do not underestimate other society forces that also thrive in these circumstances and where agendas are not always clear and sound. Such a combination can cause severe reactions and unanticipated stresses with wide ranging impacts that can be prolonged of nature. Clear open unambiguous information to all role players, with scientifically substantiated detail in support, provided through the existing governance structures is the best way to go in limiting the social impact.

PREPAREDNESS

The social impact of the preparative phase of disaster management must also be realised. In the first place this is where society in general find it a very positive experience if preparedness is managed in a participatory way and if this is then illustrated through regular exercises that are critically evaluated and reported on. Especially so if correction of deficiencies are illustrated.

The "economic" impact of large "cold" exercises should be clearly defined as this always happens at the expense of other services. Smaller practice (training) exercises are often more cost effective. Every "warm" disaster incident should formally be used as a major "exercise" opportunity and critiqued in the same way. Society must be prepared for this through transparent planning and objective open critical evaluation of actions.

INTERVENTION

As is to be expected you will find the largest potential impact on society during the acute phase of the incident and the immediate follow-up period.

During the incident the human being has the ability to cope with a tremendous onslaught. Existing "mental" states often dictate the acute reaction by individuals and a slow moving disaster with time to ponder often have a larger acute impact on individuals with limited capacity to manage more stress. This is luckily counter acted by the ability of social units and communities to re-act, organise and support. Therefore a much less traumatic general impact results. Orientation is maintained and people react in an informed manner, not necessarily in line with what disaster managers would want, but in line with their own knowledge base and reference framework. Relatively small disasters will then also be self managed and emergency personnel will often be required and expected to be supportive of nature.

Acute fast moving disasters lead to disorientation, breakdown of social unit support and a more aggressive community response is needed. Individual heroism is common. Strong leadership and decision making is necessary and expected. Very often the emergency response personnel is expected to take the lead and community leaders and politicians are expected by the affected to do the same in time of need. A large disaster of this nature now leaves the community with a need in response that is much larger than what can be provided by the authority system. Disaster and emergency response managers now need to prioritise on available information, resulting in a community and individuals left to their own means. This is the worst acute case of society impact.

Depending on the nature of the disaster a number of issues must be emphasised to be considered :

Acute displacement of people, away from their point of residence, is experienced as very stressful.

Very often people are driven back to their residences not only by the fear of losing more personal belongings to pilfering, but also to a known place of "belonging" and where separated family members and friends would also tend to visit. This is further strengthened by an inherent urge to "help".

Information is one of the most crucial needs of people affected by a disaster. The more unknown and bizarre the cause of the disaster, the greater the uncertainty in the mind of the affected. Sound updates on the progress of the disaster and the intervention process will alleviate many stresses. Also information on identified risks and the impact thereof, especially where hazardous agents are involved, must be carefully, but constantly, communicated. This needs to be continued into the follow-up phase.

It is also during this phase that the physical injury to individuals can have serious consequences to all affected parties and that will continue having effects far into the future at personal, social unit and community level. We will not here broaden on the acute rescue and individual care needs, considering the magnitude of potential risk factors, but rather look at the impact. The different aspects should be identified as soon as possible, well documented to be able to focus on specific individuals, social units, community groups, and a plan of action to be started immediately to alleviate long-term effect. Risk factor specific, medical and disaster-psychology experts need to be involved from day one.

The materialistic and sosio-economic damage needs to be first seen from the acute point of view. Disruption of everyday life, economic activities and ability to maintain an environment for basic necessities of living is paramount. After that it moves into the arena of sustainability and the ability to salvage. It must be realised that the impact and need will differ from area to area and community to community. In some circumstances the effect may be so severe, that recuperation is not possible.

The sosio-political aspects and effects of disasters are issues in there own right.

FOLLOW-UP AND LATE PHASE

This is often the most prolonged part of the effect. The severity of the impact will be determined by the nature of the cause of the disaster.

At individual level the long-term physical and psychological effects extend beyond the acute management and rehabilitation, and these need to be recognised and again the importance of information is emphasised.

Uncertainty of possible health effects often dominates where an agent was involved. This then lengthens the psychological-trauma and extensive research into the possible health impact is often needed.

Indeed, the potential does exist that acute and long-term health effects can have serious consequences. Epidemiological studies often need to follow disaster incidents and a level of preparedness is necessary to plan for this.

The economic impact could also move into a medium to late phase mode. This must not only be looked at from the individual or social unit level, but could very easily extend into communities and beyond to regions, provinces and even the country.

Especially where disasters have an effect on a core economic activity that dominates in a region, the effect is large with changes in economic activities, migration of people and even socio-political and cultural changes.

CONCLUSION

The risk also exists that one could fall into the trap of becoming so depressed by the potential effects of disasters, that one loses insight into the reality of life on earth and how humans have adapted to such.

The "worst" disasters known to man are still those of nature. It is part of life and, as disaster managers, you should see all disasters as a challenge. It is your responsibility to limit the social impact of disasters to the best of your means. You should also realise that after every disaster there is:

- a bloom of economic activity,
- opportunities to rectify past ill-informed actions and decisions,
- opportunities to increase your mitigation efforts in an informed way,
- a receptive community to educate and inform for future eventualities,
- opportunities to research and add to the scientific knowledge base,
- opportunities to evaluate effectiveness of systems and procedures,
- the need to fine-tune your planning,
- the need to focus your training and
- the need to expand your information base.